

THE TWO TOWERS



J·R·R· TOLKIEN

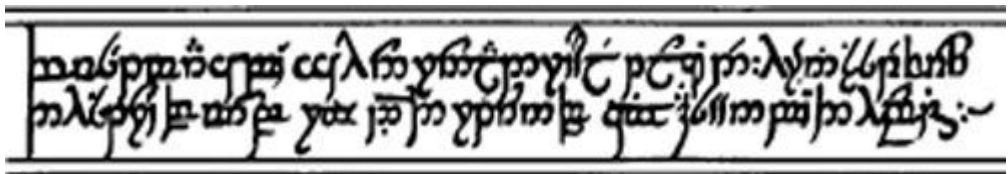
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
PART TWO



THE TWO TOWERS
BEING THE SECOND PART OF
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
BY
J.R.R. TOLKIEN



Houghton Mifflin Harcourt



The Two Towers is the second part of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic adventure *The Lord of the Rings*, a beautifully written masterpiece which is among the greatest works of imaginative fiction of the twentieth century. 'For width of imagination' said the novelist Richard Hughes, 'it almost beggars parallel, and it is nearly as remarkable for its vividness and narrative skill which carries the reader on enthralled for page after page.'

C.S. Lewis wrote: 'No imaginary world has been projected which is at once multifarious and so true to its own inner laws; none so seemingly objective, so disinfected from the taint of an author's merely individual psychology; none so relevant to the actual human situation yet free from allegory. And what fine shading there is in the variations of style to meet the almost endless diversity of scenes and characters – comic, homely, epic, monstrous, or diabolic.'

'It is timeless,' said Naomi Mitchison, 'and will go on and on.'

This is the second part of a three-book paperback edition which reproduces the complete authoritative text of *The Lord of the Rings*, together with the original maps drawn by Christopher Tolkien. The Appendices and a fully revised and expanded Index are included in *The Return of the King*.

*Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

SYNOPSIS

This is the second part of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The first part, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, told how Gandalf the Grey discovered that the ring possessed by Frodo the Hobbit was in fact the One Ring, ruler of all the Rings of Power. It recounted the flight of Frodo and his companions from the quiet Shire of their home, pursued by the terror of the Black Riders of Mordor, until at last, with the aid of Aragorn the Ranger of Eriador, they came through desperate perils to the house of Elrond in Rivendell.

There was held the great Council of Elrond, at which it was decided to attempt the destruction of the Ring, and Frodo was appointed the Ring-bearer. The Companions of the Ring were then chosen, who were to aid him in his quest: to come if he could to the Mountain of Fire in Mordor, the land of the Enemy himself, where alone the Ring could be unmade. In this fellowship were Aragorn and Boromir son of the Lord of Gondor, representing Men; Legolas son of the Elven-king of Mirkwood, for the Elves; Gimli son of Glóin of the Lonely Mountain, for the Dwarves; Frodo with his servant Samwise, and his two young kinsmen Meriadoc and Peregrin, for the Hobbits; and Gandalf the Grey.

The Companions journeyed in secret far from Rivendell in the North, until baffled in their attempt to cross the high pass of Caradhras in winter, they were led by Gandalf through the hidden gate and entered the vast Mines of Moria, seeking a way beneath the mountains. There Gandalf, in battle with a dreadful spirit of the underworld, fell into a dark abyss. But Aragorn, now revealed as

the hidden heir of the ancient Kings of the West, led the Company on from the East Gate of Moria, through the Elvish land of Lórien, and down the great River Anduin, until they came to the Falls of Rauros. Already they had become aware that their journey was watched by spies, and that the creature Gollum, who once had possessed the Ring and still lusted for it, was following their trail.

It now became necessary for them to decide whether they should turn east to Mordor; or go on with Boromir to the aid of Minas Tirith, chief city of Gondor, in the coming war; or should divide. When it became clear that the Ring-bearer was resolved to continue his hopeless journey to the land of the Enemy, Boromir attempted to seize the Ring by force. The first part ended with the fall of Boromir to the lure of the Ring; with the escape and disappearance of Frodo and his servant Samwise; and the scattering of the remainder of the Fellowship by a sudden attack of orc-soldiers, some in the service of the Dark Lord of Mordor, some of the traitor Saruman of Isengard. The Quest of the Ring-bearer seemed already overtaken by disaster.

This second part, *The Two Towers*, now tells how each of the members of the Fellowship of the Ring fared, after the breaking of their fellowship, until the coming of the great Darkness and the outbreak of the War of the Ring, which is to be recounted in the third and last part.

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MAPS

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BOOK THREE

Chapter 1

THE DEPARTURE OF BOROMIR

Aragorn sped on up the hill. Every now and again he bent to the ground. Hobbits go light, and their footprints are not easy even for a Ranger to read, but not far from the top a spring crossed the path, and in the wet earth he saw what he was seeking.

‘I read the signs aright,’ he said to himself. ‘Frodo ran to the hill-top. I wonder what he saw there? But he returned by the same way, and went down the hill again.’

Aragorn hesitated. He desired to go to the high seat himself, hoping to see there something that would guide him in his perplexities; but time was pressing. Suddenly he leaped forward, and ran to the summit, across the great flag-stones, and up the steps. Then sitting in the high seat he looked out. But the sun seemed darkened, and the world dim and remote. He turned from the North back again to North, and saw nothing save the distant hills, unless it were that far away he could see again a great bird like an eagle high in the air, descending slowly in wide circles down towards the earth.

Even as he gazed his quick ears caught sounds in the woodlands below, on the west side of the River. He stiffened. There were cries, and among them, to his horror, he could distinguish the harsh voices of Orcs. Then suddenly with a deep-throated call a

great horn blew, and the blasts of it smote the hills and echoed in the hollows, rising in a mighty shout above the roaring of the falls.

‘The horn of Boromir!’ he cried. ‘He is in need!’ He sprang down the steps and away, leaping down the path. ‘Alas! An ill fate is on me this day, and all that I do goes amiss. Where is Sam?’

As he ran the cries came louder, but fainter now and desperately the horn was blowing. Fierce and shrill rose the yells of the Orcs, and suddenly the horn-calls ceased. Aragorn raced down the last slope, but before he could reach the hill’s foot, the sounds died away; and as he turned to the left and ran towards them they retreated, until at last he could hear them no more. Drawing his bright sword and crying *Elendil! Elendil!* he crashed through the trees.

A mile, maybe, from Parth Galen in a little glade not far from the lake he found Boromir. He was sitting with his back to a great tree, as if he was resting. But Aragorn saw that he was pierced with many black-feathered arrows; his sword was still in his hand, but it was broken near the hilt; his horn cloven in two was at his side. Many Orcs lay slain, piled all about him and at his feet.

Aragorn knelt beside him. Boromir opened his eyes and strove to speak. At last slow words came. ‘I tried to take the Ring from Frodo,’ he said. ‘I am sorry. I have paid.’ His glance strayed to his fallen enemies; twenty at least lay there. ‘They have gone: the Halflings: the Orcs have taken them. I think they are not dead. Orcs bound them.’ He paused and his eyes closed wearily. After a moment he spoke again.

‘Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed.’

‘No!’ said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. ‘You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!’

Minas Tirith shall not fall!’

Boromir smiled.

‘Which way did they go? Was Frodo there?’ said Aragorn.

But Boromir did not speak again.

‘Alas!’ said Aragorn. ‘Thus passes the heir of Denethor, Lord of the Tower of Guard! This is a bitter end. Now the Company is all in ruin. It is I that have failed. Vain was Gandalf’s trust in me. What shall I do now? Boromir has laid it on me to go to Minas Tirith, and my heart desires it; but where are the Ring and the Bearer? How shall I find them and save the Quest from disaster?’

He knelt for a while, bent with weeping, still clasping Boromir’s hand. So it was that Legolas and Gimli found him. They came from the western slopes of the hill, silently, creeping through the trees as if they were hunting. Gimli had his axe in hand, and Legolas his long knife: all his arrows were spent. When they came into the glade they halted in amazement; and then they stood a moment with heads bowed in grief, for it seemed to them plain what had happened.

‘Alas!’ said Legolas, coming to Aragorn’s side. ‘We have hunted and slain many Orcs in the woods, but we should have been of more use here. We came when we heard the horn – but too late, it seems. I fear you have taken deadly hurt.’

‘Boromir is dead,’ said Aragorn. ‘I am unscathed, for I was not here with him. He fell defending the hobbits, while I was away upon the hill.’

‘The hobbits!’ cried Gimli. ‘Where are they then? Where is Frodo?’

‘I do not know,’ answered Aragorn wearily. ‘Before he died Boromir told me that the Orcs had bound them; he did not think that they were dead. I sent him to follow Merry and Pippin; but I did not ask him if Frodo or Sam were with him: not until it was too

late. All that I have done today has gone amiss. What is to be done now?’

