

Surprise Inspection by AmandaK

Boromir reined in his horse and poured some water from his water skin onto a kerchief. He wiped the sodden cloth across his brow but it did little to cool his skin. He glanced back at the three men with him. They looked as hot and dusted as he felt, with strands of sweat-darkened hair plastered against dirt-streaked foreheads. Behind them, far off on the horizon, Minas Tirith hovered like a shimmering blob of white against the dark-bluish face of Mount Mindolluin. He turned in the saddle again, the leather creaking, and gazed across the parched fields ahead. He could make out the ragged lines of the Osgiliath ruins against the clear blue sky; it was not far, now, perhaps another half hour.

It would be a long half hour under the baking noon sun.

Their journey had not gone according to plan. Boromir had left Minas Tirith at sunrise in the company of his two trusted advisers Cúnir and Mórion, and his young aide Hebor, fully expecting to reach Osgiliath before the worst of the summer heat struck. He had welcomed Cúnir's suggestion to hold a surprise inspection whole-heartedly: the tedious liberations of his father's council were chafing his nerves raw and his desire to get away from the stifling heat in the city was strong. But the unannounced early departure had much chagrined the City's garrison commander. Once he learnt of Boromir's desire to visit the ruined city, he complained that, had the Captain-General seen fit to inform him of his wishes, he could have had a platoon of the City Guard waiting and ready to ride out with the Captain-General—a complaint to which Cúnir drily remarked, "Had the Captain-General proclaimed his desire for a surprise inspection of the troops at Osgiliath, it would not have been a surprise any longer, now would it?"

Boromir chuckled beneath his breath at the memory of the look on the garrison commander's face. He knew he should not laugh, that the man had only tried to do his duty as he saw it, but sometimes it irked him that as supreme military commander of Gondor's armed forces he could never be a soldier among soldiers any more. Not the way it had been, during the early days of his service as an aide to the then Captain-General when he had run messages, not sent them, and delivered orders, not given them.

In any case, they should have arrived at Osgiliath hours ago, before the sun rose high enough to scorch the Pelennor fields with its relentless white heat. But one of the horses had lost a shoe and finding a farrier to replace it had taken longer than Boromir would have liked. Thus, the sun was nearing its zenith, and they were caught out in the open, with nary a patch of shade in sight. There was naught to do but ride on and yearn for the cool shade of the Osgiliath ruins.

There was one thing he could do to make himself more comfortable, though. Even as the thought struck, he reached for the shoulder clasps that held his leather cuirass in place, the light armor all protection he had donned before riding out. Hebor brought his horse up beside Boromir, a concerned wrinkle marring his otherwise smooth face. "My lord, you should not... What if there are orcs about?"

Boromir laughed. "Orcs? In this heat? No, do not fret, lad, I think I stand a much higher chance to melt beneath this sun than I am to encounter an orc arrow. And how would you explain that to my father?" He let out a deep breath of relief when the cuirass came free. There was no wind to speak of, but just being able to drag his sodden undershirt away from heated skin gave him great pleasure.

Emboldened by their commander's example, the other men followed suit, though Hebor needed another verbal assurance from his lord that they would be all right. After they had strapped their armor tightly behind their saddles, the men climbed back on their horses. Boromir led them on. Another half hour at most, and they would reach the shade that Osgiliath's crumpled walls cast. There, they could rest up a bit, and, with luck, the captain would have cool cider or wine available.

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As they neared the ruined city, Boromir stopped his horse again and squinted against the bright hot glare of the sun reflecting off the river in the distance.

"What is going on there?" Mórion said, giving voice to Boromir's thoughts. The lieutenant pulled up beside Boromir and lifted a hand to shade his eyes. "Could they be under attack?" A crowd of people appeared to be milling about on the bridge across the Anduin, dropping over the side into the fast-moving river.

Boromir frowned. "It is impossible to say," he said. At this distance the people on the bridge were no larger than ants and it was hard to make out what exactly they were doing. Could it be true, could Osgiliath be under attack? It was hard to imagine orcs venturing out on a day like today, with their well-known disgust for sunlight, but on the other hand, it was not unheard of for Mordor to employ people from further south. And those men came from lands where nothing grew but dust and rocks; they were used to the summer's heat.

Boromir hesitated another moment, resisting the urge to spur his horse into a gallop. They were just four, after all, and not all of them experienced soldiers. Hebor had joined his service the week before, and though the lad knew which end of a sword to hold, he was young enough that he need shave only once every three days; Boromir wasn't about to waste the boy's life on an ill-advised attempt to come to Osgiliath's rescue. If the bridge were indeed under attack—and he was not yet certain at this point—their swords would make little difference; although the company encamped

at Osgiliath consisted mostly of young soldiers, they were well-trained and led by men who had been bloodied in battle before. No, if this was an attack, there were better ways they could aid the soldiers of Osgiliath than rushing in and adding their blades to the fighting.

