Tales of the Wizard's Apprentice

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Summary

Faramir's father, Lord Denethor, Steward of Gondor, scorned his second son as a Wizard's Pupil. This is an AU exploration of how that might have come to be.

Notes

This story is set in the Desperate Hours AU, in which there are a number of small differences with canon. Among them are that Faramir was born in T.A. 2985, instead of 2980, and Thorongil did not leave Gondor until 2985.

"Faramir the younger was like [Boromir] in looks but otherwise in mind. He read the hearts of men as shrewdly as his father, but what he read moved him sooner to pity than to scorn. He was gentle in bearing, and a lover of lore and of music, and therefore by many in those days his courage was judged less than his brother's. But it was not so, except that he did not seek glory in danger without a purpose. He welcomed Gandalf at such times as he came to the City, and he learned what he could from his wisdom, and in this as in many other matters he displeased his father." - Tolkien, on Faramir, in the Appendices.
Gandalf the Gray, Wizard of the immortal Istari, returned to the White City during a rainy autumn, once again searching for the One Ring. The forces of Sauron were growing bolder and his manipulations more pernicious. Gandalf sensed that the long-awaited time of crisis was approaching. A conversation he had with his fellow Wizard Radagast the Brown had led Gandalf to think of the Library and archives of ancient Minas Tirith. The wizard hoped to find clues to Isildur’s fate, and to the path of the dread ring, amongst the books and scrolls of the White City.

Minas Tirith stood nearest of all the human realms to Mordor. In the handful of years since the Gray Wizard had last visited, the city seemed to have grown grayer itself, more despairing. Its archives, however, were as cheerful and filled with absent-minded scholars as ever, to the Wizard’s simultaneous joy and frustration.

Gandalf suppressed an oath upon realizing how many records from the time of Isildur there were in the library of Gondor. Too much was better than too little, but going through it all would take far too long without competent help. At this rate, he would never be able to leave Gondor and travel to Rivendell before the snows set in.

“Mithrandir!” A soft, sweet voice called out from nearby, disturbing only the old Wizard at the table nearest from the window. Gandalf, called Mithrandir by the humans of Gondor, looked up to the welcome sight of the Lady Finduilas, the wife of the Steward of Gondor. The Lady was ever a favorite visitor to the library and archives. He also noted the less-than-welcome presence of a small child at her side. Gandalf was very interested in making the acquaintance of Finduilas’ offspring, and was fond of human children (in fact, all children) in general. However, the Wizard was quite certain this one was far too young to handle the manuscripts he was reviewing with the care they deserved.

Beginning to gather up his research to keep it safe from small and possibly sticky fingers, Gandalf greeted “Lady Finduilas, always a pleasure. And this must be your younger son – Faramir, is it not?”

Finduilas ushered the young boy forward. “Aye, it is. Faramir, give Mithrandir your greetings. ‘Twas he who first introduced me to your father, when he visited Dol Amroth, long ago.”

Gandalf found his eyes captured by a remarkably solemn and piercing gaze. “You are looking for ways to stop the men from Mordor.” The gray eyed child observed. “May I help?”

Quite taken aback, the Wizard murmured, “hmm,” to buy time, looking to the child’s mother for guidance.

Finduilas gave her old mentor a half-smile, one he remembered well as portending mischief. Here he thought it probably expressed mere enjoyment of his shock at her child’s strangely mature manner. “Well, Fara, Mithrandir is working with very sensitive old documents, and you must needs gain even greater dexterity ‘ere you can help with them.”

The boy sighed in disappointment, perking up as his mother offered an alternative.

“But I see Gandalf has a set of newer books here – copies of older documents. Maybe you can look through those for certain words?”

“I’m good at that.” the young Gondorian Lord offered, meeting Gandalf’s eyes with sincere desire to help.
“Hmm.” The gray wizard said again, considering. “Oh, very well. It isn’t often I find such enthusiastic help. Here – look for this name – Isildur.”

“I-sil-dur” the boy pronounced, looking carefully at the word as the Wizard had written it. “Is it only in this tongue, or should I look for it in Sindarin and Quenya as well?”

“Can you spell it in those languages?” Gandalf asked in growing surprise.

“I think so,” the child frowned as he wrote in a hesitant hand the name Isildur in Quenya and Sindarin.

“Very good, kit.” Observed Finduilas, “but you forgot the accent here, and that the I should be an E here.”

“Only in the standard dialect though, right Mama?” The boy asked, writing the words again with those corrections.

“Yes, some of the texts of Quenya I remember from my girlhood in Dol Amroth did not have that variation.” Finduilas confirmed.

“Here, Fara, you begin with these books, and I shall help Mithrandir with the scrolls, until your Father’s meeting adjourns.”

The boy didn’t need a second invitation. He was soon engrossed in scanning pages for the words he’d been asked to look for, intent on his task.

Turning to Gandalf, Finduilas offered. “Now how may I help you, dear one?”

Smiling at the offer of real help at last, Gandalf explained how the object he was looking for disappeared not long after the Last Alliance of men and elves, when it had been in the possession of Isildur. Finduilas frowned in concentration, clarifying “So I am looking for anything about a belonging of Isildur’s, such as a battle fought over one, or a theft, or perhaps a law suit?”

“Yes, my dear.” The wizard confirmed. “Anything like that.” Gandalf smiled as Finduilas took a goodly portion of the old manuscripts he had gathered, and proceeded to peruse them with delicate skill. Were it not for the fine lines on the lady’s face, it could have been twenty years ago, the teenaged Finduilas offering to help Gandalf search the archives of Dol Amroth in exchange for hearing her favorite stories once again.

The three continued in their tasks, the boy and his mother occasionally calling the Wizard’s attention to one mention of Isildur or another in the books and scrolls, a few of which the Wizard noted for further research later. As the afternoon wore on, Gandalf found his attention straying from his search in the old manuscripts, to the fey Lady and her grave younger child.

Finduilas, the daughter of Prince Adrahil of Dol Amroth, had kept her fragile, near-ethereal beauty, despite years of marriage and the birth of two children, as well as a prolonged bout with ill health. She was pale, nearly as pale as an elf, with beautiful red-gold hair bound back with a circlet, and caught with a bronze clasp at the nape of her neck for ease of completing daily tasks. She was dressed in a light green dress that brought out the deeper green of her eyes. A handsome woman, and a clever one. Gandalf sincerely hoped that the rumors of her health further deteriorating were untrue. From her own Númenorian descent, she should have many years left. Still, Sauron’s forces breathed at the very door of Minas Tirith, and if there were any in Gondor he would choose to eliminate, it would be the wife and mother of the last surviving Hurins. Gandalf would miss Finduilas for her own sake, for he had allowed himself to care for the girl as he did few humans, but he would mourn her even more for the loss of her moderating influence on her hot-headed, stubborn husband, Denethor, the Lord Steward of Gondor. Although a skilled and
perceptive leader of men, Denethor had become cynical and rather an absolutist as he grew older, and anyone who did not hold Gondor’s cause above all else in Middle Earth was highly suspect in his eyes.

Adrahil’s children all possessed certain traits that could have come almost directly from their Númenorian and elven ancestors, but Finduilas more obviously so then her siblings. Dol Amroth’s was one of the first princely lines to mix that heritage, and it gave their line the Númenorians’ talent of looking into the hearts of men, and the wood elves’ way with beasts and nature. Gandalf had carefully arranged the marriage of Finduilas to Denethor (so as to bring that bloodline back to Gondor). The Wizard would have tried to marry her to Aragorn instead, had Isildur’s heir not already fallen deeply in love with Arwen, Lord Elrond’s daughter. He had tried to arrange Finduilas’ sister Inviriel’s marriage to the previous King of Rohan, but Adrahil had been disinclined to see a daughter move so far beyond the reach of the Swan Knights protection.

Finduilas, noticing his regard, looked up with a smile. “It is so pleasant to see you again, and to be able to introduce you to Faramir. I had feared I would not have the opportunity.” The lady spoke softly, so as not to disturb her son from his work.

“I would not have you wear yourself out.” Gandalf observed gently. “I am very happy to have the assistance of such a capable researcher, but not at the cost of your health, my dear.”

The lady sighed. “I am just weary, Mithrandir. I long for the sea and my childhood home, for green and growing things, but my husband needs my help here, and I worry.” At this, the lady’s eyes moved to her son.

“Worry over him?” Gandalf observed the boy more closely. The wizard had already noticed over the past few hours that Faramir seemed a very quiet child, and a hard worker with a goodly attention span for his age. He had inherited his mother’s gold-red hair, perhaps a shade or so darker. He had the gray eyes which were so common amongst the Númenoreans, and, unless Finduilas had already told the boy about his research, he had also inherited his father’s ability to look into men’s eyes and know the truth. “He does not seem a difficult child, my lady. Were I you, I would be more likely to worry over Boromir, whose enthusiasm for the war-like arts exceeds his current skills.”

“Boromir will be a great warrior.” Finduilas said “I have seen it – and Faramir shall be as well, though it is not what he would aspire to, in less dark times.” Looking at her more closely, and recalling that Finduilas bore strongly the foresight that sometimes came with Númenorean blood, Gandalf carefully asked “Then what is your concern?”

Meeting his eyes sorrowfully, Finduilas explained “I know I will die ‘ere my boys become men. It was the price for bearing another child, and I accepted it knowingly, for I believe you are right – a time of crisis is coming to Middle Earth, and Gondor needs as many warriors to face it as possible. But Denethor has never forgiven Faramir for being the innocent cause of my delicate health, nor has he forgiven me for conceiving him, knowing the likely cost.”

Looking again at the child, still reading diligently, Gandalf asked “You can’t be worried he will mistreat the boy? Denethor shares your far sight, my lady. He too knows he needs his sons. As I recall, he positively dotes on Boromir.”

For the first time this day, Finduilas began to resemble a long-time invalid. “Forgive me for burdening you thusly, Mithrandir. I should not have brought these family issues up, they are not your concern.”

“Not at all, my lady. Please let me know how I may help. Your assistance, and the boy’s, have saved me many days work, and you have been one of my more astute research assistants over the
years.” Gandalf explained.

Finduilas looked at her son again, then back to the Wizard. “You will likely visit here again as the years go by, renewing your searches in the archives. I would have you look up Faramir when you do, and encourage him in his scholar’s pursuits, for I fear my husband will discourage him, if he can.”

Gandalf looked again at the quiet boy. “I will, when I can. I don’t know how often I will be here over the years, but I will make a point of talking to the boy.”

“My husband may try to keep you away from him.” Finduilas related, a darker concern in her eyes than that which she had spoken.

Gandalf chuckled to hide his unease. “The day I can’t get around Denethor is the day I turn in my wizard’s staff. I convinced Adrahil to let you come to Gondor to marry him, didn’t I?”

Finduilas smiled her thanks, as the boy looked up and piped. “Mama, council will be over soon. You should go and rest, so that you may have dinner with us tonight.”

Finduilas nodded. “Aye, I should. Will you stay here with Mithrandir, and do as he tells you?”

The boy turned his attention to Gandalf and nodded solemnly.

“Very well, I shall take my leave. Good hunting, gentlemen.” The Lady nodded her gold-red head, and went to her rest. Had Gandalf known it was the last time he would see her, he surely would have embraced her. As it was, he merely nodded politely back, and then snorted at how neatly he had been manipulated into babysitting a child younger than he generally cared to watch in a library. Lord Faramir, fortunately, continued his angelic behavior even away from his mother’s supervision. The wizard and the boy continued their research, until a loud voice interrupted, one undoubtedly heard by all of the scholars in the library, and possibly also by the bookbinders’ a street away.

“What are you doing with my son, Wizard?” Denethor, Steward of Gondor, demanded in a tone bordering on the impolite, before looking at Faramir and scolding “Your mother will surely be searching for you rather than resting, for you were supposed to spend the day with her.”

Turning to Gandalf, the Steward said “As for you, I will keep the promise I made to my father that you can do your research here, old man, but you will not draw my wife into it anymore! She is not well.”

Raising an eyebrow at this excessively hostile greeting, Gandalf had yet to speak before Faramir said “Mother came to the library to fetch a book to read when we encountered Mithrandir. Mithrandir offered to watch me so that Mother might rest.”

“Oh.” Denethor sighed, and his anger mostly left his face. “Very well then. See that you return to your rooms in time for bed.”

“Yes, Father.” the boy agreed, dropping his gaze back down to his book as his father left the library.

“Faramir,” the wizard reprimanded, suppressing his amusement at seeing Denethor so neatly outfoxed by his five year old son, in favor of maintaining a serious expression. “While that was very diplomatic, it is not appropriate to lie to one’s Father, even for good reasons.”

The boy met the Wizard’s eyes, reassured by their twinkle. “It wasn’t a lie, Mithrandir. You did agree to watch me, and Mother has gone to rest. If Father had found out Mother had been helping
you, he would have yelled at her, and that would have been very unrestful.” he explained.

“What about your Mother’s health?” The wizard pressed. “Shouldn’t your father know she has been neglecting it to help me with this research, so that he can ask her to rest?”

The boy looked somewhat guilty, and a little torn, but continued to defend his actions. “Mother is happier on the days she spends some time in the library, or with her friends. Sometimes the soul needs different things than the body.”

That didn’t sound like something a five year old would come up with on his own, even this odd five year old. “Where did you hear that?” Gandalf inquired.

“Mother’s healers.” Faramir explained. “They told that to my Father when he overruled them about letting her spend more time in the library. Father doesn’t always understand about what the soul needs, that’s what the Warden of the House of Healing says.”

“Hmm.” Gandalf considered. “While I can appreciate that you had good intentions, misleading one’s Father is not much different from lying to him, young Faramir. You should endeavor, in the future, to avoid both.”

The boy shook his head “Even when telling the whole truth will result in more trouble for those who haven’t earned it? Mother didn’t ask to be sick, and Father always feels bad after he yells at her.”

Gandalf leaned forward, engaged, and at the same time wondering at the oddity of being drawn into a discussion of comparative ethics with a five year old. “I suppose, young man, that one must weigh the trouble that will be caused with the harm of the lie. In this instance, I judge you were perhaps in the right. Still, it is a fine line, and one that will trip you quite readily should you continue to tread it.”

The boys face furrowed in concentration, a look the Wizard had seen many times on his mother’s face as she struggled to understand something. “Boromir says that, too. Or what he says is I’m going to get spanked for being naughty, because I’m making decisions that grown-ups should make for me.”

“Boromir says that, does he?” The wizard pondered aloud, thinking it was perhaps time to reassess the other son of Denethor as well.