‘First we must tend the fallen,’ said Legolas. ‘We cannot leave him lying like carrion among these foul Orcs.’

‘But we must be swift,’ said Gimli. ‘He would not wish us to linger. We must follow the Orcs, if there is hope that any of our Company are living prisoners.’

‘But we do not know whether the Ring-bearer is with them or not,’ said Aragorn. ‘Are we to abandon him? Must we not seek him first? An evil choice is now before us!’

‘Then let us do first what we must do,’ said Legolas. ‘We have not the time or the tools to bury our comrade fitly, or to raise a mound over him. A cairn we might build.’

‘The labour would be hard and long: there are no stones that we could use nearer than the water-side,’ said Gimli.

‘Then let us lay him in a boat with his weapons, and the weapons of his vanquished foes,’ said Aragorn. ‘We will send him to the Falls of Rauros and give him to Anduin. The River of Gondor will take care at least that no evil creature dishonours his bones.’

Quickly they searched the bodies of the Orcs, gathering their swords and cloven helms and shields into a heap.

‘See!’ cried Aragorn. ‘Here we find tokens!’ He picked out from the pile of grim weapons two knives, leaf-bladed, damasked in gold and red; and searching further he found also the sheaths, black, set with small red gems. ‘No orc-tools these!’ he said.

‘They were borne by the hobbits. Doubtless the Orcs despoiled them, but feared to keep the knives, knowing them for what they are: work of Westemnesse, wound about with spells for the bane of

Mordor. Well, now, if they still live, our friends are weaponless. I will take these things, hoping against hope, to give them back.'

'And I,' said Legolas, 'will take all the arrows that I can find, for my quiver is empty.' He searched in the pile and on the ground about and found not a few that were undamaged and longer in the shaft than such arrows as the Orcs were accustomed to use. He looked at them closely.

And Aragorn looked on the slain, and he said: 'Here lie many that are not folk of Mordor. Some are from the North, from the Misty Mountains, if I know anything of Orcs and their kinds. And here are others strange to me. Their gear is not after the manner of Orcs at all!'

There were four goblin-soldiers of greater stature, swart, slant-eyed, with thick legs and large hands. They were armed with short broad-bladed swords, not with the curved scimitars usual with Orcs; and they had bows of yew, in length and shape like the bows of Men. Upon their shields they bore a strange device: a small white hand in the centre of a black field; on the front of their iron helms was set an S-rune, wrought of some white metal.

'I have not seen these tokens before,' said Aragorn. 'What do they mean?'

'S is for Sauron,' said Gimli. 'That is easy to read.'

'Nay!' said Legolas. 'Sauron does not use the elf-runes.'

'Neither does he use his right name, nor permit it to be spelt or spoken,' said Aragorn. 'And he does not use white. The Orcs in the service of Barad-dûr use the sign of the Red Eye.' He stood for a moment in thought. 'S is for Saruman, I guess,' he said at length. 'There is evil afoot in Isengard, and the West is no longer safe. It is as Gandalf feared: by some means the traitor Saruman has had news of our journey. It is likely too that he knows of Gandalf's fall. Pursuers from Moria may have escaped the vigilance of Lórien, or they may have avoided that land and come to Isengard

by other paths. Orcs travel fast. But Saruman has many ways of learning news. Do you remember the birds?’

‘Well, we have no time to ponder riddles,’ said Gimli. ‘Let us bear Boromir away!’

‘But after that we must guess the riddles, if we are to choose our course rightly,’ answered Aragorn.

‘Maybe there is no right choice,’ said Gimli.

Taking his axe the Dwarf now cut several branches. These they lashed together with bowstrings, and spread their cloaks upon the frame. Upon this rough bier they carried the body of their companion to the shore, together with such trophies of his last battle as they chose to send forth with him. It was only a short way, yet they found it no easy task, for Boromir was a man both tall and strong.

At the water-side Aragorn remained, watching the bier, while Legolas and Gimli hastened back on foot to Parth Galen. It was a mile or more, and it was some time before they came back, paddling two boats swiftly along the shore.

‘There is a strange tale to tell!’ said Legolas. ‘There are only two boats upon the bank. We could find no trace of the other.’

‘Have Orcs been there?’ asked Aragorn.

‘We saw no signs of them,’ answered Gimli. ‘And Orcs would have taken or destroyed all the boats, and the baggage as well.’

‘I will look at the ground when we come there,’ said Aragorn.

Now they laid Boromir in the middle of the boat that was to bear him away. The grey hood and elven-cloak they folded and placed beneath his head. They combed his long dark hair and arrayed it upon his shoulders. The golden belt of Lórien gleamed about his waist. His helm they set beside him, and across his lap

they laid the cloven horn and the hilt and shards of his sword; beneath his feet they put the swords of his enemies. Then fastening the prow to the stern of the other boat, they drew him out into the water. They rowed sadly along the shore, and turning into the swift-running channel they passed the green sward of Parth Galen. The steep sides of Tol Brandir were glowing: it was now mid-afternoon. As they went south the fume of Rauros rose and shimmered before them, a haze of gold. The rush and thunder of the falls shook the windless air.

Sorrowfully they cast loose the funeral boat: there Boromir lay, restful, peaceful, gliding upon the bosom of the flowing water. The stream took him while they held their own boat back with their paddles. He floated by them, and slowly his boat departed, waning to a dark spot against the golden light; and then suddenly it vanished. Rauros roared on unchanging. The River had taken Boromir son of Denethor, and he was not seen again in Minas Tirith, standing as he used to stand upon the White Tower in the morning. But in Gondor in after-days it long was said that the elven-boat rode the falls and the foaming pool, and bore him down through Osgiliath, and past the many mouths of Anduin, out into the Great Sea at night under the stars.

For a while the three companions remained silent, gazing after him. Then Aragorn spoke. 'They will look for him from the White Tower,' he said, 'but he will not return from mountain or from sea.' Then slowly he began to sing:

*Through Rohan over fen and field where the long grass grows
The West Wind comes walking, and about the walls it goes.
'What news from the West, O wandering wind, do you bring to
me tonight?*

*Have you seen Boromir the Tall by moon or by starlight?
'I saw him ride over seven streams, over waters wide and
grey;
I saw him walk in empty lands, until he passed away
Into the shadows of the North. I saw him then no more.
The North Wind may have heard the horn of the son of
Denethor.'
'O Boromir! From the high walls westward I looked afar,
But you came not from the empty lands where no men are.'*

Then Legolas sang:

*From the mouths of the Sea the South Wind flies, from the
sandhills and the stones;
The wailing of the gulls it bears, and at the gate it moans.
'What news from the South, O sighing wind, do you bring to
me at eve?
Where now is Boromir the Fair? He tarries and I grieve.'
'Ask not of me where he doth dwell – so many bones there lie
On the white shores and the dark shores under the stormy sky;
So many have passed down Anduin to find the flowing Sea.
Ask of the North Wind news of them the North Wind sends to
me!'
'O Boromir! Beyond the gate the seaward road runs south,
But you came not with the wailing gulls from the grey sea's
mouth.'*

Then Aragorn sang again:

*From the Gate of Kings the North Wind rides, and past the
roaring falls;
And clear and cold about the tower its loud horn calls.
'What news from the North, O mighty wind, do you bring to
me today?
What news of Boromir the Bold? For he is long away.'
'Beneath Amon Hen I heard his cry. There many foes he
fought.
His cloven shield, his broken sword, they to the water brought.
His head so proud, his face so fair, his limbs they laid to rest;
And Rauros, golden Rauros-falls, bore him upon its breast.'
'O Boromir! The Tower of Guard shall ever northward gaze
To Rauros, golden Rauros-falls, until the end of days.'*

So they ended. Then they turned their boat and drove it with all the speed they could against the stream back to Parth Galen.

'You left the East Wind to me,' said Gimli, 'but I will say naught of it.'

'That is as it should be,' said Aragorn. 'In Minas Tirith they endure the East Wind, but they do not ask it for tidings. But now Boromir has taken his road, and we must make haste to choose our own.'

He surveyed the green lawn, quickly but thoroughly, stooping often to the earth. 'No Orcs have been on this ground,' he said. 'Otherwise nothing can be made out for certain. All our footprints are here, crossing and re-crossing. I cannot tell whether any of the hobbits have come back since the search for Frodo began.' He returned to the bank, close to where the rill from the spring trickled out into the River. 'There are some clear prints here,' he said. 'A hobbit waded out into the water and back; but I cannot say how long ago.'

‘How then do you read this riddle?’ asked Gimli.

Aragorn did not answer at once, but went back to the camping-place and looked at the baggage. ‘Two packs are missing,’ he said, ‘and one is certainly Sam’s: it was rather large and heavy. This then is the answer: Frodo has gone by boat, and his servant has gone with him. Frodo must have returned while we were all away. I met Sam going up the hill and told him to follow me; but plainly he did not do so. He guessed his master’s mind and came back here before Frodo had gone. He did not find it easy to leave Sam behind!’

