

It was biting cold and far too early when Boromir woke up. He groaned and propped himself up on his elbows to look around - the Hobbits were still snoring gently in their mound of blankets and coats, there were no sounds on the wind, and the fire was smoldering. He shifted closer to the glowing coals for warmth and rolled onto his back, looking up through the trees at the sullen pre-dawn sky.

The dull shadows melted into the ground around him, and everything felt empty and quiet in the growing light. There had been much talk of light and darkness lately, but it no longer reassured him. The darkness hid too much, and the light didn't hide enough.

He turned his eye to Frodo, curled up tightly with one hand clasping the Ring in his pocket. Ever since Boromir had held that Ring, even just by the chain, he'd been having dreams about Eliya. His muse, and maybe if things had turned out differently, his queen.

They were never nice dreams, never even prophetic dreams. The dreams were poison, digging with clawed hands at the darkest recesses of his mind and dragging their contents to the surface.

It was always the same. They had been traveling through the woods together, everything the same as the last time he'd seen her except that her dusty blonde hair was already matted and stained with blood. Boromir had stopped to inspect the area for a rumored cache of weapons, and told her he'd catch up.

"Find me when you have the Ring," Eliya called to him softly over her shoulder, "it'll lead you to me." It was her voice, but not her words.

As he saw her walking on, he tried to yell, shout, follow her, warn her, *anything* - but he couldn't move. Not without the Ring. He stood, helpless, reliving that fateful choice for the fifth night in a row.

Then the scream came. The piercing scream from behind the tree line, he knew it was her right away. It rang out for several long seconds and then stopped with a strange gurgle. He almost yelled for her again, but this time it caught in his throat. He didn't know what was down there, and in a moment of cowardice, he didn't want to. The chance of saving her was small, it sounded like her throat had been slit. Or worse. There was nothing he could do, he told himself, and now he was alone and unguarded in the woods.

He had walked away.

Sighing deeply, he sat up slightly and looked at Frodo more intensely. That damned halfling. That damned Ring. The others were still nearby and Boromir couldn't take it without killing or being killed, he knew that, and even with it the race of Men could only dream of holding the power to change the past and bring back the dead.

Boromir frowned and rolled over to turn his back on the Hobbit-pile, pulling his blankets right up around his neck. His eyes had started to sting from the wind chill and the early awakening, so he closed them slowly and let himself drift off again.

As he slipped away he hoped to see Eliya again, even under such terrible circumstances, but this time his mind filled with visions of the Ring. The strange markings inscribed on it glowed the brightest orange he'd ever seen, and the light danced across his vision.

*There's nothing I can do*, he repeated to himself, not sure if he was trying to convince himself or the Ring. Whispers danced around his head, an ethereal voice that was not quite his own and not quite someone else's.

"You're right," it hissed, "*nothing*. But you are able to change that; to have the power to protect your people. Grief is weakness among Men, but with the Ring you will be more than weakness. More than Man. You know what you must do."

Small cracks started to form in the ring and from them beamed a light, pure white like he'd only seen in Elven artifacts. More of the light splintered out of the Ring as it disintegrated, and a noise cut through the stifling air. It was Eliya's scream. Everything got louder and brighter until there was nothing else, the scream reached a crescendo, and then - it was all gone.

He was cast into cold, silent darkness.

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It was late morning when he awoke again, though it felt like only seconds had passed. The fire pit had been dismantled, and he could hear Aragorn behind him negotiating their food rations with Merry.

"Aragorn? Frodo... where's Frodo?" Boromir rolled over and mumbled.

Aragorn pointed to the East, still holding a small package of bacon in his hand. "Oi!" Merry yelped, scrambling to reach it. "We need that for lunch, you know!"

Boromir sat up straight and craned his neck to look. Frodo was sitting alone with his back to the group, maybe fifty paces away, barely visible behind the tall grass. He turned quickly as though he had felt the gaze on his back, and met Boromir's eye.

Even across the distance, Boromir could see a spark of fear and suspicion in Frodo's face - almost as if he knew what was going to happen. On the chain around his neck, the Ring glowed a faint orange. Frodo turned back, stood up and began walking hastily further away towards the riverbank.

Boromir scrambled to his feet and followed.