In His Brother's Shadow

by Celandine

Summary

At Henneth Annûn, Faramir mentioned that he had first met Gandalf as a boy. That time must have been a turning point in his life.
Meetings

Faramir put down his quill pen and sighed. Master Golasgil had assigned him an essay on "the causes and results of the removal of the King's House to Minas Anor in T.A. 1640," and his hand was beginning to ache from writing so long.

The early afternoon sunlight was slanting in through the south-facing window, illuminating each grain of dust drifting through the air. Faramir stifled a yawn. "I've finished, Master Golasgil," he said politely to his teacher, who was dozing at the end of the great oaken table.

"Oh, er, yes," Golasgil replied, coming awake with a start and reaching for the sheaf of parchment Faramir was pushing towards him. "Well, then, go along to arms practice and I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"No, not tomorrow," protested the boy. "Boromir is coming back from leading the raids against the Orcs across the Anduin River sometime today, and you said that I could have tomorrow off to see my brother before he leaves again."

"Of course, of course. Well, then, the day after. Be sure that you find time to read through the annals dealing with the reign of Telumehtar Umbardacil before then, and we'll discuss his strategies in Umbar against the Corsairs." Golasgil nodded towards the shelf that held the books and scrolls for Faramir's studies.

"Yes, Master Golasgil," Faramir said obediently, pushing his chair under the table and leaving the room quickly, before he could be given any more homework to do.

Outside in the stone corridor, he paused to think. Boromir would most likely not return for hours yet, so he might as well go on to arms practice. At least he was getting better at swordplay, slowly. Swordmaster Hallas no longer shook his head and winced every time he looked at Faramir, although words of praise were still few and far between.

_I am getting better_, Faramir reminded himself. _I am, I will be as good as my brother someday._

Secretly, though, he doubted it. He was honest enough with himself to know that his greatest strength lay in his mind, not his sword arm. But at the age of fourteen, he also knew that he would not reach his full growth for years yet, and that by training he could become good enough to serve Gondor without dishonor, if perhaps without the distinction that Boromir had already achieved at nineteen.

_And at least, Master Golasgil thinks well of my understanding of military strategy and political maneuverings, and that should help me when I must take command_, Faramir comforted himself.

He turned around and trotted down the stone steps. Passing through the great bronze doors of the Steward's House, he headed towards the armories, where Hallas was invariably to be found in the afternoons, supervising the maintenance of the stores of weapons and armor kept there.

"Early for once, young Faramir?" Hallas greeted him. "Now, then, let's have you run twice around the yard to warm up a bit before you practice those thrusts we were working on yesterday. And mind you bind up your wrist first, it'll help keep you from letting it bend whenever you make contact."

As Faramir dashed obediently off, Hallas commented to the soldier helping him check helms for rust, "He'll do well, the lad will, once he stops thinking about every move and just lets it go
"But not like his brother?"

"No," Hallas chuckled, "he'll never outstrip Boromir on the practice field. But that'll do. We only need one to lead Gondor."

Back in his own room at sunset, Faramir splashed water over his face and chest to wash off the worst of the sweat and grime that covered him from his workout. His practice had run late and he had no time for a proper bath before dinner.

"How are the lessons going, little brother?" came a deep voice from the doorway.

"Boromir!" shouted Faramir. He turned and ran to hug his idol. "Well, I'll never be a great swordsman like you, but Hallas told me today that my stance was passable, and you know from him that's quite high praise."

"I do indeed," returned Boromir. "I can still hear him counting me through the forms and yelling any time I was out of position. But it's worth it, you know," he added seriously. "Gondor lives ever in danger, and it is up to us to keep her safe. So you must do your utmost on the practice field, for the lives of our people depend on our skill at arms."

"Yes, I know," said Faramir soberly. He had heard this since before he could remember, both from Boromir and from their father Denethor.

"But Boromir," he said, brightening, "guess what? I have the whole day off tomorrow, while you're here. We can spend it together."

Boromir smiled down at him. "Well, some of it at least."

"Why only some?"

"Come now, Faramir, of course I will have other duties to see to. I must arrange for new supplies to be sent to the forts at ruined Osgiliath, for my men there, for instance. But I can at least spend the morning with you, I think. Shall we go to the Hallows tomorrow?"

Faramir nodded ruefully. He wished that for once he and his brother could have a whole day together, but accepted what had to be. And he much preferred to have Boromir's company down Rath Dínen, the Silent Street that led to the Hallows and the House of Stewards, where the Ruling Stewards of Gondor and their wives lay in their stone beds. Since his mother Finduilas had died in 2988, when he was just five, he remembered her only vaguely, but went regularly to visit her tomb as a proper obligation. Denethor approved of such filial respect, and sometimes Faramir felt that this was one of the few ways that he could gain his father's approbation.

"Yes, I haven't been there in several weeks," he said aloud. "I suppose you haven't gone at least since your next-to-last return to Minas Tirith, as the last time you were barely here overnight." He went over to his chest and pulled out a fresh tunic, slipping it over his head.

"No, not since then. Afterwards, perhaps, we can walk along the walls of the Citadel to the Embrasure; you know that I like to go up there as well. One sees such a view of the city, her white walls shining in the clear morning sun, her white banners blowing proudly in the breeze," said Boromir. "So let us go early tomorrow. But now, we had best go and meet our father to dine; I think he has a guest joining us."
Denethor often had guests, but it was unusual for Boromir to remark on them.

"Who would that be?" asked Faramir curiously.

"I'm not certain," was the reply. "The name I heard was Mithrandir, but who that may be I do not know. Come, let us go to table. We are expected in the private chamber tonight."

Faramir followed his brother out of the door. Somehow the name Mithrandir resonated in his mind, as if he had heard it before, or perhaps as if the bearer of it would mean something to him in the future. He was not certain which, but he was certain that this meal would be better than most he shared with his father. Boromir would be there to tell the tales of his successes against the Orcs, so Denethor was likely to be in a good temper.

Denethor was in no very favorable mood when his sons reached him in the dining chamber, despite Faramir's hope.

"You are late," he frowned at his younger son. "I have told you before that I consider tardiness a grave discourtesy, especially when, as you see, we have an honorable visitor."

Faramir murmured an apology, careful not to let his distress show. As always, when Boromir and I both make the same error, Father addresses his reproof to me alone. And if I object to the unfairness, he will simply become angry. The boy shuddered at the thought of his father in one of his cold rages.

Not what I want a visitor of whatever rank to witness. I wonder who he is? Father rarely has guests present for a family meal, usually we eat in the Great Hall if he must discuss some matter with a visitor.

The stranger was seated in one of the padded chairs before the fire. He did not immediately rise, but looked up at the two young men. "I thank you for the compliment, Denethor," he said. "Introduce me to your sons, if you would."

"My son Boromir," he stated, "my heir and the future Steward of Gondor. He chances to be in the city tonight to report on the dealings with the Orcs across the Anduin. They still infest Mordor, as you no doubt know, but thus far we have mostly kept them there. Though the raids into Ithilien and even at times across the river have increased of late. Boromir, this is the lord Mithrandir. He is a member of the White Council and comes to search in the ancient records of the Stewards and the Kings, seeking the lore and wisdom of our ancestors."

As Boromir bowed politely, Mithrandir rose and bowed in his turn. "And the other lad?" he asked, turning to Faramir.

"My younger son, Faramir," said Denethor. "Still a stripling, in the schoolroom and the practice yard. He shows some promise in the former, at least, but only time will tell if he will live up to his brother's standard."

Faramir bowed respectfully. As he straightened, he caught Mithrandir's eye. The white-bearded man was looking at him intently, as if he wished to speak, but shook his head slightly and glanced back at Denethor.

"Well, well, I look forward to hearing what your sons have to say. It has been some time since I heard a youthful perspective on the world." Mithrandir gestured to the table, already laid. "Shall
we then eat?"

The windows of the chamber faced to the west, and as he turned to them for the traditional moment of silence before dining, Faramir saw from the corner of his eye that Mithrandir did not follow this custom. He wondered from what land their guest came, and whether he thought turning towards lost Númenor and living Aman before meat an odd or quaint ritual. *The fellow stands and waits patiently enough.*

They all then seated themselves, Denethor at the head of the table near the window, the light of the setting sun falling on his right side. Boromir, as always, sat to his right and Faramir on his left. Mithrandir went to the foot, near the fire, and remarked that perhaps age entitled him to the warmest seat.

The meal was simple, befitting a family meal served to the Steward and his sons, unexpected guest or no. Denethor always insisted that in private they not maintain the pomp that would have been appropriate to the line of the Kings; in public, of course, it was another matter. The dignity of the throne had to be maintained, even if there was no living heir to fill it; "of Anárion's line," as Denethor invariably added.

Mithrandir passed the dish of mutton and gravy to Boromir. "What news then from the borders, if I may ask?"

Boromir looked at his father, who nodded permission to him to speak openly. "Sir, as my father said before, the raids of the Orcs have increased these last few years. Since the Enemy has reoccupied his ancient stronghold and rebuilt Barad-dûr, his arm has grown long. We still hold green Ithilien, but none of our people lives there now; it is a disputed land, much subject to fighting. Only broken Osgiliath is safely held, and I fear," he turned to Denethor, "I fear, my lord, that such will not be the case for long."

"Indeed," replied the Steward, "if we are unable to reinforce the garrison there. I have sent to Prince Imrahil to see if Dol Amroth can spare any companies to our aid. The prince, you may know," he added, turning to Mithrandir, "is the brother of my late wife, and though still young, a valiant warrior and a great leader. If he can help us, he will." (1)

"But, Father," Faramir said tentatively, "can my uncle spare any men? Might it not be better to call on the men from Anfalas? Was there not a pestilence in Dol Amroth recently?"

Denethor scowled at his younger son. "To be sure there was, yet Imrahil will understand the urgency of your brother's need. Dol Amroth is in no immediate danger from Mordor as we in the east of Gondor must be. He will send troops," he said grimly. "His loyalty is unquestioned, especially to a sister's son."

Faramir winced inwardly. All this studying he did, learning the history of Gondor both recent and long past, all supposedly to fit him as an advisor to his brother, and yet whenever he proffered such advice it was dismissed. *Perhaps it is my age,* he thought, *and when I am older my ideas will have more respect.*

Meanwhile Boromir was speaking again. "I am sure my brother's thought is a good one, and if Imrahil's men prove not enough, then we may call on the men of Anfalas as well. But let us hope that is not necessary."

Mithrandir glanced from younger son, to elder son, to father. He saw the likeness in appearance between Denethor and Boromir; he saw, too, the likeness in mind between Denethor and Faramir, though in feature Faramir might more closely resemble his mother Finduilas. Although he had the grey eyes and dark hair common in Gondor, there was a certain set to his face that was not quite
usual, perhaps deriving from the Elvish strain in the rulers of Dol Amroth that Finduilas had brought into the line of the Stewards now as well. Musing, Mithrandir thought that it might be that very resemblance that disposed Denethor against his younger son. Denethor had loved his wife greatly, and might have resented her early death and blamed Faramir as the cause. Since she lived several years after his birth, though, that was not likely to have been the reason for it.

"No, indeed," he replied to Boromir. "We shall hope that the Enemy turns his eye again to the east and south, even if only to seek fresh allies, and gives Gondor time to gather her strength. But it is only a hope, and not to be relied on."

The talk then turned to the details of the endemic warfare on Gondor's eastern border: how many men were needed, and where; how many horses; how many supplies and of what sorts; and not least, how all of this was to be paid for. Faramir listened intently as his father and brother discussed the ways and means of resupplying the camps near Minas Morgul. Somehow the war all seemed so much more real, here, than when he read about it in the old accounts during his lessons with Master Golasgil.

To this conversation he could add little, and he noted that neither did Mithrandir speak much. Though Denethor treated the visitor courteously, even respectfully, Faramir sensed a certain tension in his father's attitude toward Mithrandir, a tension he could not understand.

Servants came in quietly and removed the remains of the meal, replacing the emptied platters with a bowl of fruit and a slab of ripe yellow cheese. When they had departed, and as Denethor and Boromir's discussion passed on to recollections of Boromir's first command, Faramir turned to the old man at his left and asked politely, "Lord Mithrandir, how long will you honor us with your presence?"

He was rewarded with a sharp glance from below the jutting white eyebrows. "That all depends," came the reply. "I am not sure looking for a particular piece of information, rather to gain a greater sense of Gondor's history, so I do not know how long it will take me to learn what I need."

"May I help you?" asked Faramir, his heart beating more quickly at his own presumption. "Master Golasgil who teaches me has granted me tomorrow off, and I have looked through many of the old scrolls in my studies. Not that I know them so well as the archivist, but perhaps I might be of some use?"

"Hm, well, yes, you might be at that. And if we can arrange with your tutor about it, I would not object to having your assistance for the whole of my stay. You might learn a few things from me, after all, and he should properly be consulted."

"What's this?" interrupted Denethor. "Are you drawing my son into your plans, now, my lord Mithrandir?"

"Not at all, not at all. The lad merely volunteered his assistance in helping me find what I need among your dusty records. I would not take time from his studies without his tutor's permission, nor from his arms practice either," returned Mithrandir peaceably.

"His tutor's permission, and mine. I must consider whether this would be a proper use of his time. Even my younger son may not idle about. And as for arms practice, Hallas says you're improving," Denethor turned a briefly approving look on Faramir, which melted away as he added, "but you still have much to learn. Perhaps you should watch your brother drill before he leaves. I'm sure he will be doing so, he has some new mail being made and will want to try it out. Is that not so, Boromir?"

"It is. I would be happy to have my brother watch, and even try a few blows with him, if he
wishes," Boromir grinned at his little brother.

"Oh please! That would be wonderful," said Faramir. He loved to spar with his brother, though he knew he was badly overmatched. But Boromir seemed to enjoy teaching Faramir swordplay, and was a good instructor, patient and thorough in this as in all matters to do with fighting and war.

"But before that, we will visit the Hallows, of course," added Boromir. "Shall we go an hour after dawn?"

Before Faramir could answer affirmatively, Denethor interjected, nodding to Boromir, "That would suit well, since I will be wanting you in the late morning to confer with some of the other lords and captains about your new ideas for fortifying Osgiliath."

Faramir's face fell, though he strove to conceal it. He had hoped for at least the whole morning with his brother, at the Hallows or elsewhere. But he knew Denethor could not be gainsaid on such a point.

"Certainly, Father," he heard Boromir respond. "We shall return by mid-morning, I expect."

As they rose from table, Mithrandir beckoned to Faramir. "As your brother will be unable to bear you company for all of tomorrow, perhaps you would like to begin assisting me? Denethor, if the lad has the day off in any case, surely you will not object?"

Denethor assented, though reluctance was clear in his demeanor.

