

Author's notes: I wish to thank Ann for her encouragement and initial beta, and Gwynnyd over at HASA for helping me work out the plotoles in the draft. If it's not obvious from some of the dialog at the beginning, this story is based on movie!verse.

PRIDE BEFORE THE FALL

"I ask only for the strength to defend my people!" All he desired was to protect Gondor, why did Frodo refuse to understand that? "If you would but lend me the Ring.."

"No!" The hobbit shied away, eyes wide, jaw set with determination.

Boromir stiffened. "Why do you recoil? I am no thief!"

"You are not yourself."

His brow furrowed in bemusement; he had never been more certain of the path he must take. He was Boromir son of Denethor, Captain-General of the Tower Guard, seasoned soldier and strategist -- with the Ring, none could stand against him; he would crush his enemies and lead Gondor to victory. If only he could convince the headstrong creature to give it up.

"What chance do you think you have?" he asked. "They will find you. They will take the Ring. And you will beg for death before the end!"

Still inching backward, Frodo stuck a hand down the neck of his shirt. Boromir's eyes narrowed. What was the little bastard planning? Trying to keep the Ring from him, was he? That would not do; the Ring should go to Gondor, it was their only chance. Was Frodo so set on destroying the jewel that he could not see?

He does not care about your home, a voice whispered. None of them do.

He heaved a sigh. There was nothing for it; the hobbit would never give up the Ring willingly, whatever arguments Boromir might use to convince him otherwise. "You fool! It is not yours save by unhappy chance." He dropped his bundle of firewood and lunged for the Ringbearer. "Give it to me. Give me the Ring!"

Frodo tripped over his own legs in his haste to get away, his fingers ever fumbling for the Ring. Boromir snatched for Frodo's hand, yanking the thin chain with the Ring out in the open. He pried away reluctant fingers. It was not as easy as might be expected; the hobbit was small, yet strong and brave, resisting fate until the last.

Not strong enough to withstand for long, though. An unbidden grin spread across Boromir's face when he had the shining jewel in his hand at last. What a gift to bring home to his father, such weapon to defend his people against the hordes from Mordor.

"Give it back," Frodo pleaded. All defiance was gone from his eyes; they had darkened with despair. "You do not know what the Ring does."

"Mayhap, but I know enough!" Boromir laughed. He held the Ring between thumb and forefinger to admire it. It was so bright, the way it reflected the filtered daylight that penetrated the canopy. "It will safeguard my land."

Before the hobbit could reply, muted calls began to drift among the trees. "Frodo? Boromir?"

Boromir gave a start. He had forgotten about the others.

"Aragorn! He--" Frodo never got the chance to finish. Boromir's fist shot out and hit him on the chin, hard. The hobbit went down without a further sound.

"Frodo?"

Aragorn appeared to come closer; the others likely not far behind. They would be upon them soon. And Aragorn would not let him keep the Ring; the Northerner believed he had not seen, but Boromir *had* noticed how Aragorn reached for his sword on the slopes of Caradhras after Frodo lost the Ring in the snow.

He had to keep the Ring safe; he could not allow himself to lose the jewel so soon after winning it. Without thinking, Boromir slipped it on and--

--the world shifted around him. Colors bled away, and unseen whisperers whirled around him. They talked in dark tongues, said words he could not recognize, yet he knew they spoke promises of doom. He clawed at his finger, trying to tear the Ring away.

Aragorn burst into the clearing, sword drawn. Boromir tensed. He abandoned his attempt to get the Ring off and reached for his own blade. Something was wrong with the ranger, though; he looked faded, colorless, like a pale, wraithlike version of himself. He never looked in Boromir's direction. His gaze fell upon the unconscious hobbit and in three great strides Aragorn dropped to his knees beside Frodo.

"Frodo?"

The hobbit moaned, slowly coming around. While Aragorn fussed over him, looking for injuries, the remaining members of the Fellowship arrived in the clearing one after the other. They too, seemed murky and pallid. None looked at Boromir.