‘But why should he leave us behind, and without a word?’ said Gimli. ‘That was a strange deed!’

‘And a brave deed,’ said Aragorn. ‘Sam was right, I think. Frodo did not wish to lead any friend to death with him in Mordor. But he knew that he must go himself. Something happened after he left us that overcame his fear and doubt.’

‘Maybe hunting Orcs came on him and he fled,’ said Legolas.

‘He fled, certainly,’ said Aragorn, ‘but not, I think, from Orcs.’ What he thought was the cause of Frodo’s sudden resolve and flight Aragorn did not say. The last words of Boromir he long kept secret.

‘Well, so much at least is now clear,’ said Legolas: ‘Frodo is no longer on this side of the River: only he can have taken the boat. And Sam is with him; only he would have taken his pack.’

‘Our choice then,’ said Gimli, ‘is either to take the remaining boat and follow Frodo, or else to follow the Orcs on foot. There is little hope either way. We have already lost precious hours.’

‘Let me think!’ said Aragorn. ‘And now may I make a right choice, and change the evil fate of this unhappy day!’ He stood silent for a moment. ‘I will follow the Orcs,’ he said at last. ‘I would have guided Frodo to Mordor and gone with him to the end; but if I seek him now in the wilderness, I must abandon the

captives to torment and death. My heart speaks clearly at last: the fate of the Bearer is in my hands no longer. The Company has played its part. Yet we that remain cannot forsake our companions while we have strength left. Come! We will go now. Leave all that can be spared behind! We will press on by day and dark!’

They drew up the last boat and carried it to the trees. They laid beneath it such of their goods as they did not need and could not carry away. Then they left Parth Galen. The afternoon was fading as they came back to the glade where Boromir had fallen. There they picked up the trail of the Orcs. It needed little skill to find.

‘No other folk make such a trampling,’ said Legolas. ‘It seems their delight to slash and beat down growing things that are not even in their way.’

‘But they go with a great speed for all that,’ said Aragorn, ‘and they do not tire. And later we may have to search for our path in hard bare lands.’

‘Well, after them!’ said Gimli. ‘Dwarves too can go swiftly, and they do not tire sooner than Orcs. But it will be a long chase: they have a long start.’

‘Yes,’ said Aragorn, ‘we shall all need the endurance of Dwarves. But come! With hope or without hope we will follow the trail of our enemies. And woe to them, if we prove the swifter! We will make such a chase as shall be accounted a marvel among the Three Kindreds: Elves, Dwarves, and Men. Forth the Three Hunters!’

Like a deer he sprang away. Through the trees he sped. On and on he led them, tireless and swift, now that his mind was at last made up. The woods about the lake they left behind. Long slopes they climbed, dark, hard-edged against the sky already red with

sunset. Dusk came. They passed away, grey shadows in a stony land.

Chapter 2

THE RIDERS OF ROHAN

Dusk deepened. Mist lay behind them among the trees below, and brooded on the pale margins of the Anduin, but the sky was clear. Stars came out. The waxing moon was riding in the West, and the shadows of the rocks were black. They had come to the feet of stony hills, and their pace was slower, for the trail was no longer easy to follow. Here the highlands of the Emyn Muil ran from North to South in two long tumbled ridges. The western side of each ridge was steep and difficult, but the eastward slopes were gentler, furrowed with many gullies and narrow ravines. All night the three companions scrambled in this bony land, climbing to the crest of the first and tallest ridge, and down again into the darkness of a deep winding valley on the other side.

There in the still cool hour before dawn they rested for a brief space. The moon had long gone down before them, the stars glittered above them; the first light of day had not yet come over the dark hills behind. For the moment Aragorn was at a loss: the orc-trail had descended into the valley, but there it had vanished.

‘Which way would they turn, do you think?’ said Legolas. ‘Northward to take a straighter road to Isengard, or Fangorn, if that is their aim as you guess? Or southward to strike the Entwash?’

‘They will not make for the river, whatever mark they aim at,’ said Aragorn. ‘And unless there is much amiss in Rohan and the

power of Saruman is greatly increased, they will take the shortest way that they can find over the fields of the Rohirrim. Let us search northwards!’

The dale ran like a stony trough between the ridged hills, and a trickling stream flowed among the boulders at the bottom. A cliff frowned upon their right; to their left rose grey slopes, dim and shadowy in the late night. They went on for a mile or more northwards. Aragorn was searching, bent towards the ground, among the folds and gullies leading up into the western ridge. Legolas was some way ahead. Suddenly the Elf gave a cry and the others came running towards him.

‘We have already overtaken some of those that we are hunting,’ he said. ‘Look!’ He pointed, and they saw that what they had at first taken to be boulders lying at the foot of the slope were huddled bodies. Five dead Orcs lay there. They had been hewn with many cruel strokes, and two had been beheaded. The ground was wet with their dark blood.

‘Here is another riddle!’ said Gimli. ‘But it needs the light of day, and for that we cannot wait.’

‘Yet however you read it, it seems not unhelpful,’ said Legolas. ‘Enemies of the Orcs are likely to be our friends. Do any folk dwell in these hills?’

‘No,’ said Aragorn. ‘The Rohirrim seldom come here, and it is far from Minas Tirith. It might be that some company of Men were hunting here for reasons that we do not know. Yet I think not.’

‘What do you think?’ said Gimli.

‘I think that the enemy brought his own enemy with him,’ answered Aragorn. ‘These are Northern Orcs from far away. Among the slain are none of the great Orcs with the strange

badges. There was a quarrel, I guess: it is no uncommon thing with these foul folk. Maybe there was some dispute about the road.'

'Or about the captives,' said Gimli. 'Let us hope that they, too, did not meet their end here.'

Aragorn searched the ground in a wide circle, but no other traces of the fight could be found. They went on. Already the eastward sky was turning pale; the stars were fading, and a grey light was slowly growing. A little further north they came to a fold in which a tiny stream, falling and winding, had cut a stony path down into the valley. In it some bushes grew, and there were patches of grass upon its sides.

'At last!' said Aragorn. 'Here are the tracks that we seek! Up this water-channel: this is the way that the Orcs went after their debate.'

Swiftly now the pursuers turned and followed the new path. As if fresh from a night's rest they sprang from stone to stone. At last they reached the crest of the grey hill, and a sudden breeze blew in their hair and stirred their cloaks: the chill wind of dawn.

Turning back they saw across the River the far hills kindled. Day leaped into the sky. The red rim of the sun rose over the shoulders of the dark land. Before them in the West the world lay still, formless and grey; but even as they looked, the shadows of night melted, the colours of the waking earth returned: green flowed over the wide meads of Rohan; the white mists shimmered in the water-vales; and far off to the left, thirty leagues or more, blue and purple stood the White Mountains, rising into peaks of jet, tipped with glimmering snows, flushed with the rose of morning.

'Gondor! Gondor!' cried Aragorn. 'Would that I looked on you again in happier hour! Not yet does my road lie southward to your

bright streams.

*Gondor! Gondor, between the Mountains and the Sea!
West Wind blew there; the light upon the Silver Tree
Fell like bright rain in gardens of the Kings of old.
O proud walls! White towers! O wingéd crown and throne of
gold!
O Gondor, Gondor! Shall Men behold the Silver Tree,
Or West Wind blow again between the Mountains and the
Sea?*

Now let us go!’ he said, drawing his eyes away from the South, and looking out west and north to the way that he must tread.

The ridge upon which the companions stood went down steeply before their feet. Below it twenty fathoms or more, there was a wide and rugged shelf which ended suddenly in the brink of a sheer cliff: the East Wall of Rohan. So ended the Emyn Muil, and the green plains of the Rohirrim stretched away before them to the edge of sight.

‘Look!’ cried Legolas, pointing up into the pale sky above them. ‘There is the eagle again! He is very high. He seems to be flying now away, from this land back to the North. He is going with great speed. Look!’

‘No, not even my eyes can see him, my good Legolas,’ said Aragorn. ‘He must be far aloft indeed. I wonder what is his errand, if he is the same bird that I have seen before. But look! I can see something nearer at hand and more urgent; there is something moving over the plain!’

‘Many things,’ said Legolas. ‘It is a great company on foot; but I cannot say more, nor see what kind of folk they may be. They are many leagues away: twelve, I guess; but the flatness of the plain is hard to measure.’

‘I think, nonetheless, that we no longer need any trail to tell us which way to go,’ said Gimli. ‘Let us find a path down to the fields as quick as may be.’

‘I doubt if you will find a path quicker than the one that the Orcs chose,’ said Aragorn.

They followed their enemies now by the clear light of day. It seemed that the Orcs had pressed on with all possible speed. Every now and again the pursuers found things that had been dropped or cast away: food-bags, the rinds and crusts of hard grey bread, a torn black cloak, a heavy iron-nailed shoe broken on the stones. The trail led them north along the top of the escarpment, and at length they came to a deep cleft carved in the rock by a stream that splashed noisily down. In the narrow ravine a rough path descended like a steep stair into the plain.