As if summoned by their discussion, the older, blonder, son of Denethor entered the library, less quietly than his mother and brother, but with less volume than his father. He moved directly to their table without having to scan the room, as if drawn to his younger brother’s presence.

“Brom!” The younger boy greeted happily, but at a low volume, being careful not to draw the attention of the other scholars.

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“Fara.” The elder greeted, smiling with exasperated tolerance at his sibling. “Hello, Mithrandir.” Boromir greeted the Wizard politely enough, but in a reserved way that made Gandalf regret that Boromir already seemed to have taken on his father’s wary attitude toward the wizard.

Pinning his younger sibling with a firm look, the ten year old explained “Mother’s going to be too tired to come down to dinner. Ada says she’s just having a bad day, but she was here helping Mithrandir, wasn’t she?”

Faramir looked a little ashamed. “Aye, but she was so happy while she was here! You should have seen her – she didn’t look sick at all!”
Boromir sighed. “I understand why you didn’t tell Ada, but you probably should have.” The older boy seemed sympathetic despite his scolding, but followed up with a “request” that made it clear he did not intend to let his clever brother entirely get away with his deception. “Why don’t you come help me with my chores, Fara?” Boromir asked archly. It was clear to Gandalf, and to Faramir, that the latter was more of a command than a request.

The younger brother’s stance turned stubborn, and he shook his head. “Nay, I shall continue to help Mithrandir, as Mother bade me.”

Gandalf chuckled at Faramir’s clever re-construing of Lady Finduilas’ instructions. “I think, young Lord of Gondor, you should help your brother with his chores, in payment for his silence over your transgressions. I’d also like to point out, for your consideration, that I’ve only known you for one afternoon, and twice I’ve seen you mislead those with authority over you as to the true state of affairs. It would behoove you to be aware that being clever won’t always get you the outcome you desire.”

Boromir looked uncertain as to whether he should thank the Wizard for his support, or reprimand his brother. Faramir, taking advantage of this momentary uncertainty, turned his best innocent expression – and it was very good – to the Wizard and made his case again. “But I want to help you, and you could use help, otherwise you will be late. I never get a chance to help Gondor.”

Boromir rolled his eyes, muttering “You’re a child, Fara. You’re to help Gondor by listening to your elders.” The Wizard chuckled again, sensing this was a discussion the brothers had engaged in before.

Turning to Faramir, the Wizard consoled. “You will have many chances to help Gondor, young one. In fact, I will welcome your help again tomorrow, but for now you must go atone for your misdeeds.”

Faramir sighed, and laid a bookmark in the book he had been reviewing. “Aye, Mithrandir.” He accepted, turning to his brother with a no-hard-feelings-smile. “Lead on, Brom. What are we doing today?”

“You’re going to scrub pots clean whilst I try to beg some food from the Cook.” The older brother said, chivvying the younger out of the room.

“You’re a child, Fara. You’re to help Gondor by listening to your elders.” his older brother said, mussing Faramir’s hair affectionately as the pair disappeared from view.

Well after midnight, Gandalf the Gray woke to an odd sound in his bedroom chamber. It sounded almost like a bare foot on stone. Seizing his staff, he gave a silent command for light as he looked around for the intruder.

The intruder was a very small boy holding a very large book. It was Faramir, who, while appearing momentarily startled by the unexpected light, and the Wizard’s fierce expression on being disturbed, immediately rallied with “Good, I don’t have to wake you up. I think I found what you were looking for – it was in a book that wasn’t in your pile.”

Flabbergasted, the Wizard stared at the Steward of Gondor’s younger son, bare foot and clad only in a thin night shirt, apparently wandering the halls of Minas Tirith after midnight at will.

Taking the Wizard’s shock as a request to please continue, Faramir held the book out, and flipped to a marked page, showing Gandalf a passage that nearly made the Wizard forget completely the
time of night and the tender age of this research assistant.

“Here, this is a copy of a passage in an old letter written by a Lord of Gondor whose manor was near Gladden fields. It says that Easendor, a great man of Gondor, came to his end in an orc ambush, and that he was brought by his retainers’ to the Lord’s manor, but it was too late to heal him. Before he died, the great lord spoke of his family, but mostly of his precious jewel, lost in the ambush. The Lord wrote to his cousin in Minas Tirith that it was sad irony the great lord had survived the siege of Barad-dur, only to fall before a party of orcs.” Faramir, every inch his scholarly mother’s son, looked up at Gandalf, explaining earnestly “Easendor is close to Isildur – adjust for the accent near Gladden fields, and give the scribe who copied this letter into the book a spelling problem, and you’re there.”

Gandalf nodded absently in agreement, further noting “great man is a reasonable translation of King, particularly given the likelihood the original letter was written in some form of Sindarin. And there were few great lords of any stripe who survived the siege at Barad-dur.”

Faramir nodded. “And he lost something precious to him. In the river that runs along these fields, probably.”

“Why would you say that, son of Finduilas?” The Wizard asked intently.

“When the passage speaks of trying to heal him, it talks of water in his lungs. Unless he had caught pneumonia, it is likely he fell into the river during the ambush.” Faramir pointed out.

“A likely conjecture.” The Wizard agreed, putting on his overrobe and swiftly copying the relevant passage. “I must travel to this area with all haste, perhaps something can still be learned. It is not that far from the Mirkwood – perhaps King Thranduil’s scouts can be of assistance.”

“King Thranduil is a wood-elf.” Faramir observed, seeming impressed. “Do you know many elves, Mithrandir?”

“Hmm? Oh yes. Lovely beings, elves.” Gandalf commented absently, collecting his travel bags.

“I shall leave the book here with a note for the staff to return it to the archives.” Lord Faramir explained, noticing that the Wizard seemed not to be aware of such little details.

“Why not take it back yourself?” The Wizard asked, still not recalling, in his excitement at making progress in his search, that Lord Denethor’s son was probably supposed to be in bed, rather than wandering the castle.

“You have used my water-proof bag to pack your parchment in.” The boy observed. “I would need it to take the book back to the archives without damaging it.”

“Hmm.” The Wizard agreed absently, noting the rain outside, before stopping abruptly. “This book came from the archives?”

The boy nodded, beginning to look worried. Mithrandir hadn’t seemed much like an ordinary adult, but Faramir knew that most adults, even the eccentric ones, disapproved of his leaving the castle by himself, particularly at night. Even Boromir disapproved of such activities at night, however Faramir had felt the Wizard’s mission was urgent enough to justify the haste.

“The archives are on the seventh level of the city.” The Wizard pointed out, sighing. “Dare I hope that you wore a warm cloak and boots?”

“Of course.” Faramir seemed insulted. “I couldn’t properly sneak…I mean go…from the castle to the seventh level without being seen if I hadn’t been properly attired.”
“Of course not.” The Wizard agreed with tired good humor. “What was I thinking? That a child who wanders several miles away from home, in the dark and the rain, by himself after an old book not even one I had thought of…incidentally, Faramir, what did make you think of this book?”

The boy blushed. “Mama reads it to fall asleep, sometimes. It is mostly a very boring collection of letters from Lords of Gondor to their families, and mostly from the time of Isildur’s grandchildren, but I remembered reading this passage a few weeks ago, and the name Easendor, and I thought it might be important.”

“It might be.” The Wizard agreed. “And you are correct that my mission here is indeed urgent, we may not fully understand how urgent yet. But still, you are a child with a duty to obey the rules set by your parents for your safety, which probably do not permit solo midnight forays to the archives.”

Faramir looked at the Wizard as if he might not be entirely sane. “Mithrandir, I am Finduilas’ son. I knew ‘ere I left that I would come to no harm, and that if I gave you this book, you would leave tonight.”

“Foreknowledge is not perfect.” The Wizard scolded. “Surely your mother has taught you that.”

The boy’s chin rose stubbornly. “She has. She also taught me that sometimes you have to break the rules in order to make sure that important things get done.”

“As I am sure Finduilas also mentioned, it is important to meet the consequences of breaking those rules.” The Wizard pointed out gently. “Come, I will take you to your nurse, and perhaps my thanks for your assistance will in some part make up for your transgressions.”

“Don’t take me to my nurse.” The boy said firmly. “She’ll wake father, who will wake mother, and a large fuss shall ensue. You’ll not be away swiftly, and everyone will be upset.” Faramir then fixed Gandalf with a very hard look, for his age and state. “This was a good day for Mama. She hardly ever makes a formal dinner anymore. If you take me to my nurse, Mama will be upset and have a couple of bad days. Its just how it is.”

“What would you suggest, child? An eccentric Wizard I may be, but I cannot leave the five year old son of my host to find his own way home.” Gandalf pointed out, impatient to be away, but mindful of his duties.

The boy looked as if he rather didn’t understand why. But instead of arguing that he had found his own way here and could find his own way back, he offered, “Take me to Boromir. He will punish me for wandering around the city alone at night, but it is better than the alternatives for everyone.”

Gandalf would normally not have left the care and discipline of a five year old child to his ten year old brother, but he recalled the strained dinner he had attended in the great hall that evening. The Steward had not mentioned his younger son once, despite Gandalf praising the lad’s scholarship. Talking to the young Lord Sendar and the old Captain Tyrel, Gandalf had learned that Denethor never mentioned his younger son if he could help it, despite praising the elder near constantly.

Captain Tyrel had explained “the younger boy seems likely enough – well formed, quick, polite. When he is with his brother, he does all the things one would expect of a boy of five. He’s already riding and shooting a small bow that Boromir had his guards buy for his brother. But the Lord Steward prefers not to see Faramir, so mostly he is not mentioned.”

Boromir, for his part, had been well-behaved during the formal dinner, far from the boisterous child Gandalf remembered from his previous visits. And Boromir had very quietly asked the server to pack up a second serving of the dessert, for his younger brother. Recalling that, and how
well the ten year old had dealt with Faramir’s earlier transgressions, the Wizard agreed. Gandalf was unsurprised when Faramir quietly guided them through hallways, pausing to enter hidden tunnels once or twice to evade guards.

Boromir woke near instantly to his brother’s quiet, hesitant knock at the door to his outer chamber in the Lord Steward’s suite. The tall ten year old immediately swept his younger brother into the room with a sigh, wrapping Faramir in his own dressing gown. “Thank you for bringing him.” Boromir said to the Wizard, looking as if it pained him to owe a man his father so disapproved of anything.

“Your brother saved me a great deal of time tonight.” The Wizard supplied, “but he probably ought not leave his room and journey to the archives by himself.”

“Fara…” Boromir scolded, frustrated but not furious. “I told you, books can always wait til tomorrow!”

Faramir huffed, and Gandalf pointed out, “Possibly not, in this case. But it was still not wise.”

“I will deal with him.” Boromir promised. To the wizard’s surprise, the younger child did not object.

“Don’t tell Mama or Father, Brom.” Faramir said, sighing.

“I won’t, kit.” Boromir promised, still frustrated but affectionate “Now go get in my bed – we’ll tell them you sleepwalked here again, should they ask, and we’ll deal with the rest in the morning.”

Faramir nodded and turned to obey, pausing at the door to Boromir’s bedchamber to ask, sounding truly like a child for possibly the first time that day, “Mithrandir, if we meet again, and you can spare the time, will you tell Brom and I stories of the elves?”

Gandalf nodded. “It will be my honor, Faramir.” The boy grinned tiredly at him, and disappeared through the door.

Gandalf felt more and more the pressure to be away, but love for Finduilas, and growing admiration for her children, made him stay. “It is unfair for a child your age to have to assume such a responsibility for a child your brother’s age.” The Wizard told Denethor’s older son.

Boromir looked at him derisively, but no hint of his derision showed in his voice, which was level and respectful, if barely so. “Its not fair that Ada looks at Fara, and can’t see beyond our mother becoming sick after she bore him. I’ll take care of him, like he helps me with my lessons. We both do what we have to, Fara and I, to keep our family as whole and happy as possible.” Boromir closed his door, and the Wizard was left to marvel at the strong friendship between the two brothers, particularly given their father’s clear preference for the elder.

As Gandalf rode swiftly away from Minas Tirith toward the site where Isildur may have lost the ring, the Gray Wizard decided that he should indeed make a point of returning to the White City on a regular basis. A scholarly spirit such as Faramir’s did indeed deserve to be nurtured, and it was unlikely that Denethor would see the value in such pursuits, standing as he did at Mordor’s gate. It would be worthwhile keeping an eye on Boromir as well – any young child who was so protective and caring of a younger sibling at such a tender age would likely also grow into a remarkable man.
Chapter Summary

The story of how Faramir came to be Gandalf's pupil. Specifically, their first meeting from the perspective of Faramir's mother Finduilas.

Chapter Notes

This story is set in the Desperate Hours AU, in which there are a number of small differences with canon. Among them are that Faramir was born in T.A. 2985, instead of 2980, and Thorongil did not leave Gondor until 2985.

In this story, Faramir is a child prodigy. Finduilas is a scholar who sees bits of the future and the past and sometimes ghosts, and Faramir inherited some of those talents.

I am Finduilas of Gondor, born a Princess of Dol Amroth by the Sea. Daughter of the old Sea Fox Adrahil, and a distant daughter of Númenor and the elves who did not sail.

I do not see the world as others do. I see things that were, and things that may someday be, and things that are, but no one will talk about them, all overlaid on what is actually happening during any given moment. Sometimes it is hard for me to tell the difference between what is now, what was, and what may someday be. I have been this way for as long as I can remember.

My family accepted me, for they bear the same gift and curse, if most to a lesser extent. They helped me learned what was safe to say, and when to say it.

The day that Mithrandir first met me, and realized how strongly my ancestors’ blood manifested in me, I saw my future change.

Gandalf the Gray, called Mithrandir, helped me learn what I would need to wed a Lord of the White City, for he wanted to bring greater elven strength to the blood line of the Stewards of Gondor. Mithrandir also trained me to assist him in his research, because I was smart and funny, and because he understood what it was to be overwhelmed by visions one cannot share.

Mithrandir called me “Anelis come again,” the first time he saw me. Anelis the Wise was my great-great-aunt, my grandfather Angelimar’s father’s younger sister, who died in a vision at the age of 70. She had no children and never married, for her visions were so strong and frequent that she found it exhaustively difficult to remember what was real, and what was not. Mithrandir, with my great-great-grandfather’s permission, had asked Anelis to try to see into one of the seeing stones, to grasp what Sauron might be plotting. The strain was too much, and she died.

But before she died, Anelis warned Mithrandir that one day, a short friend of his would ask for help going out his door, to fetch a child. Mithrandir would want to say no, for he would be in a hurry, and loathe to spend the winter in a hole. But Mithrandir must say yes, or something of immeasurable value would be lost forever.
That is what Mithrandir thought of, the first time he met me. That, and two halflings, a middle-aged one and a very young one, of whom he later told me he was quite fond.