Mithrandir continued, "Good. You can introduce me to your tutor, Faramir, and we can discuss what you might do." With a glint in his eye he added, "I doubt your presence will yet be missed at council, though that may change."

"Certainly I would be glad to help you, sir. Will you be in the muniments room? Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, come find me there when you and your brother return from your errand of respect. I know where it is, unless it has been moved these last fifty years," said Mithrandir.

Faramir wondered a little at that statement, for Mithrandir looked a hale sixty or seventy at most. When, and why, could he have been looking through Gondor's archives before? But he said, "I think not. Until tomorrow, then," and bowed courteously. He turned to Boromir. "Are you ready to retire too?"

"Yes, I'll walk with you to my rooms. Goodnight, Father. Goodnight, Lord Mithrandir."

"Rest you both well," returned Mithrandir, and Denethor said, "Goodnight, Faramir. It is good to have you home, Boromir."

"Goodnight," said Faramir, and quickly left the room.

As he and Boromir walked back along the stone hallway to their own chambers, he dared to voice his distress at losing Boromir's time the next day.

"You're here so little, I wished to speak with you longer. There are things..." he fumbled, not sure what he wanted to say.

A smile spread over Boromir's face and he reached over to tousle Faramir's hair affectionately. "Ah, I think I know what you mean. Do not worry, my brother, we will have time to talk. I expect I will here two or three days, not just one. Cirion, my second in command, is well enough on his
own for the time being, and although I cannot wait for fresh troops from Dol Amroth, or Anfalas, whichever it may be, before I return, the talk about it is likely to require more than a single morning. I will need another day then to make my supply arrangements before I can depart."

They had reached Faramir's room and he grinned in relief. "That is good to hear. I will see you at the first hour after dawn, then. Rest you well, Boromir," and he hugged his brother goodnight.

"And you," said Boromir, as he continued down the passage.

Faramir closed the door behind him and pulled off his tunic thoughtfully. Was it clean still, or had he spilled gravy on it as he so often seemed to do? Deciding that the tunic was clean enough to wear again, he folded it into the chest and then put the rest of his garments aside for laundering.

He slid into his bed and thought back on the day. It had been a good one – praise from Hallas, a promise of a day off from Master Golasgil, the chance of many days working with the mysterious Mithrandir, and most important, the return of Boromir, if only for a little while.

He mused on that point. He loved and admired his brother greatly, but from his study of history with Golasgil, he was aware that such was not often the case, and that many younger brothers disliked and resented the elder.

*Who was that, just before the Downfall of Númenor?* he asked himself sleepily. *I remember it was Tar-Palantir's brother, and his son Pharazôn usurped the throne, but what was the brother's name? He must have taught his son his own hatred. Oh yes, it was Gimilkhâd, that's right. Well, Boromir has no cause to fear me. He has his strengths and I have mine. No one could want to follow a scrawny, unprepossessing figure like me when there is a great warrior like Boromir around, but he's much better at leading men into battle than at worrying about the lives of ordinary people. He knows that is his duty, and he loves the idea of the greatness of Gondor and the glory of Minas Tirith, but he does not always see individuals as important. Not those he does not know himself, at any rate. So I will be there to remind him and guide him to remember the lowly as well as the strong.*

*I wonder*, his thoughts drifted, *I wonder if Father fears that I will prove to be like Gimilkhâd? Perhaps because he had no brother himself, he never seems to realize the ties that bind me to Boromir. After Mother died, he was the only person who understood how I felt, the only one I could speak to of my grief. Uncle Imrahil was kind, but he visited only rarely. Boromir was always there to ask for comfort.*

He turned over in bed. *And tomorrow I'll ask him about those other things, as well. Father is not quite the person to talk to on these matters.*

With that, Faramir drifted off to sleep.

As the pale light of dawn began to sift through the shutters, Faramir sat up with a start, wondering why it was that he was supposed to wake early. Then he remembered that he was to visit the Hallows that morning, with Boromir. He tumbled out of his bed and splashed water on his face from the basin on the table, then quickly rummaged in his chest for suitable clothes. While he was pulling on his best blue leggings, a knock sounded on the door.

"Little brother? Are you ready?" Boromir stuck his head into the room. "We can get some bread and cheese from the kitchens to break fast before we walk down, if you will."

Nodding in agreement, Faramir followed him down the stairs.
They paused in the kitchens and coaxed fresh bread and soft white cheese from the yawning cook's helper. Boromir drank watered wine with his meal, but insisted that Faramir have simple grape juice instead. "You're not old enough yet to want wine," he said, only half-jokingly. "When you've campaigned a few seasons, then you can have it."

Faramir took a handful of dried figs as well, tucking them into his pocket. He always seemed to get hungry by midmornning these days. Boromir noticed this too, and clapped him on the shoulder, saying, "Eat up, Faramir, and you'll be as tall as I am soon."

"Maybe as tall, but I don't think I'll ever have your build," said Faramir a bit enviously.

"Nonsense, you just don't remember what I looked like at twelve, you were too young to really pay attention. I was nearly as gangly as you are."

"Yes, but I'm fourteen already," protested Faramir.

"It's all the same. You take after Mother's side of the family, they are all slower to reach their full height. Don't worry, you'll get there," laughed Boromir. "Especially if you eat as much every day as you did at supper last night!"

Faramir looked down at his shoes in embarrassment. "Let us go, then, if you're ready."

Back up the stairs, they stepped out blinking into the bright early morning sun. Boromir led the way through the tunnel to the sixth level of the city. Once past the stables they began to walk along the road towards Fen Hollen, the door through which one reached Rath Dínen, the Silent Street which would lead them to the tomb of Finduilas. The porter at the gate bowed to Boromir, and unlocked it to let them pass into the walled way.

"Tell me something about Mother," requested Faramir, as he usually did when the two of them made this journey. Her early death meant that his memories of her were few, if precious.

"She was beautiful, you know that from the portrait in Father's room. But she seemed somehow sad much of the time. I did not understand why, then, but now I think that she missed her home in Dol Amroth greatly, and especially walking on the shore of the sea. I have heard that the Elves can experience what they call the 'sea-longing,' and perhaps Mother felt the same way. You know that long ago Imrazôr of Belfalas wedded the Elf-lady Mithrellas, and their son Galador was the first lord of Dol Amroth. So we carry a hint of the Elven-blood ourselves."

"What do you remember best about her?" asked Faramir. "I remember her singing to me, and embracing me as she put me to bed, and telling me not to worry that I couldn't keep up with you, that someday I would. She had such a scent to her perfume, somehow like the wind and the sea and the stars all together. At times I think I can smell it again, when I stand on the parapets in the cool of a late spring evening."

"I, too," said Boromir softly. "And in Ithilien, should you ever go there, you will notice a similar scent, but a greener one, more of the land than the sea." He paused, then continued, "I remember her teaching me my letters when I was perhaps five, just before you were born. I was not as quick at my books as you are, you know, I always wanted to be outside running or wrestling or exploring the gardens and the city itself, but Mother was always very gentle and patient with me."

Their conversation had brought them along Rath Dínen to the House of the Stewards, next to the House of the Kings and nearly as impressive. Faramir shivered slightly as they entered the cool dimness of the great chamber in which the carven marble figures of his forefathers lay, guarding the mortal remains beneath. The most ancient monuments were set nearest the front, and the brothers threaded their way through to where Finduilas rested.
"I think, Faramir, that Mother would have preferred to be laid to rest in the ground in the south of the land, where her parents were buried near the shore," said Boromir quietly. "But Father preferred to hold to tradition and place her here."

Faramir nodded slowly, but said, "Had he not done so, we would not now be able to pay our respects to her memory here. And surely it can matter little, since she is now beyond the bounds of Arda entirely."

The two brothers remained for some time, sitting mostly in silent thought and the memory of beauty and kindness. At last Boromir rose.

"Come, Faramir, we had best depart now. I must go to meet with the council, and were you not to help lord Mithrandir?"

As they left the hall Faramir glanced back and sighed inwardly. For all his reluctance to visit alone, he still found this House a place of peace and comfort. But duty called, and a task he felt sure to enjoy, at that.

He looked over at Boromir, who seemed equally lost in thought, and to cheer him said, "Shall we race back? I've been doing rather well against the other boys, lately."

Boromir came back to himself and chuckled. "And test Mother's prediction for you, eh? Very well, but not until we are back in the city proper."

After they returned through Fen Hollen, he said, "On your mark – set – go!"

They ran along the curving road and through the tunnel, surprisingly evenly matched. First one drew ahead, then the other. Putting on his last burst of speed, Faramir nearly caught Boromir at the door to the Steward's House, but not quite.

"Whew, you have been improving," Boromir panted. "Next time I imagine you'll beat me, especially if you're practicing with the others very often."

Faramir grinned in delight. He had not really expected to do as well as this, and the praise warmed him.

"After that I had better tidy up before I see Father and the council. And so had you!" Boromir took the steps two at a time, Faramir following. He paused before the door of his room.

"We will meet this afternoon in the practice yard?" he asked.

"Surely," Faramir assured him. "You promised to spar with me, remember?"

"Yes. I have a new move to teach you, if you'd like. Until this afternoon, then," and Boromir went in through the doorway.

Faramir entered his own room to comb his hair and straighten his garments. He nibbled hastily on a fig as he hastened down the stairs towards the muniments room, where Mithrandir waited for him.

Footnote:

(1) Imrahil is not really young, in fact. His exact age is never known, but if he is the brother of Finduilas as I assume and is perhaps five years younger than she, he would be about 43 at the time
of this story, which is about 25 years younger than Denethor.
Below the long-uninhabited King's House, the muniments room was the first in the series of chambers that comprised the archives of Gondor. Stone-flagged and stone-walled like all the other rooms in the Citadel, nevertheless the archives seemed somehow more solemn, dimmer, as if the centuries enshrined on parchment were still present in the air. True, they were below ground, but the kitchens were as well, and those rooms had quite a different atmosphere.

Master Ulbar, the current archivist, had made some changes in how the records were kept. Those that dated from the present Stewardship and the immediately previous one were located in the muniments room where they would be most easily accessible to Denethor himself, or more commonly to the various clerks and functionaries who handled the day-to-day bureaucracy of Gondor and Minas Tirith. Older records of the Stewards and Kings were relegated to the back rooms. There Ulbar had directed that they be separated into reigns and then further subdivided into types of document, so that the personal chronicles of the Kings and Stewards should not be mixed in with the tax rolls, nor inventories of the armories lumped together with minutes from council meetings. The system, although admirable in conception, was not yet fully achieved, and as a result some sections of the archives were inevitably unavailable at any given moment.

Faramir had learned all of this in passing from Golasgil, when the latter occasionally apologized for being unable to provide the records bearing on whatever piece of history Faramir happened to be studying just then. As he stepped through the doorway, he remembered Golasgil's explanations and hoped that whatever Mithrandir was searching for was not among those inaccessible items.

All seemed as usual. Scrolls and codices and loose sheets filled the many shelves lining the walls. At several of the great oaken tables in the room, a half-dozen clerks were busily recording information or checking on it. A fire burned in the hearth behind Ulbar's own desk, though at the moment the archivist was perched on a stool near one of the shelves and was peering along it, evidently looking for a misplaced item. But where was Mithrandir? Faramir looked around. A lamp burned on the central table, which was unoccupied, but a stack of parchment sheets, a quill, and an ink pot were carefully set out by the chair. Faramir guessed that he would find the white-haired man back in one of the other rooms of the archive. Mithrandir had, seemingly, gained Denethor's leave and Ulbar's permission to browse his way through Gondor's history unaided.

The boy hesitated a moment, then moved to cross the room and enter the next. He would certainly be of no help to Mithrandir just standing by the table. Better to go search for him. Although he had never been past the muniments room before, he understood that the other chambers all opened out from one another in a series, and that the oldest records, least used, were the furthest back in the recesses.

Slowly he threaded his way through the towering shelves that filled the rooms, centuries upon centuries held captive in ink and parchment. Many of the cases stood free in the center of the floors, so Faramir carefully checked on all sides of each shelf to make sure he did not accidentally pass Mithrandir by. Luckily Ulbar insisted that all the chambers be kept minimally lighted; the lamps hanging on the walls helped to keep the air dry and ensure that irreplaceable documents did not deteriorate from damp. Faramir found the flickering golden light curiously reassuring as he progressed.

Finally he saw, in a corner of the final chamber, a light that looked unlike the usual lamps. He moved closer and saw Mithrandir standing in front of a shelf, with his staff raised above his head, and a gentle bluish light glowing from its top. This sight so startled Faramir that he failed to watch
his step and tripped on the uneven edge of a flagstone, catching himself with a thump against the nearest shelf.

"Here, now," said Mithrandir, turning around at the sudden noise. "Ah, young Faramir. I was hoping that you would arrive soon. I am having a little difficulty finding the records from Meneldil's reign. Ulbar warned me that many of the early materials were being recatalogued, but he assured me that some of them were still available. Can you read the title of that volume for me?" And he raised his staff to better illuminate the book in question.

"Yes, that is a volume of Meneldil's personal reminiscences," said Faramir. "But lord Mithrandir, how is it that your staff makes this light? Is it some trick? I have never seen such a thing, nor heard of it save in children's tales or old legends."

"You need not call me lord, my lad. Master, if you will, or simply Mithrandir will suffice. And no, it is no trick, merely an ability that few have."

Faramir felt a momentary quiver of apprehension. If Mithrandir could make light from nothing, what might he not be able to do? But he quickly reassured himself that Denethor would not have received a dangerous enemy as a guest, much less have granted him the right to consult Gondor's archives. Accordingly, he asked, "Why only a few? Can it not be taught?"

"I fear not. Only five of us who live now among Men have this skill, if indeed there are still five."

"Five who live among Men? What do you mean? Who are you?" and Faramir added, greatly daring, "What are you?"

"As to that," came the reply, "Many are my names in many countries. Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn to the Dwarves; Olórin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten, in the South Incánus, in the North Gandalf; to the East I go not. (1) But if you ask my race, then nay, I am not of the race of Men. You may have heard of Curunír, or Saruman, who dwells in the tower of Orthanc in the vale of Isengard, to the North? He and I are of the same order. Some among Men call us wizards, the Istari. That is no unfitting name, and you may think of me so."

"A wizard? Then why come you here? What can Gondor's old records hold for such as you?"

Mithrandir chuckled. "The name of wizard confers no great power. I have skill with light, true, but that does not mean that I know all that passes when I am not present. To learn lore I must study, even as you do. So now let us return and begin!"

Taking the volume he had been examining, he added it to a stack of several others that he retrieved from where he had set them on an empty shelf. Then Mithrandir turned and led Faramir back to the muniments room.

"We have perhaps two hours before the noon meal," he said, "which, since Denethor has not invited me to share it privately with him, I should like to take with you, Faramir, if that is all right. We can stop a few minutes early and you can take me to meet with your Master Golasgil first."