They crowded around Frodo, faces creased with worry. The hobbit opened his eyes, blinking groggily.

"Where is Boromir? Aragorn asked.

Frodo lifted a hand to his jaw, cautiously testing the bruise Boromir's fist had left there. "He took the Ring. Boromir took the Ring."

Gasps and mutters escaped the others, and they peered around anxiously. Gimli firmed his grip on his ax while Legolas reached for an arrow.

Could they not see him?

The Ring...

A slow smile turned up Boromir's lips. So one of the Ring's gifts lay in cloaking the wearer from sight. Had Frodo known? He tiptoed around the group gathered beside the hobbit, carefully stepping over the loose leaves, and tugged at Gimli's braid. The dwarf spun around, eyes blazing. "Who--" With no obvious culprit in sight, he turned upon his eternal antagonist, like Boromir had expected.

"Confounded elf! Is this a time to play pranks?"

Legolas, startled, tensed at the accusation. He schooled his face until it showed nothing but calm, yet his jaw was taut and his back stiff. "Pranks?"

Boromir bit his tongue to suppress a giggle. Their ceaseless sniping had wearied him many a day; it was time they learned a lesson. Gimli appeared moments away from bursting with fury. The remaining hobbits stared at the pair in bewilderment.

He did not wait to see if they came to blows. He slunk away through the undergrowth, unseen, unnoticed, until he reached the water's edge. There, Boromir finally took off the Ring and the world returned to its normal state. He raised the Ring to his eyes to marvel at its golden perfection.

Such a little thing, yet it held such unimaginable power. To think they wished to destroy it. And what madness had possessed him to be prepared to help?

Aragorn insisted that no man could wield the Ring. But it had worked for Boromir, concealed him from the others. *Heir of Isildur, so he claims.* Boromir snorted. The North could keep him, if such was the extent of the man's courage. Gondor had no need of a cowardly king; it would need a bold captain, someone not afraid to use the enemy's weapon against him.

But mastering the Ring would have to wait. The others would soon find his tracks and come for him. Boromir secured the Ring in a pocket of his tunic and took out his belt knife. On the water, he would leave no trace, making it difficult to follow his trail even with eyes as keen as the elf's. He slashed two of the boats, making them useless, before pushing the third one into the water and hopping in.

oOo

The Falls of Rauros soon forced him to abandon the river. He sailed as far as he dared, until the roar of the tumbling waters drowned out all other sound. He pulled ashore, hid the boat as well as he could, and loped off through the forest without a backward glance.

The trek across land was frustratingly slow after the swift trip on the water. Though the woods thinned and the trees were smaller and farther between, the undergrowth grew denser. Thorny brambles and stands of hazel blocked his path. Boromir used his sword to hack his way through the shrubbery until the blade dulled. He lost track of how long he was stumbling through the wilderness, each day fading into the next while mad urgency drove him. To the east, enemy forces were gathering; soon, they would march on Minas Tirith. His city would need him, and the precious gift he carried; the faster he returned, the quicker could it be used to vanquish the enemy.

He slept but a few brief and restless hours in the depth of each night, when the moon was down and the forest too dark for him to see where to put his feet. He woke often, haunted by dreams; nightmares in which Minas Tirith fell before the enemy and the world turned dark for eternity. Sometimes, he thought he could feel eyes upon him, or hear the echo of pitterpattering feet that stilled as soon as he woke. Whenever weariness threatened to overtake him, he took out the Ring, cradled it in his palm, a finger tracing the smooth rim round and round, and listened to its promises. Those assurances gave him strength to keep running when an ordinary man might have collapsed with exhaustion.

He spared no time for meals, but ate while he ran. A few forgotten nuts and shriveled berries that had stuck to the bushes through the winter made up most of his fare, which he washed down with cold water from streams and ponds.