I could have been Finduilas the Wise, unwed seer. But that path, while it would have been my wish in a less desperate time, was not the one I chose to walk. It ended only in darkness, darkness everywhere, darkness without end, and slavery for all beings on Middle Earth. Learning to live in the world, and marrying Denethor, mostly ended in the same darkness, but sometimes there was a light at the end, a light, and two small men walking, the one sometimes supporting the other.

When I met Denethor, I did not yet love him, but I knew I would bear his children, and come to love him. The first day I met him, I saw the shadows of my sons playing together as children.

Still, leaving Dol Amroth for Gondor was a difficult change for me. I love the ocean, and the forests, and I find it difficult to live in a city of stone, no matter how beautiful its gardens. Still, Denethor was very kind to me, and so too were his father, Ecthelion, and his best friend, Thorongil. I made friends amongst many of the ladies of Gondor as well, though some never warmed to me, foreign and odd as I am.

When I went to Gondor, I realized how young and relatively care free was Dol Amroth, for Gondor had endured a thousand years. Thicker than its walls are its ghosts, omnipresent its sad tragedies, but strong is its hope- for Gondor and its ghosts believe the White City may yet flourish again, if Middle Earth is very brave, and very lucky.

When I came to love Gondor, and Denethor, I loved them completely. And our generation – including most especially the Captains Denethor and Thorongil – were the brightest light Minas Tirith had seen in many ages, brilliant and bold, shining against the encroaching dark. Like hope in the night of despair.

My father Adrahil knew both Denethor and Thorongil well. Sitting in the sea wind, after the men of Gondor and the Swan Knights had won a great victory together, I recall my father telling me that Thorongil had “the commander’s gleam,” that something extra that some leaders of men have, that makes serving them a joy. I remember he said that Denethor lacked this gleam, but cautioned me that this was not a criticism, for leaders of men should first be wise, brave and caring, and if they are so, as my Denethor was, their men will fight just as tirelessly, for they know that where their leader goes, they can go as well. I knew that my first son, bonny and bright, would gleam, and my second son, endurance personified, would lead.

Still, although our generation handed Mordor and its allies some of its worst defeats in many a century, Sauron’s influence nonetheless cost us dearly. A young Prince of Rohan was killed in a drunken brawl, putting paid to talk of a possible alliance. The man who killed him was said to have Haradrim features, but he disappeared, never to be found. One of Thorongils’ most trusted lieutenants vanished on a mission requested by Denethor, and the Gondorian lieutenant who was supposed to have relieved him was found in an alley with his throat cut. Most devastating of all for our family, all of the Healers and midwives skilled in the birth of overlarge babes to first-time mothers were dead or vanished from Gondor when the time came for me to birth Boromir, and all did not go well.

The best foresight cannot predict all the ways in which the human body can fail. When I gave birth to Boromir, something inside of me was hurt, badly. For want of a good midwife, my other child may never have been. The shadows of my second son became thinner, and the future more often seemed to end in darkness. Sometimes, I only saw Boromir in the future, lonelier and less kind and thoughtful having grown up without his brother, but still sometimes enough to help off set the darkness. But not as often. I had a choice to make. And the darkness was growing in those days, as the rift between Denethor and Thorongil grew, and the other sons and nephews of the House of Húrin fell, one by one, fighting the darkness.
I chose to betray Denethor, and Thorongil as well, in order to fight the darkness. I love both my sons, for all Faramir is a daily reminder of my greatest betrayal. My beloved husband Denethor is a great man and a strong one, but sometimes his foresight fails him. I could not get him to see, nor could Ecthelion, that Gondor needed another son of Denethor, despite the possible cost to my health.

Denethor never knew of my betrayal. Ecthelion saw to that, giving his son twice the normal amount of shahel (an herb from Dol Amroth with intoxicating and aphrodisiac properties) one night, from which he woke angered at his father, and believing he had betrayed his vow not to risk my life by getting me with child, when in truth, even drugged, he would not empty his seed into me.

And then there was Thorongil, my husband’s former best friend and now greatest rival. But more, for Ecthelion’s purposes, and Eru forgive me, my own – Thorongil looked very much like my husband. He too, could look into the hearts of men, if not so clearly as my husband. Thorongil, with his Dunedain strong reaction to the Dol Amroth herb shahel. We knew of it, because my husband’s men once gave him some, and would have laughed as he went to a state of unconsciousness where he called for a lost love. But my husband had scolded them and sent them away, and sat up watching his best friend until Thorongil returned from the trance many hours later. Thorongil, his dream of lying with his love Arwen, and my great betrayal. Ecthelion says it was not a betrayal, for Gondor’s need was too great. I know he was wrong, a betrayal it was, no matter how good the reasons. I committed it aware of the cost to my own honor and the loyalty I owed my husband, but more afraid of the cost of not betraying, should the absence of one pale boy-child make the darkness never-ending more inevitable.

When I was pregnant with Faramir, and sick again, I sat many hours with Ecthelion, talking over how Gondor might better resist Mordor’s encroachment. Sometimes Denethor joined in those conversations, despite his anger with his Father, and to a lesser degree, myself. When Denethor was absent, Thorongil sometimes joined us, discussing the Dunedain manners of fighting the enemy. On one of those days he wished us farewell, and told us that he must return to his own people. I told him he would return again, to be Gondor’s hope in a dark hour. Then I went and planted King’s foil in the Steward’s garden, and in the King’s abandoned, weed-choked garden, where the herb flourished ‘neath the dormant white tree.

In due time, I gave birth to a second son. The birth nearly killed me. My five year old son and my husband sat by my side for day upon day, and slowly, their love, and that of this new babe, helped me overcome the pain and return to this world for the few years I have left. Children are remarkable, even very young. Remarkable in their ability to love, in the clarity of their vision and in their courage to act upon their convictions. Brom loved Fara, from the very first. He worshiped his Father, yet he chose not to follow Denethor in shutting out the young babe Faramir, chose to love his brother, for all it would cost him some of his own childhood, and his carefree comradeship with his father.

With Ecthelion’s encouragement, while I was pregnant with Faramir, I began to delve deeply into our archives, into forgotten stories and tales passed down, from family to family. My goal was to develop a body of knowledge to help Gondor resist the encroaching darkness of Mordor. I learned how the dark lord nearly won the first time. Then I taught my sons and anyone who would listen Sauron’s preferred strategies and tactics, that they might be forewarned. Families who had stayed in Ithilien for generations taught me how they had evaded the orcs and other minions of darkness, and I listened, and recorded, and thought about how their techniques might be adopted by our soldiers and people. This became my research project, and despite my husband’s disapproval of my working due to my delicate health, I know I lasted longer because of it. I did not expect that Faramir would become my apprentice, that he would be the one who would inherit my research. I
I did not expect my baby to learn to read, until 8 year old Boromir explained to me that his tutors had been much happier with him, since his toddler brother started assisting him with his homework. My husband laughed at Boromir’s funny joke, but I knew he was serious. Lying beside me on my sick bed for hours and days at a time, my littlest one learned to read and write before he trusted his voice to speak. At five, he is so beyond where he should be in his lessons – by the time he was four, he was helping me every day. There is a conspiracy of silence between me and my boys, and the librarians, and those servants of Ecthelion’s who remain. We know the work I do is important, though my husband does not fully appreciate it, nor would he be glad to know that our second son is unnaturally intelligent.

Faramir and I were in the library today continuing this research. I am so glad that we were, for Mithrandir clearly needed some help, and one has so few opportunities to surprise a wizard of his age. But Faramir astonished him, much to my amusement. I was also grateful, for as much as I would like to ask Mithrandir what he thinks of my research, and share it with him, Denethor has demanded that he remain ignorant. My husband does not trust Mithrandir, which may, someday, be Gondor’s undoing.

The next day, I was not surprised to learn that Mithrandir had left during the middle of the night. Denethor complained of the poor manners of Wizards, but I knew that Mithrandir’s quest had been urgent, and that it had been Faramir who had helped him. I know, for my poor younger son was squirming uncomfortably in his seat. My husband, noticing this, asked Boromir what Faramir had done now.

Boromir explained, “It wasn’t really Fara’s fault, Ada. He was sleep-walking from my room to his, and tripped ‘oer the basket of council dolls that Lord Sendar had made for us, breaking Lord Sendar in half. Still, Nurse had to birch him, for he must learn not to sleep walk, or break things.”

Faramir looked down, pretending to be ashamed. Boromir’s eyes widened, as he does when he lies.

My husband, who thought dolls of council figures were ridiculous, and who does not like Lord Sendar, laughed loudly. He actually comforted Faramir, telling him that he would out-grow sleep-walking. Then Denethor offered to take both his sons to the river to swim, should the weather clear.

I know, as my much-loved husband does not, that Boromir would never raise a hand to Faramir, nor let anyone else do so, merely for sleep walking. I also know that Faramir is almost preternaturally graceful, and never breaks things even when he does sleep-walk. More, I know that Faramir’s nurse has never birched him, for he is entirely too clever and fey for her to be able to deal with. My poor dear Faramir, tempted into mischief to help Mithrandir. His poor older brother, who hates to cause him pain.

I would that I could take these burdens from my boys. I wish I could be there everyday with them, like a normal mother, the touchstone and mainstay of their lives. I long to heal the rift between my husband and my younger son, that I fear my death will only widen. But I have learned through painful experience that mourning for the time I lose being sick, and the mother I cannot be, only poisons the time I have left. I will do my best to give my boys good memories of me, and of my love for them, to which they can hold on throughout the long years to come.
Language Lessons

Chapter Summary

Faramir, age seven, learns how to speak orc, Haradrim, and deceit. This is the Faramir who learns to keep his own counsel, who learns how to hide things even from those who love him, because he knows no one can help. Gandalf doesn’t show up in this one, though it was his idea that motivated Faramir to write the essay that brought Denethor’s attention to Faramir.

Chapter Notes

This story is set in the Desperate Hours AU, in which there are a number of small differences with canon. Among them are that Faramir was born in T.A. 2985, instead of 2980, and Thorongil did not leave Gondor until 2985. In fact, unbeknownst to Denethor or Thorongil, Denethor is not actually the father of Faramir; Thorongil is.

In this story, Faramir is a child prodigy. Finduilas is a scholar who sees bits of the future and the past and sometimes ghosts, and Faramir inherited some of those talents.

This chapter contains some torture of orcs (not graphic), and oblique mention of torture of Haradrim. This and later chapters also include mention of what is abusive treatment of Faramir by members of Denethor’s staff. Overall, this chapter is dark, because a lot of Faramir’s childhood was bleak in the DH AU. Please don’t read if that doesn’t appeal.

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger."
– Friedrich Nietzsche

The orc screamed again, then shouted a string of syllables that made the scribe beside him shrug, bored.

“Nothing to report to your father in that, Lad. I don’t know why the torturers bother – can’t get any sense out of these creatures.” Faramir was quiet; he disagreed with the torture, and the orc’s curses wouldn’t make it end any faster.

Another burning brand held to the creature, and the orc screamed and cursed again. Faramir remained silent, stone-faced. This was his second month being required by his father the Steward to watch the “interrogators” at their work, prompted by the Lord Denethor’s disgust with a recent essay of Faramir’s, suggesting possible ways to tempt the Haradrim away from their alliance with Sauron. The ideas expressed in the essay had been partially Mithrandir’s, who had asked Faramir to put them to Denethor somehow, as Denethor would not listen to Mithrandir. Faramir had worked very hard on the essay, producing such a fine product that he knew his tutor would show it to his father. Faramir’s plan worked. It had been the first time Denethor had taken any note of his younger son in the past two years, and Faramir was now resolved to avoid such attention in the future.
“Hey, soldier.” Called his father’s scribe. “Can’t you move on to the humans you captured with this bunch? You’ve been at this for an hour and I’ve nothing to report to Lord Denethor.”

“Hold your horses, Master Scribe.” The most experienced of the torturers lectured. “Hearing these tough creatures scream weakens the will of the Haradrim and other outlaw scum.”

“Try to speed it up, at least.” The scribe asked.

The next time the heated metal touched the orc’s skin, the creature cried out an explanation.


“He just said that he accepted the southron’s money to attack the men on the road because he was hungry.” Faramir disagreed. “It’s been a long winter and his clan had no food.”

The torturers put down their implements, and the scribe dropped his quill. “Lord Faramir,” the Scribe gasped, “Can you understand these creatures?”

Faramir had already weighed all the pros and cons of revealing that he’d learned the orcs’ tongue over the past few months before translating the orcs’s last pained cry. “Aye, I can. I am good with languages. You may confirm that with any of my tutors.”

The scribe’s look turned calculating. “Do you also speak the southron tongue, my Lord?”

Faramir, suppressing his first response of “much better than you, you lazy misbegotten excuse for a scribe,” instead answered ingenuously “Aye, Master Scribe. I’ve been studying it and have mostly translated the southron captives’ statements much as you have, these past few days. But I know I am but a student, much younger and less knowledgeable than you, and have not wanted to waste your time with my foolishness.”

The scribe straightened, taking Faramir’s humility for true feeling rather than flattery. “That’s right, Lord Faramir. I am very important, and my time is valuable. I have other important duties to attend to.”

Faramir nodded, keeping his eyes wide and innocent, and concealing his inner comment “like spending a few hours with your mistress.”

“Perhaps, since you also understand what these enemies of Gondor are saying, I can leave writing down their statements to you, while I engage in other important duties.” The scribe continued officiously.

Since this was the outcome he wanted, Faramir would agree, but he knew he must not seem too eager. “Oh, I would be happy to help, honored Scribe, but I am not sure if I can do it quite as well as you.”

“I’m sure your best effort will be fine.” The Scribe said haughtily, eager to use his now free afternoon to visit the young lady at the inn on the second level of the city whom he so admired. “I will check your work over before I hand it to your father, so that he need not know you have taken so much upon yourself.”

The scribe departed, leaving Faramir with the bemused torturers and their unhappy subject. “Interrogators,” Faramir reminded himself, “Interrogators. If I slip and call them torturers again in the Lord Steward’s hearing, he will order me punished by his Treasurer again. I’ve no desire to feel the man’s belt again. I must be careful, circumspect.”

One of the more clever of the guards pointed out, “Good riddance to that whinging scribe. But
you should know, Lad, yon scribe’s too lazy to rewrite your notes in his own hand, and your Lord father’s no fool. He’ll know that you’ve been writing the accounts, and question the scribe as to why. You’re not to be unaccompanied, and it could land you in trouble.”