To this Faramir assented wholeheartedly. The next two hours were not at all what he had expected. He had thought that perhaps Mithrandir would set him to looking through the chosen volumes to find references to particular people or places. Instead, he found himself being thoroughly quizzed about his knowledge of the history of Gondor, his insight into her political developments, and his understanding of all the languages and scripts used in any records that the archive might hold.

Faramir answered as well as he could, though to himself he wondered why Mithrandir chose to
test his knowledge like this. Surely he could simply ask Master Golasgil what I have studied? Would that not be quicker?

As if in answer to his unspoken thought, Mithrandir said, "I may be catechizing you a bit, Faramir, but I prefer to come to my own opinion about people rather than rely on others' reports. Moreover, I can gauge more accurately than someone else what I might need to teach you so that you can assist me more effectively. Do not worry, we will be doing both at once; I will not require you to read and speak Quenya fluently before I let you help me search through documents in the Common Speech. But you will probably enjoy learning the High-Elven tongue. It is distantly related to Sindarin, which you already seem to know quite thoroughly."

Faramir nodded and replied, "Yes, my mother taught us that language before she died. I have tried to maintain my skill in it to honor her memory."

"I see," said Mithrandir thoughtfully. Then he added, "But I have done with my questions for now, and we had better go to see your Master Golasgil before we eat."

Mithrandir decided to leave his books and leaves of parchment out and ready to take up again after the meal, so Faramir led him back up the stairways and passages and across the court to Golasgil's chambers. He was fairly certain that the tutor would be there, working on the *Short History of Gondor* that he had been writing for some years now.

Indeed, Golasgil answered almost as soon as Mithrandir had rapped on the door with his staff. "Come in, come in," he greeted them. "I had word sent from Denethor that his guest would likely be paying me a visit. What is it you wish?"

"I have a proposal to make to you," Mithrandir replied. "I need some assistance with certain materials in the archives here, and young Faramir volunteered his help. I was hoping that you would be willing to spare him from his usual lessons for the next several weeks or so. He will certainly learn some history in the process, and I should like to start him studying the High-Elven language as well. A fair few old records were written in that tongue, and he might find it useful for that and possibly even for diplomatic purposes in the future."

"Certainly, if the Lord Steward agrees to it. Indeed, I would be happy to take leave for a fortnight or so and do a little traveling; my sister has often urged me to visit her and her family, and this would be a good opportunity," agreed Golasgil.

Faramir let out the breath that he had been holding. Not that he had seriously doubted Golasgil's reaction, but it was good to have it definite. He urged his teachers, "Let us go down to the Great Hall, then, lest we miss the noon meal. And we can ask for my father's agreement to this arrangement."

The three then returned across the yard to the Steward's House. An observer might have thought them an oddly assorted group. One a gangling boy, with a shock of dark hair needing to be trimmed and level serious grey eyes; clearly not entirely at ease with himself, and yet surprisingly relaxed in the company of the older men. The second, middle-aged, slightly stooped and with thinning brownish hair, had an air that combined impatience with resignation. And last an older man, white-browed, bearing a staff that he seemed not to need, gazing about him as if everything he saw was new in its particulars, yet ancient in its type. Perhaps the most peculiar thing about the trio was that the eldest and youngest resembled one another more than either did the third: not in outward appearance, but in bearing and attitude. The observer might have wrongly guessed them to be granduncle and grandnephew. For similarities of mind can manifest in the outward self, unexplained by any physical likeness.
Meals in the Steward's household were usually taken in company in the Great Hall. Servants, clerks, family, guests, all dined together at long tables, arranged by rank. Normally Denethor himself sat at the top of the room, with those councilors and captains who might be present and any others he chose. Today it appeared that the council was eating in its chamber in the White Tower to save time during their deliberations, for the high table was still empty as Faramir, Mithrandir, and Golasgil entered amid the clattering sounds of food being served and the hubbub of conversation.

Faramir led the two older men to the high table. In his father's absence it was his duty to represent the Steward at the meal, and he had no desire to dine alone, regardless of where his companions' rank might normally place them. They could ask Denethor's permission for Master Golasgil to take leave and Mithrandir to teach Faramir later in the day.

"I understand that you travel a good deal, Master Mithrandir," said Golasgil. "Can you tell us news of the lands to the North?"

Mithrandir dipped a piece of bread in his soup before replying.

"Dale thrives since the dragon Smaug was killed, nearly sixty years ago that is now. Bain, son of Bard the dragon-slayer, has been king these twenty years, and has restored the old amity with Dáin II and the Dwarves of Erebor. The Dale folk trade with the Dwarves, and along the River Running with the Elves of Mirkwood, and down the Anduin. No doubt you have seen some of their goods in the markets here. I gather that some of their wares even travel over the Misty Mountains into Eriador."

"Into Eriador? But who lives there now, since the end of the kingdoms of Cardolan, Rhudaur, and Arthedain? I thought that land uninhabited," commented Faramir, and Golasgil nodded, for he too had believed it so.

"There are few who dwell there, it is true. But some Men still live in scattered villages near the old North Road, and the lands of the Periannath – as the Elves call them – lie mostly west of the Baranduin River. Even some of the blood of Númenor remain, Dunedain who guard those lesser folk against Orcs and other fell creatures of the wild, though their purpose is oft misunderstood by the very people they protect. Never think that Gondor is the only place left with a memory of glory, or a watch to keep," answered Mithrandir gravely. "Many Men, and Elves, and Dwarves in other lands also strive against the servants of the Dark Lord, even as your people do."

"I had not thought much about that," admitted Faramir.

"We of Gondor have perhaps contracted our views over time," said Golasgil. "Our people grow less numerous, and we no longer even claim the land of Calenardhon north of the Ered Nimrais as once we did. The Rohirrim have lived there since 2510, when Eorl the Young won the victory at the Field of Celebrant, and Cirion the Steward ceded the province to him and his people. Now we rely on Rohan to defend our northern border and rarely consider what happens beyond."

Faramir continued to listen as Mithrandir discussed more of the doings of the world beyond Gondor with Golasgil, but he was equally intent on eating enough of his noon meal to hold him over until the evening. If he was to have a practice bout with Boromir later this afternoon, he knew he needed to eat well now. His brother and he had not set a definite time for their match, but Faramir assumed that the council meeting would end by late afternoon. Several of the councilors besides Boromir also served as captains in the army, and had duties there that they would need to tend to before evening. Faramir caught the sleeve of one of the servants passing behind him and smiled at her.
"Serindë, would you be so good as to send word to me when the council break up for the day? Or better yet, ask my brother to come to find me in the muniments room when they finish, rather than meeting me in the practice yard."

"Certainly, sir," she said. "Rodnor is serving in the council chambers today; I will have him speak to the lord Boromir. And please," she hesitated, "if you would be kind enough to thank your brother for me, for his patronage of my brother. Hunthor was so pleased to be admitted into his company."

"I will," promised Faramir. "Thank you, Serindë."

He turned back to his meal and saw Mithrandir looking at him curiously.

"So Boromir is a good captain, eh?" asked the wizard.

"Oh, yes," said Faramir earnestly. "Men from all over Gondor seek to join his company. Though none who defends our borders is safe, few of Boromir's men perish, for he does not spend lives recklessly. He thinks it better to be careful, for though Orcs breed like dung-beetles in the stablyard, the lives of men are not so easily replaced. Which is not to say that he is a coward, nor even overcautious, just that he has a reputation for caring for his men in a way that some captains do not."

"And you admire him."

"Of course I do: he is a great warrior, a great leader of men. One day he will be the Steward of Gondor, and thus my lord as well as my brother, but I could not choose a man I would rather follow. Do not believe I think him perfect," Faramir added hastily. "I know he has his failings. He is impatient with the tedium of making policy and would rather be in action on the field, defending Minas Tirith with the strength of his arm instead of worrying about how her sewers are cleaned."

Mithrandir had been holding Faramir's gaze steadily as the boy described his brother. Now he said, "How, then, will he be as Steward? For is it not the case that a Steward most often must sit in the Tower of Ecthelion and direct the deeds of others, rather than performing them himself?"

"You are right, but Boromir and I have talked of this at times. Though I shall have to serve in war as well, my role will be as his chief advisor and counselor. And if the people trust me enough, then Boromir will be free to lead the army himself at times, which he would prefer. He knows that I would not try to take power behind his back," said Faramir.

"So you will be your brother's shadow," mused Mithrandir. "Well, the presence of a shadow shows that there is sun as well. May your brother's rule be prosperous, but first may your father's rule be long."

"I thank you for your good wishes, my lord Mithrandir," came a resonant voice dryly from behind them. Faramir sprang to his feet as Denethor pulled out his chair to sit.

"Father, I – we – have a request to make of you," he said hastily.

"And what might that be?" said his father, using his knife to spear a slab of cheese from the platter. "Today's council is not yet over, I have only a few minutes, but I always like to appear in the Hall at noontide, as you know. I would not be thought of as too proud to sit with my own folk."

"This will take but a moment. Lord Mithrandir wishes me to assist him, as we spoke of yestereve, and says he will also instruct me in history and in the Elven languages as well. Since he will need most of my time, except the late afternoons when I have arms practice anyway, Master Golasgil
would like to take several weeks’ leave to visit his sister’s family,” said Faramir, his words tumbling over one another in his anxiety to get them out.

"Hmm. Where do they live, your sister and her folk?” Denethor asked Golasgil.

"South, near to Edhellond, but to the west of the River Ringló,” answered Golasgil. "I would travel down Anduin and go by ship through the Bay of Belfalas to Cobas Haven."

"Indeed, the sensible way to travel there," Denethor approved. "Very well. Shall we say a month’s leave? I believe you intended to be here at least a month, Mithrandir?"

Mithrandir nodded. "A month or more, yes."

"I have given this matter some thought, Faramir, since it was first proposed last evening. Normally Master Golasgil provides me with regular reports on the progress of your studies. In his absence, I shall require you to write a detailed weekly summary of all that you and the lord Mithrandir study and discuss, and to give me brief verbal reports as well, when I choose. Are you willing to undertake this responsibility?” Denethor asked.

Faramir nodded eagerly, although it crossed his mind that Denethor’s requirement would mean that he would report as much on the wizard’s doings as on his own. Now, why should he want that? Surely he trusts Master Mithrandir, or he would not allow him to use Gondor’s archives.

"In that case, you have my permission, Faramir, to study with Mithrandir instead of Golasgil for the time being, and Golasgil, you may leave at your convenience. As it is now the twelfth of Ringarë, I shall expect to see you again in Narvinyë, about the middle of the month."

Denethor arose, still chewing the crust of his bread. "I must return now. I will see you this evening, Faramir. Boromir reminds me that he will be sparring with you later; I look forward to his evaluation of your progress. Good afternoon, Golasgil, Mithrandir." And with that the Steward departed.

Faramir sat down again and sighed. After a moment he felt Mithrandir's hand on his shoulder and looked up to see the old man smiling kindly down at him.

"Your father is efficient in his disposal of time, is he not? I imagine that can be wearing for you on occasion. But now we should also go and return to our work for a few hours. Are you ready?"

Hastily swallowing the last of his nut pastry, Faramir stood. "Yes, sir. At your will!” And they departed from the hall.

As they settled back down at the table where the wizard had left all his books, Faramir asked, "What do you want me to do now, Master Mithrandir? Shall I search for something particular back in the storage rooms for you?"

"No," said Mithrandir slowly. "No, I think today I will start you on learning Quenya. You cannot become proficient in a month, but the sooner you begin, the greater your knowledge of it will be. And perhaps after I leave I will be able to arrange to have some additional works in that language sent to you, so that you may continue to study on your own. But you must know the fundamentals, first." He drew a piece of parchment towards himself and began to write a column of letters.

"I know the letters," said Faramir. "Why need I begin there?"

"You know the Sindarin letters, which are also used to write in the Westron tongue," responded
Mithrandir. "Most of the Quenya letter-forms look the same, but they have different sounds associated with them. I am going to write down first the Quenya letters, then the Sindarin letters with the most similar sound. But I will also speak them all aloud for you, since they are not exactly equivalent in every case. Once you have studied those and learned them, we can move on to the language itself."

And he went slowly down the list, pronouncing each letter and pointing out where they sounded different from the letters Faramir knew, where the sounds were identical but the symbol different, and the cases where both sound and letter were the same in each language.

"Now, you should go over this carefully. You may wish to write down the letters again as you pronounce them, so that you can begin to associate sound and symbol. For spoken Quenya of course that is not so important, but you will be using it mostly as a learned tongue, for reading only."

"Yes, sir," said Faramir obediently, although he had really hoped to spend the afternoon doing something more interesting than memorizing letter-forms. "But Master Mithrandir, could you not first tell me a bit about why you are here? I mean not just here in Minas Tirith, I know you are studying lore and history, but here altogether? If you are not an ordinary man, but a wizard, what is your purpose, your fate? I promise I will study the Quenya letters again tonight, to fix them in my mind, but just now my mind is seething with questions simply from what you have already told me!"

Mithrandir smiled. "You have an inquiring and scholarly turn of mind, I see. Very well. Since I spent the morning drilling you, I suppose we can spend an hour or so playing turnabout."

"I thank you, sir. So, then, what are you doing here?" said the boy eagerly.

"A short question, but one that may have an answer longer than you expect. Well. I am not here to do tricks such as the one you saw this morning, of course. I am here," and Mithrandir paused to consider his words, "to encourage men to pursue good and to strive against evil, in whatever form, but especially against the Dark Lord of Mordor, against Sauron the Deceiver."

Faramir stared at this. "But who would do otherwise? At least in these lands," he added, thinking of the histories he had studied so recently, the invasions of the Wainriders and the campaigns against the Corsairs of Umbar. He could believe almost anything of those peoples, from what he had learned of them.

"Many," answered Mithrandir. "Some men choose evil deliberately, for many reasons. On such men I can have little effect. But many others turn to evil unknowingly, and there I can sometimes affect their decisions, if I am present and if they are willing to listen. For I can only persuade or suggest; I cannot force any man to make wise decisions."

"I do not entirely understand that," confessed Faramir. "Why would anyone choose evil purposely? How can a man choose it unknowingly? And why can you only persuade? Surely you have the ability to do more."

"Every question answered will spawn three more, I see," chuckled the wizard. "We can talk philosophy all you like over the next month, but let me try to begin to answer you. I can only persuade, not force, because to force a man to do something is to make him less than a man, and it is wrong to diminish another. By doing so I would myself be diminished. Does that make sense to you?"

"Somewhat, yes. But I still do not understand why anyone would turn to evil, whether deliberately or unknowingly," said Faramir.
"There are some men for whom power is everything, and they are willing to sacrifice anything – including honor, or love, or any virtue – to achieve that power. And Sauron makes many promises to such men. Some he has ensnared forever," and Mithrandir broke off, a shadow passing over his face.

