Beginnings & Endings

by Susana Rosa (SusanaR)

Summary

An exploration of how a friendship might have developed between the New King and his Steward, in the wake of the Ring War, taking place in an alternate universe where Faramir is Aragorn's son...but neither of them know it, yet.

Most recent chapter summary: Aragorn and Faramir meet again. Faramir offers the King his loyalty again, and warns Aragorn that not all in Gondor feel likewise.

Notes

Proofreading assistance and helpful comments received from KC, Beth, and FC. All remaining errors are my fault.

This story is set in the Desperate Hours AU.

This story is set beginning at the end of ROTK, and goes through a little over a year after that (summer of Third Age 3020). The main character is Faramir, but it is an AU rendering of how the developing friendship between Aragorn and his Steward might have come about, so various other characters are developed (including OCs as needed) to bring depth and interest to the story. One clear departure from canon is that the eagles brought Sam...
and Frodo to Minas Tirith rather than the Black Gate after rescuing them, and that the celebration at Cormallen fields did not take place in the same way, so that the first time the ringbearers will be reunited with Aragorn and those of the fellowship who marched to Mordor will be when the armies of the West return to Minas Tirith.

"The most intense conflicts, if overcome, leave behind a sense of security and calm that is not easily disturbed." - Carl Jung

"Extraordinary people survive under the most terrible circumstances and they become more extraordinary because of it." - Robertson Davies

"In the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures. For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed." -Kahlil Gibran
Of Breakfasts, Gardens, and Brighter Days

In a pleasant little garden attached to Gondor’s House of Healing, a small group of companions gathered for breakfast, as had become their habit over the past few days. It was an odd group, not because all of its members bore the signs of war and hard use. That alone would have been common enough in the days immediately following the end of the Ring War. Rather, it was odd because three members of the group were small people – hobbits, or halflings, as they were called by humans. It was rare in those days to see hobbits wander so far from their shire as to be observed in Gondor. One of the hobbits was dressed as a Squire of Rohan, another still wore the comfortable pale blue leggings and tunic of a patient of the Halls of Healing. It was impossible to tell what the third hobbit wore, for he lay swaddled in blankets in a lounge chair, dozing whilst his companions ate and spoke. The rest of the group consisted of two humans who frequently paused to hold hands or meet eyes, in the way that those newly fallen in love are wont to do. The woman was blond and slight, but her bright blue eyes hinted at a will of steel. And so it was, for she was Éowyn of Rohan, who together with the hobbit Meriadoc, had slain the witch king of the Nazgûl. Éowyn wore white, the color of mourning in her native Rohan. She had lost a beloved uncle mere days ago, and not long before, an equally loved cousin.

The man was tall with a warrior’s mien, though his piercing gray eyes, and the musical tone of his deep voice, were more apt to be gentle than fierce. His shoulder-length red-gold hair hinted at a heritage foreign to the land of Gondor, where dark hair and dark eyes were the norm. He was Faramir, and he was a reluctant, though effective, warrior and leader of men. Son of the former Steward Denethor of Gondor, brother of the former Captain-General the Lord Boromir of Gondor, he wore black in mourning for his lost father and brother. As the former Captain of the Ithilien Rangers, he had visited his few surviving comrades in the House of Healing. Those who had, like himself, been too badly injured to join the siege of Mordor with the King-to-be, Aragorn, Isildur’s heir.

At the Lady Éowyn’s side, Faramir had visited those Riders of the Mark similarly afflicted, thanking them, on Gondor’s behalf, for their bravery and sacrifice. The hobbit Meriadoc, who preferred to be called Merry, had accompanied his human friends, for he took his duties as a Squire of Rohan quite seriously. The Riders were happy to see their beautiful Shield-maiden, and the brave Hobbit who had become one of them, and took heart at their returning health. Faramir, sometimes with Éowyn’s company, also visited those wounded members of the Dunedain, the northern rangers of lost Arnor, who had come early to Gondor at the request of their King-to-Be, and had been wounded too gravely to accompany him to the Black Gate. No one who met the soft-spoken young Lord forgot him, though he had not the overwhelming presence of his departed brother, or of Aragorn who would be King.

That same Aragorn had ordered that Faramir, Éowyn, and Merry rest in the Houses of Healing over the last ten days. It was the longest period of time that Faramir had been still and comparatively idle since he began military training at the age of ten. Faramir had been frustrated, unable to do anything to help the distracting army, but glad to have Éowyn, and Merry, as companions in his waiting. Then the sky lightened, and Minas Tirith realized that Sauron was no more, defeated by two small hobbits. At that point, Faramir felt a joy and relief he had never before known. Having Éowyn and Merry to keep him company, and later the ringbearers as well, had made the remaining time pass quickly. Still, Faramir had not truly been idle.

Although he had learned all he needed to know of the future King when Aragorn healed him of the black breath, Faramir had realized that others would not be so easily convinced. Son of a politician, Faramir was also aware that the new King would need help claiming the Kingdom which was his birthright, despite winning it again through bravery and feats of arms and heroism.
Also, Faramir by nature was as curious as a cat. So Faramir had gently teased out details about Aragorn and his wife-to-be from the three hobbits and Éowyn, as well as from the Dunedain. Drawing upon that knowledge, Faramir made another attempt to engage the quietest member of their group, the hobbit wrapped in blankets.