Faramir shook his head and explained politely. “I can write in the scribe’s hand writing instead of my own. My father has never…noted the discrepancy, before.”

The guard shrugged and went back to his unpleasant work, dragging out the next orc for questioning.

The interrogations proceeded quickly that afternoon. Faramir now spoke much better Haradrim than the scribe, and the soldier in charge of the intelligence gathering was a decent enough sort, only requiring the captured enemies to repeat their statements once or twice before believing that they were, indeed, telling the truth. Faramir himself could tell when the men were lying, it was in their eyes. Faramir didn’t want to be in this dungeon, witness to these men’s and creatures’ pain, at all. But he had no choice, and he would not demean their suffering by turning his head from it. More, he had a responsibility, hateful as it was, to make sure the blood that was being spilt in this room was not shed in vain. Some of the information these enemies had, was truly needed by Gondor’s military. Other captives were merely unfortunates, caught in the wrong place at the wrong moment.

In time, the interrogators would grow to trust their young, unwilling witness, and would cease trying to wring more information from their subjects when Faramir reported that they had the whole truth. But these soldiers of Gondor did not yet know Faramir well enough to accept his sworn word, so Faramir would not yet speak up. He would bide his time until he might be heeded, slowly dropping hints that he could read the truth in the eyes of others’, as could his father.

Since the torturer’s work was done in half the time it normally took, Faramir had several hours of free time. Time when none of his tutors or his new, brutal arms-masters would be looking for him. After delivering the promised information to the scribe’s in-box, Faramir went up to his chamber. First thing, as he always did after watching the interrogators at their work, the boy threw up. Then he laid an essay in progress on his desk, and arranged his bed to look as if he had decided on a quick nap before dinner instead of finishing his homework.

Nodding at the completion of his preparations, the young Lord of Gondor then hopped nimbly onto his window ledge, and jumped to the ledge of the next closest window a level down, which he knew looked in on an unoccupied room. Using a lockpick to disengage the window lock, the seven year old boy crept in, and then opened a hidden tunnel which led to a lookout point on the side of the mountain. Faramir free-form climbed down the side of the mountain, which put him outside the city. Faramir took a deep breath of the fresh air, and grinned, trotting toward the field on the Pelennor where he knew his brother would be this day, practicing jousting with his fellow students from the academy.

On the way to his destination, the boy stopped to wipe some dirt on his face, disarrange his hair, and turn his tunic (which bore the arms of the House of Hurin, differenced by the label of a second son) inside out. For good measure, he rolled down a hill. When Faramir arrived at the field where the academy students were jousting, he blended in perfectly with the other children of city-folk who had come to watch the spectacle. Faramir’s light hair would have made him stand out, save that it was quite dirty, and that there were a fair number of other light-haired children among Minas Tirith’s population. Faramir’s light hair was the legacy of Prince Adrahil’s wife, his long-dead grandmother. That of the other children was probably from Rohirric heritage, judging by their knowledgeable commentary on the horses ridden by the cadets.

When the cadets were riding back toward the city, Faramir joined the other children in cheering them through the gates, thereby entering the city unquestioned. He then parted ways from the
group of children, who were going to a nearby park, and headed for an alley that ran beside the
dormitory of the cadets in his brother’s year. Climbing up a gutter, Faramir jumped along the
window ledges until he reached the window into the room of Boromir and his friends. Tapping on
the window first, Faramir then opened it, calling in without looking, “Its me. Is everyone decent?”
A few swears – one his brother’s – and several softer cries of greeting met Faramir’s ears. Taking
that as a “come on in,” the slender seven year old jumped down from the window ledge.

Boromir, bathed and half-dressed, gave his younger brother an exasperated grin. “Did you see me
unhorse the trainer?” He asked Faramir proudly.

Faramir grinned hugely, happier than he had been since the last time he’d managed to sneak down
to see his brother a month ago, and enthused “I sure did! It was a neat bit of jousting, and he sure
was shocked! I hope I’m as good a rider and jouster as you are, someday.” Faramir finished, a bit
wistfully.

His brother’s best friend Gendarion laughed. “I don’t know about that, Faramir, but I think you
might already be a better archer than our “Golden boy,” Gendarion cuffed Boromir gently o’er the
head, and returned to dressing for their last class before dinner.

“What are you doing down here, anyway, Fara?’ Boromir asked with some concern. “I thought
you said Ada changed your lesson schedule around.”

“He did. It was that one scribe I told you about tutoring me today – he left me translating some
Haradrim work I’ve done before while he went to see his mistress, so I’ve a few free hours.”
Faramir explained.

Boromir shook his head. He wasn’t sure if it was possible to get Faramir to stop sneaking down to
visit him, and he enjoyed seeing the boy anyway. “Don’t get caught.” He warned his younger
brother.

Faramir grinned confidently. “I won’t. Sneaking in here is MUCH easier than sneaking into the
House of Healing, and I did that for years without getting caught. Well, at least by anyone who
might object.”

Boromir nodded, as that was true enough. “How about helping us finish our essays for history,
since you’re here anyway, and we’re not yet finished.” He cajoled his oddly intelligent younger
brother.

Faramir sighed. “Isn’t that class in less than an hour? Do any of you ever finish an assignment
before the last possible moment?”

Boromir’s friend and roommate Tavasond laughed gaily. “Mine is done. But Boromir and Gendan
were occupied last night sneaking out to drink.”

Faramir rolled his eyes at his brother’s wild streak, but gamely enough assisted Gendan and Brom
to finish their essays, and even reviewed Tavas’s, making a few suggested changes and
corrections. “You’re lucky I studied this topic at Yuletide,” Faramir scolded his brother, “else I
wouldn’t be able to help you this much.”

“Lucky, nothing.” Boromir retorted. “I chose the topic for our essays, kit, remembering a fair
amount of what you babbled about the Kinst strife o’er the holidays.”

“My cousin Dev was in those lessons too.” Gendarion added. “Are you and that little pipsqueak
still being taught by some of the same tutors, Faramir?”
“We are. And Dev’s not that bad, Gendan. I keep telling you that.” Faramir protested.

“He’s a little weasel, telling on you for being late to Ada, even when you help him with his lessons. Ungrateful wretch.” Boromir complained.

“I think his father makes him tell on me.” Faramir observed softly. “He always apologizes, after.”

Changing the subject, Gendan asked “What did Umbar get out of sheltering Casimir and his followers, again, Faramir?”

“Nasty bugger, that Casimir.” Tavas interrupted. “If you ask me, all of Harad should be put to the sword. Women, babies, they’re nothing but scum and the breeders of scum.”

Faramir couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He knew that Tavasond’s father Lord Tarston was a prejudiced man, but he’d never heard Boromir’s friend say anything so horrible. Unfortunately, Tavas continued on his tirade against the Haradrim, and Faramir couldn’t stop thinking about the one man from Umbar who had been accidentally tortured to death in front of him a few weeks ago. The trader from Umbar had only been in Gondor to attend his cousin’s wedding, and had accidentally made a joke about Gondorians in front of the wrong guardsman. That, and it had taken the scribe forever to correctly translate what he was saying. Faramir had watched him die with tears in his eyes. When Tavas’s insults grew more and more creative at the urging of the other boys, Faramir felt a noise in his ears like the hum of hundreds of bees. The next thing the Faramir knew, he was attacking his brother’s friend. Normally, a tiny seven year old against a big thirteen year old would be no contest, but Faramir had been trained how to fight at an early age by his brother, who couldn’t always be there when younger bullies taunted his recently motherless baby brother.

Boromir, shocked at this behavior from his normally peace-loving younger brother, was a bit too slow to respond, letting Faramir get a few good hits in before Tavas managed to heave the younger boy off of him. Tavas was also, Boromir noted appreciatively, hampered by the fact that he was trying not to hurt Faramir, even though not hurting Tavas didn’t seem to be Faramir’s concern at the moment.

“Fara!” Boromir reprimanded as he grabbed his brother, who looked ready to attack the pained Tavas again. “What are you doing?”

“They’re not all scum.” Faramir glared at Tavas. “They’re just people.”

Tavas raised his hands in a gesture of peace. He was really annoyed that Boromir’s younger brother had hit him and kicked him just for calling a bunch of foreigners some nasty names, but he was fond of the kid otherwise, and he didn’t want the younger boy to hold a grudge. “Sorry, Faramir.” Tavasond offered. “I forgot that you still don’t like to hear even orcs insulted. You’ll outgrow that when you start having to fight them, I’ll warrant. ’Til then, I’ll try not to offend your delicate sensibilities.”

Faramir had nodded when Tavas begun his apology. “I’m not going to out-grow it, even though I know I will have to kill orcs. Just because someone is my enemy, doesn’t mean I should have to demean them.” The boy said softly. “I am sorry I lost my temper and hurt you, though.”

Gendarion, trying to lighten the mood, chuckled and stated, “Its a good thing the other cadets are used to hearing thumps from our room, ‘else we’d have someone in to see what is going on.”

Boromir sighed. “True.” Lord Denethor’s older son agreed, then added “You lot go on down to class. I need to have a word with my idiot brother. Tavas, you’re not hurt, are you?”
“Nay, Brom.” The dark-haired boy denied, asking “Don’t be too hard on the kit, eh? I shouldn’t have been using those words around him, anyway.”

Boromir nodded as his friends filed out, both pausing to say farewell to Faramir. When they had left, Boromir turned his brother around to face him. “First off, idiot, are you hurt?”

“No.” Faramir answered softly.

“Very well then.” His older brother said, taking a seat on his bed. “You know what comes next, kit. Don’t make this anymore difficult than it already is.”

Faramir sighed and lowered his leggings, bending unhappily over his brother’s lap. “Don’t you have to finish your essay?” He asked Boromir plaintively.

“It’s done enough, and your attitude is in more need of my attention.” Boromir lectured, bringing his hand down first on one of his brother’s small, white, cheeks, and then the other. “I can’t believe you attacked a friend of mine for no good reason! If this is how you behave at home, no wonder Ada is always complaining that you are sullen and resentful!” Boromir continued, as he continued to bring his hand down sharply on his younger brother’s too-thin backside.

Faramir rigidly held back tears as his brother firmly spanked him. Boromir’s spankings were painful, but never left him bruised or cut, like the punishments he’d received of late from his father’s treasurer. But there was no point in complaining of that to Boromir. No point in complaining that he was only sullen and resentful because he had reason to be. Boromir would probably be on his side if he knew all of what was going on, but Boromir couldn’t do anything to help him. Denethor ruled in Minas Tirith and Gondor, and Denethor had decided that his Treasurer would punish Faramir, because his tutors and his older brother were too soft on him. Denethor had decided that Faramir was old enough to learn to fight with bladed weapons, and that he was not learning fast enough because his old arms-masters were too soft. Gone were the old arms-masters, in were the new ones who didn’t mind leaving cuts or bruises on their pupil, so long as he learned. And he learned. Faramir had learned he was a survivor. He didn’t necessarily like that about himself; but he knew sometimes you had to embrace even the parts of yourself you didn’t like, to accomplish certain objectives.

Boromir, for his part, was growing frustrated. Faramir was showing no signs of remorse, and he had to end this spanking soon, as he would not risk hurting his small, slender brother. “Kit,” Boromir asked, spanking the undercurve of his brother’s backside particularly hard, “are you even listening to me?”

“Aye, I’ve disgraced you and you hate me, and your friends don’t ever want me to come back.” Faramir said, letting his tears free at last. This he could feel guilty for, this attacking of Tavas. It had been an inappropriate reaction, a poor way to treat a friend of Boromir’s who was, after all, probably just repeating word-for-word one of his own father’s tirades. Faramir personally thought the world might be better off without fathers, though at least Gendan seemed to have a nice one. Captain the Lord Tyorvond often brought candies with him to help him stay awake during council meetings, and he always gave one to Faramir and his nephew Dervorin, even though Tyvond, as he was called, was not on speaking terms with his brother, Dervorin’s father, the Lord Morvirin, who was also Denethor’s Treasurer.

Boromir ended the spanking as soon as his brother spoke, setting Faramir gently on his feet and helping him right his clothing. Boromir then lifted his brother carefully onto his lap, cuddling him gently. Faramir relaxed into the embrace. Surely Boromir wouldn’t hold him and soothe him if he hated him?

“I don’t hate you at all, stupid.” Boromir said aloud. “I just want you to act like the well-behaved
child you normally are in in front of my friends, ok?”

Faramir sniffled. “Ok.” He agreed.

“And I like when you visit, Fara. I just worry that you’re going to get in trouble for doing so.”
Boromir explained. “So have a care, alright?”

“Alright.” His younger brother agreed. “Brom, you’ll be late to class, and me to dinner, if we don’t hurry.”

Boromir chuckled “True. Next time don’t behave like a warg, and I won’t have to waste valuable time spanking you, eh? “

“Ok.” Faramir agreed again, biting down on his argument that if he were a warg, he would’ve bitten Tavas. Faramir turned around to hug his brother, and as he did so Boromir saw clearly a bandage wrapped around his brother’s upper torso, snug by his neck. It had been concealed until now by his tunic and undershirt, but looked like the wrapping for an injury like a pulled muscle in the shoulder.

“What’s this, Fara?” Boromir asked sternly, touching the bandage gently.

“I fell off of my horse in riding lessons yesterday,” Faramir lied fluently, as the truth would do no one any good. Faramir could just imagine the response if he said, “I didn’t do well enough in my sword lesson yesterday, so my new arms-master held me up by one arm over the battlement, threatening to drop me if my efforts didn’t improve.” Yeah. That would make Boromir angry, and he would tell Denethor, who would mildly ask the arms-master to keep his reprimands of Faramir constructive rather than punitive. “No thanks.” Faramir thought to himself. He had learned to lie as fluently as he could speak Haradrim; he already knew that his brother could no longer tell when he lied, not when he went to the quiet place inside his mind before he spoke. And it took less and less effort to reach that place.

“I’m sorry, kit.” Boromir soothed, believing the lie. “You’ll get better, don’t fret. And I’ll sneak you out the door, so that you don’t have to worry about climbing down. Take the tunnel from the fourth level directly up to our chambers today, hey? No more climbing with a sore shoulder.”

“Ok, Brom.” Faramir agreed easily, glad that someone still cared about him, and desperate not to loose his brother’s love by telling him that he had lost his temper with Tavas, because he’d had to learn to watch torture without breaking.

