

LIFE LESSON

The carriage swerved and the rattle of the wheels changed pitch as it rolled off the smooth flagstones of the road and onto the cobbles of the courtyard.

"Whoa," the driver cried and the wagon came to a standstill. Outside, the mounted escort milled about amidst horse snorts while their captain shouted orders.

Boromir twitched in his seat, no longer able to sit still. He was eager to get out of the coach and stretch his legs yet knew better than to do so without permission. Each year, after having spent the summer in Dol Amroth and visiting his grandfather and uncle, they stopped at *The Two Oaks* for lunch. The last two years, when travel wearied his mother increasingly, she lay down for an hour or so also in one of the large upstairs bedrooms. It proved a welcome interlude from sitting in the rocking carriage for hours.

"Momma? May I get out?"

His mother smiled. "Aye, Boromir, you may. But mind that you do not get all dirty. And do not go out of sight of the soldiers."

"Yes, Momma." Boromir grabbed his wooden sword from the cushion beside him, swung open the door and jumped down from the carriage, ignoring the steps

"Obomi! Fami too!"

Boromir froze and turned slowly. Eager gray eyes looked out from a chubby face and small hands reached for him.

"Look after your brother," his mother said, while Nurse lifted the toddler from the coach.

Boromir rolled his eyes. Why did he always have to take the baby along? Taking care of Faramir was Nurse's work, was it not?

She had already turned back to help his mother from the carriage. The driver took out a small valise and preceded the two women into the inn.

Boromir sighed. "Well, all right," he said magnanimously. "You can come and watch." Faramir grinned at him, a gap-toothed smile.

He skipped around the crowd of milling horses and soldiers, and ignored the inn's servants who bustled about to welcome their important guests. Faramir toddled on his

heels, nattering incomprehensibly in his own private babyspeak.

Boromir knew his way around. Behind the stables was a quiet area; nobody ever came there. Probably because it stank. But Boromir ignored the dungheap, the pigsty and the beady pig eyes watching him curiously. At least he could escape Nurse's piercing gaze for a bit, and practice his swings. The captain of their escort had showed him a move that was hard to learn.

The long ride had left him restless and full of energy. He wished his father had joined them for the journey; at least Father let him ride with him on the big horse sometimes. Nurse wanted him to use the time in the carriage to study his letters. She only gave in when he complained it made him feel sick, and never for long. He was eager to get away from her a bit and study more important matters, such as his sword skills.

He swung the blade experimentally, rolling his shoulders, like the soldiers always did before their practice. If he studied hard, he could show Father what he had learned. Perhaps Father would tell the armsmaster to give him a real sword, then! Wood swords were for children, really.

"Obomi?" Faramir tugged at his coat. "Go bird?" With a hopeful look, his brother pointed down a small path. A little ahead, a couple of tamed geese and a peacock wandered in an enclosed meadow.

"No, not now, Faramir. I'm busy, this is important." How could he ever become a soldier when people kept interrupting him?

He turned away from his little brother. What had the captain said? *Hold your arm up, like so. Then swing, left to right. Keep your wrist loose.*

Tongue stuck between his teeth in concentration, Boromir attempted to follow the remembered instructions. He brandished his sword, once, twice, three times. But the weapon grew heavy and he lowered it, resting the tip for a moment in the mud.

"Fami do." Two pudgy fists closed around the blade, nearly pulling it from Boromir's unsuspecting grip. He jerked it out of Faramir's hands, feeling a pang of guilt when the boy flinched.

"What did I tell you? A sword is not a toy for a baby." He glanced around. Where was Nurse when you needed her? She always seemed to be around when he did something she did not approve of. "You are lucky it is not sharp, or you would have cut yourself," he continued. "You must wait until you grow up to be a man."

Their nanny was nowhere in sight. She was probably with his mother still. Muted voices drifted from beyond the stable walls; the soldiers and hostlers remained busy with the horses. He had a few more moments before someone would come get them to wash up for lunch.

"Leave me alone, Faramir." Who would have thought a baby brother could be such a bother. The boy couldn't even say his name properly. It would have been better if Faramir had not learned how to walk either.

But when Boromir stalked off, Faramir simply followed on his wobbly legs. "Obomi!"

Boromir whirled, vexed. "Are you hard of hearing?"

Faramir reached for the sword again, fascinated.

"I said to leave me." Boromir pulled the sword out of reach with one hand while pushing his brother with the other. "Go away!"

The shove unbalanced Faramir and he could not compensate. With a startled gasp, he tripped and splashed into the muck. For a moment, shocked silence reigned, broken only by the surprised grunt of the swine who lifted their heads and trotted over to investigate. They looked big enough to squash Faramir.