At the bottom they came with a strange suddenness on the grass of Rohan. It swelled like a green sea up to the very foot of the Emyrn Muil. The falling stream vanished into a deep growth of cresses and water-plants, and they could hear it tinkling away in green tunnels, down long gentle slopes towards the fens of Entwash Vale far away. They seemed to have left winter clinging to the hills behind. Here the air was softer and warmer, and faintly scented, as if spring was already stirring and the sap was flowing again in herb and leaf. Legolas took a deep breath, like one that drinks a great draught after long thirst in barren places.

‘Ah! the green smell!’ he said. ‘It is better than much sleep. Let us run!’

‘Light feet may run swiftly here,’ said Aragorn. ‘More swiftly, maybe, than iron-shod Orcs. Now we have a chance to lessen their

lead!’

They went in single file, running like hounds on a strong scent, and an eager light was in their eyes. Nearly due west the broad swath of the marching Orcs tramped its ugly slot; the sweet grass of Rohan had been bruised and blackened as they passed.

Presently Aragorn gave a cry and turned aside.

‘Stay!’ he shouted. ‘Do not follow me yet!’ He ran quickly to the right, away from the main trail; for he had seen footprints that went that way, branching off from the others, the marks of small unshod feet. These, however, did not go far before they were crossed by orc-prints, also coming out from the main trail behind and in front, and then they curved sharply back again and were lost in the trampling. At the furthest point Aragorn stooped and picked up something from the grass; then he ran back.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘they are quite plain: a hobbit’s footprints. Pippin’s, I think. He is smaller than the others. And look at this!’ He held up a thing that glittered in the sunlight. It looked like the new-opened leaf of a beech-tree, fair and strange in that treeless plain.

‘The brooch of an elven-cloak!’ cried Legolas and Gimli together.

‘Not idly do the leaves of Lórien fall,’ said Aragorn. ‘This did not drop by chance: it was cast away as a token to any that might follow. I think Pippin ran away from the trail for that purpose.’

‘Then he at least was alive,’ said Gimli. ‘And he had the use of his wits, and of his legs too. That is heartening. We do not pursue in vain.’

‘Let us hope that he did not pay too dearly for his boldness,’ said Legolas. ‘Come! Let us go on! The thought of those merry young folk driven like cattle burns my heart.’

The sun climbed to the noon and then rode slowly down the sky. Light clouds came up out of the sea in the distant South and were blown away upon the breeze. The sun sank. Shadows rose behind and reached out long arms from the East. Still the hunters held on. One day now had passed since Boromir fell, and the Orcs were yet far ahead. No longer could any sight of them be seen in the level plains.

As nightshade was closing about them Aragorn halted. Only twice in the day's march had they rested for a brief while, and twelve leagues now lay between them and the eastern wall where they had stood at dawn.

'We have come at last to a hard choice,' he said. 'Shall we rest by night, or shall we go on while our will and strength hold?'

'Unless our enemies rest also, they will leave us far behind, if we stay to sleep,' said Legolas.

'Surely even Orcs must pause on the march?' said Gimli.

'Seldom will Orcs journey in the open under the sun, yet these have done so,' said Legolas. 'Certainly they will not rest by night.'

'But if we walk by night, we cannot follow their trail,' said Gimli.

'The trail is straight, and turns neither right nor left, as far as my eyes can see,' said Legolas.

'Maybe, I could lead you at guess in the darkness and hold to the line,' said Aragorn; 'but if we strayed, or they turned aside, then when light came there might be long delay before the trail was found again.'

'And there is this also,' said Gimli: 'only by day can we see if any tracks lead away. If a prisoner should escape, or if one should be carried off, eastward, say, to the Great River, towards Mordor, we might pass the signs and never know it.'

'That is true,' said Aragorn. 'But if I read the signs back yonder rightly, the Orcs of the White Hand prevailed, and the whole

company is now bound for Isengard. Their present course bears me out.'

'Yet it would be rash to be sure of their counsels,' said Gimli. 'And what of escape? In the dark we should have passed the signs that led you to the brooch.'

'The Orcs will be doubly on their guard since then, and the prisoners even wearier,' said Legolas. 'There will be no escape again, if we do not contrive it. How that is to be done cannot be guessed, but first we must overtake them.'

'And yet even I, Dwarf of many journeys, and not the least hardy of my folk, cannot run all the way to Isengard without any pause,' said Gimli. 'My heart burns me too, and I would have started sooner; but now I must rest a little to run the better. And if we rest, then the blind night is the time to do so.'

'I said that it was a hard choice,' said Aragorn. 'How shall we end this debate?'

'You are our guide,' said Gimli, 'and you are skilled in the chase. You shall choose.'

'My heart bids me go on,' said Legolas. 'But we must hold together. I will follow your counsel.'

'You give the choice to an ill chooser,' said Aragorn. 'Since we passed through the Argonath my choices have gone amiss.' He fell silent, gazing north and west into the gathering night for a long while.

'We will not walk in the dark,' he said at length. 'The peril of missing the trail or signs of other coming and going seems to me the greater. If the Moon gave enough light, we would use it, but alas! he sets early and is yet young and pale.'

'And tonight he is shrouded anyway,' Gimli murmured. 'Would that the Lady had given us a light, such a gift as she gave to Frodo!'

‘It will be more needed where it is bestowed,’ said Aragorn. ‘With him lies the true Quest. Ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of this time. A vain pursuit from its beginning, maybe, which no choice of mine can mar or mend. Well, I have chosen. So let us use the time as best we may!’

He cast himself on the ground and fell at once into sleep, for he had not slept since their night under the shadow of Tol Brandir. Before dawn was in the sky he woke and rose. Gimli was still deep in slumber, but Legolas was standing, gazing northwards into the darkness, thoughtful and silent as a young tree in a windless night.

‘They are far far away,’ he said sadly, turning to Aragorn. ‘I know in my heart that they have not rested this night. Only an eagle could overtake them now.’

‘Nonetheless we will still follow as we may,’ said Aragorn. Stooping he roused the Dwarf. ‘Come! We must go,’ he said. ‘The scent is growing cold.’

‘But it is still dark,’ said Gimli. ‘Even Legolas on a hill-top could not see them till the Sun is up.’

‘I fear they have passed beyond my sight from hill or plain, under moon or sun,’ said Legolas.

‘Where sight fails the earth may bring us rumour,’ said Aragorn. ‘The land must groan under their hated feet.’ He stretched himself upon the ground with his ear pressed against the turf. He lay there motionless, for so long a time that Gimli wondered if he had swooned or fallen asleep again. Dawn came glimmering, and slowly a grey light grew about them. At last he rose, and now his friends could see his face: it was pale and drawn, and his look was troubled.

‘The rumour of the earth is dim and confused,’ he said. ‘Nothing walks upon it for many miles about us. Faint and far are

the feet of our enemies. But loud are the hoofs of the horses. It comes to my mind that I heard them, even as I lay on the ground in sleep, and they troubled my dreams: horses galloping, passing in the West. But now they are drawing ever further from us, riding northward. I wonder what is happening in this land!’ ‘Let us go!’ said Legolas.

So the third day of their pursuit began. During all its long hours of cloud and fitful sun they hardly paused, now striding, now running, as if no weariness could quench the fire that burned them. They seldom spoke. Over the wide solitude they passed and their elven-cloaks faded against the background of the grey-green fields; even in the cool sunlight of mid-day few but Elvish eyes would have marked them, until they were close at hand. Often in their hearts they thanked the Lady of Lórien for the gift of *lembas*, for they could eat of it and find new strength even as they ran.

All day the track of their enemies led straight on, going north-west without a break or turn. As once again the day wore to its end they came to long treeless slopes, where the land rose, swelling up towards a line of low humpbacked downs ahead. The orc-trail grew fainter as it bent north towards them, for the ground became harder and the grass shorter. Far away to the left the river Entwash wound, a silver thread in a green floor. No moving thing could be seen. Often Aragorn wondered that they saw no sign of beast or man. The dwellings of the Rohirrim were for the most part many leagues away to the South, under the wooded eaves of the White Mountains, now hidden in mist and cloud; yet the Horse-lords had formerly kept many herds and studs in the Eastemnet, this easterly region of their realm, and there the herdsmen had wandered much, living in camp and tent, even in winter-time. But now all the land

was empty, and there was a silence that did not seem to be the quiet of peace.

At dusk they halted again. Now twice twelve leagues they had passed over the plains of Rohan and the wall of the Eryn Muil was lost in the shadows of the East. The young moon was glimmering in a misty sky, but it gave small light, and the stars were veiled.

‘Now do I most grudge a time of rest or any halt in our chase,’ said Legolas. ‘The Orcs have run before us, as if the very whips of Sauron were behind them. I fear they have already reached the forest and the dark hills, and even now are passing into the shadows of the trees.’