At dawn one morning, he stumbled upon a bobcat devouring its prey -- a grouse, if he were not mistaken. Reddish feathers and soft down floated in the still air with every

shake of the cat's head. The predator hunched down, snarling at Boromir through jaws tight around its kill. Though they were elusive, he had hunted such cats in the foothills of the White Mountains; when cornered, they could be dangerous -- but this one was blocking his path and there was no time to go around. His hand sought the Ring, securely in his pocket, and he snarled in turn at the animal.

Its growl changed to a whimper. The cat's ears flattened atop its head and it dropped the fowl, shrinking away from Boromir on bent legs before it turned and bounded off through the scrub, tail drooping. Boromir bared his teeth in a satisfied grimace; the cat attested that beasts of the wild acknowledged his mastery of the Ring -- the orcs of Mordor would surely prove no braver than this animal.

He snatched the fowl from the ground, brushed off the dirt and trotted onward. While he walked, he tore away the bird's last feathers and yanked off strips of pale meat that he stuffed into his mouth. It was an unpleasant meal, yet he did not dare stop to build a fire.

Gradually, the woods gave way to grassy marshlands; they, in turn, changed into the newly plowed fields of Anorien. Boromir wavered for a moment in indecision. Which course to take? To the east lay the garrison at Cair Andros; they could provide him with a horse to carry him the rest of the way. If, however, he continued south, heading for Minas Tirith on a straight path, he would soon reach the Great West Road, which would make for easy travel. And he might still find a horse along the way. Orodruin had grown more active during his absence; the mountain, visible beyond the river and the Ithilien woods, spewed up its poisonous cloud in a thick, billowing mass. It could mean the final assault was imminent and speed was of the utmost importance.

Mind made up, he went south, stumbling across the fresh furrows in the deep red soil of Anorien. At the first farm he passed, he took their only horse, brushing aside the farmer's protests that he needed the animal to work his land. It was an old mottled mare more suited for dragging a harrow than carrying a soldier, yet she would have to do. He pushed the mare relentlessly, ignoring the roll of her eyes and heaving flanks. Whenever she lagged, he drove her on with the flat of his blade, pushing her beyond her limits.

At last, Minas Tirith loomed on the horizon and despite his haste, Boromir took a moment to take in the sight and let the horse catch her breath. Affection surged through him at the white walls clinging to the mountainside, the slim Tower of Ecthelion jutting up far above the highest level of the city. Banners, too far away to make out their sigil, flapped in the wind.

The mare held on until he was within the bounds of the Pelennor Fields. There her heart gave out without warning and she collapsed in a knot of trembling legs, flinging Boromir out of the saddle. The impact drove the air from his lungs and he lay dazed for a

moment.

"Kiss a crossbred orc!" he swore when he had regained his breath. Still, he should count himself fortunate he had not broken his neck or ended up beneath the mare. One look told him she was dead. He was patting his bruises, checking for more serious injuries, when he came across the pocket that held the Ring.

It was empty.

The Ring was not there.

For one heart-stopping moment, panic chased all thought from his mind. He scrambled around on his knees through the grass, clawing at the dirt, tearing away clumps of wildflowers and flinging them over his shoulder. Where was it?

A ray of late afternoon sunlight pierced the clouds, bathing the world in a golden glow. Something blinked in the grass, and Boromir dove for it like a hawk would for a mouse. He laughed with relief when he held the Ring once more, dusty but undamaged in the fall. He wiped it clean and put it safely in his tunic once more before he clambered to his feet.

The Ring burned in his pocket and, collecting the last of his strength, Boromir started to jog across the Pelennor, a begrimed warrior, tattered cloak flapping behind him. He never noticed the startled looks the farmers gave him as he passed near their homesteads. Mothers grabbed their children and shoved them inside the houses when they caught the mad gleam in his eyes, yet Boromir ignored them. All that mattered was reaching the city, where he could lay the precious gem in his father's hands and ensure the future of his home.