"What is it?" asked Faramir.

"I suppose you are old enough to know without too much fear. Long ago, Sauron gave rings of power to nine Men, great lords or kings most of them, by which they were able to wield great power and through which they achieved an extended term of life. They believed, I think, that they could use these powers to attain greatness for themselves and their peoples. Yet in the end all their works turned to evil and Sauron gained the mastery over their spirits. Now they are slaves to his will, the Nazgûl, the Ringwraiths as you may have heard them called. They are not dead, but neither are they truly alive; they exist only in shapeless and dreadful forms. Their chief weapon is terror, and it serves them well. They have not been seen abroad for long years, though it may be that one or more of them is now in Dol Guldur, in the forest of Mirkwood. Something of great evil is there, and it cannot be Sauron himself, for the rekindling of Orodruin shows him to have returned in secret to Mordor. The fires of Mount Doom can only be responding to his dread presence."

Faramir listened in wonder and dismay to this. He had certainly heard nothing of such import either from his father or in his history lessons with Golasgil. The Dark Lord's return was an open secret, but of his servants Faramir had learned little as yet.

"Can they not be fought? Is the Enemy's power so great that they are immortal and invincible?" he asked.

"Oh, they can be fought. Their chief at one time founded the kingdom of Angmar, up in Eriador, and for centuries Amor and the later northern kingdoms fought against the Witch-king. He was finally defeated at the Battle of Fornost, in 1975. He fled north to the Ettenmoors and vanished, but was not killed. It is prophesied that he, at least, cannot be slain by the hand of any man. But that may not be so for the other Nazgûl," said Mithrandir. "And in any case they can and must be fought, even if they cannot be defeated forever. It is enough for men of good heart to do what they can, so that those who come after may stand and defend the right in their turn."

"Moreover," he continued, "open battle is not the only way that men can fight against evil. It is the most evident, perhaps, when Orcs invade the lands of Gondor and Rohan and elsewhere, and Sauron's power grows. It may be for that reason that Men now esteem prowess in battle above all other virtues. And I would not belittle it. But men and women may reject and defeat evil in other ways as well. Acting with honor in all things – that is also a way to withstand the power of darkness. Darkness," he mused. "Once, very long ago, there was no fear in the darkness. It is a great sadness that it did not remain so."

Faramir looked at Mithrandir curiously, but the latter had ceased speaking. "I have one more question today, if you are willing," he said tentatively.

"Eh? Yes? Pray do not make it another difficult one to answer," the wizard requested.

"Oh, I think it is not. But this morning, when you were speaking of those who lived in Eriador, in the lands once held by Amor, you mentioned a folk that the Elves called the Periannath. I had not heard of that people before and I merely wondered who they were, if they were some obscure branch of the Elven-folk," said Faramir.

Mithrandir chuckled.
"They are assuredly not Elves, but mortals. A little people, they are; not few in number, rather smaller in body than any Man of Gondor. Where they came from originally I do not know for certain, but they have lived in Eriador for nearly two thousand years. They are good archers, and fought at times in the armies of the North-kingdoms. Argeleb II granted them the lands beyond the river Baranduin to hold in 1601. They are a settled and rustic folk, who stay mostly in their own lands and tend to their own business. Though one of them traveled all the way to Erebor and was at the Battle of Five Armies in Dale, when Dáin of the Iron Hills became King under the Mountain. But I should not think it likely that you would ever meet any of that folk," said Mithrandir.

"No, I suppose not," said Faramir thoughtfully. "Clearly they dwell too far away for Gondor to have the need or ability to ask for their aid, even if they would give it."

"Indeed. And now," Mithrandir added, "I want you to study your letters for a time before you must go off to your arms practice. I think I have answered enough questions for the moment!"

And for the next two hours all that could be heard at the table was the scratching of Faramir's pen and the soft murmur of his voice as he practiced the Quenya letters, and the rustle of the leaves as Mithrandir turned the pages of his books, searching for he knew not what.

Footnote:
(1) The lines from "Many are my names" to "I go not" are a quotation from the conversation between Faramir and Frodo in Ithilien. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Two Towers: being the second part of The Lord of the Rings*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 279.
The door to the muniments room opened and the sound of firm steps was heard to approach their table.

"Faramir," came Boromir's voice softly. "Are you ready for our practice?"

Faramir stretched, clasping his hands above his head and extending his arms back to ease his shoulders. He looked over at Mithrandir, who was reading intently.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "I must go now. Shall I see you at dinner this evening?"

Mithrandir's head came up with a jerk. "What? Oh, good afternoon, Boromir. I see you have come to take away my assistant for the rest of the day. Yes, Faramir, I shall dine with your family again this evening. I will see you both then. Enjoy your swordplay," and he turned back to his leather-bound volume.

Pushing back his chair, Faramir rose and followed Boromir out of the room, up through the grey stone passages and outside to the armories and the practice yard.

"How was your afternoon in the archives?" Boromir asked his brother as they walked. "It seems dull to me, although probably no more dull than sitting in council and listening to some of that talk. Always someone objects to a perfectly sensible proposal, and has to be brought to see reason. And Father had me stay once the discussion was concluded – I will tell you later, perhaps, of what he said, but just now I wish not to think of it. I'll be glad to shake some of the cobwebs out of my head with a little exercise. So, how was working with lord Mithrandir?"

"Well, not as interesting today as I had hoped," confessed Faramir. "He had me practicing the alphabet for the High-Elven language; the letters are mostly the same but many of them stand for different sounds, so it is a bit confusing. But we did talk a little as well. Did you know that there are still Dúnedain living in Eriador? They are called Rangers, and protect the folk of that land just as you protect Gondor. And there is even some settled country there. Master Mithrandir did not tell me the name of the land, I do not think it is a proper kingdom, but more an old province ceded by the king of Arthedain to a people called the Periannath."

"I had heard something of the Dúnedain to the north," said Boromir indifferently. "A scattered people now, I think. Their kingdoms are long gone, and their kings as well. But if they oppose our enemies, that is all to the good. The Periannath? That folk I do not know. I imagine they are of no great significance."

"No, I shouldn't think so, I just thought it was interesting to learn of them," replied Faramir. "So, Father said that you were getting some new mail? Are you going to try that out today?"

"I had better try it out here before I wear it in the field," smiled Boromir. "I have to be sure that it fits so that I can move properly, after all. I tell you what, why don't you warm up and do your usual practice while I deal with that and talk for a little with Hallas, and then later I will show you a new move I've been working on."

"All right," said Faramir cheerfully. His ordinary drill would be much more fun with a bout with Boromir to anticipate at the end of it. For once he almost looked forward to putting on the padded and quilted practice garments.

Two hours later, he was not certain if he would last through the session. Boromir was in some
ways a harder taskmaster than Hallas. He had shown Faramir the promised new move, a twist of
the wrist that if performed correctly could disarm an unwary opponent, and now they were
practicing it. The trouble was that Boromir was expecting the move, which made it much more
difficult for Faramir to carry it out.

"Keep your feet light," advised Boromir. "Try to feel as if the sword is an extension of your arm,
and let them move together naturally."

"I can't," panted Faramir. "I just can't feel like that at all. I have to think about what to do."

Boromir frowned a little. "That's why you're having trouble, then. I think the best thing to do
would be for you to practice all your drills to the point of absolute boredom. Start by counting the
movements, as when you learn a new technique. But go through them all so often that you don't
have to do that at all, your body simply knows what to do next. You need to make it so that each
action is as automatic as breathing. For me, this was easy to do, just as book-learning is easier for
you. But if you will be on the field as a captain someday, you will have to acquire this skill.
Enough for today, however. Perhaps the next time I am able to be in Minas Tirith we will have
another chance to practice."

"Oh, are you leaving so soon?" said Faramir in disappointment. "I had thought you were to be
here several more days."

"I doubt I will leave tomorrow, no. But we may not be able to drill together again before I leave.
Much of my time will be spent arranging for supplies to be taken to Osgiliath, and things of that
sort. I may do my sword practice in the morning, while you are bent over your books."

They walked back into the armory to put away their gear. There was still some time before the
usual dinner hour, and Faramir commented, "After that session, I suppose I really should bathe
before dining with Father and Master Mithrandir and whomever else will be present tonight."

"A good idea," said Boromir. "Do you usually use the big bathing room, or the little one upstairs
in the family quarters?"

"Most often the little one, but then one has to get a servant to bring all the hot water up, and we
don't have that much time to spare. The baths down here have that big tank which is always
heated, so it will be quicker, and at this hour there will probably be no one else using it," answered
Faramir.

The bathing room, open to use by all who dwelt within the Citadel, lay next to the kitchens
underneath the Steward's House. It had originally been a single large chamber, but now a wooden
wall divided it into a men's and a women's side. Each area had a dozen or so tubs in a semicircle
around the perimeter, with a pair of pipes running along the wall to supply the cold and heated
water to the bather's taste. Towels were stacked on a table in the middle, and a large basket stood
ready to hold the damp towels after use.

The brothers chose a pair of tubs next to each other, and started the taps running as they pulled off
their sweaty garments.

"Ah," sighed Boromir, as he lowered himself into the steaming water. "This is a luxury I miss in
the field."

"It is good to be able to soak off the sweat," agreed Faramir, reaching for a bar of soap. "What
else do you miss, when you're on campaign?"

"Not much, really," said Boromir. "You know I don't care for fine clothes or anything of that sort.
And I certainly do not miss having to attend council meetings; in fact to avoid those I would give up any sort of luxury and stay out fighting the Orcs all the time! Well, perhaps not quite. By the time that Father dies I expect I will feel otherwise, and he looks not like a man who will die young in any case."

"Do you miss having women around?" asked Faramir shyly.

Boromir twisted around to gaze at his brother. "I wondered when this topic would appear, after what you said yesterday evening. The answer to that question is, sometimes. But I think you have other questions you want to ask me, do you not?"

Faramir squirmed a little. Now that it came to it, he was not sure just what he wanted to ask his brother. "I know some things," he said, "You know I was out on the home farms last summer for the harvest."

"Oh yes, I had to do that as well at your age. Father is very keen to make sure that we know something about how ordinary folk live and work, and the farm is a good way to do it. He'll probably have you spend some time with the smiths here in the city at some point – a bit of knowledge of smithcraft is useful in the army, so that at least you can see to the shoeing of your own horse! – and perhaps work at another trade or two also."

"Yes, well, I talked with the lads there, and they told me about the girls they knew and that kind of thing. And the farm's reeve was breeding some herding dogs, and had me supervise their matings. But it all seemed so, so, I don't know, so mechanical. Is it really like that? To be with a girl?" asked Faramir in some embarrassment.

"I don't know if I'm the best person for you to talk to, really," said Boromir. "I'll tell you what I know and think, but sometime you should talk with our uncle Imrahil, if you can. He's the one who told me about all these things, and he's really very easy to talk with. Mechanical – no, I wouldn't call it that. Have you had dreams about girls, where you wake up excited?"

"A few times," said Faramir, looking sideways at the edge of the tub.

"Well, then, when you're really with a girl it feels like that, only more so. Uncle Imrahil says that it is far better to be with your wife, whom you love and who loves you, but I wouldn't know about that. I'm not that interested in being married, anyway, certainly not soon," he scowled.

"Well, I think I want to marry. And I would hope to love the woman I wed," said Faramir. "Although any such event is a long way off. But, Boromir," he hesitated, "how old were you when..." his voice trailed off.

"When I was first with a woman? Seventeen, I think. It wasn't exactly what I'd expected. I was with several of the other younger fellows in my company – this was before I had a command, of course – and we had just had a very successful skirmish, a whole band of forty Orcs killed and no men lost. So we wanted to celebrate, and one of the older men suggested that we go to a particular tavern, which was supposed to have very good ale and women available for those who wanted them. After I had had a few tankards I suppose it just seemed like a good idea. But I don't remember it all that clearly, now. I wouldn't advise you to follow in my footsteps in this matter, Faramir! There's no reason why you should feel you are somehow slow in these things," declared Boromir.

"No, I'm not ready for that yet. But I feel like I look so much younger than my age; I'm getting taller, to be sure, but that is all."

"As I've said before, you shouldn't worry about that. It's the Elf-blood, perhaps. I wasn't the first
of my friends to start a beard, either. Is that what's bothering you?” said Boromir.

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I am just impatient to be older altogether. Whatever I want to do, I seem to be too young for, and no one takes me seriously even if I have something worthwhile to say. Perhaps if I looked older they would,” Faramir muttered.

"Now, listen to me. Don't be self-pitying, Faramir. You know that's not true. Father may not always pay the attention to you he might, but you know that I listen to you. And Mithrandir seems to as well," Boromir said thoughtfully. Then he added, "By the White Tree, look at the time. We had better hurry if we don't want to be late to supper again."

They climbed from the tubs and went dripping for the towels. Boromir snapped his at his brother playfully.

"Feeling better now?” he asked. "You know that I will always be there for you, here in person when my other duties allow, and you are in my thoughts as well. That is what brothers are for, is it not?"

"Yes, Boromir,” said Faramir soberly. "There is no one like your own brother."

Pulling their dirty clothes back on for the moment, the brothers walked companionably up to their rooms.

"Do you know if we are having just a family dinner again tonight, or if we are eating in the Great Hall?” Faramir asked.

"Father didn't say,” Boromir frowned. "I suppose we should try the chamber up here, and if he is not there then we can go down to the Great Hall. I will knock at your door in twenty minutes, all right?"

As Faramir changed into his dark red tunic and grey trousers, he thought over the conversations he had had with Mithrandir that day. Choosing evil, he mused. I still don't really understand that. I think I can see how someone might fall into evil unknowingly, but not why a person would turn to evil deeds deliberately. Perhaps this evening or tomorrow I can ask Boromir what he thinks. He has worked and lived with many men, yes, and fought our enemies too. I'm sure he has had to deal with prisoners. Perhaps he understands all this more than I, and can explain it.

He took up the wide-toothed comb on the washstand and pulled it carefully through his damp and tangled hair. He was just slipping on his soft indoor shoes when Boromir's knock sounded at the door and his brother entered.

"Ready yet?"

Faramir looked up. Boromir, too, had dressed carefully tonight, and looked every inch the son of the Steward of Gondor in a dark green tunic with silver leaves embroidered around the neck and wrists. His dark hair was caught back in a carved leather clasp, and he had even somehow managed to find time to have his beard trimmed.

"You look well," said Faramir, and added apprehensively, "Is there something special happening of which I have not heard?"

Boromir shook his head. "No, but Father remarked this afternoon that I need not look shabby simply because I had only just returned from the field. You know how he can be," and he gave his
brother a tight smile that quickly faded from his face.

Faramir sighed. He certainly did know, but it was unusual for Denethor to make that kind of remark to his elder son. Ordinarily his more cutting words were reserved for the awkwardness of the younger.