The brothers parted at a backdoor to the academy complex, whispered greetings passing between them, and Faramir’s sincere promise to his brother to take care. Faramir would take care; but life had, since Denethor took note of him, become much more filled with things to have a care of. “Fathers,” thought Faramir, “were best left in the dark as to one’s true abilities and intentions. If only I could go back in time, and get someone else to give Mithrandir’s ideas to my father!”
Chapter Summary

In which Gandalf goes to Dol Amroth and does not find what he was looking for, but does come to an unexpected realization, courtesy of the Brothers Hurin and Prince Imrahil's family.

Chapter Notes

A/N 1: This story is set during a visit to Dol Amroth when Faramir is 8 and Boromir just turned 14. There are several differences from canon in this story. Prince Imrahil's wife was unnamed in canon, I am calling her Princess Lorias. Prince Adrahil is still alive (which is canon-consistent), but I have changed Imrahil's children's ages to make them closer in age Boromir and Faramir. According to canon, Imrahil's children are all younger than the Hurin Brothers. For purposes of my series, Elphir is 13, Erchirion is 11, Lothiriel is 7, and Amrothos is 5.

As a side note, I've made Faramir slightly younger than in canon, by moving up the date of the battle with the corsairs and Aragorn/Thorongil's departure from Gondor by five years. In the AU, Faramir is 33 at the time of the Ring War, rather than 37.

Quotes:

"It is the child in man that is the source of his uniqueness and creativeness, and the playground is the optimal milieu for the unfolding of his capacities and talents." - Eric Hoffer
No, Gandalf had been thinking of the ring, and of Bilbo, whose invitation to visit he had recently declined with regret, and the two unrelated ideas had combined in an illogical manner. Elrond's potion simply had not worked.

"Still, I will stay with you the rest of the night, to guard your dreams." Elrond promised.

"No, Hir Nin, I'll stay." Interrupted a golden tenor.

"Glorfindel...."

A firm rebuke in Quenya, and the great Lord Elrond was sent on his way.

Gandalf chuckled.

"It's just your basic ruling-lord management." Glorfindel explained with a grin. "Besides, you irritated the healer in him by not following instructions. He doesn't understand how sturdy you lot are, not really. How could he? He's only known you and the...."

"Please," Gandalf interrupted wryly, "Do spare me your ever-flattering description of my dear brother Saruman."

Glorfindel snorted. "He's a pompous...."

"Yes, yes, he can be a bit....overly formal, at times. But he believes that he is acting for the best."

Glorfindel took a deep breath and conceded the point with a languorous wave of one broad, calloused palm. He waited until Gandalf had lit his pipe and begun to relax before asking, "So, if you do find the One Ring, what are you going to do with it?"

"And that, dear Glorfindel, is part of the problem."

"Oh?"

"I have no idea."

"You should figure that out, then."

"Easier said than done, my friend."

"Still, there's no point finding the thing until you know how to destroy it, Olor....Mithrandir. Elrond and Erestor will help you." Offered Glorfindel, with the supremely unconcerned air of an elf who had just handed over a problem to someone entirely more suited to the task.

The morning dawned not long after. Elrond was in a much better mood, and well disposed towards aiding Gandalf in his mission. The two combed through the archives, with the occasional aid of the willing but harried Erestor. The work that Elrond was neglecting in favor of playing archivist was almost entirely falling upon Erestor's shoulders, since Erestor's adopted son Melpomaen, Gandalf's normal research assistant in Imladris, was off knight-erranting with Elrond's twin sons.

At last, Elrond remembered several lesser objects of mischief, let loose by Sauron's surviving lieutenants after the War of the Last Alliance to wreak havoc in the days not long after the war.

"It was when my sons were young," Elrond explained with a fond, tired smile, "And I'm afraid that many of those years tend to blur together."

"Mmm." Murmured Gandalf, his eyes twinkling. He hadn't met Elladan and Elrohir until they
"Mmm." Murmured Gandalf, his eyes twinkling. He hadn't met Elladan and Elrohir until they were almost nine hundred years old, but he could well imagine.

"There was a cloak clasp." Elrond continued, absently accepting a bread roll that Glorfindel had buttered for him, "A gift from a jealous old woman to the young King Galador of Dol Amroth. It near drove him mad."

"He tried to kill Orophin." Erestor remembered, dropping his own toasted bread. Glorfindel sighed, and handed him another.

"Yes," Elrond agreed with somber mien, "Orophin threw the clasp into the sea and subdued his friend the Prince. Not even two months later, the cloak clasp washed ashore and drove a good, decent fisherman to become a multiple murderer, thief, and rapist."

Terrible, yes indeed, but promising, for Gandalf's purpose. He leaned forward intently, "And how was it destroyed?"

Elrond frowned, Erestor shook his head, and Glorfindel raised a brow.

"How is it possible that none of you recall?" Gandalf scolded.

"I was more concerned with healing the poor young half-elf's mind." Elrond explained, "Erestor was playing regent, and Glorfindel...."

"Protecting Elrond, protecting Orophin, protecting Galadriel, protecting Celebrian, and arranging for the protection of Elrohir and Elladan, and for the protection of Lothlorien from Elrohir and Elladan."

"But I'm sure we've got it written down somewhere." Elrond reassured Gandalf.

A week later, even Elrond had to concede that they didn't, but it was Glorfindel who remembered that Elrond had decided to leave all of that research behind in Dol Amroth, for Galador's peace of mind.

And so Gandalf the Grey found himself bound for Dol Amroth's sunny shores, just as green spring gave way to summer's sun-drenched splendor. He followed the course of the Bruinen to the Grayflood, passing the ruins at Lond Daer before coming to the rough harbor at the river's mouth at noon on a bright day.

He had planned to find a ship there, but as it happened, a ship found him.

"Mithrandir!" Roared a cheerful, familiar voice from the dock. A blond giant of a man stood before one of Dol Amroth's newest and fastest merchant ships. Laughing blue eyes, neatly trimmed mustache, and a grin broader than the Anduin - it could be no one but Telemnar, son of Celudir. The brother of Dol Amroth's commoner Princess Lorias, and one of the most talented and terrifying mariners ever to Captain a ship. Also a man well-known to Gandalf from the days that Aragorn Isildurchil had served in Gondor's army and Dol Amroth's navy under the name Thorongil. Telemnar had been promoted to Captain for his skill and ability to inspire others, demoted to Lieutenant for daring things no sane man would consider, and then promoted back to Captain again for further acts of valor and brilliance. Twice. And that was just that Gandalf knew of.

"Telemnar," Gandalf greeted, preparing to talk his way on to the man's ship, despite the potential of an overexciting voyage - always a possibility which could not be discounted when it came to Telemnar.

"'Tis good that I found you," Telemnar said, his teeth flashing in another pirate's grin, "We'll load
just what we need, then set sail for Dol Amroth within the half hour."

Gandalf stared at the many crates and barrels being off-loaded from the ship, and the greater stack on the dock, clearly intended for Telemnar's holds, and marked for destinations in the opposite direction. Still, Gandalf felt the need for haste, and accepted the situation without demur.

It wasn't until they were well on their way with a following wind at their backs that Gandalf finally inquired as to his good fortune, "I am glad for the ride, Telemnar, but you clearly lost a small fortune, and did look to be headed home, besides."

Telemnar laughed and leaned forward, "I get paid either way, Mithrandir. I'm a military man, not a merchant. And I had orders- we all did, to bring you to Dol Amroth as soon as possible, or sooner."

That was a surprise, and potentially an unwelcome one. "Adrahil is looking for me?" Gandalf asked, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"Yes." Telemnar agreed, still in good cheer. It gave Gandalf a great deal to think about, as the stars came out overhead. Once, many years ago, Adrahil had aided Gandalf in identifying the source of a poison which had been used by Sauron's agents to tracelessly slay many of the Lords and powerful of Gondor. It had been a long-term project requiring nine different trips over five successive decades. On the first, Adrahil had been a young man of twenty and nine, and his father Angelimir had been very glad to see the back of him, due to some scandal with a married woman. On the last, Adrahil had been in his eighties, and he'd endured torture near unto death protecting Gandalf's secrets from orcs and worse at Minas Morgul. If Gandalf owed a debt to any man living, it was Prince Adrahil of Dol Amroth. A debt that in half a century the man had never once tried to collect. What he might need now, Gandalf could not even begin to imagine.

Telemnar kept them sailing full-tilt through the nights as well as the days, and the wind stayed in their favor. In less time than Gandalf would have thought possible, they were sailing up the harbor towards Adrahil's reddish-pink sandstone castle, the waves blue-green in the mid-morning light.

One of Telemnar's men lifted up his arm to offer a perch to a sea-hawk. Taking off a message tube, Telemnar tossed it to Gandalf.

"A reply, addressed to you." The Captain explained.

"I didn't send anyone a message."

"I did, to let Prince Adrahil know I'd found you." Telemnar explained.

"I see." The brief message on rolled-up parchment had been written in Adrahil's own near-illegible hand. Whatever urgent matter had impelled him to order Mithrandir brought to him at all haste had apparently been resolved, but Adrahil made clear that Gandalf was still most welcome to Dol Amroth. A second parchment, in a scribe's more measured script, promised that Gandalf's room would be made ready for him, and invited him to dine with the Prince and his court that evening.

Adrahil's castellan, a new man whom Gandalf didn't recognize from his last visit some dozen years ago, greeted him at the dock. Gandalf shocked the poor fellow once by carrying only one small satchel, and then shocked him again by insisting on going directly to the castle's largest library.

"But, Lord Mithrandir, do you not wish to take refreshment first?" The young official asked as Gandalf set a rapid pace through cool courtyards full of singing, trilling fountains, shaded by large,
sheltering branches, and smaller trees bearing ripe lemons, oranges, and limes.

After finally convincing the man that he did not, Gandalf was able to begin his research, at last.
Gandalf the Gray, Wizard and immortal Ithron, paused his research in frustration. Why the Dol Amroth library had to alphabetize its catalog of resources in a bastardized version of Quenya that seemed almost more like a strange dialect of Nandorin, rather than in Sindarin or Westron, as did every other library in the world, the Wizard did not know. But when he found the unfortunate individual responsible for that decision...

"There's an alternative catalog in Westron." A young voice piped up. "Aunt Ivriniel's husband ordered it done, when he couldn't find the treatises he wished to consult on different navigational techniques."

Gandalf looked up to find a grinning eight year old, both taller and tanner than he recalled, but quite unmistakably the late Lady Finduilas' younger son, Lord Faramir of Gondor.

"What are you doing here?" The Wizard asked, startled. To the best of his ability to recall, this human child belonged in Minas Tirith.

"Visiting my Uncle Imrahil and Aunt Lorias, and my grandfather Adrahil." Faramir explained. "What are you researching, Mithrandir? May I help?"

"Ah." Gandalf commented. He had not thought that Faramir might be here in Dol Amroth, but it made sense, he supposed. Boromir, now a teenager, would not be in military school during the summer, and Adrahil did love having his family about. So much so he had tried to refuse to let any of his children marry away from Dol Amroth. The Wizard quickly took advantage of the situation and put Faramir to work. "Go find the catalog in Westron, and start looking for rings of power, enchanted objects, objects of power, or focuses."

With the assistance of Finduilas' clever son, Gandalf's progress improved rapidly. Unfortunately, they did not find very much. Only two scrolls, recopied from earlier originals, from not long after Isildur's death, and a book written several centuries later, by a scholar who had never personally seen an object of power.

Gandalf, frustrated with the paltry results of their research, barked to Faramir to check the catalog in Quenya.

Young Faramir took a deep breath, clearly summoning his patience. "Mithrandir, perhaps if you were to explain more of what you are looking for, I might be able to recognize possible...alternative categorizations of that information, as I did for you in the past."
Gandalf considered that for a moment. He had not planned on sharing this particular research with any humans, indeed not with any beings except perhaps Lord Elrond, Lady Galadriel or Lord Cirdan. However, the child had a point. More, Finduilas had been nigh incorruptible, and her ancestress Anelis the same. Finally, the Wizard decided it was worth the risk.

"What I am about to explain to you, Faramir son of Finduilas, you must never share with any other soul, living or dead. Do you understand me?" The Wizard asked, putting a note of power in his voice.

The boy's eyes widened, but he stood his ground. "Aye, Mithrandir. Though I must warn you, if it be treason against Gondor or Dol Amroth, I am previously sworn to tell my father, grandfather or uncle."

Gandalf chuckled despite himself. "You have a advocate's mind, or a fox's, child. No, this is no treason against your kingdom or your grandfather's princedom. It is merely something that can easily lead to darkness. Knowledge such as this has perverted good men, turned them into beasts who would slay their own children to accumulate power. Do you swear you will not reveal this knowledge, unless the keeping of it forswear your earlier oaths?" Gandalf asked, the note of power again in his voice.

"I swear." Faramir promised sincerely.

Gandalf proceeded to explain that he was looking for ways to destroy an object of great evil power. The Wizard recalled that, in the distant past, Sauron had created many less powerful objects, which had weaknesses that could be exploited, and the objects thereby destroyed.

"And that is our task, young Faramir. To find out what those ways were, so that we might perhaps learn something about how to destroy this most powerful object." The Wizard concluded.

Faramir tilted his head, and asked "Why look here in Dol Amroth, rather than in Gondor? The archives in Minas Tirith generally have much more information."

"Ah, child. I am here because of one of your distant Dol Amroth ancestors, Galador, the son of Imrazor the Numenorean and Mithrellas, a silvan elf from a settlement near Lothlorien, was corrupted by such an object of power. His friends nearly had to kill him to prevent his spreading death and destruction across middle earth. At that point, they - and he - developed a great deal of interest in how those objects could be destroyed, and fought."

Faramir nodded seriously. "Do people who have been exposed always need to be killed, or can they be redeemed?" the child asked seriously.

The Wizard looked at the boy thoughtfully. "The objects can be fought, by a person's resisting the urge to admire them for their nature, or to give them what they want. But if a person has been exposed to the object for too long, redemption can be .... nigh impossible."

"But not impossible." The boy insisted.

"As I said, child. You have a promising future as an advocate." The Wizard repeated.

"I must be a soldier, like my father and brother." Faramir disagreed.

Gandalf held his tongue. He did not think Faramir would make a particularly good soldier, obedience to authority and following orders without creative interpretation not seeming to be strengths of Faramir's. More, the lad looked to have inherited his great-grandfather Angelimar's slight build. The child would probably do better amongst the Swan Knights of Dol Amroth, or amongst the Dunedain, where being a great hulking menace was not such a basic requirement of
soldiery. But Gandalf didn't think there was anything to be gained by arguing about it, so he merely instructed Faramir to return to the Quenya catalog and see what he could find.