Realizing he would need more information before he could decide on the best course of action, Boromir rode on, spurring his horse into a trot. His men followed on his heels. He kept his eyes on the bridge, blinking when the dust his horse's hooves threw up made them sting. Noises started to reach them, drifting on the air, muted at first but growing more pronounced when what little breeze wafted in from the river carried shouts and yelling from the men on the bridge to Boromir's ears.

Abruptly, he drew his horse to halt. The animal shook his head, snorting in protest at the sudden stop. "My lord, what—" Hebor began, but Boromir raised a hand to beckon the boy to silence.

"Is that... laughter I hear?"

His two lieutenants cocked their heads, wearing identical expressions of fierce concentration.

"I believe it is," Cúnir said slowly after a few moments had passed.

Mórlion nodded his agreement. "I do think so, too, my lord."

Relief washed over Boromir. He had seen and heard many a strange thing in the heat of battle, but never had laughter come in to play. If the men on the bridge were laughing, then they could not be under attack.

It still begged the question of what they were doing on the bridge they were charged to protect and defend that caused such merriment, but with the urgency to reach Osgiliath forthwith lessened, Boromir and his small company continued at pace better suited to the heat.

Close to the old city's broken walls, two young sentries carrying pikes accosted them. "Who goes there?"

Cúnir pushed his horse forward. "Please inform your commander that the Captain-General has arrived and wishes to inspect the troops."

"The Capt—?"

Boromir watched the two soldiers, boys still, really, exchange a wide-eyed glance. The one on the left, a tall, lanky lad, paled beneath his crop of unruly brown hair, whereas the other's face grew even redder than the sun had already burned it. Most curious...

"Sir," the taller of the two stammered, "the captain is not here. He went to Cair Andros."

"Then take us to whomever is in charge."

The lads snapped a salute and the red-faced soldier set off at a run. Boromir's horse carried him after the man and into the streets of Osgiliath at a more moderate pace. Though the walls had crumbled and many of the once-majestic stone palaces were falling to ruin, the streets were clear of rubble. He nodded approvingly; rubbish in the street could trip up soldiers during a fight, or give an enemy undue advantage by providing them something to hide from the defenders' arrows.

They navigated through the abandoned streets towards the river bank, and the shrieks and laughter grew louder. They could no longer see the bridge; it had been hidden behind the city proper for a time now, and Boromir was growing more and more curious to find out what exactly it could be that brought the men to create such a racket.

At last they reached the large plaza that used to be the fish market when Osgiliath was still populated. High walls around the square provided some shade and two-dozen or so off-duty men lounged in small clusters playing at stones or talking quietly amongst themselves. They watched the newcomers with interest. One or two recognized Boromir and nudged their neighbors even as they sprang to their feet, offering a respectful salute. Boromir slipped from his saddle before acknowledging their greeting. There was something odd about the soldiers, and it took him several seconds to realize that all present were older men, grizzled and scarred from many a war campaign.

Before he could contemplate the matter further, the sentry came running back, a young lieutenant scurrying on his heels.

"Sir, this is lieutenant Gornir. The captain left him in charge during his absence."

Boromir dismissed the sentry, who looked a bit relieved he had done his duty and could return to his companion to guard the road. Boromir shifted his attention to the lieutenant. The man was panting for air and at the same time tugging on his vambraces, juggling his helmet and baldric in the other hand.

"My lord..." he gasped. "Captain-General... Nobody told me... I would not have allowed..."

Boromir's brow drew down in puzzlement at the man's stuttering. "Is something amiss, lieutenant?"

Gornir turned as beet-red as the sentry had. The crease in Boromir's forehead deepened and worry niggled in his mind. "I would like to inspect the men, if you please."

"Sir, that's... I'm..."

Worry turned to annoyance. Boromir's good mood at being away from the City for a spell had evaporated during the long, hot ride to Osgiliath, and he had looked forward to rest in the shade as well as to having something cool to drink and a bite to eat before continuing his inspection. But the lieutenant's behavior told him something was not right in Osgiliath, and it seemed his visit had not come a day too soon.

"I believe the Captain-General means right *now*."

The warning contained in Cúnir's tone made the lieutenant blanch. He stiffened and gave a curt nod. "Yes sir." Turning to the soldiers who watched the exchange from the shade, Gornir barked at them to rally the rest of the troops and line them up for inspection. They saluted and hurried off. A moment later, the sounds drifting from the direction of the river stilled and Osgiliath grew quiet. Somewhere high above, a bird cawed.

"Well?" Boromir said.

Gornir drew a deep breath and swiveled on his heels. "If you would follow me, please." He sounded like a man headed for the gallows. A shiver of apprehension wanted to run through Boromir. The ancient city of Osgiliath played an important part in Gondor's defenses and thoughts about what misdoings could have the lieutenant so nervous chilled him to his core.