Dusk had fallen and the gatekeepers were winching the doors of the Great Gate shut for the night. Two of the guardsmen lowered their halberds in Boromir's path. Their eyes shifted from his clothes to his face before they exchanged a glance.

"The gates are closed. You must come back tomorrow."

They presumed to refuse him entry? Boromir pulled himself up to his full height. One hand rested on the hilt of his sword, the other wrapped itself around the Ring hidden in the folds of his tunic.

"Stand down," he barked. "Gorvon, Noreg, how dare you challenge me? I am your Captain-General. I have returned, bearing important news for my father the Steward."

The guards' eyes widened; their faces paled, and they snapped their halberds upright. "We apologize, Lord Boromir," they said. "We did not recognize you."

He glared, dissatisfied with the poor excuse. It was not so long ago that he had departed for Rivendell. "If you cannot tell friend from foe, perhaps you would better serve in the vanguard eastward," he growled. At the border, anyone coming from the east could be presupposed to be the enemy.

"Yes, my lord." If anything, they paled even further.

Cowards. Discipline must have grown slack in his absence. He should send them to join the border patrol this very instant. Yet, he had more important matters to see to; the guards could wait until the morrow.

"Report to your captain at the third hour tomorrow," he told them. "Orders will be waiting."

"Yes sir." They jerked to attention, never stirring while he passed through the narrow slit left between the doors. Behind him, the gates swung close with a final, dull bang.

Boromir hurried along the city's seven circles. The streets were mostly deserted; over the years, the populace of Minas Tirith had declined until many houses stood abandoned. Paint peeled, ivy grew abundant in cracks between the stone blocks and beneath rafters. Only a few windows showed any light, and once, weak laughter drifted from an inn. It irked him like it had never before, to see how his once mighty home had gradually fallen into decay. One day, he would have it restored to its former beauty. Roofs would be repaired, stone walls mended. The laughter of children would mingle once more with the cries of hawkers. There would be music and singing in the taverns, and shops would line crowded streets. With the help of the Ring, he would see it done.

He stopped at the entrance to the tunnel leading to the citadel. Lamps had been lit, disbanding some of the darkness and illuminating the way across the uneven cobbles on the tunnel floor. At the far end of its upward slope and barely visible in the fading evening light, paced more soldiers. Boromir hesitated. He had no desire to waste more time on dim-witted troops who could not recognize their commander. And these guards were not the only ones he would need to pass by. If memory served, at this late hour he would find his father in the Tower Hall, where he liked to contemplate the day's important matters among the wise stares of the old kings. A guard would have been posted at the entrance to ensure the Steward remain undisturbed.

No, it was best he slip in unnoticed. He dug up the Ring and put it on his finger. Strange, how well it seemed to fit him, almost as if it were forged for him.

Unseen, hidden in the ghostly world of the Ring, he traversed the tunnel and walked past the guards. He placed his feet carefully so as not to make a sound that might alert them. As soon as he entered the citadel grounds, he veered toward the Tower, where, like he had expected, a soldier stood in front of the heavy door. Boromir did not remember him; the guardsman was young, with soft fuzz on his cheeks barely worthy of a razor. A new recruit, then. But young and inexperienced or not, the boy posed a problem. Though he could not be seen, it would be impossible for Boromir to open the door to the Tower Hall without the guard noticing. His cry of alarm would bring down an entire company of soldiers before Boromir had a chance to speak with his father.

He drew the Ring off. "Step aside, lad."

The boy's eyes widened with fright at the man materializing before his eyes seemingly from thin air.

"Who... You cannot..." he squeaked, voice cracking. He fumbled to pull his sword from its scabbard.

Boromir sighed, and swung his own blade in a wide arch. He caught the boy on the skull, just beneath the rim of the helmet. It was a well-aimed blow with the flat of the sword, and the guard crumpled without a further sound. His armor jingled softly for a moment, then he lay still. A small trickle of blood seeped from his helmet. Boromir paid him no further mind and stepped over the body to push open the door.

