The Strength of Men

by randi2204

Summary

Elrond's words resonated with young Estel, and shaped his life.

Notes

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“I was there the day the strength of Men failed,” Elrond said, his face and tone sterner than Estel could ever remember—and Lord Elrond could be incredibly stern when he chose. It was not often, though, that he spoke of the great battle of his younger days, when he had been in the host of Gil-galad, and Estel listened with eyes wide, paying attention with the single-mindedness only an eight-year old could muster.

“Isildur cut the One Ring from Sauron’s hand, using nothing more than the shattered hilt of his father’s sword. There was a great cry, a rush of air, as Sauron fell, and the hosts of Men and Elves fell with him, unable to keep their footing in the face of such wind. Some never rose again.

“At the foot of Mount Doom, Isildur dropped his father’s sword, and stretched out his hand to the Ring, picking it from the charcoal of the Enemy’s fingers. All was chaos about him, but he stared only at the Ring, as if it would give him the secrets of the world, knowledge beyond time.” For a moment, Elrond stared off into space, leaning forward slightly, elbows braced on his knees.
Estel swallowed, and it seemed impossible for his eyes to grow any rounder. He dared not speak, but he wanted to hear the rest of the story. He did not know why they were not in the library, where the rest of his lessons took place, but they were in the inner hall, sitting on one of the benches there. Across the way, there was a mural, barely visible in the surprisingly dark room, and a statue of a graceful lady that reminded him achingly of his mother.

Before he could find the nerve to ask Elrond to continue his tale, the Elven lord shook his head slightly, to bring himself back from the memory in which he’d lost himself. “I took him up into Mount Doom, to the very place where the Ring had been forged, and I bade him cast it in to the fire. For that was the only place it could be destroyed, there where it had been made.”

Elrond turned to him then, his gaze hard, and Estel felt his heart beat faster in fear. He had never seen the Elf so harsh, so wroth. Even in the deep silence of this room, Estel had to strain to hear his words. “And he said me, ‘No’.”

As if sensing that he was frightening the boy, Elrond looked away, straightening slightly. “He said he would keep it, that it would be the heirloom of his house. That was later, of course, once he had climbed down from the cavern in the mountain. At that moment, though, with the fury of the mountain around us and the air shimmering in the heat, all he said was ‘No’. I thought I saw a shadow pass over his face, and the way he looked at me—like I was less than nothing… the Ring had taken him.”

The Elf stood then, and walked across to the mural, saying nothing. Estel slid from the bench and followed to stand beside him. He glanced sidelong at the painting on the wall, but most of his attention was fixed on Elrond.

“Estel. Look at the mural,” Elrond ordered softly. “Who do you see?”

Obediently, Estel studied the painting. In it, a man had fallen, but was trying to get back up. One of his hands braced him against the ground, while the other held what looked like a very short sword. Light flared around the sword, yet some artist’s trick made it look like it was dying, that the light was fading, even as the man held it up. The fallen man held the sword between himself and a tall shadowy shape wearing a fearsome black mask.

Estel blinked and peered closer, sensing that there was something he was missing. The sword! It was too short, and too jagged, too slanted at the tip to have been made that way. “It is the broken sword,” he said at last. “That must be Isildur and the Enemy.” As soon as he had spoken, he turned his eyes up to the tall form next to him for approval.
Slowly, Elrond nodded. “Yes. That is Isildur.” He took a breath as if to say more, then seemed to think better of it and fell silent.

Looking again at the mural, Estel cocked his head to one side. The man on the ground looked like any other man, though he could recall seeing only a few in his life… but still, there was a sense of the noble about him, an air that was strange to his young mind. “He was not a bad man, was he?” He asked the question haltingly, trying to reconcile what the artist had rendered with what Elrond had said.

The Elf gave him one of his grave smiles. “No, he was not an evil man. He was just… weak. Like most Men.”

Slowly, Estel nodded, though the words struck a deep part of him and hurt. He did not then know why.

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“No longer shall you be Estel, but who you truly are, who you were born to be. You are Aragorn, son of Arathorn, of the line of kings. You are Isildur’s heir.”

Losing himself from Elrond’s words seemed impossible. They followed him no matter where he went, from the roar of the waterfall to the silence of the forest and every airy hall and pleasant garden in between.

He studiously avoided the dim hall where Narsil lay enshrined on fine silk and velvet, where the mural of Sauron’s defeat graced the wall. While at first he had been gladdened to learn that he was the descendent of kings, that he might one day be king himself, now he was reminded of his childhood lessons, and the great battle in Mordor.

“I was there the day the strength of Men failed.”

Even the sunshine streaming down into the green glade in which he stood could not warm him. His heart had turned to ice, and it was sharp and brittle in his breast. He shuddered despite the heat of the sun, and could find no ease from his discontent.

Wherever he looked, Aragorn could see Isildur on the field of battle, tall and proud in his victory, mourning over his father and brother, who died on the ashy plain.
When he closed his eyes, though… he saw Isildur as Elrond had seen him in the crack of Mount Doom; he saw the sneer curling his lip, the hunger for power in his eyes, watched him turn away from what would assure his victory would be complete.