Gimli ground his teeth. ‘This is a bitter end to our hope and to all our toil!’ he said.

‘To hope, maybe, but not to toil,’ said Aragorn. ‘We shall not turn back here. Yet I am weary.’ He gazed back along the way that they had come towards the night gathering in the East. ‘There is something strange at work in this land. I distrust the silence. I distrust even the pale Moon. The stars are faint; and I am weary as I have seldom been before, weary as no Ranger should be with a clear trail to follow. There is some will that lends speed to our foes and sets an unseen barrier before us: a weariness that is in the heart more than in the limb.’

‘Truly!’ said Legolas. ‘That I have known since first we came down from the Eryn Muil. For the will is not behind us but before us.’ He pointed away over the land of Rohan into the darkling West under the sickle moon.

‘Saruman!’ muttered Aragorn. ‘But he shall not turn us back! Halt we must once more; for, see! even the Moon is falling into

gathering cloud. But north lies our road between down and fen when day returns.'

As before Legolas was first afoot, if indeed he had ever slept. 'Awake! Awake!' he cried. 'It is a red dawn. Strange things await us by the eaves of the forest. Good or evil, I do not know; but we are called. Awake!'

The others sprang up, and almost at once they set off again. Slowly the downs drew near. It was still an hour before noon when they reached them: green slopes rising to bare ridges that ran in a line straight towards the North. At their feet the ground was dry and the turf short, but a long strip of sunken land, some ten miles wide, lay between them and the river wandering deep in dim thickets of reed and rush. Just to the West of the southernmost slope there was a great ring, where the turf had been torn and beaten by many trampling feet. From it the orc-trail ran out again, turning north along the dry skirts of the hills. Aragorn halted and examined the tracks closely.

'They rested here a while,' he said, 'but even the outward trail is already old. I fear that your heart spoke truly, Legolas: it is thrice twelve hours, I guess, since the Orcs stood where we now stand. If they held to their pace, then at sundown yesterday they would reach the borders of Fangorn.'

'I can see nothing away north or west but grass dwindling into mist,' said Gimli. 'Could we see the forest, if we climbed the hills?'

'It is still far away,' said Aragorn. 'If I remember rightly, these downs run eight leagues or more to the north, and then north-west to the issuing of the Entwash there lies still a wide land, another fifteen leagues it may be.'

‘Well, let us go on,’ said Gimli. ‘My legs must forget the miles. They would be more willing, if my heart were less heavy.’

The sun was sinking when at last they drew near to the end of the line of downs. For many hours they had marched without rest. They were going slowly now, and Gimli’s back was bent. Stone-hard are the Dwarves in labour or journey, but this endless chase began to tell on him, as all hope failed in his heart. Aragorn walked behind him, grim and silent, stooping now and again to scan some print or mark upon the ground. Only Legolas still stepped as lightly as ever, his feet hardly seeming to press the grass, leaving no footprints as he passed; but in the waybread of the Elves he found all the sustenance that he needed, and he could sleep, if sleep it could be called by Men, resting his mind in the strange paths of Elvish dreams, even as he walked open-eyed in the light of this world.

‘Let us go up on to this green hill!’ he said. Wearily they followed him, climbing the long slope, until they came out upon the top. It was a round hill smooth and bare, standing by itself, the most northerly of the downs. The sun sank and the shadows of evening fell like a curtain. They were alone in a grey formless world without mark or measure. Only far away north-west there was a deeper darkness against the dying light: the Mountains of Mist and the forest at their feet.

‘Nothing can we see to guide us here,’ said Gimli. ‘Well, now we must halt again and wear the night away. It is growing cold!’

‘The wind is north from the snows,’ said Aragorn.

‘And ere morning it will be in the East,’ said Legolas. ‘But rest, if you must. Yet do not cast all hope away. Tomorrow is unknown. Rede oft is found at the rising of the Sun.’

‘Three suns already have risen on our chase and brought no counsel,’ said Gimli.

The night grew ever colder. Aragorn and Gimli slept fitfully, and whenever they awoke they saw Legolas standing beside them, or walking to and fro, singing softly to himself in his own tongue, and as he sang the white stars opened in the hard black vault above. So the night passed. Together they watched the dawn grow slowly in the sky, now bare and cloudless, until at last the sunrise came. It was pale and clear. The wind was in the East and all the mists had rolled away; wide lands lay bleak about them in the bitter light.

Ahead and eastward they saw the windy uplands of the Wold of Rohan that they had already glimpsed many days ago from the Great River. North-westward stalked the dark forest of Fangorn; still ten leagues away stood its shadowy eaves, and its further slopes faded into the distant blue. Beyond there glimmered far away, as if floating on a grey cloud, the white head of tall Methedras, the last peak of the Misty Mountains. Out of the forest the Entwash flowed to meet them, its stream now swift and narrow, and its banks deep-cloven. The orc-trail turned from the downs towards it.

Following with his keen eyes the trail to the river, and then the river back towards the forest, Aragorn saw a shadow on the distant green, a dark swift-moving blur. He cast himself upon the ground and listened again intently. But Legolas stood beside him, shading his bright elven-eyes with his long slender hand, and he saw not a shadow, nor a blur, but the small figures of horsemen, many horsemen, and the glint of morning on the tips of their spears was like the twinkle of minute stars beyond the edge of mortal sight. Far behind them a dark smoke rose in thin curling threads.

There was a silence in the empty fields, and Gimli could hear the air moving in the grass.

‘Riders!’ cried Aragorn, springing to his feet. ‘Many riders on swift steeds are coming towards us!’

‘Yes,’ said Legolas, ‘there are one hundred and five. Yellow is their hair, and bright are their spears. Their leader is very tall.’

Aragorn smiled. ‘Keen are the eyes of the Elves,’ he said.

‘Nay! The riders are little more than five leagues distant,’ said Legolas.

‘Five leagues or one,’ said Gimli, ‘we cannot escape them in this bare land. Shall we wait for them here or go on our way?’

‘We will wait,’ said Aragorn. ‘I am weary, and our hunt has failed. Or at least others were before us; for these horsemen are riding back down the orc-trail. We may get news from them.’

‘Or spears,’ said Gimli.

‘There are three empty saddles, but I see no hobbits,’ said Legolas.

‘I did not say that we should hear good news,’ said Aragorn. ‘But evil or good we will await it here.’

The three companions now left the hill-top, where they might be an easy mark against the pale sky, and they walked slowly down the northward slope. A little above the hill’s foot they halted, and wrapping their cloaks about them, they sat huddled together upon the faded grass. The time passed slowly and heavily. The wind was thin and searching. Gimli was uneasy.

‘What do you know of these horsemen, Aragorn?’ he said. ‘Do we sit here waiting for sudden death?’

‘I have been among them,’ answered Aragorn. ‘They are proud and wilful, but they are true-hearted, generous in thought and deed; bold but not cruel; wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many songs, after the manner of the children of Men before the Dark Years. But I do not know what has happened here

of late, nor in what mind the Rohirrim may now be between the traitor Saruman and the threat of Sauron. They have long been the friends of the people of Gondor, though they are not akin to them. It was in forgotten years long ago that Eorl the Young brought them out of the North, and their kinship is rather with the Bardings of Dale, and with the Beornings of the Wood, among whom may still be seen many men tall and fair, as are the Riders of Rohan. At least they will not love the Orcs.'

'But Gandalf spoke of a rumour that they pay tribute to Mordor,' said Gimli.

'I believe it no more than did Boromir,' answered Aragorn.

'You will soon learn the truth,' said Legolas. 'Already they approach.'

At length even Gimli could hear the distant beat of galloping hoofs. The horsemen, following the trail, had turned from the river, and were drawing near the downs. They were riding like the wind.

Now the cries of clear strong voices came ringing over the fields. Suddenly they swept up with a noise like thunder, and the foremost horseman swerved, passing by the foot of the hill, and leading the host back southward along the western skirts of the downs. After him they rode: a long line of mail-clad men, swift, shining, fell and fair to look upon.

Their horses were of great stature, strong and clean-limbed; their grey coats glistened, their long tails flowed in the wind, their manes were braided on their proud necks. The Men that rode them matched them well: tall and long-limbed; their hair, flaxen-pale, flowed under their light helmets, and streamed in long braids behind them; their faces were stern and keen. In their hands were tall spears of ash, painted shields were slung at their backs, long

swords were at their belts, their burnished shirts of mail hung down upon their knees.

In pairs they galloped by, and though every now and then one rose in his stirrups and gazed ahead and to either side, they appeared not to perceive the three strangers sitting silently and watching them. The host had almost passed when suddenly Aragorn stood up, and called in a loud voice:

‘What news from the North, Riders of Rohan?’

