

The Captain's Last Charge

I am going to die.

The thought kept churning in Faramir's mind while he made his way from the Citadel to the army barracks. He paid no attention to where he was going; his feet carried him by their own volition, even as his mind was occupied with the discovery of his imminent demise.

Dying had always been a possibility, of course; a dark shadow hanging over him every time he returned to his duties in Ithilien. Yet never before had death been a certainty. And he found the knowledge strangely comforting.

It has come to this at last.

The Gondorian captain had no particular desire to die. Like any sane man, he wished to live to a grand old age and die peacefully in his bed, surrounded by his children and his children's children. At the very least, he desired to see another springtime paint the meads of Pelennor a fresh green and cloak the fertile wilderness of Ithilien in sweet-smelling blooms.

But such was not to be his fate, it seemed. He would not live to nightfall. The Steward had given his orders. In a few hours, he would ride out and attempt to take back what was lost.

"If I should return, think better of me, Father."

"That will depend upon the nature of your return."

His father's parting words echoed in his ears. They both knew there was only one way in which he could return from his current assignment.

Realization struck him, like a painful blow to the chest.

He really wants me to die.

Did his years of service not count? Years spent in Ithilien, slaying Orcs, facing Nazgûl? Was he such a disappointment to Denethor that his father could only admit to his worth if he gave his life for Gondor also, as his brother had? The thought brought fresh tears to his eyes, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. He focused upon his surroundings at last, and was startled to find himself before the door that led to the Rangers' quarters. He had no recollection on how he came here.

Faramir hesitated an instant before he pushed the door open and stood silently on the threshold.

It took his men several moments to notice their captain's presence and he used the time to study them unobserved. Sturdy, tanned men, all of them, they were busying themselves with oiling leather vambraces, sharpening swords, or whittling arrows.

So few are left.

Once a force that numbered in the hundreds, the Rangers' regiment before him had not even need for all the bedrolls in the single barracks.

I have failed them.

Perhaps Denethor was right. Perhaps only his death would expiate his failure as Captain of Ithilien. He mentally listed down the names of the men who died under his command. Some had passed on years ago, but he could recall every one of them still. And the next hour, his final hour in Minas Tirith, he would spend writing more letters. Letters to the families of those who died in the morning's battle. Arthadan and Hurion, and Madril, his loyal lieutenant for long years. So many had died. And still Osgiliath had fallen. Still Mordor was gathering its forces for the final assault on a crumbling Gondorian defense force.

"Captain! Sorry, sir, we did not notice you!"

The cry went through the barracks, and the Rangers dropped whatever they were doing and gathered around their captain.

He stared at their faces, one after the other -- and knew he would not give the order. He did not bemoan his own death so much, but he refused to assign the same destiny to those who had served faithfully under him.

Faramir swallowed. "The Steward has given his orders," he said, grateful to hear his voice was steady. "I am charged to retake Osgiliath."

The Rangers kept silent. The only sign of their discomfiture were the quick glances they threw at their captain's face before averting their eyes.

"Soon," Faramir continued, "I will set out to do our Lord's bidding. I shall not order any of you to accompany me. I will take only those who come of their own will." The discomfort increased, evidenced by shuffling feet and throats being cleared

surreptitiously.

"Know that no man will be diminished in my eyes, if he chooses not to come." Faramir paused a moment and lowered his voice. "I will not lie to you and say we have a chance. Those who ride out with me ride to their deaths. And Gondor will have need of strong, experienced soldiers on the walls of Minas Tirith soon."

"Captain Faramir, I would not leave your--"

Faramir held up his hand to silence the soldier. "Do not decide now," he said. "We will gather at the stables in one hour. You have until then."

Without waiting for further questions or protestations, Faramir turned on his heels and marched out the door. He could no longer abide to see their faces.