"Actually his words were, ‘If you persist in dressing like a common soldier, no noble will respect you and none of their daughters will look at you.’ So I thought it best to dress the part of the fine nobleman tonight, and avoid any further quarrel. That is all," said Boromir, turning and leading the way out of Faramir's room.

The family chamber, when they reached it, proved to hold only Mithrandir, standing at the window and gazing westward into the darkling roses and golds of the clouds on the horizon. He turned his head as the brothers entered the room.

"Good evening," he greeted them. "Denethor left a message that he was called urgently to deal with some business, but that he should return within an hour, or two at most. He asked that we begin the meal without him, if we desired."

Boromir raised his eyebrows at Faramir, who shrugged in reply.

"How surprising of Father," remarked Boromir. "In general he requires us to wait, if he is delayed by pressing affairs of state."

"I imagine it is in deference to me, do you not suppose? Perhaps he feels that the elderly should be accommodated to a greater extent than youth?" asked the wizard, a gleam in his eye and a wry twist to his mouth. "Still, since you say he prefers you to wait, we shall do so. He most courteously ordered a flagon of a very good wine to be brought. Will you join me in a cup? We can talk until your father's arrival."

Boromir nodded, and filled a goblet of wine for himself. He paused, and then poured one for Faramir as well, mixing it half-and-half with water. Faramir accepted the cup and sipped tentatively. He rarely drank wine and did not mind at all that his brother had watered his share.

"Of what would you speak, Lord Mithrandir?" said Boromir, seating himself in one of the heavy oaken chairs and stretching his legs in front of him. Mithrandir moved to sit in one of the pair of leathern chairs on either side of the hearth. Faramir noted that he did not take the worn chair that was clearly Denethor's, but the other. For his part, Faramir chose a seat from which he could watch both his brother and his new teacher as they conversed.

"Why, anything you please," answered the wizard. "If you like, you could tell me something about your city and your land. For although I have traveled in Gondor many times, I do not know the country as would one for whom it is home."

Faramir wondered if Mithrandir knew he could have chosen no better subject for the conversation. Boromir's love for his land shone on his face like the last light in the West as he leaned forward to speak.

"Minas Tirith has no equal," he began. "Surely not in strength, and I daresay not in beauty either, at least not among the cities of Men. She has never been taken by force, and shall not be, as long as I and mine draw breath. The White City is fair and proud and strong, and she serves as guardian to the rest of Gondor. The plains of Lebennin would bear no golden grain, the hills of Pinnath Gelin no fruit, were Minas Tirith not their strong bulwark."

"Do you then see the city as predominant over the countryside?" inquired Mithrandir.
Boromir thought about the question for several moments before answering. "I see them as partners, as equals. The city is a warrior, as some of the women among the Rohirrim are reputed to be, and she defends her weaker sister from the Enemy. But without the country, Minas Tirith also would starve and fail. They need and support each other, as all true siblings must." He sighed.

"I do not know for how long she can endure, though," he said sadly. "Each year we lose ground to the Enemy. His forces multiply, and the green dells of Ithilien are trampled bit by bit by Orcs' feet and filled with the stench of their foul burnings. Meanwhile our oldest kindreds wither, their sons falling untimely in Gondor's defense. We shall never be conquered unresisting, but I begin to fear that in the end this land will not last. May it not be in my time!"

"No, nor in any of our times," agreed Mithrandir. "But I did not intend that you should speak of such dark things. Perhaps you would rather talk of something else?"

Boromir shook his head. "No, I am happy to tell you somewhat of Gondor. I will simply try to keep my descriptions to what is, and not what might never come to pass!"

And for the next hour he spoke at length of the different lands within the realm: of the broad fields of Lebennin between Anduin and the Hills of Tarnost; of the gulls crying on rocky Tolfalas near the Ethir Anduin, in the Bay of Belfalas; of the rushing waters of the River Lefnui; of the mines near the Starkhorn in the White Mountains. Faramir listened as closely as Mithrandir, for he had not yet had the opportunity to visit much of Gondor far from Minas Tirith, although he had several times been to Dol Amroth where his uncle and cousins dwelt.

*I hope that Father decides to have me travel through Gondor before I am placed into one of the fighting companies,* he thought. *Clearly there is far more to our land than I could ever imagine or understand clearly from Master Golasgil's tutelage alone!*

Finally Boromir sketched his impressions of the Morthond Vale, in the north of which rose the Hill of Erech, where stood that stone where the lords of the mountains had sworn oaths to Isildur as king, at the very beginning of the age.

"I have seen Erech only from a distance, mind you," Boromir added. "The local folk avoid it in great fear, for it is haunted by the spirits of the Dead, the Men of Dunharrow. No sooner had they sworn allegiance to the king than they broke their word, and returned to the Dark Lord's fold. When the Enemy was defeated they were condemned to remain in and near the Ered Nimrais, whence they came, until the heir of Isildur should call them to fulfill their oaths at last. And since that may never come to pass, now that the line of the Kings is broken, it would seem that the hill will be inhabited by their spirits for all time."

As he finished these words, Faramir saw Mithrandir sit motionless for a moment, as if recalling something long forgotten.

"Indeed," breathed the wizard finally. "You are no doubt correct."

*Now, what can that tale mean to one such as Master Mithrandir? Faramir wondered. Surely it is not new to him, though I had not heard it before. I knew of the oath-breaking, but not that the Dead haunted the Hill of Erech.*

By this time the sun was long set, and the servants had discreetly lighted the tapers in all the sconces on the walls, and placed glowing lamps on the tables.

"I think we can wait no longer for the Steward," said Mithrandir abruptly. "I will claim the privilege of age that he offered me, and dine now."
He rose and asked Boromir, "Is there a bell I should ring, or will there be someone in the passage waiting upon our needs?"

"Try the hall first," was the reply. "Since we have delayed the meal, I would suppose that it will be ready to serve as soon as we ask, and that someone will be on hand to bring it."

Mithrandir strode towards the door, but it opened before he could reach it, and Denethor himself walked in. He appeared surprised.

"The table is still bare? I told you, did I not, Mithrandir, to dine without waiting for me, since I knew not when I might return?"

"You did, and I was about to bespeak our supper; we had just decided to delay no longer. Although naturally I preferred to dine with my host than without him, adept though his sons are at conversing in his place," responded the wizard.

Denethor raised his eyebrows, but did not reply. He merely turned in the doorway and spoke to the servant waiting beyond, bidding him to bring the meal at once.

Like the night before, the conversation dwelt mostly upon the war and how best to apportion troops and supplies to Gondor's greatest advantage. Denethor looked fatigued, the skin of his face slack and almost grey, even in the lamplight. But he spoke forcefully enough, arguing not uncivilly with Boromir's ideas, and even acknowledging Mithrandir's contributions. Faramir held his tongue, remembering his father's previous dismissal of his suggestions.

When dinner was over, and even Faramir was merely picking at the raisins more for something to occupy him than from hunger, Denethor pushed back his chair and spoke.

"It has been a long day, and I am weary. I must bid you all a good night. Mithrandir, if you wish to remain and converse further with my sons, or to study your books, please do so. Boromir, Faramir, rest well. And Boromir, before you begin your duties tomorrow, be sure to see me in my study in the Tower." He bowed slightly to Mithrandir, and left the room.

Mithrandir looked at his companions. "I believe I will return to my rooms as well, and not prevent you from spending a little more time together privately before Boromir must return to his company. Boromir, it was a pleasure to talk with you this evening. Faramir, I will see you in the archives tomorrow morning, if we do not break fast together first," and he too departed.

"Now, how did he know that we would want to talk?" Boromir questioned his brother.

"Why, that would simply be common sense. We are brothers, we see each other rarely, what could be more natural? I doubt it has anything to do with him being a wizard," said Faramir.

Boromir halted in his restless movement around the room and looked at Faramir. "You jest, my brother."

"No, really," protested the younger boy. "He told me so himself, and I saw him cast light from his staff."

"Too bad he cannot cast some spell to defeat our enemies," sighed Boromir. "A wizard would be a handy ally to have in these wars. Unless that is in fact his purpose here?"

"No," said Faramir regretfully. "He says that all his power is to persuade men to the side of good – he cannot force them to go against their natures, for that in itself would be evil."

Boromir shook his head. "What matters the reason, if he cannot carry out the action. But it is not
our part to judge him, I suppose. Now. You did want to talk further, did you not, Faramir? Do you want to stay here, or go off to one of our rooms?"

"To your room, I think. I have but one comfortable chair in mine, while you have two, unless one has been removed since I was last there. And I expect that we should leave this chamber so that it may be tidied before morning." Faramir responded.

"Very well. Let me just ask to have something brought for us to drink, if our talk should go on all night," and Boromir grinned at Faramir, who wrinkled his nose in return.

"As long as you don't have them bring spiced wine, since you wouldn't let me have that anyway!" he said.

"Certainly not. Cider will suit me admirably."

They walked back down the passage together, and entered Boromir's room.

Faramir curled up in one of the two battered leather-covered chairs that sat before Boromir's hearth, his shoes slipped off and resting on the floor to his left, his feet tucked under him. He balanced his mug of cider on the arm of the chair and spoke to his brother.

"I meant to tell you before, Boromir, but I forgot. Serindë asked me especially to thank you for sponsoring her brother Hunthor into your company."

Boromir turned from his clothes press, where he was changing his fine tunic for one warmer and more comfortable.

"Oh, did she? I will have to find time to speak with her. Hunthor is shaping into an excellent scout. On our last long foray near the Ephel Dúath, he alerted us to at least four bands of Orcs, which we were then able to intercept and defeat without a single death among our own men."

"She will be most pleased to know that, I am certain," said Faramir. "I do not think that Hunthor can write to tell her, so she has probably not heard of his successes."

"No," agreed Boromir. "Few of my men can write, although if they wished one of the clerks in the main camp in Osgiliath would write their letters for a small fee, and arrange for them to be sent to their families. But not many think of it, and even those that do often decide that they would rather tell their stories to their loved ones in person, when they are on leave."

"I can understand that. It is hard to describe blood and sweat with mere ink!" Faramir grinned.

"Well, as you are here in person yourself, you can tell me what it is like to be on campaign. It is not something that I can learn very clearly from all those histories and annals that Master Golasgil has me read," he said deprecatingly. "For those generally report on the course of great battles and the politics behind them, but not the skirmishes or how the soldiers live from day to day in the field."

Boromir moved to seat himself in the other chair, pulling it around to face his brother.

"It's not really all that interesting or exciting, most of the time." He pulled a wry face. "A lot of marching, digging latrine trenches, caring for pack animals, that sort of thing. Battling Orcs, yes, and the Men who have allied themselves with the Enemy, but that does not happen every day, thankfully. Of course, when you are an officer you do not do much of the physical labor, but you have to decide how best to transport and allot your supplies, determine what routes to take on patrol, and supervise your men generally. There are all kinds of details to attend to and they
always take more time than you expect."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I feel lucky to get six hours of sleep a night. At times a skirmish comes as a welcome relief; then I know I am accomplishing something definite!"

"You began in the ranks, did you not?" asked Faramir.

"I did... but I do not know if you will. It did not always work very well. They all knew that I was the son of the Lord Steward, of course; that could be no secret, and many of the other men in my company either resented me or tried to curry favor, especially in the beginning. Either reaction disrupted discipline, even though I tried to ignore both groups and simply obey my captain's commands. So it may be that our father will decide to start you as a junior officer, to avoid such problems. But then, it is not a bad idea to learn how an ordinary soldier experiences things. If you are given the choice I would suggest you begin among the rank and file; it will be difficult, and your officers may not be too happy either, but it will be worth it in the long run," advised Boromir.

"Yes," said Faramir thoughtfully. "I think I would rather see how it is to be an ordinary soldier first, before I have to make the decisions that affect them. It certainly worked out well for you, men are always anxious to join your company whenever there is an opening; not that that happens often! And no doubt your experience is part of the reason. When I am in the markets I sometimes hear folk talking of Gondor's companies and captains, and your name is always mentioned as one of the greatest."

Boromir flushed at the compliment. "Oh, there are other officers equally well thought of, Faramir, and I have perhaps an unfair advantage in being the Lord Steward's son. A man who serves under me now may expect or hope to receive preference in years to come," he said, but Faramir could tell that his brother was pleased that his successes were known.

"Still, were you not a good captain, and known for the care you take of your men, they would not try to be in your company. What reward can a corpse receive?" persisted Faramir.

At that Boromir chuckled. "True enough! So, has Father mentioned when he expects you to take up arms? Not for several years yet, I should think. I did not join until my eighteenth year, and at that I was full young for it."

"No, he has said nothing, but I do not expect it for at least three or four years. He has suggested that I should learn something of other trades first. Though in late years Gondor has had little commerce with the lands to the south, we still have dealings with those to the north and west, and it is fitting that either you or I should know well what our people produce for trade. And since you are occupied with other things, it will undoubtedly be my responsibility," said Faramir. "Indeed, I rather look forward to it. Perhaps then I will have some reason to travel more through the land and learn to know and love it as you do."

"Most likely," assented Boromir. "And you might be sent as I was to represent Father to the lesser lords, who come seldom to Minas Tirith. He cannot spare the time most years, but they ought not to be ignored, for without them where would we be? Three years ago I journeyed all around Gondor on such a mission, and it was then that I saw all the lands of which I spoke to Mithrandir. I would not willingly have given up that chance."

They sat companionably in silence for a time then, each thinking of their country. Boromir reflected on his travels through the land and planned strategies for its protection. Faramir, meanwhile, dwelt more on the lives of the people who lived there, wondering how many of them thought of Gondor as a whole and how many were content to lead their own lives, affected but little by the events on the borders to the east and south.
After a little, Boromir stood up and stretched, clasping his hands before him and turning from side to side.

"Would you like another mug of cider?" he inquired, and Faramir handed over an empty cup to be refilled.

"We have spoken of what I have been doing," Boromir said, pouring, "but what has occupied you these last months? I have heard a little from Hallas and from Father, but I would rather know your account."

"From Father? Why, what did he say?" asked Faramir, taking the mug back. "He rarely speaks even to me of what I do."

"Oh, just that you were progressing well in your studies, or so Master Golasgil had informed him. He seemed pleased enough by that, although I suspect he would prefer it if Hallas should prove able to turn you into a great warrior," replied Boromir. "But come, you have not answered me."

Faramir recovered himself from the surprise that Denethor had been paying attention to what he did, and speaking of it to others. "Much as you might expect. Practicing at arms, certainly; studying; wandering the markets on occasion."

He laughed. "There was a funny incident there only a week or two ago. A wine merchant had opened a cask, pried the whole lid off, and was dipping out samples for potential customers. Well, it was a cool day and he must have been tasting his own wares to help keep warm. As the level in the barrel got lower and lower, he had to lean further and further over to dip up the wine. Around midafternoon there was a great thump and a splash and a cry: he had overbalanced and fallen in head first! The man he was serving hauled him out before he could come near to drowning, luckily, but he was a rare sight, standing there dripping red and looking as annoyed as a cat in a rainstorm."