“Frodo,” the young Lord called softly, “what was the name of the elven rider who saved you from the Nazgûl the first time you escaped them, outside Imladris?”

“Umm.” The hobbit murmured, allowing himself to be coaxed to the table, and seated beside his good friend Sam, also still a patient of the House. “I believe it was Arwen.”

“It was, Master Frodo!” The hobbit Sam commented, joyful that Frodo had deigned to join them. Éowyn quickly handed the most injured hobbit a cup of hot chocolate and a biscuit slathered in butter and jam.

Merry, understanding Faramir’s gambit, put in his own oar. “And she was an elf of rank, as well, wasn’t she, cousin?” He asked Frodo, frowning thoughtfully. As Frodo’s attention turned to the new question, Merry met Faramir’s eyes, nodding his thanks. Merry and the human lord had become fast friends, building on Faramir’s respect and affection for Merry’s cousin Pippin. Moreover, Faramir and Merry had found in the other a kindred spirit. Both, though less outgoing than many of their companions, were beings who liked to prepare for every contingency in advance. Merry had told Faramir of how he had planned for Frodo’s travels from the shire for several years, such that they had been ready when the Nazgûl came. Faramir, much impressed, had shared some of his own stratagems for fighting off a superior force with inferior numbers, learned from his experiences holding Ithilien.

Frodo nodded, slowly chewing the biscuit. “Lord Elrond’s daughter,” he commented after a moment of thought.

“Lady Arwen,” Faramir said thoughtfully. “That would make her the same Lady Arwen who is betrothed to Aragorn, our King-to-Be?”

“She and Strider did seem friendly,” Merry observed, “though I’d not heard they were properly betrothed.”

Faramir smiled. “Apparently,” he related, “Lord Elrond is a most difficult father-in-law. Although by all other tales he treats the King-to-Be like a son, he told the future King in no uncertain terms that Aragorn could not be engaged to his daughter until he had taken up Isildur’s heritage, and seen the dark lord defeated!”

“Oh my,” observed Frodo, drawn in to the tale, for he loved stories, and cared deeply for Strider. “That is quite a figurative dragon to be required to slay, merely for an engagement.”

“Indeed.” Faramir continued, playing to his audience. “Moreover, ‘twas nearly fifty years ago that Aragorn and Arwen first went to the Lord Elrond, and asked for his permission to wed. So, in a sense, they have been waiting to be engaged for fifty years!”

The hobbits all gasped in surprise, shaking their heads at what a trial their poor Strider had been put through. Hobbits were accustomed to long engagements, they explained to their human friends, but, fifty years! That was above and beyond!

Éowyn met Faramir’s eyes over the heads of their diminutive companions. What passed between them was difficult to describe, for they could, even after such short acquaintance, exchange an entire conversation in one loaded glance. But it had something to do, on Éowyn’s side, with acknowledging her shame for having loved a man who could not love her back. Now that she had
met Faramir, and come to know him, Éowyn realized how foolish was that earlier infatuation. Without words, Faramir’s gentle, loving glance told his Lady that he held none of that against her, that he saw no shame in falling in love with an honorable man. There was also, in the gaze exchanged between the two humans, a layer of great admiration for a pair of lovers who could wait out fifty years of time and great trials. The White Lady of Rohan and the new Steward of Gondor desired to be married as soon as possible. The two young lovers knew they both had obligations which might make the hasty marriage they desired an impossibility. Still, they could comfort themselves that they should not have to wait fifty years.

“Indeed..” Éowyn commented at length aloud. “As good and reserved a man as the King is, and as virtuous a lady as I’m sure Lord Elrond’s daughter is, I should not be surprised if theirs is a very brief engagement.”

“Hmm.” commented Faramir, eyes dancing. “I would not care to bet against you, Lady Éowyn. In fact, I have heard from Lord Húrin that the King-to-Be has, in fact, asked for quarters for the Lord Elrond and his daughter to be made available by the end of this week, and that the necessary formalities for a wedding of the King be explained to him at Hurin’s earliest convenience.”

The hobbits and Éowyn all laughed merrily.

“Speaking of Hurin, my Lord,” Éowyn inquired “Shall he come to meet you here again this morning?”

“Nay, my lady, today I shall go to meet him at the Citadel, and take over my work as Steward. Much to poor Hurin’s relief, though he has been faithfully, if not uncomplainingly, discharging those duties during my convalescence. One of the northern Dunedain and one of my rangers shall be discharged this morning as well, and I shall take them with me as guards to the Castle. Apparently the Steward of Gondor may not walk about unaccompanied, as Denethor’s second son, the Captain of the Ithilien rangers, was wont to do.” Faramir gave his love a weary half-smile, and she smiled in understanding back. Éomer’s daughter had never thought to be second in line to the throne of Rohan, where now she stood.