The shadows grew long on the marble wall while the boy searched and the Wizard read. After several hours, they switched places, and the boy read aloud while the Wizard searched the catalog, finding a few more possible references he flagged to ask the archivists to retrieve. Looking out the long windows, where the setting sun was giving the dark blue waves an orange-pink sheen, Faramir paused. Then he addressed Mithrandir, "To summarize, these sources contend that lesser objects whose power was created by spilling the blood of unwilling men and elves can be destroyed by even a token spilling of willing blood. Objects created in certain types of fire can be destroyed in the sea. Those created by sea water and unwilling blood can be destroyed by fire and willing blood. Objects created by stagnant water can be destroyed by fresh, running water. None of these evil...things...seem that hard to destroy. Why did Sauron bother?"

"Hmm, yes." The Wizard agreed, recalling now that he had once spoken to elves with clear if long-ago memories of such relatively simple tricks working, and having seen it once or twice himself since arriving on Middle Earth the better part of two millenia ago. No artefacts comparable to the ring or even Galador's cloak clasp, but information of some use. "Still, to actually destroy those objects took an impressive amount of power...."

"Power like magic?" Faramir asked. "That doesn't make sense, as some of the people who were credited as having destroyed them are men, elves, and dwarves."

"No, not like magic." The wizard snapped. "Pay attention, boy. I said power, not magic. I meant "will power." You don't have to be a Wizard to destroy a common object of power, you just need enough pure bloody-minded stubbornness. Either you or your father Denethor should have no trouble."

Faramir sighed again, seemingly holding onto his temper by the skin of his teeth. "So, does that answer the question you came for, then?"

"No it most certainly does not." Gandalf scolded. "Don't be sloppy, Faramir. These objects we have been reading of were but the weak objects of power, those Sauron created on the way to learning how to make the ...final objects."

"The rings." Faramir supplied.

Gandalf looked at him intently. "How did you know about those?" The Wizard asked, dangerously.

Faramir swallowed but met the Ithron's eyes without giving an inch. "I guessed. It wasn't hard. The ring that Isildur lost at Gladden fields was the ring Isildur cut off of Sauron's hand, ending the earlier war, the one between the Last Alliance of Men and Elves, and Sauron's forces."

"Hmm." Gandalf murmured, disturbed. "Have you told anyone else of this?"

"No." Faramir said, meeting Gandalf's eyes again so that the Wizard could read that he told the truth. "I didn't figure it out until after...Mother died, and no one else would care."

Gandalf sighed in frustration. "Eru be praised for that at least..." He took a deep breath. "Faramir, I can assure you, many people would care. Your father would care, as would your grandfather. Your uncle might care. And, if they were to succeed in finding Isildur's precious object, it would corrupt them utterly, as it once did Isildur."

"Why didn't he just destroy it then?" Faramir asked, with a child's understanding of right and
"He failed." Gandalf said bluntly. "As has everyone who has tried to carry and resist that ring. Which is why we need to destroy it."

"Very well." Faramir said, rallying himself to the cause. "So what do we know, and what do we still need to find out?"

Gandalf looked at the boy, reconsidering. Maybe Faramir would experience some success in the military after all, if he was promoted high enough before he was discharged for disobedience. Gandalf mused aloud in answer, "Mostly Sauron locked these weak objects away in secret rooms, releasing one or another only to cause a specific mischief. We know that the Enemy viewed them as failures, and did not want it known that his creations could so easily be defeated."

Faramir nodded. "So we know that. And we know that we need to find a way to destroy the one ring, a way that doesn't depend on any one person having the strength to destroy it."

"Hmm." Gandalf murmured, very frustrated, for they had still found nothing about how to defeat the one ring, save taking it to the fires of Mount Doom. How on Arda could they hide that little expedition from canny, paranoid, old Sauron? And how to get it there in the first place? The only elves who had the strength of will to resist the Sauron's call through the rings were too powerful to be allowed near the one ring, just as Gandalf was himself.

"Faramir, I want you to go through each source in the archive, starting with the most ancient, and peruse the pages quickly, looking for mentions of rings of power, first, then other objects of power." Gandalf commanded.

Faramir stared at him. "Mithrandir, that could take months..." The boy protested.

"You're here all summer, aren't you?" The Wizard replied, irritated. Did the boy want to help, or not?

Faramir sighed, then answered. "I do want to assist you, Mithrandir. But now I must leave for dinner. Uncle Imrahil and Aunt Lorias insist that I not miss meals."

Gandalf grunted. That was probably a good thing, the boy was very thin. "Very well, I shall join you, and we shall return here immediately after dinner."

The boy shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mithrandir. I can't assist you then, I have prior commitments."

"Hmm." The Wizard murmured, clearly disapproving. "And may you not return after you have discharged those obligations, young Faramir? As I recall, when several years younger, you thought nothing of appearing at my room with an answer well after midnight. My need for assistance now is just as dire, if not more so, than my need was then."

"But that was just luck!" Faramir objected, "I do not know as I will be fortunate enough to find something so relevant again, Mithrandir. Without that compelling a reason, I would not risk my uncle and aunt's displeasure."

The Wizard raised his eyebrow. "Not your brother's?" He asked.

A strange, sad, troubled look passed over the child's face. "Nay. Boromir is not talking to me right now."

Gandalf worried, but the child would explain no more. Faramir said, and not incorrectly, that it was between the brothers and no matter of the Wizard's.
At Adrahil's invitation, Gandalf attended dinner that evening in the breezy great hall of the old sandstone castle. He found himself seated at the head table with Prince Adrahil, his son Imrahil, Imrahil's wife Lorias, sister Ivriniel, and a smattering of Adrahil's and Imrahil's officers (including the very young castellan), and their wives.

Faramir and Boromir were seated with the other children. There appeared to Gandalf to be almost fifty of them, but it might just be that they moved so quickly and made so much noise that every one child seemed more like two or even two and a half.

Gandalf did notice that Lords Faramir and Boromir were sitting on opposite ends of the table of children. It might not have struck the casual observer that there was a breach between the two, as Faramir logically sat with a group who were closer to his own age, as did Boromir, but for someone who had seen the children so close in Minas Tirith, it was notable.

Neither child seemed unhappy, however, save in their very occasional glances towards one another. Both laughed and chattered with their companions, Faramir and the smaller children getting up between courses and chasing one another around the room, until caught and sent back to their seats by one adult or another.

Lord Denethor's heir had grown into a sturdy young teenager. He sat with a host of other big, husky young teenagers and pre-teens, including two slightly younger lads whom Gandalf would later learn were Imrahil's heir, Elphir, and his next oldest son, Erchirion.

Imrahil himself was, until you came to know him well, a curiously placid fellow to have descended from the old Sea Fox Adrahil. Though Imrahil was clever, he did not use his wit for cutting others as his father was occasionally still wont to do, not unless he had been greatly pressed.

Imrahil and Finduilas had been close, despite her having been eight years his senior and a lass. Imrahil clearly loved the two sons his sister had left behind. And though Gandalf knew that Adrahil had been taken aback by his patient and easy-going son, the old sea prince had always been a good father despite his well-known fire, and he loved all of his children and grandchildren deeply.

During the dinner, Gandalf was amazed to see Denethor's sons acting like children, albeit engaging and well-behaved children, as opposed to curious little miniature adults, and said so.

Imrahil exchanged a troubled look with his wife and father. "It is a recent development, and, if past precedent holds, will last only as long as their stay with us."

"Hmm." Said Gandalf. What else was there to say? One could not unilaterally withhold the sons of the Steward of Gondor, not even if one happened to be their grandfather or uncle.
The following morning found Gandalf in the archives again, continuing with his mission. Faramir joined him in the early afternoon, his hair still wet from washing.

"We have arms practice in the morning, and lessons in the afternoon." The boy explained, "But Daerada excused me from lessons to help you."

"I will have to remember to thank him for that. Now, pick up with the catalog where you left off yestereve."

Faramir was, for his age, an extremely capable research assistant. That is not to say that Gandalf didn't miss Elrond, or Melpomaen, or, for that matter, Faramir's late mother, but the boy was by any measure of the words a scholastic prodigy. He lacked the dedication of an adult scholar - he often disappeared in the late afternoons and early evenings, leaving Gandalf to struggle on by himself, and have to interact with the archivists' staff, which was in some ways more annoying. Having Faramir there to request more parchment and quills, or to politely ask young Lord Boromir's loud friends to go about whatever lesson had sent them to the archives more quietly, was a boon to Gandalf.

Which made it all the more difficult when the boy was not there. And then the jokes! Gandalf had forgotten, if indeed he'd ever known, that eight year old children were apparently preoccupied with inane jests, the punchlines of which they often forgot or bungled, and the repetition of which they hardly ever tired of. There were several afternoons when Gandalf had to institute a "no talking except for the mission" rule.

Faramir would often appear in the evenings, when the sparkling stars were high in the night sky. In a loose white cotton sleep shirt and pants and a soft blue robe, the boy looked even younger than his age. But his voice barely faltered when he found a source of interest, and read it aloud to the oft-impatient wizard. As the days went by, however, the boy became short-tempered, and more prone to missing important details. Gandalf gave him the afternoon off, hoping that would help.

That night, Faramir was not even at dinner, and Boromir spent the evening glaring at the Wizard. When the meal was over and the Prince's court had withdrawn to one of the cool, ocean-facing terraces for dessert, drinks, dancing, and in the case of the children, more chasing of one another about, Boromir sought out his uncle, his grandfather, and the wizard.

"You need to stop making Faramir help you after lights out, Wizard." The boy commanded.

"Boromir!" Scolded Imrahil, whilst Adrahil looked on with interest.

"Well, he does!" Said Boromir, unrepentant, though his cheeks did betray a slight flush at his uncle's tone of approbation, "That's why Faramir has been getting in trouble with you for wandering the halls late at night, Uncle. And why he has been too tired to pay attention to his fighting lessons in the morning." Narrowing his eyes and tilting his chin up as he turned his fierce gaze on the Wizard once more, Boromir concluded, "And why he hit his head this afternoon, playing capture the flag! He never would have mis-timed that jump from the platform so badly if he hadn't been tired from helping Mithrandir! Father doesn't even let him, and what's more....."

"That's enough, Brom." Adrahil interrupted mildly. "Thank you for bringing the matter to our attention. Mithrandir is my guest, and not much accustomed to dealing with children. He likely did not realize the effect that so much time in the archives has had on a child as young as Faramir."

"That's enough, Brom." Adrahil interrupted mildly. "Thank you for bringing the matter to our attention. Mithrandir is my guest, and not much accustomed to dealing with children. He likely did not realize the effect that so much time in the archives has had on a child as young as Faramir."

"No, I had not." Agreed Mithrandir, somewhat abashed although still irritated at the peremptory tone of Denethor's heir, "Faramir often comes to see me in the late evenings. I gather that he has trouble sleeping."
"He does." Said Imrahil shortly, "But he is supposed to seek me out, if he does. Not go wandering off to the archives. He knows that," the Prince continued, almost to himself. Shaking his head, Imrahil turned to Boromir. "Nephew, I do appreciate your looking out for your brother." Gandalf was somewhat impressed at how Imrahil managed to combine pride and a scold in the same level comment.

"I'm sorry for doing so rudely." Boromir apologized, not with a stunning amount of sincerity, but well enough that Gandalf felt obliged to accept it.

Imrahil sent his nephew on his way with a promise to take care of the matter, then invited Mithrandir to join him in a quieter chamber overlooking the sea. Adrahil followed, as sure of his welcome as a cat, his cane click-click-clicking on the marble floor.

Gandalf was fond of Imrahil, but had little patience for rebukes from a young man who understood so little of what he was trying to do.

"Your children are not like Finduilas' younger son, for you married for love rather than blood." Gandalf explained tersely, "Faramir has a responsibility that goes along with his intelligence and his heritage. And my work is of vital importance, lest we all perish."

Imrahil flushed, looking more like his fiery sire than Gandalf had ever seen him before. But it was Princess Lorias, entering, who spoke, and firmly so. "You will not put Faramir to work so many afternoons and evenings, Mithrandir."

Gandalf gaped at this firm command from the normally vivacious, easy-going Princess. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Imrahil was suppressing a smile.

Lorias continued, "I know you did not approve of Imrahil's marrying me. To the best of my knowledge, none of you approved save Finduilas and Imrahil, and I only needed Imrahil. But I will tell you this; Faramir is a child, not a tool you can use as you will. Yes, he has the foresight in full strength, but as Finduilas was wont to say, the foresight is not omniscience."

Gandalf tried to rally his arguments again, even as Adrahil shook his head in warning. A warning which the Wizard declined to heed.

"My dear Lady," Gandalf began, "If I do not use all the resources at my disposal, including your nephew, young though he may be, there may be no future other than slavery and pain for all your children. Would you condemn the world to such darkness merely that Faramir might have a few more afternoons in the sun, or nights of full sleep?"

"My dear Wizard," The Lady replied, not giving an inch. "If you do not allow my nephew to be a child, to learn how to work with other people to achieve his aims, he may not be whole enough nor wise enough to make the decisions he must when the foresight comes upon him in the dark hours to come."

For the first time in the conversation, Gandalf was truly listening, rather than just waiting out objections he felt were unworthy. "What do you mean?" He asked.

"Simply this. Foresight is only as valuable as the vessel who sees. Finduilas, and now Faramir, and everyone in this family except for me, occasionally see flashes of what might be, or receive sudden knowledge of what must be done so that a possible future can be attained or averted. That knowledge is nothing without the wisdom and the courage and the wholeness to make a good decision. There are some terrible sacrifices and instant decisions called for by foresight. If Faramir doesn't grow into a whole, balanced, man, he may not be able to take the instant action required to help save our future. If he does not learn how to work with and inspire others, he still may not be
able to achieve those objectives, once they are decided upon. If he does not develop good
good judgment, how can he make these terrible decisions that will be called for? Some prices are too
and some are terribly high but better than the other choices, and he must learn to know
himself and others that he may make these decisions for all of us in the desperate hours that will
come."

Princess Lorias, seeming somewhat embarrassed by the length of this speech, but not at all
apologetic on her point that Faramir must be allowed to be a child, sighed. "I am sorry if I have
offended you, Mithrandir. But that Faramir grow whole and well, in spirit and mind as well as
body, may be more important than that he help you these nights."

"He has Boromir to keep him whole." The Wizard objected. "I merely need him to be smart, and I
will be gone soon enough anyway."

Imrahil exchanged a long look with his father, and then Adrahil explained, "The brothers Hurin
were not speaking to one another when they arrived, Mithrandir. Faramir must be whole on his
own behalf. Boromir cannot handle all of his interactions with the outside world for him. They are
both good boys, but they are but boys. You must let them grow, even if you may only have my
grandson's help for but a few hours a day."