With astonishing speed and skill they checked their steeds, wheeled, and came charging round. Soon the three companions found themselves in a ring of horsemen moving in a running circle, up the hill-slope behind them and down, round and round them, and drawing ever inwards. Aragorn stood silent, and the other two sat without moving, wondering what way things would turn.

Without a word or cry, suddenly, the Riders halted. A thicket of spears were pointed towards the strangers; and some of the horsemen had bows in hand, and their arrows were already fitted to the string. Then one rode forward, a tall man, taller than all the rest; from his helm as a crest a white horsetail flowed. He advanced until the point of his spear was within a foot of Aragorn’s breast. Aragorn did not stir.

‘Who are you, and what are you doing in this land?’ said the Rider, using the Common Speech of the West, in manner and tone like to the speech of Boromir, Man of Gondor.

‘I am called Strider,’ answered Aragorn. ‘I came out of the North. I am hunting Orcs.’

The Rider leaped from his horse. Giving his spear to another who rode up and dismounted at his side, he drew his sword and

stood face to face with Aragorn, surveying him keenly, and not without wonder. At length he spoke again.

‘At first I thought that you yourselves were Orcs,’ he said; ‘but now I see that it is not so. Indeed you know little of Orcs, if you go hunting them in this fashion. They were swift and well-armed, and they were many. You would have changed from hunters to prey, if ever you had overtaken them. But there is something strange about you, Strider.’ He bent his clear bright eyes again upon the Ranger. ‘That is no name for a Man that you give. And strange too is your raiment. Have you sprung out of the grass? How did you escape our sight? Are you Elvish folk?’

‘No,’ said Aragorn. ‘One only of us is an Elf, Legolas from the Woodland Realm in distant Mirkwood. But we have passed through Lothlórien, and the gifts and favour of the Lady go with us.’

The Rider looked at them with renewed wonder, but his eyes hardened. ‘Then there is a Lady in the Golden Wood, as old tales tell!’ he said. ‘Few escape her nets, they say. These are strange days! But if you have her favour, then you also are net-weavers and sorcerers, maybe.’ He turned a cold glance suddenly upon Legolas and Gimli. ‘Why do you not speak, silent ones?’ he demanded.

Gimli rose and planted his feet firmly apart: his hand gripped the handle of his axe, and his dark eyes flashed. ‘Give me your name, horse-master, and I will give you mine, and more besides,’ he said.

‘As for that,’ said the Rider, staring down at the Dwarf, ‘the stranger should declare himself first. Yet I am named Éomer son of Éomund, and am called the Third Marshal of Riddermark.’

‘Then Éomer son of Éomund, Third Marshal of Riddermark, let Gimli the Dwarf Glóin’s son warn you against foolish words. You

speak evil of that which is fair beyond the reach of your thought, and only little wit can excuse you.'

Éomer's eyes blazed, and the Men of Rohan murmured angrily, and closed in, advancing their spears. 'I would cut off your head, beard and all, Master Dwarf, if it stood but a little higher from the ground,' said Éomer.

'He stands not alone,' said Legolas, bending his bow and fitting an arrow with hands that moved quicker than sight. 'You would die before your stroke fell.'

Éomer raised his sword, and things might have gone ill, but Aragorn sprang between them, and raised his hand. 'Your pardon, Éomer!' he cried. 'When you know more you will understand why you have angered my companions. We intend no evil to Rohan, nor to any of its folk, neither to man nor to horse. Will you not hear our tale before you strike?'

'I will,' said Éomer lowering his blade. 'But wanderers in the Riddermark would be wise to be less haughty in these days of doubt. First tell me your right name.'

'First tell me whom you serve,' said Aragorn. 'Are you friend or foe of Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor?'

'I serve only the Lord of the Mark, Théoden King son of Thengel,' answered Éomer. 'We do not serve the Power of the Black Land far away, but neither are we yet at open war with him; and if you are fleeing from him, then you had best leave this land. There is trouble now on all our borders, and we are threatened; but we desire only to be free, and to live as we have lived, keeping our own, and serving no foreign lord, good or evil. We welcomed guests kindly in the better days, but in these times the unbidden stranger finds us swift and hard. Come! Who are you? Whom do *you* serve? At whose command do you hunt Orcs in our land?'

'I serve no man,' said Aragorn; 'but the servants of Sauron I pursue into whatever land they may go. There are few among

mortal Men who know more of Orcs; and I do not hunt them in this fashion out of choice. The Orcs whom we pursued took captive two of my friends. In such need a man that has no horse will go on foot, and he will not ask for leave to follow the trail. Nor will he count the heads of the enemy save with a sword. I am not weaponless.'

Aragorn threw back his cloak. The elven-sheath glittered as he grasped it, and the bright blade of Andúril shone like a sudden flame as he swept it out. 'Elendil!' he cried. 'I am Aragorn son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!'

Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement, for they had not seen him in this mood before. He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown.

Éomer stepped back and a look of awe was in his face. He cast down his proud eyes. 'These are indeed strange days,' he muttered. 'Dreams and legends spring to life out of the grass.'

'Tell me, lord,' he said, 'what brings you here? And what was the meaning of the dark words? Long has Boromir son of Denethor been gone seeking an answer, and the horse that we lent him came back riderless. What doom do you bring out of the North?'

'The doom of choice,' said Aragorn. 'You may say this to Théoden son of Thengel: open war lies before him, with Sauron or against him. None may live now as they have lived, and few shall keep what they call their own. But of these great matters we will speak later. If chance allows, I will come myself to the king. Now

I am in great need, and I ask for help, or at least for tidings. You heard that we are pursuing an orc-host that carried off our friends. What can you tell us?’

‘That you need not pursue them further,’ said Éomer. ‘The Orcs are destroyed.’

‘And our friends?’

‘We found none but Orcs.’

‘But that is strange indeed,’ said Aragorn. ‘Did you search the slain? Were there no bodies other than those of orc-kind? They would be small, only children to your eyes, unshod but clad in grey.’

‘There were no dwarves nor children,’ said Éomer. ‘We counted all the slain and despoiled them, and then we piled the carcasses and burned them, as is our custom. The ashes are smoking still.’

‘We do not speak of dwarves or children,’ said Gimli. ‘Our friends were hobbits.’

‘Hobbits?’ said Éomer. ‘And what may they be? It is a strange name.’

‘A strange name for a strange folk,’ said Gimli. ‘But these were very dear to us. It seems that you have heard in Rohan of the words that troubled Minas Tirith. They spoke of the Halfling. These hobbits are Halflings.’

‘Halflings!’ laughed the Rider that stood beside Éomer. ‘Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children’s tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?’

‘A man may do both,’ said Aragorn. ‘For not we but those who come after will make the legends of our time. The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!’

‘Time is pressing,’ said the Rider, not heeding Aragorn. ‘We must hasten south, lord. Let us leave these wild folk to their

fancies. Or let us bind them and take them to the king.’

‘Peace, Éothain!’ said Éomer in his own tongue. ‘Leave me a while. Tell the *éored* to assemble on the path, and make ready to ride to the Entwade.’

Muttering Éothain retired, and spoke to the others. Soon they drew off and left Éomer alone with the three companions.

‘All that you say is strange, Aragorn,’ he said. ‘Yet you speak the truth, that is plain: the Men of the Mark do not lie, and therefore they are not easily deceived. But you have not told all. Will you not now speak more fully of your errand, so that I may judge what to do?’

‘I set out from Imladris, as it is named in the rhyme, many weeks ago,’ answered Aragorn. ‘With me went Boromir of Minas Tirith. My errand was to go to that city with the son of Denethor, to aid his folk in their war against Sauron. But the Company that I journeyed with had other business. Of that I cannot speak now. Gandalf the Grey was our leader.’

‘Gandalf!’ Éomer exclaimed. ‘Gandalf Greyhame is known in the Mark; but his name, I warn you, is no longer a password to the king’s favour. He has been a guest in the land many times in the memory of men, coming as he will, after a season, or after many years. He is ever the herald of strange events: a bringer of evil, some now say.’

‘Indeed since his last coming in the summer all things have gone amiss. At that time our trouble with Saruman began. Until then we counted Saruman our friend, but Gandalf came then and warned us that sudden war was preparing in Isengard. He said that he himself had been a prisoner in Orthanc and had hardly escaped, and he begged for help. But Théoden would not listen to him, and he went away. Speak not the name of Gandalf loudly in Théoden’s

ears! He is wroth. For Gandalf took the horse that is called Shadowfax, the most precious of all the king's steeds, chief of the *Mearas*, which only the Lord of the Mark may ride. For the sire of their race was the great horse of Eorl that knew the speech of Men. Seven nights ago Shadowfax returned; but the king's anger is not less, for now the horse is wild and will let no man handle him.'

'Then Shadowfax has found his way alone from the far North,' said Aragorn; 'for it was there that he and Gandalf parted. But alas! Gandalf will ride no longer. He fell into darkness in the Mines of Moria and comes not again.'

