

Weighty Praise

"Captain Faramir. You have shown your quality, sir. The very highest."

For long moments, I can only stare at the Hobbit, the words not quite making their way into my comprehension. Then I smile, inordinately pleased.

"The Shire must truly be a great realm, Master Gamgee," I answer, "where gardeners are held in high regard."

Sam blushes and scuffles his feet in embarrassment. Then it is time for a few last words, filled with warning and counsel on the dangerous road ahead. Before long, the two Hobbits vanish into the old sewer, that gangrel creature who serves as their guide on their heels. As I look after their disappearing forms, I wonder if they truly realize they carry the fate of all Middle-earth with them.

When we first captured the little creatures that call themselves Hobbits, I did not quite know what to think of them. Were they spies for the enemy, as my men suspected? Or did they speak the truth and were they innocent travelers from the Shire; wherever that realm might be? They did not feel evil to me -- and, despite my father's misgivings in such matters, I like to listen to my instincts.

Then I found out what treasure they bore.

The One Ring spoke many promises, whispered in a dark voice inside my head. For an eternity, while it gleamed, dangling from the tip of my sword, all I could think about was my father. This great Ring, the Ring of Power, lost for so many centuries, would be a mighty gift, indeed. Our father sent Boromir to Rivendell to procure this particular item, choosing him over me once again. But my brother is dead, and here the Ring was so close, I had but reach out my hand to grasp it.

What would Denethor say if it were I, Faramir, who brought him the Ring -- and not Boromir, his favored son? He would no longer be able to deny my quality as captain of Gondor. He would have to accept me as a worthy son in the line of the Stewards. And, mayhap, he would finally admit that he loved me as he loved my brother.

I was in great doubt about what to do. The Ring's lure was strong, its voice persuasive, the rewards it spoke of tempting beyond measure. All the way from the caves at Henneth Annûn to the ruins of Osgiliath I tried to make up my mind -- until finally I gave in and ordered the halflings be taken to my father.

But that decision did not give me the peace of mind I had anticipated. Doubt still

lingered. And Sam's charges against my brother enforced my reserve. Boromir would never break a vow; unless the Hobbit was right, and the Ring had driven him mad.

"Captain Faramir?"

I give a start as Madril's voice cuts through my memories. I realize I have been staring into the shadows of the sewer tunnel for several long minutes, lost in thought.

"Aye," I acknowledge my faithful lieutenant, turning on my heels to face him.

He gazes at me uncertainly for a moment, starts to say something, then snaps his mouth close again. I wait, but when he finally speaks it is not what I expected. "The scouts have returned," he informs me brusquely. "They bring word of Orcs building crafts to sail across the Anduin."

With his sword, he outlines the river in the dust of the once fair city, marking the locations where our scouts spotted the Orc armies gathering on the eastern shores of the Anduin. "The enemy is preparing for a landing right here in Osgiliath."

I study the sketch for a moment, and can only concur with Madril's evaluation. "Good," I mutter. I know we will not be able to prevent the forces of Mordor from crossing the river. But we can keep them busy and distracted. Our best option is to ambush them and kill as many as possible before they drive us out of Osgiliath. Our numbers are simply too few to have any hope in holding the city.

I start giving orders, telling Madril my plan, when I notice his puzzlement. The shadow of his doubt hovers over us like a storm cloud. I cannot afford to have my lieutenants question my judgement. Not here, not now. I believe I know what disturbs him; and if he does not speak of the matter of his own, I will have to compel him to voice his concerns.

"What troubles you?" I ask. "Speak freely."

For a long moment, he keeps silent. Then, making up his mind, he says, "The Hobbits, sir. Why did you let them go? The One Ring would prove a mighty weapon. The laws of your father--"

"I know the laws of my father," I interrupt him. "Do you not see, Madril? This Ring, this weapon, it is not meant for Man to wield. Yes, the Ring would change our fortunes in war, but for the worse; it would work for the enemy, instead of for Gondor. It would turn against us, become the knife in our backs."

I pause for a moment while I look off to the east, where the mountains of Mordor loom in the distance. They are barely visible through the smoke rising from the ruins of Osgiliath and the occasional spout of water when another Orc missile lands in the Anduin. My thoughts go out to the two brave creatures that have to travel across those mountains, carrying such a terrible burden. It was during the Nazgûl attack that I realized what grave mistake I was about to make and recognized the Ring's promises for the falsehoods they were. I can never buy my father's respect or love, no matter what mighty gifts I should send him. He will find fault with me still, for that is the man he is.

"I meant it when I said my life is forfeit," I tell Madril. "I aim to keep this treacherous jewel as far away from the White City as I can, no matter the price. You heard the Hobbit tell of Boromir's fate. You witnessed how he was nearly slain at the hands of the Ringbearer -- his friend. Do you still believe the Ring should go to Gondor?"

"But to send it off to the enemy, in the hands of two halflings!" Madril protests.

I laugh softly. "Not with ten thousand men would we be able to take the Ring into Mordor and destroy it. You know this. But two small, harmless-looking creatures might pass unnoticed. Especially when Mordor's forces are occupied with wresting Osgiliath away from us. With a little luck, Sam and Frodo will succeed in what they set out to do."

Madril seems to ponder this for a moment. I can see he is not quite convinced, but he appears to understand my reasoning. At least he no longer looks at me with the belief I have taken leave of my senses written upon his face. "If the Steward asks--" he begins reluctantly, and I interrupt him again.

"Then tell him the truth. I would not have you abandon honor on my behalf, my old friend."

"Aye, captain." He lowers his head.

I smile to myself. I am aware Madril still disagrees but he has not lost faith. I know others will disagree with my decision also. My father especially, if the men in our company live long enough for someone to tell him. But I am convinced that I have done the right thing. I do not need Sam to tell me that I have shown my quality when faced with the greatest challenge in my life. Yet, the recognition that I did pleases me. And should I die here tonight, in the defense of my land, I shall die with a peaceful mind.

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