We are all going to die.

oOo

Sixty minutes and a dozen letters later, Faramir prepared himself for the coming battle. He put on his chain mail undershirt and donned the heavy battle armor atop the hauberk. It felt strange and clumsy, used as he was to the lighter attire of the Rangers. For a moment, he wondered why he even bothered. The heavy steel cuirass would not change the day's outcome. Then he squared his shoulders and girded on his sword. He took the winged helmet and carried it under his arm as he left his quarters without a look back. The armor might not allow him to survive; yet, hopefully, it would serve to keep him alive long enough to inflict some casualties upon the enemy.

I will not die a coward.

When he reached the stables, he discovered that his men were already present. They were checking each other's armor, or adjusting saddle or bridle on their horse. He did a quick count.

So few had come.

Yet they are too many.

Gondor no longer possessed the strength of numbers sufficient to drive the Orcs out of Osgiliath. The number of men that rode out today only mattered as the amount of Gondorian blood to be spilt upon the ancient city's ruins.

The Rangers lined themselves up for a final inspection. Faramir walked down the line, committing each face and name to memory.

"Túgann." He stopped in front of the soldier, who snapped up straighter. "Why are you here?"

"Sir?" The man looked confused. "I have no wish to desert you, Captain Faramir. Besides," he grinned suddenly beneath his helmet, "I *am* your best archer, sir!"

"Yeah. If you need someone to pierce his own hide," another soldier further down the line commented below his breath. The others guffawed at the jab. Faramir smiled.

"'Tis true," he admitted. "You are indeed skilled with a bow. Yet I have no particular need of marksmen today." His smile faded. "You have a young wife, have you not? And a newborn babe?"

"Aye, sir. A daughter."

"Go home, Túgann," Faramir said softly. "Go home to your wife and your little girl. Your death today would avail them nothing."

"But sir--"

"You are dismissed. And that *is* an order."

His features a mixture of resentment and relief as he took off his helmet, Túgann left the ranks.

Faramir continued his inspection and sent several others away, men he knew had families whom depended upon them. Until at last he faced only the most experienced, war-hardened men among the Rangers. Men who lived for battle, men who had no desire for a life outside of Gondor's armed service.

Faramir surveyed them, and nodded to himself. They were good men to die with. He wished, though, that he could dismiss them all. Except such an order would merely force them to disobey him, and he did not need to put such a burden upon their shoulders also.

Time stretched out before him.

I wish Boromir were here.

The thought came unbidden, and left him gasping. Still, it was true. Boromir would know what to say upon such an occasion. His brother would have a few inspiring words, a little joke perhaps, to ease the tension. Whereas he, Faramir, was left speechless. He could not think of a single thing to say that would express his feelings.

"Let us ride out."

They mounted in silence. Faramir headed the company and led them out of the barracks and down through the circles to the Great Gate. He was surprised to see how many people lined the streets. News had traveled fast, apparently. The crowd was subdued, staring at the passing Rangers wide-eyed and marking their path with the first flowers of spring -- a wordless tribute to those they knew would not return.

"Faramir! Faramir!" The sudden cry startled the captain from his introspection. He turned in his saddle to see Gandalf approach, robes flowing behind him. "Your father's will has turned to madness. Do not throw your life away so rashly."

Faramir's courage faltered, briefly. Did Mithrandir, who was so wise, not understand? "Where does my allegiance lie," he asked the wizard, "if not here?"

"Your father still loves you, Faramir. He will remember it before the end."

Faramir did not reply. Mayhap Mithrandir was right, and Denethor would remember. But not today. He brought his horse back into motion.

At last, the mounted Rangers reached the gates, which opened upon their approach. Outside, on the edge of the Pelennor Fields, Faramir halted his horse a moment. Behind him, the gates swung shut with the soft noise of creaking wood. In the distance loomed the ruins of Osgiliath.

He spurred his steed into a gallop. Without being ordered, the soldiers followed his example. Soon, the ground trembled beneath the pounding hooves.

Such was the Rangers' last charge.

Are you watching, Father?

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