Gandalf, at length, conceded the point. He had worked with worse restrictions in Gondor, though
Faramir had been his ally in getting around those. Faramir seemed to care much more for the
opinions of his brother and his Dol Amroth kin, and Gandalf could see why.

Faramir had spent that afternoon with the healers and then ensconced in his bedroom at the castle.
Lorias had just come from keeping him company. Gandalf sought the boy out, intending to
apologize. From just outside the child's room, he heard the sound of two voices, and realized that
Boromir must have gotten there, first.

"No, I'm sorry." Said Faramir miserably, "I never should have mouthed off to you when you told
me to get down from the rigging, on the voyage here."

"You ignored me first, then you mouthed off."
Chided Boromir.

"Yes. That. I shouldn't have."

A long sigh, then Boromir spoke again, "I should have been....more understanding. I should have
realized that you didn't hear me at first, and then....that you were....." A long pause, "Eight years
old."

"I'm still eight years old." Replied a baffled Faramir.

"And you get to be eight, Daerada says. And he's right. It's....it's not awful of you to act like a
brat, Faramir, as long as it's not too often. Erchirion does it all the time, and he's older than you."

"You play with him, more. You always want him on your team." Faramir accused, the hurt clear
in his young voice.

"He's older. But I'll put you on my team, when Uncle Imrahil lets you play again."

"No." Said Faramir thoughtfully, "I'll stay on Elphir's team, at least until we win once. Then I'll be
on your team."

"You think you're going to win, even once?" Boromir asked with a chuckle.

Gandalf decided that was as auspicious a moment for his entrance as he was going to get. Faramir,
with a large bruise on his forehead, was pouting at his brother in a way that made Gandalf think he was about to either burst into tears or say something unfortunate. The Wizard's arrival spared him either outcome, and although Gandalf had wanted to ask what they were talking about, he kept his focus on something more important.

"Ah, Faramir. There you are. It has come to my attention that I have rather been taking advantage of your good nature and willingness to dedicate your scholarly skills to my cause."

Faramir blinked at him. "It....it is well, Mithrandir." The child assured him, "I want to help."

Boromir muttered something under his breath, until Faramir gave him a sad look.

"Still, I should have remembered that a boy your age needs sunshine and rest," Gandalf said kindly, "I will endeavor to do better, in the future. And since helping me has put you in a position to miss the dancing tonight....why don't I tell you a story?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Faramir enthused, his slate gray eyes gleaming. Gandalf berated himself. He should have remembered how much the boy liked stories, and shared more of them. Ah, well. It was not too late.

Boromir looked torn between going and staying, but as Gandalf reached the part of the tale of the Quest for Erebor where the dwarves and Bilbo fought the three trolls, the young teenager elected to stay. He scooted closer to his brother on the bed, sitting up straight against the board so that Faramir's head could rest comfortably against his shoulder as the younger boy slouched amidst his pillows.

Not much to Gandalf’s surprise, Boromir liked the battle scenes. He played very close attention during the entirety of the part where Gandalf and the dwarves fought their way free of the Goblin-king. Faramir, on the other hand, preferred the tale Bilbo had passed on to Gandalf, of how he had bested the creature Gollum with his riddles.

Faramir fell asleep as the dwarves and Bilbo rode the barrels down towards Laketown, but Boromir was still awake, and intently interested by that point. He pulled the blanket up closer around his brother, and asked fairly politely for Mithrandir to continue. Which Gandalf did. Boromir liked hearing of how Bard and his son had defeated the dragon, and the story of the tactical maneuvers during the Battle of the Five Armies.
The next day dawned bright and sunny, with a refreshing salt-scented breeze from the crashing sea. Eye-sore and hoping to assuage his curiosity over the brothers' conversation the previous night, the afternoon found Gandalf following the rock-cut steps down to the sheltered side of the castle. A wide beach was dotted here and there with open-sided tents and sunbathers. The shallows of the ocean were inhabited by small children and their caregivers, but what immediately seized a bystander's attention were two smallish but functional-seeming warships, each at anchor on either ends of the deep beach. The great ships of Dol Amroth's navy, mercantile and offensive, could be seen at a distance, docked in the deeper water on the far side of the harbor. But these two small ships were occupied by shouting children and teens and a few adults, apparently pitted against one another in teams.

"What in the name of all the Valar are they doing?" A bemused Gandalf queried the watching Imrahil, from the shelter of the open-ended tent best positioned to watch the heated battle.

"Capture-the-flag." Explained Imrahil with the faintest of smiles.

"Capture-the-flag." Repeated Gandalf, looking at the chaotic scene again. There was, indeed, a flag at the top of the main mast of each ship.

"The team which captures the other ship's flag and flies it from their mast first, wins." Explained the Prince.

"Wins? Wins what?"

"Bragging rights, mostly. Although also the the privilege to have free time instead of helping with the washing-up after first meal. Most often the contest ends in a stale-mate, so they split the chore."

"You put them to work?" Gandalf asked, unable to hide his amusement. The younglings in Imrahil's care included not only his own young princes and princess, and his nephews the Steward's sons, but also what seemed like a good half of the noble children of the Falas, and many of more humbler birth besides.

Imrahil laughed, "I have over thirty of them, most summers. What else should I do with them?" His gaze turned towards the steps, where a remarkably burly young Swan Knight was carrying the aged Prince Adrahil carefully down to the beach. Behind him came Captain Telemnar, Faramir's small arms clasped around his neck as he carried the boy pick-a-back down the steep steps to deliver him beside Prince Adrahil on the cushions of a settee that had been placed under the shade of the open-walled tent.

"My knees ache too much to come down the stairs easily these days." Adrahil reported with no sign whatsoever of shame or self-consciousness, "My pride lies in more important things, and 'tis
much easier to have young Bellasaer carry me than to take the long way about."

"A far more pleasant duty than playing your scribe, if you don't mind my saying so, your highness." Quipped the very young swan knight with a grin.

"You have a fine mind, Bellasaer." Imrahil scolded, "'Twill do you good to learn better how to use it." Imrahil turned his attention to his nephew, offering the boy some iced fruit drink and a pair of binoculars.

"Now, Faramir," Began Adrahil, with the tone of a confidant, "Watch the two teams carefully, then tell me what your brother is doing wrong, and what your cousin Erchirion is doing right."

It took a few tries, but Faramir eventually correctly deduced that Boromir was forgetting the water and pressure canons on the ships, while Erchirion, Elphir's deputy on the other team, used them to devastating advantage. Elphir's team still lost the day, in no small part because he had his younger sister Lothiriel and youngest brother Amrothos also playing for them, but Erchirion's clever tactics enabled them fight to nearly a stand-still.

The following day, Faramir was approved to go about his normal routine. He came to the library in the afternoon, chattering as gaily as a magpie as he went about his work. Gandalf let it go; the child was young, and he was still helping. Besides, it was nice to hear him happy. He was never so much so, in Gondor.

The sun-drenched days slipped by, only occasionally disturbed by sudden summer storms. Gandalf mainly kept to the library, appreciating the assistance that Faramir offered him in the early afternoons and evenings, and the occasional late night, but not allowing himself to become reliant upon it again. When he'd had all even he could tolerate of books and scrolls, Gandalf would join Prince Imrahil's warriors and the children at their morning training sessions. Since the Wizard could not use anywhere near the full extent of his power and there were many dangerous things on Middle Earth, he had become quite accomplished with sword and spear, as well as the staff he always carried. Sparring with the Swan Knights and Imrahil's sailors was very rewarding. He learned new techniques and defenses, and had the opportunity to observe the next generation, as well.

Boromir was an incredibly talented young apprentice warrior. Faramir was decidedly less so, though he hit the mark with a bow or a sling far more often than younglings twice his age. And Imrahil and the arms-masters Adrahil had hired were very patient with their hesitant young fox-haired pupil, and with the other children.

Gandalf observed that Faramir applied himself doggedly to his arms lessons, if not with the brilliance and flair he showed when assisting Gandalf with his research. The youth was so far advanced in his academic lessons, even in mathematics which was apparently his weakest subject, that neither Imrahil nor Adrahil had any objection to Faramir spending the time the other children spent in lessons with their teachers in the library with Gandalf. And Faramir certainly seemed to enjoy the time, and having Gandalf's attention. The boy was an apt pupil, and he rarely needed to be told something twice.

The same was not so true of Faramir when he was playing with the other children. Gandalf found his way down to the beach to watch them several times a week, enjoying the sea breeze and the chaos. Faramir was far from the worst offender against the loose set of rules that Imrahil and Adrahil and their chosen deputies insisted upon for the game. Possibly the worst was Erchirion, who was summoned from the play for a brisk spanking out of sight on several occasions. Like most of the Dol Amoth and Falas folk, Erchirion swam in the nude, so the bright pink impressions left by his father's hand were more than evident when he went back to playing. It didn't seem to bother him, although several of the other children were more self-conscious after getting into
trouble. Teasing seemed to be kept to a minimum, though, in no small part because Boromir and Elphir, the two team Captains, had very little patience for it.

Faramir didn't often get into trouble, in part because he tried to be conscientious about following the rules, but even more because he was good at disobeying only when no one was looking. Or no one except Erchirion, who had a great deal of patience for other players on his team disregarding adult direction. Gandalf occasionally noticed Adrahil observing Faramir's not infrequent flouting of the rules involving how high a child of his age was permitted to climb before diving off into the water, but Adrahil rarely called attention to it. Gandalf could understand why. Faramir was nimble and, within a certain meaning of the term, careful. It was clear that he had a good idea of his own capabilities, and rarely exceeded them. When he did, it was most likely to be Boromir who noticed. Boromir could usually just point at his brother, and Faramir would sigh, and swim himself back to the shore to wait out the fifteen minutes that was the normal 'first warning' penalty for erring players.

It was, rather to Gandalf's surprise, Imrahil with whom young Faramir was the most likely to clash. The Wizard had observed such contests of will over issues ranging from when Faramir needed to take a break during training, to nights when Imrahil found him in the archives and sent him back to bed.

"It's not fair!" Faramir had objected, on one such night. "My father lets me do as I please, of an evening."

That wasn't strictly true, so far as Gandalf knew. It was more than Denethor was unaware and therefore unobjecting to Faramir's night wanderings. Imrahil insisted, and Faramir, over-tired perhaps, stomped his foot and shouted that he wished he was home in Minas Tirith. It was the first time, in Gandalf's memory, that the boy had called Minas Tirith home, and the word sounded strange coming from his mouth.

Far from growing angry, Imrahil half-knelt down so that he could look Faramir in the eyes, and placed a gentle hand on his nephew's shoulder. "I'm very sorry to hear that, sister-son," He said calmly, "I hope that you feel otherwise, when you are less upset. We love to have you here. I would keep you with us forever and raise you like my own son, if I could. And I will treat you like my own child, when I have you - including making decisions to keep you safe and healthy, even if you do not like them. Making the hard choices is what parenting is about, sometimes."

With that said, and so kindly, Faramir went more-or-less willingly to bed. And on other nights when Imrahil appeared, Faramir sighed and obeyed his Uncle's direction without vocal complaint. But the boy was not above waiting until Imrahil was otherwise occupied to appear, or asking his grandfather for permission to study late with Mithrandir when Imrahil was not around.

Gandalf was well aware that Imrahil had hammered into each of his children's understanding at an early age that "Just because Daerada is involved, does NOT mean you have adult supervision. Use your judgment," but even he was unwilling to overcall his father when Adrahil's will had been so clearly stated. And Faramir was very good at charming his grandfather into agreeing with whatever course of action Faramir's heart was set upon. Adrahil had always been an easy sell for his children, and he was even more so, with his grandchildren. Gandalf suspected that was particularly with respect to Faramir and Boromir. There was only so much that their Dol Amroth family could do for them, in Minas Tirith, and Imrahil, Lorias, and Adrahil all knew that Denethor was a stern and distant parent, even to Boromir whom he favored. If they let their nephews get away with just a bit more than they might have otherwise, if they lavished them and the other grandchildren with additional affection and presents above and beyond what they might have otherwise during these summers, well, Gandalf could understand.

He found himself prone to the same sort of indulgence, even towards Boromir, whom Gandalf
found exhausting. Nor was he always a good influence on his younger brother. At one point during the summer, Faramir and Gandalf came to another dead end in their research, and Faramir shocked the Wizard by cursing a blue streak. Certainly words that no eight year old should know! He'd probably learned them from Boromir and Erchirion, or perhaps even Telemnar.

Faramir saw the shock on Gandalf's face, and clapped both hands over his mouth.

"I'm sorry!" He squeaked.

Gandalf's first impulse was actually to be impressed as much as appalled. Then he remembered that he was an authority figure, and should scold the child. But he made it a very mild scolding, centering around Faramir having a better command of language and sufficient intelligence to express his frustration in a more appropriate manner. He didn't bother to point out that Denethor would punish the child harshly indeed for such uncouth words. There was no need to say bitter truths that the child knew all to well. Faramir heard them just fine without Gandalf having to speak them.

But Faramir did not always get away with his flouting of the rules, nor would Gandalf have expected him to. The following day, Faramir scared Gandalf as well as Imrahil by leaping from the high mast of Boromir's ship with Boromir's team's flag. He fell with a splash into the water, clearing the forecastle of the ship by scarcely a yard. Boromir had started moving even as Faramir was jumping, to shove him further away from breaking his fragile bones on the wooden railing of the ship. Seamlessly, Boromir followed after, tackling his brother in the water, just as Imrahil shouted.

"Faramir!"

The boy's head snapped around, looking grateful for the reprieve from his brother's wrath. At least until he saw the frightened, angry expression on his Uncle's face. Gandalf could see the boy say "uh-oh," though Faramir was too far away to hear his voice over the sound of the waves.

"Come here, now!" Imrahil commanded furiously.

Faramir obeyed, white-faced. Boromir took the flag from him and smacked his brother's shoulder, relenting and ruffling the younger boy's hair when Faramir gave him a hurt look. With some words of encouragement that Gandalf also couldn't hear, Boromir shoved Faramir towards the shore. The boy swam back, taking his time about it. Boromir and Elphir called for the games to continue, and didn't hesitate to thump or throw over board those who didn't listen to the instruction. Consequently, by the time that Faramir got to Imrahil, the interested audience had mostly turned its attention elsewhere.

Imrahil knelt down in the surf by his nephew, speaking sharply to him. Resigned and fighting tears, Faramir followed his uncle off towards the wooden building at the base of the stairs that served as a changing area for those members of the princely family and their guests who did choose to wear clothing when they swam (which number did, incidentally, include Faramir and his brother, as well as Imrahil).