"That must have been something to see, indeed," smiled Boromir.

"Mm, what else? I have been reading some of Mother's old books, especially the Elvish poetry. The language of it alone is like music, and the stories told seem almost real to me as I read them. Right now I am in the middle of The Lay of Leithian, which tells the tale of Beren and Lúthien, their love and the great deeds they did so that her father Thingol would allow them to wed. I know you probably think it silly that I like to read such things," said Faramir, a touch of defensiveness in his voice on the last sentence.

"Not at all," Boromir replied gravely. "The tale of Beren and Lúthien is one I have myself loved since I was a boy, and Mother used to tell me stories at night of all the great heroes. I don't think I realized then that Thû in the story was the same Enemy we strive against now; I was always more interested in the details of the fighting than in the fact that the story was true! But Beren was not the hero I admired most. I preferred Túrin above all the others, though at that time I did not know the ending to his story. Mother always stopped her telling at the point where he dwelt among the Men of Brethil, and had wed the woman he found on the hill, what was her name, Nienor. Only years later did I learn the whole of the tragedy; as a boy I was merely in awe of Túrin's prowess at arms."

"Well, though I trust your end will prove better than his, still Túrin is no bad hero for a warrior to admire; he certainly was the most skilled fighter of his day, excepting only perhaps Beleg. And Beleg was an Elf, anyway, and had had many more years to perfect his abilities; so that is no fair comparison," said Faramir. "But I am glad you do not think it childish of me to read Elvish poetry."
"Such an occupation might not be entirely to my taste, brother, but there is no reason why I should mock you for it," said Boromir.

"Father does... well, he doesn't exactly mock, but he makes it clear that he thinks it a waste of time," Faramir said unhappily.

"You know Father, intensely practical. Since Mother died I do not think he has devoted a waking moment to anything other than the rule of Gondor, except by necessity," Boromir mused. "I cannot imagine such devotion. I have never met a girl I wished to wed; one seems much the same as another to me, so it may be that Father will simply tell me which girl would bring the best political alliance."

"It doesn't matter to you whom you marry?" asked Faramir curiously. "I should think it would be hard to be married to someone you disliked, or even someone you were indifferent to."

"For me I think it would be easier to be married to a woman I had no strong feelings for. I will have to think of the good of the whole of Gondor, and caring too much for a single person could complicate things. I saw how Father was after Mother died. It was as if he became a different person, almost. And if I am out on campaign, well, missing a wife greatly could distract me when I most needed to pay attention; and that would be no good for either of us," said Boromir.

"But it seems I will have little choice in the matter, from what Father said today," he added.

"What did he say? You mentioned this afternoon that you did not yet wish to think of it – but you know I will gladly listen if talking will help you," said Faramir.

"He brought up the subject of marriage, actually. He will not pressure me, he says, but he wants me to begin thinking about it, and he even reeled off a whole list of suitable girls." Boromir rose and began to pace around the room.

"I'm not ready for this yet!" he finally exploded. "I may be his heir but I have not yet even seen twenty winters. He did not marry until he was forty-six, himself; why need I do so this young?"

"Perhaps he feels his age creeping up on him?" ventured Faramir. "Simply because he wed so late, he may worry that there must be an heir to follow you? I mean, tonight he looked quite grey with exhaustion. So maybe that is his reason."

"Humph," said Boromir, pausing with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders tensed forwards. "A poor reason, I should say. He ought at least to wait until I am five-and-twenty! It is practically unheard-of for any of the lords of Gondor to wed before that age."

"Well, you just told me yourself that one girl was the same to you as another," said Faramir equably, "and that you have no particular desire to wed. So this could be Father's way of getting you used to the idea. He did say that he had no immediate plans to marry you off, after all. Tell him you'll think about it for awhile. You only have to see him every few months or so, anyhow; perhaps he will not think of it again for some time."

"You're probably right," Boromir said, beginning to pace again. "I've simply become accustomed to making my own decisions, and being in command of others, rather than immediately subject to someone else's wishes. But what must be, will be."

"Wait, I know. Did not the sister of the king of Rohan bear a daughter these two or three years past? Tell Father you will wait for her to grow up. I imagine he would not scorn an alliance with Rohan, and if she is so young, then you would have many years before a marriage could occur. Since the king's son is over twenty, and he has no sister and is not like to now, this girl is the
closest of his female kin. She would be a good political match, if that is all you care about," Faramir suggested.

"Ha. That's an idea. Father might not agree but it is worth a try," Boromir said. "He wants to see me in the morning, so I could mention it then."

He yawned. "But the hour grows late, Faramir, and we both should seek our beds, I think."

"You are right," said Faramir a little regretfully. "Rest you well, then, Boromir. I will see you tomorrow."

"And you rest well, too, my brother."

Faramir walked down the passage to his own room, then peeled his clothes off and climbed into bed, first setting a candle on the table by his pillow. He reached for his copy of The Lay of Leithian and began to read. The words sang in his head as if Lúthien herself were chanting them, and presently his eyelids drooped under their spell. He leaned over to blow out the flame, and then relaxed into sleep.
Of Elves and Swordplay

Faramir jerked awake at the rapping on his door. He half-sat up, pulling the blankets around him, and said, "Who is it?"

The door eased open and his brother stepped into the room.

"Still asleep, were you? I thought I would see if you wanted to have breakfast with me this morning. Father seems to have already eaten and gone to the Tower, and though I must see him there soon, I have a little time yet," said Boromir.

Yawning, Faramir stepped out of bed and splashed his face with water to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"If you can wait but five minutes, I will be ready," he replied, looking for a pair of clean stockings.

"Certainly," said Boromir, closing the door and leaning against it.

Once Faramir had dressed, they walked quickly down the stairs to the Great Hall. Denethor had decided, when Boromir had left for service in his first company, that it was wasteful to have breakfast served in the family quarters, when he and Faramir rarely ate the meal together anyhow. Although Faramir understood and agreed with the principle, he sometimes regretted the reality. If he had to eat alone, he would prefer to be truly alone rather than solitary amid the usual crowd in the Hall.

"What are you doing today, Boromir?" Faramir asked through a mouthful of porridge.

"Before anything else I must see what Father wants me for this morning, and make the proposal you suggested last night. But most of the day, I hope, I will be arranging for the delivery of arms and provisions to resupply Osgiliath. First I must meet with Hallas and then with Quartermaster Eradan. And you?" Boromir returned.

"I am to meet Master Mithrandir down in the archives, I expect. Although I had thought to see him here," said Faramir, craning his neck to see if the wizard were elsewhere in the hall.

Boromir chuckled. "Well, you know that the children's tales say 'Do not meddle in the ways of wizards,' although I had never thought to put the line to the test. Perhaps he broke fast earlier; perhaps he does not eat the morning meal every day. Or perhaps he will appear soon. As long as you turn up in the archives in a timely manner I cannot imagine it will matter whether you see him beforehand."

"I wasn't worried about seeing him here, brother. I merely thought I might," said Faramir. "So it sounds as if you do not plan to leave until tomorrow at the earliest then?"

"It depends on what I can accomplish today. Probably I will leave tomorrow; although I have no fear that Cirion will do anything amiss in my absence, still I would prefer to be back in the field myself. And it is my duty," Boromir added as he saw dismay on Faramir's face. "Though I would enjoy spending more time with you, Faramir, we each have our different responsibilities. Do not forget that!"

"I had no thought to," Faramir said honestly. "Two days in Minas Tirith merely seems hardly worth the travel, that is all."
Boromir shrugged. "We do what we can, what we must."

He finished his last morsel of bread and rose. "If I see you not at the noon meal, and I probably will not, then this evening. Have a good day with Master Mithrandir – learn much!"

He strode out of the Hall, heading to the White Tower and his appointment with Denethor. Near the doorway, Faramir saw him pause to speak to someone.

Faramir grinned. That will be Serindë, he thought, and Boromir is telling her of Hunthor's accomplishments. She will be so pleased to hear good news of her brother!

Then he returned to his own meal, spooning the last few bites of porridge out of the bowl. He considered the hour, then got up to fetch himself some bread and honey and an apple.

"Your father does not stint, I see," came Mithrandir's voice from behind.

Faramir looked over his shoulder and saw the wizard balancing a plate in one hand and a mug of tea in the other, his staff held in the crook of his elbow.

"Let me take that for you," he said, relieving Mithrandir of the hot cup.

"Thank you," Mithrandir returned gravely. "Are you ready to work today?"

"Of course," said Faramir in some surprise. "Why would I not be?"

"No real reason, only that you might be tired, since you were up rather late last night with your brother. I was awake until a late hour myself, and heard your voices as I passed through the hallway," explained Mithrandir.

"Oh, that is no matter. Actually I am looking forward to today. What will you have me do?"

"First I will test your understanding of the Quenya letters, and begin you on some simple words and phrases in the tongue. But those you can study later today, or this evening. I think I will use you as my legs to go and find the books and scrolls that I wish to examine; that will be a more efficient use of my time," the wizard said.

Faramir thought guiltily that he had not studied the letters as he had promised, and hoped that he would remember them all.

"Did Master Ulbar show you his indexes?" he asked. "They are incomplete, but still useful, according to Master Golasgil, as they are comprehensive lists of the extant records for a given reign. I believe that they begin with my grandfather's rule and extend backward, but I do not know how far."

"No, I was not aware of those. Your Master Ulbar is clearly very conscientious about his duties; from what I saw yesterday the archives are far better run than they have been in many, many years," said Mithrandir, sipping his tea.

Faramir licked the honey from his fingers. "I am ready whenever you are, sir."

"Well, let us turn the day to good use, then." Mithrandir pushed his chair back.

They walked slowly across the court to the King's House and down the stone-flagged stairs to the bustling muniments room. After conferring with Ulbar for a few moments, Mithrandir nodded sharply and returned to the table where Faramir waited.
"It seems that the indexes reach back only through the time of the Stewards, so far, and not to the reigns of the Kings. So we will not be using those for some time. I find it easier, myself, to move forward rather than backward though the years, and prefer to begin with Meneldil. But first, your language lesson," said Mithrandir.

For fifteen minutes the wizard patiently took Faramir through the Elven alphabet once again, praising the boy's quick learning. Then he spoke a few simple words of Quenya, having Faramir write them down, first in the original tongue and then translated into both Sindarin and Westron for future study.

"That will do for now," said Mithrandir, and Faramir laid aside his quill in some relief. "Now, you said that your mother taught you your Sindarin, did you not? Your command of that language is very good."

"Yes, my mother taught us," said Faramir quietly. "She used to speak Sindarin with Boromir in the evenings, saying that this was an easier way to learn than through books, especially for an active lad such as my brother. I learned much just by listening to them, though I was still very young when she died. My father speaks it as well, more for formal occasions with the high nobles than for everyday use, and he required both of his sons to practice. I read poetry and stories in the language quite often in the evenings. And my uncle Imrahil and I often speak it when we see each other – though that is infrequently – I think he enjoys doing so in memory of his sister. Many of the folk of Dol Amroth speak the tongue regularly, though it is not a birth-language for any, even there."

"That explains matters," said Mithrandir. "Your accent is remarkably pure, compared to most who usually speak in the Common Tongue."

Faramir said nothing; he had never given thought to how he spoke the Elven language, merely imitating the pronunciation of his mother and uncle.

"A convenient ability, in any case," Mithrandir added briskly. "Which we will put to good use. I made a list last night of works I know I wish to consult; if you will please go try to find them for me," and he handed Faramir a slip of parchment.

The boy nodded and disappeared into the back rooms, returning some little time later, staggering under the weight of four huge volumes.

"I was only able to bring a few codices in this trip," he explained breathlessly. "I will bring the rest of them, and then the scrolls next."

When he had collected all the items on the wizard's list and piled them neatly on the table, Faramir inquired, "What would you have me do now, Master Mithrandir?"

Mithrandir shot him a glance from under bushy white brows. "Hmm. Difficult, since I am not entirely certain what I am looking for myself. But in general I am studying the course of events in Gondor – how she became sundered from the Dúnedain of the north, for instance, why her boundaries have ebbed and flowed over the centuries, and perhaps most importantly for any mention of Elves as political allies or even trading partners."

"Elves? Why are you interested in Gondor's contacts with the Elves?" asked Faramir.

"For one thing, it was only the alliance between Men and Elves that permitted the defeat of Sauron at the end of the Second Age," said Mithrandir tartly. Then he softened his voice. "I am sure that Master Golasgil has taught you well about events within Gondor, but there is much else to this land of Middle-earth. Elves and Men will not always have the same perspective on events,
and that is to the good – each race has its own strengths. I have some idea how the Elves perceive Gondor and her people, but I would like to know the perspective of Gondor on the relationship."

"Where shall I start, then?"

"Begin with the court rolls that survive from Osgiliath, and look for any mention of trading concessions, special privileges granted to Elvish merchants, if there was any quarter of the city where Elves usually stayed – that sort of thing," Mithrandir told him.

Faramir sorted through the pile. When Osgiliath was destroyed, many of the original records of Gondor had been lost, and those that remained were unevenly scattered over the decades and centuries. He chose what appeared to be the earliest scroll and began to scan through it, bracing the roll of parchment with his left hand as he slowly unwound it with his right, letting the loose end curl over itself as he went. He was nearly halfway through the second scroll when he first saw Elves mentioned.

"Here, Master Mithrandir," he said, and nudged a codex aside to spread the crackling parchment in front of the wizard. "King Cemendur made an arrangement with King Thranduil of Greenwood to transship one hundred barrels of wine each year from Dorwinion, for the royal household. In return for a guaranteed price on the wine, the Elves who brought it were granted the right to use two warehouses and a large dwelling convenient to the River Anduin."

"Ah, excellent," said Mithrandir, making a note of the information. "That is the sort of thing I hoped to find, something that indicates the movements of different peoples and goods around the lands, and that shows with what degree of courtesy they treated one another."

"Why do you need to know all that sort of thing for such a long time ago? Surely it can have little to do with today?" questioned Faramir.

"You study the political alliances and wars of that period of Gondor's history, do you not?"

"Yes, of course; but that is important, that is politics," Faramir replied.

"Well, does not trade affect as many people, or more? If some particular item was once traded with the Elves, might it not be worth thinking about reestablishing the exchange, if possible, to the benefit of both peoples? It might even turn to practical purposes as well, to be on good terms," said Mithrandir.

Faramir thought about that for the remainder of the morning, even as he continued searching through the documents and showing Mithrandir what he found. I am not entirely sure I agree with Master Mithrandir; it is long since Gondor had much trade with the Elves, though we do some business with the Men to the north. But I suppose it is worth thinking of, as a possibility. I never really connected all these things together before. Father seems to talk most of politics, but he must pay attention to the rest as well.