'That is heavy tidings,' said Éomer. 'At least to me, and to many; though not to all, as you may find, if you come to the king.'

'It is tidings more grievous than any in this land can understand, though it may touch them sorely ere the year is much older,' said Aragorn. 'But when the great fall, the less must lead. My part it has been to guide our Company on the long road from Moria. Through Lórien we came – of which it were well that you should learn the truth ere you speak of it again – and thence down the leagues of the Great River to the falls of Rauros. There Boromir was slain by the same Orcs whom you destroyed.'

'Your news is all of woe!' cried Éomer in dismay. 'Great harm is this death to Minas Tirith, and to us all. That was a worthy man! All spoke his praise. He came seldom to the Mark, for he was ever in the wars on the East-borders; but I have seen him. More like to the swift sons of Eorl than to the grave Men of Gondor he seemed to me, and likely to prove a great captain of his people when his time came. But we have had no word of this grief out of Gondor. When did he fall?'

'It is now the fourth day since he was slain,' answered Aragorn; 'and since the evening of that day we have journeyed from the shadow of Tol Brandir.'

'On foot?' cried Éomer.

‘Yes, even as you see us.’

Wide wonder came into Éomer’s eyes. ‘Strider is too poor a name, son of Arathorn,’ he said. ‘Wingfoot I name you. This deed of the three friends should be sung in many a hall. Forty leagues and five you have measured ere the fourth day is ended! Hardy is the race of Elendil!

‘But now, lord, what would you have me do! I must return in haste to Théoden. I spoke warily before my men. It is true that we are not yet at open war with the Black Land, and there are some, close to the king’s ear, that speak craven counsels; but war is coming. We shall not forsake our old alliance with Gondor, and while they fight we shall aid them: so say I and all who hold with me. The East-mark is my charge, the ward of the Third Marshal, and I have removed all our herds and herdfolk, withdrawing them beyond Entwash, and leaving none here but guards and swift scouts.’

‘Then you do not pay tribute to Sauron?’ said Gimli.

‘We do not and we never have,’ said Éomer with a flash of his eyes; ‘though it comes to my ears that that lie has been told. Some years ago the Lord of the Black Land wished to purchase horses of us at great price, but we refused him, for he puts beasts to evil use. Then he sent plundering Orcs, and they carry off what they can, choosing always the black horses: few of these are now left. For that reason our feud with the Orcs is bitter.

‘But at this time our chief concern is with Saruman. He has claimed lordship over all this land, and there has been war between us for many months. He has taken Orcs into his service, and Wolf-riders, and evil Men, and he has closed the Gap against us, so that we are likely to be beset both east and west.

‘It is ill dealing with such a foe: he is a wizard both cunning and dwimmer-crafty, having many guises. He walks here and there, they say, as an old man hooded and cloaked, very like to

Gandalf, as many now recall. His spies slip through every net, and his birds of ill omen are abroad in the sky. I do not know how it will all end, and my heart misgives me; for it seems to me that his friends do not all dwell in Isengard. But if you come to the king's house, you shall see for yourself. Will you not come? Do I hope in vain that you have been sent to me for a help in doubt and need?'

'I will come when I may,' said Aragorn.

'Come now!' said Éomer. 'The Heir of Elendil would be a strength indeed to the Sons of Eorl in this evil tide. There is battle even now upon the Westemnet, and I fear that it may go ill for us.

'Indeed in this riding north I went without the king's leave, for in my absence his house is left with little guard. But scouts warned me of the orc-host coming down out of the East Wall four nights ago, and among them they reported that some bore the white badges of Saruman. So suspecting what I most fear, a league between Orthanc and the Dark Tower, I led forth my *éored*, men of my own household; and we overtook the Orcs at nightfall two days ago, near to the borders of the Entwood. There we surrounded them, and gave battle yesterday at dawn. Fifteen of my men I lost, and twelve horses alas! For the Orcs were greater in number than we counted on. Others joined them, coming out of the East across the Great River: their trail is plain to see a little north of this spot. And others, too, came out of the forest. Great Orcs, who also bore the White Hand of Isengard: that kind is stronger and more fell than all others.

'Nonetheless we put an end to them. But we have been too long away. We are needed south and west. Will you not come? There are spare horses as you see. There is work for the Sword to do. Yes, and we could find a use for Gimli's axe and the bow of Legolas, if they will pardon my rash words concerning the Lady of the Wood. I spoke only as do all men in my land, and I would gladly learn better.'

‘I thank you for your fair words,’ said Aragorn, ‘and my heart desires to come with you; but I cannot desert my friends while hope remains.’

‘Hope does not remain,’ said Éomer. ‘You will not find your friends on the North-borders.’

‘Yet my friends are not behind. We found a clear token not far from the East Wall that one at least of them was still alive there. But between the wall and the downs we have found no other trace of them, and no trail has turned aside, this way or that, unless my skill has wholly left me.’

‘Then what do you think has become of them?’

‘I do not know. They may have been slain and burned among the Orcs; but that you will say cannot be, and I do not fear it. I can only think that they were carried off into the forest before the battle, even before you encircled your foes, maybe. Can you swear that none escaped your net in such a way?’

‘I would swear that no Orc escaped after we sighted them,’ said Éomer. ‘We reached the forest-eaves before them, and if after that any living thing broke through our ring, then it was no Orc and had some Elvish power.’

‘Our friends were attired even as we are,’ said Aragorn; ‘and you passed us by under the full light of day.’

‘I had forgotten that,’ said Éomer. ‘It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily fields; and folk speak with the Lady of the Wood and yet live; and the Sword comes back to war that was broken in the long ages ere the fathers of our fathers rode into the Mark! How shall a man judge what to do in such times?’

‘As he ever has judged,’ said Aragorn. ‘Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and

Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man's part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.'

'True indeed,' said Éomer. 'But I do not doubt you, nor the deed which my heart would do. Yet I am not free to do all as I would. It is against our law to let strangers wander at will in our land, until the king himself shall give them leave, and more strict is the command in these days of peril. I have begged you to come back willingly with me, and you will not. Loth am I to begin a battle of one hundred against three.'

'I do not think your law was made for such a chance,' said Aragorn. 'Nor indeed am I a stranger; for I have been in this land before, more than once, and ridden with the host of the Rohirrim, though under other name and in other guise. You I have not seen before, for you are young, but I have spoken with Éomund your father, and with Théoden son of Thengel. Never in former days would any high lord of this land have constrained a man to abandon such a quest as mine. My duty at least is clear, to go on. Come now, son of Éomund, the choice must be made at last. Aid us, or at the worst let us go free. Or seek to carry out your law. If you do so there will be fewer to return to your war or to your king.'

Éomer was silent for a moment, then he spoke. 'We both have need of haste,' he said. 'My company chafes to be away, and every hour lessens your hope. This is my choice. You may go; and what is more, I will lend you horses. This only I ask: when your quest is achieved, or is proved vain, return with the horses over the Entwade to Meduseld, the high house in Edoras where Théoden now sits. Thus you shall prove to him that I have not misjudged. In this I place myself, and maybe my very life, in the keeping of your good faith. Do not fail.'

'I will not,' said Aragorn.

There was great wonder, and many dark and doubtful glances, among his men, when Éomer gave orders that the spare horses were to be lent to the strangers; but only Éothain dared to speak openly.

‘It may be well enough for this lord of the race of Gondor, as he claims,’ he said, ‘but who has heard of a horse of the Mark being given to a Dwarf?’

‘No one,’ said Gimli. ‘And do not trouble: no one will ever hear of it. I would sooner walk than sit on the back of any beast so great, free or begrudged.’

‘But you must ride now, or you will hinder us,’ said Aragorn.

‘Come, you shall sit behind me, friend Gimli,’ said Legolas. ‘Then all will be well, and you need neither borrow a horse nor be troubled by one.’

A great dark-grey horse was brought to Aragorn, and he mounted it. ‘Hasufel is his name,’ said Éomer. ‘May he bear you well and to better fortune than Gárulf, his late master!’

A smaller and lighter horse, but restive and fiery, was brought to Legolas. Arod was his name. But Legolas asked them to take off saddle and rein. ‘I need them not,’ he said, and leaped lightly up, and to their wonder Arod was tame and willing beneath him, moving here and there with but a spoken word: such was the Elvish way with all good beasts. Gimli was lifted up behind his friend, and he clung to him, not much more at ease than Sam Gamgee in a boat.

‘Farewell, and may you find what you seek!’ cried Éomer. ‘Return with what speed you may, and let our swords hereafter shine together!’

‘I will come,’ said Aragorn.

‘And I will come, too,’ said Gimli. ‘The matter of the Lady Galadriel lies still between us. I have yet to teach you gentle speech.’

‘We shall see,’ said Éomer. ‘So many strange things have chanced that to learn the praise of a fair lady under the loving strokes of a Dwarf’s axe will seem no great wonder. Farewell!’