Whatever transpired in the changing house went unheard by Gandalf and the others on the beach. The building was several stone throws away, and the wind carried noise up the cliff rather than back towards the waves. It was a good half hour before Imrahil and Faramir reappeared. The boy was red-faced and evidently still fighting off tears. Imrahil's hand rested upon his shoulder, and he knelt again, presumably to tell Faramir that he was free to go back to playing. Faramir shook his head, and trudged dully towards the other end of the beach, along the narrow track by the cliff's edge towards where the water met the forested hills to the north of the city.
Imrahil rejoined Gandalf and Adrahil under the shade of the tent.

"Boy needs to grow a thicker skin." Commented Adrahil shortly. His gray-blue eyes went to Gandalf, and then he smiled guilelessly. "Perhaps you would go and have a word with him, Mithrandir? Imrahil will hardly be his favorite person to talk to right now, and I....well, you know, my knees."

Gandalf grimly suspected that the wily old fox's knees were just fine, but he went, anyway. He was very fond of Faramir, after all. His longer legs let him catch up with the boy just beyond the north side of the castle. The waves crashed more loudly here, slapping against the rock jetties and the cliffs.

Faramir was wiping away tears, but tried to hide it.

"No shame in making a mistake, my boy."

Faramir sniffled, crossed his arms, and looked away.

Gandalf let him. The sound of the wind and the waves filled the silence, and the tears on Faramir's face dried.

"Everyone makes mistakes." Gandalf spoke again, "And everyone pays for them, from time to time. The shame isn't in making the mistake - that's past, and can't be changed. The only shame is in not trying again."

"But, I...." The boy began.

"You're not the first to be taken to task in the course of that wildly dangerous game your Daeradar came up with. No one thinks the less of your cousin Erchirion, and he ends up going for a walk with your Uncle near daily."

"Yes, but he's GOOD at this, I'm hardly more use than Lothiriel!" Faramir protested.

"You're hardly older than Lothiriel." Gandalf pointed out fairly, "And she has two older brothers to fight with, whereas you have the disadvantage of only one."

Faramir laughed a little at that. "Boromir is more than enough to handle, all on his own."

"I should say so, yes."

The boy and the Wizard shared a smile. Then Faramir straightened his shoulders. "I'm ready to go back now, I think."

And so he did, diving back through the waves to meet his team. Elphir ruffled his hair and sent him to try and block Boromir's friend Gendarion from getting around the back of the ship. Faramir by himself wasn't up to the task, but he did recruit little Amrothos, who at a mere five years old wasn't good for much. But he was, apparently, known for sometimes forgetting that he wasn't allowed to bite, which meant that even the big boys like Gendarion took him seriously, particularly while Amrothos was clinging to Gendarion's neck.

That night after dinner Adrahil, Imrahil, and Ivriniel took the children back down to the beach. There was a phosphorescent tide, and some of the sailors took the children up with them on kayaks and boards, surfing though the waves. Ivriniel and Imrahil went with them, but Imrahil came back when Adrahil gestured to him to return, accepting a towel, a flask of heated brandy, and his father's invitation to sit beside him on the settee.
"Imrahil," The old Prince began, after first sending everyone but Gandalf away on one errand or another, "I think that the time has come for you to rule in my stead, as Prince-Regent."

"You're retiring?" The younger Prince of Dol Amroth inquired incredulously.

"Yes. I'm getting old, starting to miss things." Adrahil waved a hand, looking saddened. "Time to turn the reins over to a new generation, and you're more than ready, my boy."

"Missing things?" Imrahil inquired caustically. "I highly doubt that, honored sire. May I know the real reason you are planning on dumping even more administrative burdens in my lap, and during the visit of my nephews, no less?"

Adrahil grinned. "Sorry for that, my Rahi. I am not so much missing things as finding I lack the patience to deal with them, and my bones do ache. Some damp mornings I have to down several cups of willow-bark tea, and a dose of poppy juice, in order to function during the day. The time is soon coming when even that will no longer be enough, and I'd rather make the transition now, before we are forced to do so in more desperate straits."

Imrahil's manner softened. Both he and Gandalf knew of Adrahil's aches from his many years of service, both in the navy and clandestinely. "As you wish, of course, Ada." Imrahil conceded.

"That's my lad." Said Adrahil, squeezing his son's shoulder, "I will be here to help you. And it will be good for me to have more time with my grandchildren, and some of our other promising officers who need a bit more guidance."

Imrahil looked at his father suspiciously. "You gave up actively spying years ago, or at least so both you and the Captain of our silent service have told me."

"I did." Adrahil assured his son. "But others may have need of the skills I can teach. I would like to be more active in their training this summer, and for the other summers left to me." As he said that, Adrahil winked over his son's shoulder at Gandalf. It filled Gandalf with unease. Imrahil was still suspicious, but he was obedient to his father's will, and went back to taking the children out into the shining water when Adrahil dismissed him.

"What ARE you up to, old friend?" Gandalf asked.

Adrahil chuckled. "You'll find out, in time."

It was another week before that time came. Another evening, but this time Adrahil's joints really were paining him. He took dinner alone in his west-facing rooms, leaving Imrahil preside over the hall himself. And he invited Gandalf to join him.

Adrahil kept the conversation light during the meal. It was a particular talent of his. Only afterward, pouring iced wine and fruit for Gandalf, did he turn the topic to more serious matters.

"I know, Mithrandir, that you can be ruthless."

"Now, Adrahil...."

"For you, the ends can justify the means."

"Adrahil...."

"I can be ruthless, too."

"Adrahil...."
"I am sending Faramir back to Minas Tirith, after all. It is a bleak existence there, for him, but I will send him back. I will do so because Boromir needs him. My oldest grandson is brave, and good-hearted, but tends towards his father's faults. Without Faramir, we could end up with another Denethor, one who is more charismatic and able to command the hearts of men, yet even less insightful. But Boromir will not become that, not while Faramir lives. Boromir respects scholars, because his brother does. He is kind to those with less power, because he has seen the cost that such a lack of kindness has upon Faramir. Without Faramir, Boromir could become worse than Denethor - but that will not happen, while they have eachother. I will sacrifice Faramir's happy childhood, for the good of Gondor. I, too, am ruthless. Up to a point."

It was hard, so very hard, to hear these truths about a child he had come to love spoken aloud. But Adrahil must have a reason, and a good one, for bringing Gandalf here to tell him this. So Gandalf took a deep breath, and asked, "Oh, yes?"

Adrahil's even white teeth flashed into a fierce, fey smile, "If I decide that Faramir is not safe in Minas Tirith, then I am going to stage his death. I expect you to help, if it gets that far. To come and meet my agents as soon as I send for you, and to take Faramir to Elladan, in Imladris."

That was....impossible. Yet tempting. But it would certainly be a desperate measure, and Gandalf said so.

"I will not lose a grandchild to the negligence of my son-in-law." Said Adrahil flatly, "I would burn the world first."

"Calm thyself, Adrahil!," Gandalf snapped, putting some of his power behind his words, "You and I, all five of your grandchildren, and thousands of other souls live here, as well, after all!"

Adrahil, who had almost never in his life been quailed by anything, stood firm again, only a slight bit abashed. He straightened, pulling himself to his feet painfully and gesturing towards a recent portrait of his grandchildren. "If those we mean to protect are broken," he asked, "then what use is winning?"

"Adrahil....." Sighed Gandalf, his heart aching, understanding why his old friend was torn between jeopardizing their hope for the future by destabilizing Gondor, and saving one beloved child.

"You owe me, Mithrandir." Said Adrahil.

Gandalf sighed again, "I will help if I can, but Elladan is most often not in Imladris.

Adrahil laughed harshly, "And the great Lord Elrond would turn away one of his late twin brother's long-sons, brought to his own son for safe-keeping? I somehow doubt that. After all, he did a good enough job raising Thorongil."

"Adrahil...." "Speaking of Thorongil, I do hope that he's doing a better job of covering up his identity in the south."

Gandalf sighed. Adrahil was not supposed to know any of that, but that did not stop Adrahil. "I do, as well. And so do Lords Elrond and Elladan."

"Good. We are in agreement, then. Hopefully it will not be necessary. Hopefully, I can train Faramir and Boromir well enough, that between the two of them and those Imrahil and I set to watch them, they can keep eachother safe."
Gandalf snorted. "Training them, while your son rules your princedom?"

"We all have our roles to play, old friend. Have some more wine."
Adrahil's contingency plans were much in Gandalf's thoughts over the following days. He watched Faramir closely, wondering what it was that had raised the specter of such a desperate plan. Adrahil was canny, careful, and yes, even ruthless. He was not the type to panic easily, and before Gandalf arrived in Dol Amroth, he had apparently been ready and willing to fake his nephew’s death, and send Faramir far away from everyone and everything he’d ever known, so far from his family that he might never see them again. A loving grandfather, who adored being surrounded by his grandchildren. What had happened, what had Faramir said or done that showed such dire vulnerability, that Adrahil would even have considered such a desperate plan?

The boy himself showed no sign of being in so much danger, at least not that Gandalf could see. He was a solemn child, yes, but not an unhappy one. He bore the signs of emotional negligence, quite clearly, but was far from broken, far even from stunted. On the contrary, he was blossoming in Dol Amroth, under the love and regard of Lorias, Imrahil, Adrahil, and even Gandalf. His other Aunt Ivriniel seemed to pay Faramir less attention than her other nephews, but then she was busy. Perhaps Faramir seemed to remind her, as he reminded Denethor, of Finduilas’ death.

Gandalf was watching Faramir again on a slightly overcast day, while the children played capture-the-flag. Faramir had fortunately been more careful ever since running afoul of Imrahil, but this day the boy seemed particularly excited, as if he had a plan. Boromir looked at him, puzzled, as the children chose teams in the sand before running into the sea. Faramir, true to his word, was still on Elphir's team, since the young sea prince had yet to defeat Boromir's team.

The afternoon's contest began, the children's high voices yelling out war cries. Splashing and flailing and confusion ensued. In the thick of it, Faramir made another attempt to climb the high mast. This time, Boromir caught him, smacked him, and sent him carefully overboard into the water. While Boromir was distracted by his brother, Prince Erchirion swarmed up the main mast like a monkey, cut the flag loose, swung from the high mast towards the foresail, and then jumped safely from there into the water. Boromir and Gendarion and the entire team swam to intercept him, while Faramir and Elphir tried to stop them.

No one noticed, well, no one but Gandalf and Imrahil, but Erchirion must actually have dropped the flag to Imrahil's youngest children, Amrothos and Lothiriel. At five and seven years of age, the two were usually discounted. Sometimes they were distracted by playing in the water or watching the birds, and that is what they had apparently been doing, on the far side of the ship, when Erchirion swung out over their location on his way to the foresail.

Unwatched, unqueried, unopposed, Lothiriel and Amrothos swam leisurely back towards Elphir's ship. Just as they arrived, a shout went up when Boromir discovered that Erchirion did not, in fact, have the flag. But by then it was too late. Lord Duilin and the one other lad left behind to guard Elphir's ship were able to accept the flag from Lothiriel, and climb up to fly it from their own high mast. Elphir's team had won.
Back on the sand afterward, on the way back up to the castle, Gandalf saw Boromir grab Faramir around the shoulders and muss his brother's hair.

"Clever, kit." He complimented Faramir ruefully, "But tomorrow, we're going to crush you."

"But I thought you said that you would pick me for your team, now that you're not mad at me anymore?"

Boromir laughed merrily. "So I will. Tomorrow, we're going to defeat Elphir! You and I together."

Gandalf stayed in Dol Amroth for another week after that, attending the dinners and the dances, watching the children at their play and telling them stories as well as continuing his research. It had been enlightening for Gandalf to see Boromir and Faramir with Imrahil and his family. In Dol Amroth, they behaved more like normal children, although still with a gravity and maturity beyond their years. It had been enlightening, too, to see them playing in the sand and the waves. There was something about Faramir's tactics that one day, using the discounted Amrothos and Lothiriel to steal the enemy flag, that stuck in Gandalf's mind, although he was not yet sure why.

The Wizard had not brought fireworks with him to Dol Amroth, but there were Khandian merchants as well as native Dol Amroth alchemists who sold everything he needed to put together quite a show on the beach. The children ooh'ed and aah'ed, wading back into the water to play after the last of the rockets had shot up into the air.

"Thank you for doing this." Said the Princess Lorias, her fine gown discarded in favor of a light gray shift and blue vest more appropriate to the warm night and the wind and water.

"You are most welcome, dear Lady. Thank you for hosting me. May I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Lorias answered, surprise in her wide violet eyes.

Gandalf had hardly known what he was going to say, but the words came to him. "What did Finduilas say, when you and Imrahil married without your father-by-law's approval?"

Lorias, startled for a moment, blushed and then replied. "That a love like ours can make doors where there are only walls, and that such grace can grant courage beyond endurance."

Gandalf smoked his pipe as he considered that. "She always had a way with words, did Finduilas." He murmured. "I think that my clever pupil, Faramir's mother, was right again, and I was wrong. Your husband is well-married, lady. I suspect that the brothers Hurin and your husband and children will have a part to play in all this before it ends, and that they come to it as strong and capable as they will is in no small part due to you, warrior and scholar though you are not."

Lorias smiled and blushed prettily at the complement, before letting herself be swept into her husband's arms to dance before a bonfire on the beach.

The next morning dawned bright and cool, with a wind blowing away from Dol Amroth. Gandalf took it as an omen. He said farewell to Faramir at breakfast, then went to the dock to find a ship.

"Where are you bound, Mithrandir?" Prince Imrahil asked, bemused.

"Oh, to the Shire, I believe. In Eriador, where dwell the peaceful halflings."

"Not to Imladris or Gondor, to continue your research?"
"No, Imrahil. I think I have found all I can find in books, for the time being." Gandalf explained, thinking to himself that it would not matter how much knowledge he had accumulated, if he had not also nurtured enough such beings who could wield the knowledge. He, and middle earth, might owe Imrahil, Lorias, and Faramir for a timely reminder, as well as a clever idea.

"Well, I can have Telemnar and the Wind Weaver sail you wherever you would like to go." The Prince of Dol Amroth offered, not bothering to hide a smile at Gandalf's poorly hidden wince at the idea of sailing with Telemnar again. Imrahil's brother-by-law was a good man, but he loved sailing the fastest, most adventurous way he thought would not break his ship. Still, a ride was a ride.

As Gandalf prepared to sail from Dol Amroth to the port nearest the shire, he saw the two small ships bobbing in the harbor, as Boromir and Elphir led their brave crews in another game of capture-the-flag. So much might well rest on this generation. Gandalf hoped that they would be ready.

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