At noontime they went to the Great Hall for their meal. Denethor was present at the high table today, but he was engaged in a conversation with the bailiff of the royal farmlands and merely nodded curtly at Faramir and Mithrandir as they sat down. Boromir was nowhere to be seen. Faramir assumed that his duties were keeping him busy, as he had expected.

Mithrandir ate sparingly as usual, taking only the thick vegetable soup and some bread, but he urged Faramir to eat his fill of the sliced meats and cheese, with stewed pears to finish off.
"I have seen growing boys before," the wizard said, his eyes twinkling. "Do not stint yourself in order to hurry; I am in no rush."

Faramir smiled shyly at that and took another piece of bread and cheese.

"I will have to go off in midafternoon to the armories for my usual practice," he reminded Mithrandir.

"Yes, I know. But that gives us another good two or three hours, and I can certainly continue on my own afterward. Not that I do not appreciate your assistance, of course; it makes my studies progress more rapidly. Yet it would be impolitic of me to interfere with your other responsibilities. I fear that your father believes I will waste your time in any case. No, no, I am happy to have you work with me during your usual hours of study, but you need feel no urgency or especial obligation."

When Faramir had eaten as much as he wanted, then, they returned to the muniments room and continued to sift through the earliest records of Osgiliath and the rest of Gondor, looking for evidence of interactions between Men and Elves, political or economic. After a time Faramir ventured to ask Mithrandir another question.

"I think I can see why you wish to know how Elves were looked at by our early settlers, Master Mithrandir, but I was wondering what you know of the Elves today. We in Gondor have little or no direct contact with them, and though our nobles may use the Sindarin tongue at times, we speak it only to one another, not to its originators. I know from what I have read and heard that the Elves are immortal, and fairer than Men, but that tells me little of them as people. In your travels, surely you must have met and come to know many of them."

Mithrandir chuckled quietly. "As I said yesterday, you do indeed have an inquiring turn of mind. I cannot tell you all in a minute what I know of the Elves, that is certain. There are as many differences between one Elf and another as between one Man and another, for one matter. And they live in many places, and have many lords and rulers, just as Men have their different kingdoms. Anything I can say of the Elves would be no more than a gross generalization. But if you wish I will try to say a few things."

"Yes, please do," said Faramir eagerly. "Are there still great heroes among them such as Fingolfin who fought hand-to-hand against the great Enemy Morgoth at the gates of Angband? Most of what I know of the Elves is from the old stories and poems, you see," he added self-deprecatingly, "and I am aware that such tales do not give a complete picture."

Mithrandir sighed. "Few such heroes yet dwell in Middle-earth, no. Many perished fighting Morgoth, as you know, and others at the hands of Sauron and his allies; Gil-galad was one such, at the end of the Second Age. And many of the High Elves, of the kindreds of the Noldor and Teleri, have chosen at last to take ship into the West. Yet some remain, loving Middle-earth too well to leave it. One such is the lady Galadriel, who rules Laurelindórinan to the north with her husband Celeborn. She is of high kindred indeed, the granddaughter of Finwë the first king of the Noldor, and niece of Fëanor who wrought the Silmarils. I would name her among the heroes; she has fought to hold back the darkness from her lands."

"Fought? Do the women of the Elves wield sword, then, as we hear the women of the Rohirrim may do at times?" Faramir asked.

"No, they do not usually use weapons in that way. I meant fighting as in drawing boundaries to protect her country, encouraging her people to reject evil – that manner of action, as we discussed a bit yesterday," Mithrandir explained. "Galadriel was herself born in Valinor in the time when the Two Trees of legend still shone, and she is accounted among the greatest of her people."
"It seems unusual for a woman to hold such high regard," Faramir commented. "There have been none such in Gondor; and if one looks back to Númenor, the four ruling Queens there were not considered among the greatest rulers of the land. Indeed the last Queen was so powerless that her own husband usurped her throne, and in his pride attacked Valinor and caused the entire destruction of the land. Tar-Míriel is not remembered fondly by my people."

"In general, perhaps," Mithrandir agreed, "but Galadriel's respect is well-earned. In her youth she was one of those who crossed the Grinding Ice of the Helcaraxë to reach Middle-earth; those who survived that passage all had great strength of mind and body. Galadriel has always held equal power with Celeborn in the land they rule together. And there is also the example of Melian's wise counsel to her husband King Thingol of Doriath in the First Age. I would say that among the Elves, ability is respected whether the possessor be man or woman."

"I see," said Faramir thoughtfully. "The Elves seem a practical race in that respect at least."

"Oh, I should say practical always," said Mithrandir, "If by practical you mean doing things in ways that will work effectively. The Elves may be reputed most among Men as lovers of beauty, but appearance does not outweigh purpose among them. A beautiful but leaky vessel would never be cherished there."

He raised an eyebrow at Faramir. "But if that satisfies your curiosity for the moment, let us try to get through this next couple of codices before you must leave for your lessons in swordplay."

Faramir agreed, pulling another volume towards himself and bending over the pages studiously.

At midafternoon, he bade Mithrandir farewell for the moment and trotted up the stairs and across the yard to the armory. He was slightly disappointed, if unsurprised, to find that Boromir was not there. Today, after his usual warm-up exercises, Hallas set him to practice with Beregond, the young son of one of the guards in the Third Company of the Citadel, who was hoping to join his father there in a few years. A year or two younger than Faramir, the boy was clearly somewhat intimidated at the thought of crossing swords with the son of the Steward, even in practice.

"Don't worry," said Faramir cheerfully. "I'm really not that good; not anywhere near my brother's abilities."

At the comment Beregond relaxed a trifle and smiled hesitantly before assuming a combat stance.

Indeed it proved that the two boys were fairly well-matched; Faramir had the edge in reach but Beregond was a touch quicker. Hallas kept an eye on them as they continued, stopping one or the other occasionally to correct a stance or a grip. At last he released them for the supper hour.

"Would you like to practice together again tomorrow? Boromir showed me a new move yesterday, and I could share it with you," invited Faramir.

"Oh, indeed I would," Beregond responded eagerly. He glanced at the lowering sun. "But I had best get home now, or my mother will scold me for being late to dinner. See you tomorrow!" He ran off towards the tunnel to the lower levels of the city, and turned to wave before disappearing into the dark opening.

Faramir wished briefly that he still had his own mother to scold him similarly, but the thought of a tongue-lashing from Denethor for tardiness brought him quickly to the bathing room to sluice off the sweat and grime from practice, before dashing upstairs to change before dinner. A message waited for him that this evening the Steward planned to dine in the Great Hall, and his son should join him there. Faramir hoped this would not mean he would be unable to spend a last evening with Boromir before his brother left. He tapped at the door to Boromir's room before walking
down, but there was no response.

To his relief he saw that he was a few minutes early for the meal; the lower tables were slowly filling but only Mithrandir and two captains sat at the high table as yet. Faramir bowed to the lords and seated himself by the wizard, leaving a space to his left where he hoped Boromir might sit.

"Did you find anything interesting in the records after I left, Master Mithrandir?" he inquired.

Mithrandir shook his head slowly. "Not especially, more of the same that we saw in the morning."

He shrugged. "Still it enables me to build up a picture of Gondor and her folk in the early years of the land, so that I may be able to better understand the changes that have occurred. It is hard to see how one can try to influence a people if one does not know how they have developed."

At that moment Denethor entered the room and made his way up to his usual seat, followed by several more lords and captains. Boromir strode among them and clapped a hand on Faramir's shoulder before dropping into the next seat.

"I'm starving," he said, sniffing hungrily around and reaching for a piece of bread. "Thank goodness they're already bringing in the platters. I didn't get a chance to eat at midday, just snatched an apple in the stables."

"No oats?" Faramir joked.

"No, not even horse-bread. I should have tucked something in my pocket before I left this morning, but I didn't think of it then."

Denethor rose and ceremoniously gestured for the rest of the room to join him. They turned as one toward the western walls to observe the moment of the Standing Silence, and then the room burst out into noise again as everyone sat and began to pass the dishes around the tables.
Mithrandir took the platter of sliced pork from Serindë, thanking her courteously. He slipped a piece onto his own plate, then passed the platter to Faramir, who took several slices.

"Here, Boromir," he offered the dish to his brother in turn. "This should satisfy you more than your apple did."

Boromir scowled ferociously at Faramir, taking the platter and serving himself a substantial portion, then let his face relax into a grin.

"Don't mock me, brother!" he said. "I may not be growing the way you are, but I still feel it when I miss a meal. If I had not known that dinner would be ready for me at this hour, I imagine that I would have cadged a slab of horse-bread, or even a handful of oats, in the stables."

"That's something to think about, actually," he added. "An army travels on its stomach; if your men aren't getting regular and adequate meals, they'll not fight well. So supplying them properly is very important! Not that you'll be responsible for such matters any time soon, but tuck it away for later."

"I suppose the same holds true for the country as a whole," said Faramir, serving himself a large helping of cabbage and passing Boromir the bowl. "Not just in times of major famine, but anytime there is a dearth of some necessity. I wonder if it would be wise to encourage the lords of the different towns and regions to establish stockpiles of, oh, grain for instance, against such lacks."

"Some of them do already," mumbled Boromir through a mouthful of beans. He swallowed and continued, "I know uncle Imrahil does, for instance."

"Actually," Mithrandir interjected, "as early as Meneldil's reign some did. And after the plague of the seventeenth century, King Tarondor required all those who governed territories in which at least fifty thousand people dwelt to create similar granaries. That was one of the laws I ran across today – I read a few things from relatively more recent times by way of comparison to the early records we were working on most of the day," he said to Faramir.

"I should have known that such an idea would already have been thought of and put into action," Faramir said.

"Well, but I doubt that the first to do it was only fourteen," Boromir pointed out. "You can't expect that every good idea you have will be unique, after all."

"I suppose not," Faramir admitted. Wishing to turn the subject, he added, "Did you make all your arrangements today, then, Boromir? Since you gave up the noon meal in their pursuit?"

"That I did," Boromir replied. "Eradan and Hallas were both very helpful, and the supplies should reach my company within a fortnight. So we won't have to worry about boiling our shoes for soup," and he nudged Faramir, who had just taken a large spoonful of the same.

Faramir spluttered. "All right, all right. I'll give up with the food comments if you will," he complained.

Boromir raised his right hand. "Truce then," and the two clasped hands in a ritual they had had from childhood, to end a disagreement.

"And how about you?" Boromir asked in return. "What did you accomplish today?"
"Master Mithrandir and I," Faramir inclined his head toward the wizard, "looked for old records of Gondor's dealings with the Elves, mostly. And then I had arms practice, of course. Do you know Baranor, in the Third Company of the Citadel? I was practicing with his son Beregond today. He's really quite good. I thought I'd show him that move you were teaching me yesterday."

"Just don't forget what I told you about your own practice," Boromir reminded him. "If you rehearse each movement and position until you are positively weary of it and it is sunk into your very bones and muscles, I think you'll find sword practice much easier."

"Well, if you really think that will help, I suppose I'll try it, although it sounds extremely tedious," Faramir agreed.

"I do think it will. It is like, like, tying your shoes. When you were first learning you had to stop and think about it each time, did you not, which lace went where and all that. But now you can tie them automatically, even while thinking or talking of something completely different, right? Same principle here, then," said Boromir.

As the brothers talked, Mithrandir had watched them quietly. He himself and Denethor, though observing all the proper courtesies, had never seen eye to eye, and the wizard hoped that would not be the case with Boromir. The way that the Steward's heir interacted with his younger brother suggested that Boromir would at least be willing to hear advice from others, whether or not he later chose to follow it.

Now the private conversation between the brothers was interrupted as the two captains sitting beyond Boromir called on him to settle a point regarding the clustered islands on which Osgiliath had been partly built. Faramir, who had not yet visited the ruined city and could not partake in the soldierly talk, turned to Mithrandir instead.

"What think you then of your studies so far?" he asked. "Will Gondor's records serve your purpose? Will it indeed take you a month to sift through them?"

Mithrandir nodded, saying, "In many ways there is more there than I had dared hope. It could take me rather more than a month, in fact, but I do not think I will stay much longer than that this time. I have other responsibilities to see to. But I imagine I may well return within the next year or three, to add to my knowledge further."

Faramir grinned. "Should I still be in Minas Tirith then, I would gladly assist you again, if my father is willing."

"I rather thought you might," Mithrandir smiled in return. Then his expression became serious. "But do not be too eager for that; it seems to me that in Gondor now, prowess at arms rather than learning is most greatly valued. To have the respect of both lords and people, it would be wise of you to direct your efforts in the directions they prefer, at least openly."

"Now, do not call that hypocrisy," he continued, as Faramir began to object. "I do not tell you to cease your studies, far from it. I merely advise prudence. You and I both know that it is unnecessary to be skilled with a sword in order to direct the course of a battle, but not all would agree. So if you wish your words to be heeded, it is good to have abilities that will gain the respect of those you wish to listen to you. It will bring you an advantage not to be despised."

Faramir shut his mouth and nodded slowly. Privately he thought, *Certain lords, and others, are foolish if that is how they view the world, but if this is the only way I can gain their respect and attention, then I will do it. If they are unwilling to listen to me, how can I carry out my responsibilities as a member of the Steward's family, as son and brother?*
He sighed and spoke aloud. "I am sure that is excellent advice, and I will try not to give it the fate that most good advice has!"

"What, to be ignored?" Mithrandir laughed. "Do not worry, I am used to that result!"

"Really?" said Faramir in some astonishment. "I would have thought that anyone would listen to a wizard."

"Some do," Mithrandir returned, "but if they listen simply because of what I am, and follow what I say for that reason, they are not thinking for themselves – which is what I prefer. It is a difficult balance to maintain, for of course I have my own opinions of the correct conclusions they should draw from their thinking."

Engrossed in their talk, the boy and the wizard did not realize that dinner had drawn to an end around them until Boromir nudged Faramir's shoulder.

"I hate to disturb such a serious conversation," he said, "but I think that they need to clear off this table now."

Faramir stood up to see the hall was rapidly emptying. Denethor had paused in the north doorway, surrounded by a knot of men talking intently.

"The Lord Steward is going to be busy the rest of this evening," Boromir added, placing his hand on Faramir's back and gently propelling him away from the table. "He asked me to tell you, Master Mithrandir, that later on he would appreciate your presence in council, if you would be so kind. They are meeting in the White Tower as usual and he hoped you could join them in an hour or so; before then they will only be discussing matters in which you would have little interest, he thought."

"Certainly I will attend Denethor's council, since he desires it, but I confess myself surprised to be invited in such a way," Mithrandir said.