Lit candles in sconces lined the walls of the Hall, attempting and failing to chase off the night's gloom. Shadows played over the features of the kings. Boromir avoided looking at them; the light of the flames made it seem as if the stone had come alive, the statues' stern gazes piercing his soul. His father paid no attention to either the shadows or the stone kings; he slumped on the hard seat beneath the white marble throne high on its dais, deep in thought. True to his custom, Denethor was alone.

Why have we not yet thrown out that ugly old chair? An idle thought, yet a valid question. Aragorn -- Boromir's mouth twisted with distaste -- would never put forward his claim, while the line of Húrin certainly had earned the throne.

He cleared his throat. "Father."

Denethor's head shot up and he sprang out of the chair. Gripping the white rod of his office tight, he raised it like an undersized quarter staff. "Who dares to sneak up--"

"Father, it is I, Boromir," Boromir interrupted, startled at the response. Did even his

father no longer know him? He had been gone not a year yet; and though his travels had been hard, he could not have changed so much.

"Are you not pleased to see me? Wait until I show you what worthy gift I bring you."

Denethor lowered the rod. "Boromir?" He peered at his son, his expression incredulous. "Is it truly you? What terrible fate has befallen you?"

"No, not terrible," Boromir said. "A most fortuitous happenstance came about, Father. I have found the powerful weapon you asked me to bring. Behold!" He held up the Ring, mesmerized by the way its smooth surface reflected the candle light. It was an effort to pull his eyes away and look at the Steward.

"With this, we will destroy Mordor. We will raze Sauron's realm to the ground. And we will restore the might of our people until none shall dare stand against us. Show me how it works and we will conquer the world!"

Denethor squinted at the Ring. "The weapon of the enemy," he whispered. "Never had I thought..." His voice faded and he brought his eyes back to his son's face. He approached slowly, wariness lining his features. "Give it to me, Boromir." He held out his free hand.

Without thinking, Boromir took a step back. His fingers curled around the Ring. To consider giving it up, even to his father, even for an instant... "It is mine," he said. "Mine!"

Raised voices rang outside the Tower Hall. Someone shouted to get the healers, followed by the sound of boots clattering off at a run. They had found the guard. Boromir's grip tensed on the hilt of his sword.

The door opened and a grizzled lieutenant in the uniform of the Tower Guard marched in, blade half bared, three soldiers on his heels. "My Lord?"

"What is it?" Denethor barked. He never shifted his gaze from his son, eyes riveted on the fist that concealed the Ring.

The soldiers fanned out behind their commander, encircling Boromir cautiously. He raised his blade, blinking with surprise at the half-dried blood glistening in the candle's flames.

"Tholvel is found dead, murdered outside your door," the lieutenant said. "He was guarding your solitude when someone whopped him over the head."

"Dead?" Denethor turned to stare at the guards. He was silent for a moment before he shook his head. "Then go find his murderer. Post another guard."

"My lord?" The lieutenant hesitated, glaring at Boromir.

"Did you not hear my father?" Boromir snapped. "Go. Go!"

Still, the soldiers hesitated, torn between duty and their Steward's command.

Calmly, Denethor said, "Please, lieutenant. Let me conduct my business with my son in peace."

It took another heartbeat before the guardsmen saluted. "As you command, my lord."

Denethor waited until the door closed behind them before he directed his attention back to Boromir. "Murder, Boromir?"

Boromir shrugged, not truly surprised. His father had always shown great understanding for necessity. "I must have hit him harder than I thought. The boy was in my way. I will not let anything or anyone stand in our way to victory."

Something shifted in his father's look, a spark that extinguished in his eyes. Denethor sighed deeply and his shoulders drooped, as if suddenly burdened with a great weight.