*And that blood flows in me,* he thought, and could not stop the despair he felt from welling up in him.

For a moment, he imagined that his ancestor was there with him, and thought he could feel Isildur’s large hands heavy on his arms, could feel the stubble of his beard against his cheek as he leaned in to murmur promises to him…

He forced his eyes open, staring at the trees around him and willing his tears not to fall.

*I am Estel—no, I am Aragorn. I am not Isildur. I am not.*

And when his blood sang sweetly to him of power and lordship, he took his leave of Elrond and departed Imladris for the wild.

He would not be king. He would not allow himself to fall prey to the temptation Isildur whispered in his ear.

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Many years later, Gandalf met him on the borders of the Shire, where the wizard spent much time. The old man’s face was even more careworn than usual, lines carved deep around his mouth, bleak and nearly hopeless. “It has been found, Aragorn. And he knows this. He searches for it.”

It took a moment for Aragorn to divine what Gandalf meant. “The One Ring?” he whispered, fearing to speak its name too loudly, lest he be overheard.

Gandalf nodded solemnly.

And suddenly, Isildur was with him again, a presence stronger than he had been for a long, long
time. He didn’t have to imagine; he could feel the other man with him, behind him. The strong arms were wrapped around him, hands sneaking in beneath his vest until he could practically feel the sword-hardened palms against his skin. The armor Isildur wore was solid and strangely warm against his back; they were pressed so close that he thought that the designs and dents would be imprinted on his flesh. And the deep voice once again was lifted to speak inaudibly in his ear…

“My son… my heir… it is yours, your birthright…”

No, it is not! I don’t…

“Do not deny you want it. Your heart knows better… knows that it belongs to you…”

“Aragorn?”

Gandalf’s voice, sharp, puzzled, made Aragorn start and look up, dazed. The wizard was looking at him, his face creased in concern. “Are you all right?”

He felt off-balance, slow to recognize the words that struck his ear. But he pulled himself together as quickly as he could, and nodded.

Gandalf looked at him searchingly for a moment, but seemed to accept his response in the end, and settled down beside his small fire.

But as the old man started to outline what he wanted to do over the coming months, to keep Sauron from knowing just where the Ring was hidden, Aragorn was distracted and distant.

For Isildur was still with him, within him.

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Frodo had wandered away from them, as had been his wont of late, since leaving Lothlorien. Galadriel had said something to him that haunted him, of that Aragorn was sure.

When Boromir had also gone missing from their camp on the lake, within sight of Rauros Falls… Aragorn had not hesitated to search for them, despite the chaos he knew would ensue.
He found the hobbit atop Amon Hen, in the ruins of the watchtower there, panting as if he’d run a great distance, or had a terrible scare. “Frodo?”

Frodo jumped at the sound of his name, turning, and his fear was plain on his face. “It has taken Boromir,” he said simply, knowing that Aragorn would know what he meant without further words.

“How is the Ring?” he asked, his voice harsh, and he could not tell if it was only anger at what Boromir had done or if somehow Isildur was speaking through him, the desire for what he considered his taking him over.

“Stay away!” Frodo scrambled backwards, through the watchtower, and nearly tumbled down the hill. Only his quick grip against the stone saved him.

“Frodo?” He took a step forward, wanting only to help, but Frodo saw other intent in him, and stood poised for flight.

“I swore to protect you,” he protested, hands spread wide, trying to calm the frightened hobbit.

“Can you protect me from yourself?” Frodo shot back, and Aragorn knew then that Boromir had tried to wrest the Ring from him, that there might be no way to ease the betrayal the hobbit felt.

And then… Frodo held out his hand, the Ring winking golden in his palm. “Would you destroy it?”

He could not tell, then, what Frodo was doing—was he offering the Ring freely? Was he asking Aragorn to shoulder the burden? Was he tempting him deliberately?

Then he heard the siren call of the ring… and it was not Isildur’s voice that spoke to him, that whispered of power and glory. It was darker, it was stronger, it seeped through him like groundwater and left him feeling soiled and empty.

Aragorn…
Elessar…

He drew closer hesitantly, his reluctance vivid in every step. There was only silence now; the air was still except for the murmur of the Ring.

Slowly, Aragorn sank to his knees in front of Frodo, reached out his hand…

And folded the hobbit’s fingers around the burden he carried, pressed that hand back against his chest. “I would have gone with you to the end,” he whispered, each word filled with regret, “into the very fires of Mordor.” His hands trembled as he withdrew them, as if leaving the Ring in Frodo’s hand was the most difficult thing he’d ever done.

“I know.” Frodo whispered, and his bright blue eyes seemed to say that he’d felt Aragorn’s struggle as his own.

A moment of understanding, and then it was shattered. He sent Frodo fleeing down the hillside, away from the evil that pursued him, and turned to face his fate with absolute calm.

Evil rolled off the Uruk-hai in waves, and their sheer numbers should have daunted him. But Aragorn advanced upon them, and as he swung at the first, the knowledge he’d gained buoyed him.

Isildur had never been with him, except as his own fear personified. If in his long ago ancestor the strength of Men had failed, if it had failed in Boromir, in him, at least, it was redeemed.

And recognizing that, Aragorn felt that he might be worthy indeed.

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