Boromir shrugged. "As to that, you will have to ask him. I have been excused this evening; all I can tell of the current situation has already been said. But can I, in his stead, offer you a cup of wine or spiced mead to settle your stomach?"

The three began to climb the stairs towards the Steward's family chambers.

"A cup of wine would not come amiss," said Mithrandir. "I hope you will join me in it."

To that Boromir assented. Faramir, as he preferred, took a well-watered glass. They sat as they had done on the previous evening, but talked only idly of this and that – the weather, the last harvest, the state of the roads.

After a time Mithrandir put his cup aside and stood.

"I suppose I had better go to see what Denethor wishes me to contribute to his council," he said. "In case I do not see you before you leave tomorrow, Boromir, may I say that I am very pleased to have become acquainted with you, and please accept my best wishes for the success of your present command."

"Thank you, sir," Boromir rose and bowed.

Mithrandir bowed in return. "And Faramir, if we do not happen to meet to break fast in the morning, I will see you in the muniments room at your usual hour. Rest you both well tonight," and he passed from the room.
The brothers resettled themselves in their chairs.

"I am glad that I need not attend the council meeting tonight," remarked Boromir. "Cooped up in the White Tower, with dry and dusty conversation – even when they talk of military matters they make them dully practical! Give me a nice, straightforward fight against the filthy Orcs, and then a chance to talk strategy afterwards with the other captains, over a few tankards of ale or some good wine."

"Although that sounds quite practical in its own way, too. Do you never speak of other matters besides the course of the war?"

Boromir frowned. "What, do you mean talking of our families, or of women, that sort of thing? Yes, of course, sometimes we speak of such things."

"That is not exactly what I meant. I was talking with Master Mithrandir yesterday, about good and evil, and why men choose to turn to evil in their lives. Since you fight against wicked Men as well as the Orcs, I wondered if you spoke of them, perhaps thought about how they might be turned from their path and brought to be allies rather than foes," said Faramir. "Or why they chose to follow the Dark Lord in the first place. Master Mithrandir thinks that there are many reasons why, but power seems to be the chief among them – the love of power, even if a person begins with good intentions, will ultimately be his downfall."

"We are not likely to turn to such deep philosophical matters in the camps, that is certain! There are plenty of immediate matters to take our attention. I do not know why some men turn to evil; I have never given it much thought," conceded Boromir. "I suppose I have assumed that it was merely in their natures. Had Master Mithrandir a purpose for such discussion?"

"A question I asked started the subject. But oh, one thing of which he told me you should surely know," Faramir gave a shiver. "You have heard of the Nazgûl?"

"The Nazgûl? I do not recollect that name."

"You may have heard tell of them as the Ringwraiths. Mithrandir spoke of them as an example of the corruption of the Enemy. They were Men greedy for power who fell under his control many centuries ago, and exist yet. Though they have not been definitely seen outside Mordor for hundreds of years, Mithrandir hinted that they might have returned to Mirkwood, near the northern border of Rohan," said Faramir.

"No, that tale is not familiar to me. But if they are allies or thralls of the Unnamed, my men and I will certainly be wary of them, should we see them," Boromir said.

He rose and began to pace around the room, his heels tapping sharply as he moved from carpet to stone floor. Faramir watched him toss his head as if trying to dislodge something unpleasant from his thoughts, and eventually asked if it was the idea of the Dark Lord's growing power that distressed him so.

"No, it is not that. You seem to be getting on well with Master Mithrandir – how have you and Father gotten along, these past months?"

Faramir hesitated, not wishing to speak ill of his father and lord, and Boromir urged him, "Come now, brother, you may speak freely to me. Well do I know that you and he have often been like oil and water – is this still true?"

"It is," Faramir confessed. "When you said that he had commented on my doings to you, I was astounded, as for the most part we merely speak civilly when we must, and I try to stay out of his
way. When we do converse at greater length, he is wont to point out my faults and compare my abilities to yours, always to your advantage. Which is natural since you have five more years of experience than I! But the comparison is unjust, and once when I ventured to say so, he struck me across the face and said that I should be glad to get no worse for my impudence." On the last words Faramir's voice faltered and he turned his head, unwilling to let his brother see the tears in his eyes before he brushed them angrily away.

Boromir shook his head. "I had not known that matters stood thus between you."

"What could you have done had you been aware, when your own responsibilities take you far from the city?" Faramir exclaimed. "He has always favored you, it seems you can do no wrong in his eyes – or at least if you do, his anger towards you burns cold, and never hot. Having had both directed at me, I assure you I prefer the former."

"True, I have rarely felt the full impact of his anger," said Boromir, "although remind me some other time to tell you how he acted the second time I swore in front of him. But I cannot see why he should act so towards you. Your behavior is neither disrespectful nor disobedient, less so than mine at your age, I should judge. And your talents are more like to his than are mine – I would expect that he would value them, not dismiss them."

"Yes," agreed Faramir with some bitterness. "He often quotes the saying 'You cannot knit wool from a hen,' as evidence of why a wise ruler uses the abilities of his people to best advantage, rather than trying to make them become what they are not. Except that this piece of wisdom apparently does not apply in the case of his own son. I think at times he does not even like me, and tolerates my presence only because he hopes I can be trained in soldiery sufficiently to be useful in service to his rule and someday yours."

"That could be. I wish we could divine the reason for his antipathy, though, so that perhaps we could think of a way to overcome it. For it is clear to me that he does not entirely trust you, or your judgment. Perhaps because you are still young, but I do not think that is the only reason. Let me tell you what happened this morning, if I may?" Boromir asked.

"Of course."

"Well, I went to speak to Father as he had asked me, after breakfast. He had a few things to tell me regarding which purveyors he wished me to use for resupply, and so on. At the end of the interview he commented that I looked less like a bandit's whelp that day than the previous, and asked if I had given any thought to his point about marriage. I made the suggestion about the King of Rohan's niece that you had thought of. That surprised him, all right, and after a moment he wanted to know if it was my own idea. I told him no, it was yours, but I thought it a good one, since I had no immediate wish to marry and a renewed alliance with Rohan might serve Gondor well."

Boromir took a breath and continued.

"Then Father frowned, and said that it was not a poor scheme, but that it would be better had I thought of it for myself. And he said something I did not understand, about you being too witting to serve your purpose. Then abruptly he seemed to change the subject, and asked if I purposed to follow your advice often. It seems he overheard you say something to lord Mithrandir yesterday about acting as my chief counselor, when the time came. He said naught to you at the time, but now he warned me that I should be careful of the choices I made lest they not turn to my advantage. He spoke obscurely, but I understood his intent. For reasons of his own, he wishes to divide us. The only explanation I can think of is that by this means he expects each of us to be more loyal to him – but that makes little sense, either."
Faramir had heard his brother's story with increasing dismay. "What can Father be thinking? How could he believe I would be anything other than loyal to him, or to you when you become Steward in due time? I have never done or said or even thought anything that should suggest otherwise."

Boromir lifted his shoulders in a shrug and dropped them, saying, "I do not understand it either. But whatever Father may think, I do trust you, Faramir."

He paused for a moment, thinking, and then continued, "And I wish to show it, even if Father would disapprove. Steward though he may be, his judgment here is mistaken to consider you unworthy. I am no fool, but I know well that I am more at home on the battlefield than in the council chamber, whereas you are like to be the opposite. It would suit both our abilities well for you to stand at my shoulder; I to be the strong arm to defend our land, and you to be the keen mind to guide her people. Though it may be presumptuous of me, when no man knows what the future may bring, I would wish now to seal our long-ago pact that you should be my chief counselor. Come, brother, let us take an oath together on it!"

Hardly believing his ears, Faramir found himself risen to his feet and clasping Boromir's two hands with his own.

"I swear to you, my brother, that as Steward, I will do my utmost to protect the land and the people of Gondor in honor, ruling justly, and turning to you as my first counselor in all matters," Boromir said.

"And I in turn swear that I will serve you honorably in all duties you may require of me, but most by giving advice for the preservation of our land," Faramir responded, through the lump in his throat at the thought of the trust being placed in him. Should our father die unexpectedly, I might be called on to do this sooner than we think.

The unexpected gravity of the moment brought them both to silence, regarding each other's faces; then Boromir spoke again.

"Well, and though I did not intend that when we began to talk tonight, it is well done." He gripped Faramir's hands more tightly for an instant, then released them.

"Do not speak of this yet to any other, if you will. Father has already made clear how he feels, and tales can grow in the telling until common report bears no likeness to the truth. I can do nothing to change his opinion of you at present, it would appear, but it will not help either of us to have him mistrust me as well," he said.

"I will be silent, if you wish it. None except Master Mithrandir – and Father – knows that we had long planned for me to advise you, and I need not tell the wizard we have taken oath," said Faramir.

"Very well, then," said Boromir. "But the hour grows late, and I must depart early in the morning."

"Will Father go to see you off?" asked Faramir cautiously.

"I doubt it greatly – it would be unnecessary, time better spent elsewhere," Boromir answered. "At least to his thinking."

"In that case I will come to bid you farewell. I think it would be best if I do not see Father if I can avoid it for a day or two, lest I be unable to keep from asking him why he dismisses me so. Despite everything I owe him respect as my lord, even if at present I am angry with him as my
father. And I would not create a scene in front of all the city, or even in our own quarters with Master Mithrandir about and likely to overhear any quarrels."

"I will look for you early, then."

Boromir rose, stretching. "I am surprised that Father and Mithrandir have not returned, at this late hour. I had not imagined that the wizard would have any news of such import that it could not wait until morning, especially given that Father waited two days to hear it."

"Unless he delayed for some other reason," added Faramir thoughtfully.

He too stood. "But whatever is brewing, we will learn of it or not as Father chooses. And I think I would rather be safely in my room before he does return. In his current frame of mind he might imagine anything, if he saw us sitting up together so late."

Boromir could only agree to that, and they parted until the morning.

Once again it was his brother’s insistent tapping on the door that roused Faramir from his dreams.

*Water... falling water... but a wave or a waterfall? And grave peril...* He shook his head to clear it of the images now fading to splintered shreds.

"I am up," he called, and hastily pulled on whatever garments came to hand most readily.

Boromir eyed him dubiously as he slipped out of the room.

"I hope you don’t run into Father before you can change clothes again," he snorted. "You look as if you belonged to a group of traveling minstrels. All you lack is an instrument. And perhaps some bells on your shoes!"

Faramir glanced down at himself. He had managed to select an outfit in which no two items made any pretense of matching: and ancient and patched mustard-yellow tunic, blue belt, and bright green trousers, with a knitted red vest over all.

"Perhaps I should change," he admitted, and was careful to choose more sober garb on his second rummage through the clothes-press.

"Much better," Boromir approved, when Faramir reappeared wearing dark blue trousers and a creamy linen shirt. "You don't want to give Father such an easy excuse to snipe, do you?"

"Not without you here to distract him," and Faramir dug an elbow into his brother’s ribs. "If he’s been critical of your attire, imagine what he would say to mine. ‘You have a responsibility to your rank, boy. Never forget that,’” he intoned in a passable imitation of Denethor’s voice.

Boromir smiled. "And don't let him catch you doing *that*, either!” He tousled Faramir’s unbrushed hair affectionately.

"Humph. As if I would around anyone but you. Are you ready to leave? Have you broken fast yet?” Faramir asked.

"Almost, and no. I've packed my bags and sent them on to the stables, but I thought to eat with you before going to the gates. Come on."
They hurried down to the Great Hall, where the laden tureens and platters were just being set out. Boromir piled his plate high.

"Back to camp food after this," he remarked over a forkful of egg-filled pastry.

The brothers were sitting at one end of the high table, far from any of the other early arrivals for the morning meal. Nevertheless Boromir glanced around carefully before continuing in a quiet tone.

"Look, Faramir. I wish I did not have to leave immediately, but I must. Still before I do, we need to speak further of – what we discussed last night. The more I think on it, the more certain I am that our oath must be secret."

"You do not wish to revoke it, though, do you?" said Faramir.

"Of course not. But until we can learn why Father seemingly bears a grudge against you, you must not give him any cause for further mistrust – or you will not be able to fulfill your vow. How exactly you can avoid provoking his anger and distrust I do not know. Have you any ideas?"

Boromir gazed at his brother, his eyes thoughtful.

Faramir looked down into his mug. "Well, he clearly puts as much faith in you and your skills as in any other man…"

He paused, and recalled Mithrandir's advice from the previous evening.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "perhaps it would be best for me to try to follow in your footsteps as closely as I am able. By my oath I must continue to study in order to serve as your advisor, and indeed I would not wish otherwise. But maybe if I put more effort into the military side of things – Father values those skills more, at least that is where his comments are always directed."

"That seems like a wise thing to try, at least," Boromir agreed. "You can write to me and tell me whether it seems to be working. If it does not we can think of alternatives. And remember, too, that in a few years you will almost certainly be out of Minas Tirith, with your own company, and not under Father's eye. Then he will not be able to judge you as closely; perhaps distance will give him the perspective to value you."

"Yes," but Faramir avoided his brother's gaze.

_I wish I did not have to do this_, he thought unhappily. _It is not so much the swordplay and the horsemanship and learning all the military skills that I do not like, it is deceiving my lord and father. Can that ever be right? Even if it does him no harm, and is intended for the ultimate good of the land. If we knew he would have forbidden the oath we made, were we right in taking it? But it is done, now. And if Father sees that all I do is to be like Boromir, maybe he will relent in his feelings for me._

"All right, then," said Boromir, after waiting to see if Faramir would add more to the bare affirmative. "Time for me to go."

They walked down the tunnel to the stables, where Boromir collected his horse and checked to make certain all his gear was safely stowed in the saddlebags. Though the streets were not yet crowded this early, since Faramir was afoot he chose to lead the horse rather than ride the winding path back and forth across the face of Minas Tirith to the final gate.

In silence they walked, surrounded by the early-morning sounds of the waking city. At last they reached the outer, eastern gate. Boromir swung himself up into the saddle and leaned down to clasp Faramir's hands in his own.
"Remember, brother, what honor demands and where your loyalty lies. We do nothing but look to the future."

Faramir gazed up. The sun stood several handspans above the horizon now, and shone around his brother's figure, making it blaze as if with the glory he would seek and find in battle with the Orcs and other minions of the Enemy.

*I stand in my brother's shadow, he thought. And that is where I wish to be, where I may be safe from my father's disapproval and yet be loyal to both of them.*

"Farewell, Boromir. Good luck to you," he said.

"And to you as well – you will need it more than I, I think. Do not forget to write and tell me how Father takes your new approach. I shall probably not be here for the celebration of yestarë at midwinter, but I hope perhaps for tuilérë in the spring. No doubt we will each have much to tell. Farewell!"

The same sun that edged Boromir in light shone full upon Faramir as he stepped back. Boromir lifted his horn and let it sound to mark his departure, and with a final salute to his brother, he was gone into the eastern morning.

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