He followed Gornir through a shady, narrow alleyway leading from the market down to the river. He could see a patch of silver-blue water sparkle beneath the sunlight at the end of the alley. They reached the river's edge and Gornir preceded Boromir around the corner onto the decrepit stone docks.

The Captain-General stopped dead in his tracks.

A full company of Gondorian soldiers stood at attention on the old docks, formed up in rigid lines, their backs ramrod straight, their shoulders squared.

They were also stark naked, and dripping wet.

It took all Boromir had to keep his jaw in place and not let it drop in astonishment. Hebor made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded like a nervous snicker, and Boromir shot him a glare. The sound cut off and the boy swallowed visibly beneath his master's fierce look.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mórion said.

"It... it is so hot," Lieutenant Gornir said. "And... and the river looked so cool. The men asked... and I thought..."

"You *thought*?" Cúnir stepped up into the lieutenant's face. "You are charged with the security of Osgiliath, and as such the safety of the Pelennor, of Minas Tirith itself. The threat of Mordor ever looms over us. And you *thought* it would be all right to caper around in the sun?"

Boromir glanced at Gornir, who searched for something to reply. He pondered the lines of naked men. They had heaped their clothes and armor at the foot of the wall of the nearest building, near the end of the docks. The clothes had been placed in neat little piles, the armor laid out beside them, ready to be donned. Most significantly, a scabbarded sword rested atop each pile, worn hafts pointing at the river in such a way that the weapons could be drawn in an instant. The pikemen's spears leaned against another wall, easily reached.

He rubbed his chin in thought. "Sentries?" he asked.

"Posted across the river, sir." Gornir pointed. "I also deployed scouts further out to warn of any enemy approaching." The lieutenant drew himself up. "Mordor will not catch us unawares, my lord," he said. Despite the tremor in his voice, he sounded convinced. "We are ready."

Cúnir snorted, loudly.

"Hm." Boromir peered across the Anduin toward Ithilien, the glare from the sun on the river making his eyes water. He thought he could detect the nearest sentries on the opposite shore, half-hidden in the underbrush that grew back as fast as they could cut it away to keep their lines of sight clear. He was not quite sure what to think. On the one hand, it was a relief to learn he had not stumbled upon an orgy of drunken soldiers enjoying the company of pleasure girls smuggled in from Minas Tirith, as he had come to fear, yet on the other hand... "How long?"

"My lord?"

"How long between the first alarm and battle readiness?"

"Mere moments, my lord," the lieutenant assured Boromir. He seemed certain.

"A demonstration, then, if you please."

Gornir saluted. He stepped away from Boromir, facing the soldiers, and hollered the command. The group of naked Gondorians sprang into action and started for their gear in a flurry of movement. Boromir counted the seconds. He realized there was a deliberate design behind the way

the clothes had been piled up. The men didn't have to scramble and dig around, but could simply start at the top with their underclothes. True to the lieutenant's words, it did not take them long to put their gear back on, girth their scabbards and draw their swords or heft their pikes. They did not wear the regular army's full-body armor, with the steel helmets and heavy spaulders, but Boromir surmised that in the current heat, such an outfit of mail and steel was likely to be as much hindrance as help, should Osgiliath come under attack.

"Sir." Gornir saluted again.

"Impressive," Mórion admitted grudgingly. "Still, lieutenant, this is—"

Boromir held up his hand. He stared down the lines of soldiers, most of them young men, many still boys, really. Sweat and river water beaded brows and chins barely showing fuzz where beards would one day grow—assuming they lived long enough. Today, however, it was unlikely anyone would die. He turned back to the Osgiliath commander.

"I've seen enough. Tell your men to carry on."

"My lord?" The order seemed to confuse the lieutenant.

"As they were." Boromir's lips quirked in a half-smile. "It is quite a torrid day today, would you not agree, lieutenant? Perhaps further manoeuvres should wait until the sun has lowered somewhat."

Slow understanding dawned on Gornir, and a wide grin filled with relief crept onto his face. "Aye, my lord."

Cheers rose from the assembled soldiers once Boromir's orders were passed down. In an instant, their clothes had been piled up again and water splashed as dozens of soldiers jumped back into the river. Boromir watched them a little whistful. At times like these, he could wish he were not the Steward's son or the Captain-General. The river did look inviting. But it would never do for him to be seen frolicing naked with the men.

Releasing a sigh, he turned away. "Lieutenant, I would like to take our midday meal now before I take a look at your logs. I assume we can use your captain's quarters?"

"Yes sir." The lieutenant hesitated a moment. "My lord... if I may..."

Boromir quirked a brow.

"There is a shallows about a quarter league upriver," Gornir said hastily. "It's shaded and sheltered, and I thought, mayhap..." His voice faded and a fresh blush crept onto his face. He dipped his head.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. That was—"

Boromir grinned. "Lead the way, lieutenant."

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