With that they parted. Very swift were the horses of Rohan. When after a little Gimli looked back, the company of Éomer were already small and far away. Aragorn did not look back: he was watching the trail as they sped on their way, bending low with his head beside the neck of Hasufel. Before long they came to the borders of the Entwash, and there they met the other trail of which Éomer had spoken, coming down from the East out of the Wold.

Aragorn dismounted and surveyed the ground, then leaping back into the saddle, he rode away for some distance eastward, keeping to one side and taking care not to override the footprints. Then he again dismounted and examined the ground, going backwards and forwards on foot.

‘There is little to discover,’ he said when he returned. ‘The main trail is all confused with the passage of the horsemen as they came back; their outward course must have lain nearer the river. But this eastward trail is fresh and clear. There is no sign there of any feet going the other way, back towards Anduin. Now we must ride slower, and make sure that no trace or footstep branches off on either side. The Orcs must have been aware from this point that they were pursued; they may have made some attempt to get their captives away before they were overtaken.’

As they rode forward the day was overcast. Low grey clouds came over the Wold. A mist shrouded the sun. Ever nearer the tree-clad slopes of Fangorn loomed, slowly darkling as the sun went west. They saw no sign of any trail to right or left, but here

and there they passed single Orcs, fallen in their tracks as they ran, with grey-feathered arrows sticking in back or throat.

At last as the afternoon was waning they came to the eaves of the forest, and in an open glade among the first trees they found the place of the great burning: the ashes were still hot and smoking. Beside it was a great pile of helms and mail, cloven shields, and broken swords, bows and darts and other gear of war. Upon a stake in the middle was set a great goblin head; upon its shattered helm the white badge could still be seen. Further away, not far from the river, where it came streaming out from the edge of the wood, there was a mound. It was newly raised: the raw earth was covered with fresh-cut turves: about it were planted fifteen spears.

Aragorn and his companions searched far and wide about the field of battle, but the light faded, and evening soon drew down, dim and misty. By nightfall they had discovered no trace of Merry and Pippin.

‘We can do no more,’ said Gimli sadly. ‘We have been set many riddles since we came to Tol Brandir, but this is the hardest to unravel. I would guess that the burned bones of the hobbits are now mingled with the Orcs’. It will be hard news for Frodo, if he lives to hear it; and hard too for the old hobbit who waits in Rivendell. Elrond was against their coming.’

‘But Gandalf was not,’ said Legolas.

‘But Gandalf chose to come himself, and he was the first to be lost,’ answered Gimli. ‘His foresight failed him.’

‘The counsel of Gandalf was not founded on foreknowledge of safety, for himself or for others,’ said Aragorn. ‘There are some things that it is better to begin than to refuse, even though the end may be dark. But I shall not depart from this place yet. In any case we must here await the morning-light.’

A little way beyond the battle-field they made their camp under a spreading tree: it looked like a chestnut, and yet it still bore many broad brown leaves of a former year, like dry hands with long splayed fingers; they rattled mournfully in the night-breeze.

Gimli shivered. They had brought only one blanket apiece. 'Let us light a fire,' he said. 'I care no longer for the danger. Let the Orcs come as thick as summer-moths round a candle!'

'If those unhappy hobbits are astray in the woods, it might draw them hither,' said Legolas.

'And it might draw other things, neither Orc nor Hobbit,' said Aragorn. 'We are near to the mountain-marches of the traitor Saruman. Also we are on the very edge of Fangorn, and it is perilous to touch the trees of that wood, it is said.'

'But the Rohirrim made a great burning here yesterday,' said Gimli, 'and they felled trees for the fire, as can be seen. Yet they passed the night after safely here, when their labour was ended.'

'They were many,' said Aragorn, 'and they do not heed the wrath of Fangorn, for they come here seldom, and they do not go under the trees. But our paths are likely to lead us into the very forest itself. So have a care! Cut no living wood!'

'There is no need,' said Gimli. 'The Riders have left chip and bough enough, and there is dead wood lying in plenty.' He went off to gather fuel, and busied himself with building and kindling a fire; but Aragorn sat silent with his back to the great tree, deep in thought; and Legolas stood alone in the open, looking towards the profound shadow of the wood, leaning forward, as one who listens to voices calling from a distance.

When the Dwarf had a small bright blaze going, the three companions drew close to it and sat together, shrouding the light with their hooded forms. Legolas looked up at the boughs of the tree reaching out above them.

‘Look!’ he said. ‘The tree is glad of the fire!’

It may have been that the dancing shadows tricked their eyes, but certainly to each of the companions the boughs appeared to be bending this way and that so as to come above the flames, while the upper branches were stooping down; the brown leaves now stood out stiff, and rubbed together like many cold cracked hands taking comfort in the warmth.

There was a silence, for suddenly the dark and unknown forest, so near at hand, made itself felt as a great brooding presence, full of secret purpose. After a while Legolas spoke again.

‘Celeborn warned us not to go far into Fangorn,’ he said. ‘Do you know why, Aragorn? What are the fables of the forest that Boromir had heard?’

‘I have heard many tales in Gondor and elsewhere,’ said Aragorn, ‘but if it were not for the words of Celeborn I should deem them only fables that Men have made as true knowledge fades. I had thought of asking you what was the truth of the matter. And if an Elf of the wood does not know, how shall a Man answer?’

‘You have journeyed further than I,’ said Legolas. ‘I have heard nothing of this in my own land, save only songs that tell how the Onodrim, that Men call Ents, dwelt there long ago; for Fangorn is old, old even as the Elves would reckon it.’

‘Yes, it is old,’ said Aragorn, ‘as old as the forest by the Barrow-downs, and it is far greater. Elrond says that the two are akin, the last strongholds of the mighty woods of the Elder Days, in which the Firstborn roamed while Men still slept. Yet Fangorn holds some secret of its own. What it is I do not know.’

‘And I do not wish to know,’ said Gimli. ‘Let nothing that dwells in Fangorn be troubled on my account!’

They now drew lots for the watches, and the lot for the first watch fell to Gimli. The others lay down. Almost at once sleep

laid hold on them. ‘Gimli!’ said Aragorn drowsily. ‘Remember, it is perilous to cut bough or twig from a living tree in Fangorn. But do not stray far in search of dead wood. Let the fire die rather! Call me at need!’

With that he fell asleep. Legolas already lay motionless, his fair hands folded upon his breast, his eyes unclosed, blending living night and deep dream, as is the way with Elves. Gimli sat hunched by the fire, running his thumb thoughtfully along the edge of his axe. The tree rustled. There was no other sound.

Suddenly Gimli looked up, and there just on the edge of the firelight stood an old bent man, leaning on a staff, and wrapped in a great cloak; his wide-brimmed hat was pulled down over his eyes. Gimli sprang up, too amazed for the moment to cry out, though at once the thought flashed into his mind that Saruman had caught them. Both Aragorn and Legolas, roused by his sudden movement, sat up and stared. The old man did not speak or make a sign.

‘Well, father, what can we do for you?’ said Aragorn, leaping to his feet. ‘Come and be warm, if you are cold!’ He strode forward, but the old man was gone. There was no trace of him to be found near at hand, and they did not dare to wander far. The moon had set and the night was very dark.

Suddenly Legolas gave a cry. ‘The horses! The horses!’ The horses were gone. They had dragged their pickets and disappeared. For some time the three companions stood still and silent, troubled by this new stroke of ill fortune. They were under the eaves of Fangorn, and endless leagues lay between them and the Men of Rohan, their only friends in this wide and dangerous land. As they stood, it seemed to them that they heard, far off in the night, the sound of horses whinnying and neighing. Then all was quiet again, except for the cold rustle of the wind.

‘Well, they are gone,’ said Aragorn at last. ‘We cannot find them or catch them; so that if they do not return of their own will, we must do without. We started on our feet, and we have those still.’

‘Feet!’ said Gimli. ‘But we cannot eat them as well as walk on them.’ He threw some fuel on the fire and slumped down beside it.

‘Only a few hours ago you were unwilling to sit on a horse of Rohan,’ laughed Legolas. ‘You will make a rider yet.’

‘It seems unlikely that I shall have the chance,’ said Gimli.

‘If you wish to know what I think,’ he began again after a while, ‘I think it was Saruman. Who else? Remember the words of Éomer: *he walks about like an old man hooded and cloaked*. Those were the words. He has gone off with our horses, or scared them away, and here we are. There is more trouble coming to us, mark my words!’

‘I mark them,’ said Aragorn. ‘But I marked also that this old man had a hat not a hood. Still I do not doubt that you guess right, and that we are in peril here, by night or day. Yet in the meantime there is nothing that we can do but rest, while we may. I will watch for a while now, Gimli. I have more need of thought than of sleep.’

The night passed slowly. Legolas followed Aragorn, and Gimli followed Legolas, and their watches wore away. But nothing happened. The old man did not appear again, and the horses did not return.

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