

**A**T last, the people of Minas Tirith knew their king. The legends of old were on their lips again; in all the houses and hostels, men sang of the return of Gondor's line, swift to praise the man who had brought his army to their aid. Talk of a golden age spread as fast as the tale of Faramir's healing, even while wives mourned their husbands who had fallen on the Pelennor Fields.

But Aragorn himself moved quietly among them. Their losses had been grievous; he had no desire to burden them with the duties of servitude when their wounds remained deep. And moreover, the evils that still lay beyond Gondor were of ever greater concern. On Gandalf's counsel, Aragorn resolved to ride away from the city as captain of the army of the West; after brief preparations, he would lead as many of his men as could fight after the siege of Gondor, with Imrahil and Éomer each commanding their own forces by his side.

While the armies were assembled, he found himself weary. It troubled him to look on the faces of the widows and children of Minas Tirith, heartened by the sight of their king and yet so wretched, forced into a poverty that would last long months. He would see to it when he returned, he resolved, once the men and awful creatures of Mordor were dealt with. He could do no good for them now; instead, he wished selfishly for a moment's repose, and found himself making his way to the Healing House, a quieter place than most in the city. There he found the lady Éowyn, half-clothed in armour, but still pale, and slow as she turned to greet him.

"Lord Aragorn," said Éowyn, "are you come to set me free from this place? I have idled too long."

"Nay, lady," said Aragorn. "You still must rest."

He feared that she would argue, but she made no protest; for she herself knew that she was in no condition to leave the Healing House, much less to join her comrades on the battlefield. "Then go to Faramir," she said. "He has been asking for you."

"Has he yet risen?" Aragorn asked.

"He still lies abed," Éowyn said, "but he grows stronger with each hour, and the Warden thinks he will be up tomorrow."

Aragorn was cheered to hear it; and he proceeded to Faramir's bedside to find him seated, leaning against his pillows and smiling at the sight of his visitor.

“My king,” said Faramir. “Alas, I cannot stand to bow.”

“I have no need of your bowing,” said Aragorn. “I did not come here for praise.”

“No praise would be enough to thank you,” Faramir replied. “I was near death, they told me. I owe you my life.”

“Speak not of it, I beseech you,” said Aragorn. “Much has happened during your sickness. Tomorrow my forces make for Mordor.”

“Would that I could join you,” said Faramir. “You have the support of Minas Tirith, I trust.”

“Prince Imrahil is to lead a force from the city,” Aragorn confirmed.

“And what of my father?” said Faramir.

It was still too soon to tell him of Denethor’s madness; Gandalf had warned as much. “He was moved by your sickness,” Aragorn said carefully, thinking it wise to speak of other matters. Now that Faramir was a little stronger than last they had met, it was almost impossible to look at him without being reminded of Boromir. They had the same dark hair and grey eyes, and even the way Faramir sat in his bed, weak and pained though he clearly was, put him in mind of how Boromir had settled beside him at the campfire as they journeyed south from Rivendell. The thought of the man he had held so dear was as a dagger to his heart.

“I was with your brother at his death,” he said.

“Dear Boromir,” said Faramir; his eyes suddenly shone with tears, and Aragorn worried that he might weaken further and faint away; but at length he drew himself up and said, “Tell me. Did he suffer terribly?”

About this, Aragorn could not lie, not even by omission. “He was pierced with many arrows,” he said softly. “It was a cruel death.”

“But you were a comfort to him,” said Faramir.

“Not enough, alas,” Aragorn replied. “I could but take his hand while he spoke his last words.” He raised his own hand to his face to look at it; he could still remember how it had felt to clutch Boromir with that hand and feel his strength draining away.

To Aragorn’s surprise, Faramir reached for the hand and grasped it. He had not the limp grip of a sick man, Aragorn thought, although he still suffered; it was a strong hold, firm and sure.

“Forgive me,” said Faramir, although his face showed no repentance. “My beloved brother: his death still pains me. It would set my mind at ease to know his last moments. Is there more you remember?”

Aragorn remembered what had passed as if had been just the day before; his recollections of Boromir were still more vibrant than any other memories from his time with the Fellowship. “He bade me farewell,” he said. “He told me to come here, and to save his people.”

“That you have done,” said Faramir.

“I have not done it yet,” Aragorn protested, and he tried to pull his hand away from Faramir’s grasp; but Faramir held on still more tightly, and Aragorn found himself drawn forward until he was inches from Faramir’s face, so close to those features that were almost the same as those of dear Boromir.

“I trust you sent him off with honour,” Faramir murmured.

“I did,” said Aragorn, his voice low and insistent. At once, a compulsion came over him to prove to Faramir that he had bade his brother a heartfelt farewell; not just to tell him what he had done, but to show it.

He leant forward still further, and let his lips rest on the warm brow before them; and he closed his eyes, and it felt as if he was back in that field at the base of Amon Hen, saying goodbye to the friend who had been so dear. With reluctance, he pulled back; and he found with a little embarrassment that the grey eyes before him were still those of Faramir and not of his departed brother.

“I see,” said Faramir. “That was no mere kiss of companionship, Lord Aragorn.”

He spoke the truth: Aragorn had forgotten himself, and let his memory take over. No longer had he been in the Healing House in Minas Tirith, for a moment; he had found himself once again on the grass at Porth Galen. The man he stooped over had not been Faramir, for a second. All he had seen, in that instant, was battle-tanned skin and soft dark hair, and that

had been enough.

“It was a long journey,” he said softly. “A lonely one, with but one other man for company. Each of us provided the other with certain comforts.”

Faramir acknowledged his words with a slow nod; Aragorn dared look at his face, and saw nothing he could interpret as either discomfort or a blessing. “Do I shock you?” he asked.

At length, Faramir smiled. “Nay,” he said. “For what man could resist the strength and beauty of my brother? I saw it in my father’s house, when we had lately come of age; the young men who visited could barely keep themselves from him. They brought him gifts, rare flowers and stones from all over Middle-earth; but he never paid them any heed. His dear brother was company enough.”

Aragorn understood the meaning of his words, and stilled his hand in Faramir’s.

“It is I who have shocked you,” Faramir said.

“I never had a brother,” said Aragorn.

Faramir laughed then, a sad laugh, and said, “Well, most men do not have such fondness for their brothers as I had for mine, Lord Aragorn.”

He leant forward, placing his free hand against the back of Aragorn’s head, and kissed him on the mouth; Aragorn once again let himself forget where he was. For it was so easy: his memories of sweet Boromir’s touch had always lain close to the surface, ready to spill out at the first hint of a summons.

“Your lips are his lips,” he murmured against them.

Faramir drew back: there was a flush on his face that came not from sickness. “You pay me a fine compliment,” he said. “My king.” Aragorn shook his head in protest, but he spoke more insistently. “My *king*. When your battle is won, I shall be well.”

“Yes,” said Aragorn.

“You will return to me,” said Faramir.

“I shall return to Minas Tirith,” said Aragorn, “but not until the war is over. But, then, I will return, and I will come to you, my –” He hesitated a little. “My Steward.”

“Your Steward,” said Faramir. “It will be my greatest honour to serve; and to love. Farewell then, my king.”

“Farewell, dear Faramir,” said Aragorn as he took his leave. The pains of his heart were beginning to ease a little. He would take Boromir’s memories into battle, but now those memories were accompanied by something else: a glint of hope for the future, and, however selfish it seemed, for his own desires.