"Fear has blinded me, but I see it now," he said. His voice was low, barely audible, as if he were speaking to himself. "The history scrolls spoke true; it is a vile thing, this Ring. A curse, a poison. I should not have sent you to chase after this wicked thing; I should have sent Faramir."

Boromir shook his head. "No! Why do you say that? My brother would never have understood what needed to be done. You said it yourself: Faramir would have failed you."

His father gave a nod. "Aye."

"You wish I had failed?" Boromir's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Why would his father deny his worth, the eldest and most favored son? Was this a ploy to get hold of the Ring?

"Look at yourself, Boromir. See what possession of that foul gem has done to you. Please, give it to me." Denethor took another step toward Boromir, hand held out once more.

Boromir thrust his fist deep into his pocket. His father was old, craven. Did he dare trust

Gondor's defenses to such a captain? Should the Ring not be wielded by a younger, stronger man? "It is mine," he snarled. "I won it. I will wield it. For Gondor."

Still Denethor kept coming, slowly but surely. "It is not meant for men to use. It will destroy you. It will destroy Gondor."

"No!" Boromir backed away until he could go no further. "Liar," he growled. "You promised me victory. Yet now you wish to take this weapon from my hand, saying it cannot be wielded. But I see you."

A cold stone pedestal pressed against his back. Boromir glanced up to find unseeing eyes stare off over his head. It was one of the few kings he remembered by name: Tarondor, the king who moved the seat of power to this very city, who strove to rebuild his country after the Great Plague. Tarandor would understand that he only did what must be done. For their people. For their homeland.

"I see what you want. You want it for yourself. You care not for Gondor." Boromir shoved his father roughly. Caught off guard, Denethor floundered against one of the dark marble pillars. The white rod slipped from his fingers and clattered across the smooth tiles.

Boromir drew his sword and stood to tower over his father. The look of dismay in Denethor's eyes disgusted him. His father's mouth worked, but he was not interested in hearing false pleas. "You are a traitor, to your people, to your land. And to me."

Unmindful of the hands Denethor held up in supplication, Boromir shoved his blade down hard. The point, dark with the young guard's blood and blunted during his mad flight through the forest, slid through velvet and flesh easily beneath his weight. With a soft clunk, it hit the stone floor beneath and refused to go further. Boromir let up and straightened.

Blood bubbled on his father's lips. "Forgive me, my son..." Denethor gasped before he continued, "for I have wronged you terribly." A moan, a sigh, then his chest no longer rose or fell, and dull eyes stared without seeing.

Boromir leaned down and wiped his blade clean on his father's cloak. With a hand, he brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"Lord Steward!" Booted feet thumped the Tower Hall, announcing the return of the guardsmen. Boromir stood to face them. He straightened his back and squared his shoulders. The soldiers faltered to a stop before his stare, hands limp on their sword pommels.

"The traitor Denethor is dead," Boromir said. His voice could have frozen the Bay of Belfalas. "I, Boromir of House Húrin, am your commander now. Is there any who would dare challenge me for my birthright?" The Ring sat heavy and hot inside his pocket and his hand clenched around it.

One by one the guards shook their head. They did not meet his eyes, their gazes focused on the tiles at their feet.

"Good. Send runners south, gather the armies," Boromir said. He did not look at his father's corpse. "And have someone fetch Eärnur's crown. Gondor will march on Mordor, and she shall do so under command of a King."

Drabble-sized Epilogue

Strong winds drove the distant screams to his cell atop Barad-dûr. Shackled to the wall, he listened -- orcs roamed freely, burning, raping, killing. The chains that held him were unneeded; crushed of spirit, memory of his own deeds held him more captive than any bond could: his father, murdered; his brother, imprisoned; his people, enslaved; his city, destroyed.

Defeated, his legions annihilated, even honor in death had been denied him. The Ring-maker *thanked* him as he took the jewel from his hand, then sent him to this cell.

Alone in eternal darkness, Boromir hearkened the world false pride had wrought.

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