"Git, git!" Boromir shouted at the beasts. He would not stand by while those smelling pigs ate his baby brother. "Shoo!"

He lunged with his sword. The pigs squealed and jostled against each other, eager to get away from the weapon. Faramir began to shriek.

"Hush, Faramir." Boromir watched the hogs warily and clutched the hilt in his fist. "I will protect you."

Faramir cried only harder, eyes scrunched tight and face going a deep red. Could he not shut up?

"Be still. You will frighten Nurse."

Boromir started tugging on his brother's elbow, trying to set him back on his feet. He brushed vainly at the mud spatters on Faramir's cheeks.

"Oh my sweetness!" Nurse scurried around the corner. "Lord Boromir, what have you done?" She scooped Faramir from the dirt and inspected him for injuries.

"Nothing." Why did he always get the blame?

He withered beneath Nurse's inquisitive look. "I pushed him." The look turned into a glare.

"Go in and get yourself cleaned up, my lord. Lunch is about to be served. Then we will see what milady your mother has to say when I tell her about your behavior. Your brother might have easily been hurt." She turned to Faramir and her stern tone turned gentle. "Hush, my lord. It is all right, just a bit of dirt. No harm done."

Shoulders slumped, sword dragging after him through the dirt, Boromir followed Nurse inside.

oOo

Lunch lasted forever. Boromir pushed his food around, barely eating.

"Boromir, finish your plate," Nurse told him when he put his fork down.

He sighed, and picked the fork back up. The inn's cook had made his favorite dish: meatcakes with applesauce on the side but for some reason it did not taste as good as he remembered.

He kept darting glances at his mother. She sat two seats over, with Nurse and his brother between them. She also did not eat much; her plate was still full when they came to clear the table. Nurse frowned when she noticed it, and Boromir half-expected that she would admonish his mother to finish her meal too.

Would Momma be very cross with him? At least the pigs had not hurt Faramir. Nurse had stopped his crying and cleaned him up, and he was happily smacking the applesauce with his spoon while chattering away.

When lunch was finished, his mother retired to the master bedchamber and Boromir was bidden to join her. The room was shaded, with the blinds already drawn to shut out the bright summer sun. His mother sat in a chair, wrapped in her blue dressing gown, her hair loose. She waved him near. "Boromir?"

He approached on leaden feet. "Yes, mother?"

"Mistress Hûbeth tells me you thrust your little brother among the pigs. Did you?"

"Yes mother." He spoke in but a whisper.

His mother sat forward. "Speak up, my son. I can not hear you."

Somehow, his mother's gentle disapproval was far worse than his father's anger would have been. "Yes, mother, I did." He looked up. "Faramir was being a pest. He wouldn't leave me alone."

"Would not," she corrected. "Boromir, that may be so, yet you are the elder. You must also be the wiser. Your brother is but a baby, and did I not ask you to look after him?"

Tears burned behind Boromir's eyes and he hung his head. "Yes."

She sighed. "You will be steward one day. A steward's job is to look after those who are small and weak, and to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Do you understand?"

He sniffled. "Yes, mother."

"Will you promise me you will remember that?"

"I promise." Again, his voice had softened until it was barely audible, yet this time his mother had no difficulty understanding him.

She smiled and reached out to brush a stray tear from his cheek. "Come here." She pulled him into his arms.

He hid his face against her bosom. "I did not mean it," he sobbed. "I was so frightened. I thought the pigs would eat Faramir!"

Her body began to shake. Boromir pulled away, startled. What was wrong? Had he made Momma cry? Had he made her more sick? But, although her eyes twinkled, there were no tears. She ran a hand through his hair. "You are a good boy, Boromir. You will make a great lord of Gondor one day."

The remorse weighed no longer as heavy beneath her kind words. "Will you... will you tell Father?" His voice quivered.

"I believe we have settled the matter between us, do you not? I do not think we should trouble your father."

Boromir sighed with relief. "No."

"Now, you should go. I must rest a bit."

She did sound tired and her face was a pale oval in the gloom of the bedchamber. Boromir creased his brow in concern. "Will you be all right, Momma?"

"Aye, I will. Do not worry."

"Sleep well," he said and kissed her cheek.

After he pulled the door close behind him, he scrubbed the last tears from his eyes and squared his shoulders. He would not forget the promise he made: he would protect his brother, and everyone else.

Boromir turned away from the door. Perhaps Faramir would like to go and feed the peacock some grains while Momma rested.

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