Their breakfast was interrupted by the arrival of Warden Del, the chief Healer and Administrator of the Houses of Healing, and two of his assistant healers. The Warden smiled widely to see Frodo sitting up and eating, but, upon checking the hobbit’s pulse rate and eyes, insisted that he go back to resting, though he might rejoin his friends for lunch and dinner. Sam accompanied Frodo, and the two assistant healers left to aid the hobbits on the short walk to their rooms, which looked out on the same garden. After they had left, Faramir invited the Warden Del to join them for breakfast, and asked the healer’s honest opinion on the recovery of the Ringbearer and his companion.

Warden Del shook his head, “I wish I could tell you, Faramir. They seem to be recovering, but Frodo in particular is more wearied than he should be after several days of rest. More, his wounds heal very, very slowly, even after application of the King’s foil which was so efficacious on others’ injuries. Both Frodo and Sam are suffering from a lingering fatigue beyond what I would expect. I simply don’t know how to help them, besides copious amounts of food and rest. I’ve treated hobbits before this, but I am not an expert. I rather wish we had the future King’s elven kin already amongst us, for many of the elves have made a study of treating all manner of light beings, including hobbits.”

Faramir nodded, deep in thought. He had directed Húrin to write the King-to-Be and tell him of the hobbits’ arrival and prognosis. Aragorn had written back with advice for the hobbits’ recovery, and to ask that the hobbits, if they were well enough, be present for the King’s arrival at Minas Tirith, and his coronation that same day. Faramir very much wished that the two ringbearers could be present for such momentous celebrations. Their victory over Sauron and Mordor was,
after all, mostly due to these small, brave, souls. But Faramir was reluctant to risk their recovery, which Warden Del had told them such exertions might, and Warden Del, out of all the human healers, should know.

Del was acknowledged to be the best and most talented of the healers at the House, and Gondor’s House of Healing was justly famous throughout Middle Earth for the skill of its healers and the breadth of their knowledge. It was where Faramir had spent much of the first five years of his life, when those same healers had been powerless to stop his mother’s gradual decline and eventual death. Faramir had been reluctant to leave the houses of healing during his early years, because it had often meant leaving his mother.

The young Faramir had learned to read by following his mother’s finger as she traced lines in ancient texts, desperately trying with the last of her dying strength to learn more about the ways that their ancestors had fought the Dark forces of Sauron, that Gondor may be fortified with knowledge as well as armed men against foes which could twist men’s minds and deaden their spirits, ‘ere ever facing them in battle.

It was in the white halls and green gardens of the House of Healing, redolent with the smells of herbs and occasionally with the less pleasant odors of the dying and the sick, that the young Lord Faramir had first learned to walk, talk, and manipulate those in power over him into doing as he willed.

This latter lesson was probably not intentional, but being the youngest child in a family haunted by his mother’s sickness, and possessed of a prodigious intelligence that Gandalf the Gray once referred to as “catastrophic, in a less well intentioned soul,” it had come about somewhat naturally.

The lady Finduilas felt better on days her sons were with her. With Boromir starting military training at the young age of 8, Faramir, at age 3, appointed himself his mother’s near constant companion. Therefore Faramir, by age five, knew thirteen different ways to go from the nursery in the Steward’s quarters of the citadel to the Houses of Healing without being observed. The schedule of Healers and wisewomen caring for the ailing Lady of Gondor had been carefully memorized by both of her sons. Oddly, those healers who were unwilling to permit the unplanned company of Boromir and Faramir usually left after a very short period of time, claiming that “ghosts” were tormenting them. It had actually become easier for Faramir to see his mother after Boromir started military training, for Faramir alone was less likely to be missed. Denethor had frequently come into the nursery or schoolroom to look for Boromir, but hardly ever sought out his second son. Faramir had yet to start formal school lessons, his nurse had long since given up keeping track of her fey charge, and, as a small child, he had no other duties to claim his time.

Faramir had learned, at this early age, that one must not be too picky in acquiring allies. Just because a certain healer always had an unpleasant expression on his face, or because a certain janitor always smelled unpleasant, didn’t mean they might not be willing accomplices to two young boys who wanted to spend time with their sick mother. The frowning healer- who, it turned out, was simply always worried about his patients – was quite willing to mislead the Lord Denethor as to where and when his boys had been present, provided that those boys did nothing to set back their mother’s recovery. The janitor who always smelled of astringent cleaners was perfectly willing to lend said boys whatever supplies they needed to convince their victims that malignant spirits meant them ill.

After his mother died, Faramir for many years avoided the Houses of Healing, save on those few occasions where his brother Boromir ended up there. When Faramir joined the Ithilien rangers, he made it a practice, as his duties permitted, to visit any of his fellows who ended up in the Houses of Healing, as he recalled what a difference visitors had made to his mother. Seeing the care and compassion with which his men were treated, Faramir convinced Boromir, and some of their allies
on the council, to direct more of the city’s resources to the Healers, so that more of Gondor’s
injured soldiers might be returned to the ranks of healthy fighters with little delay. That, or re-
trained to other occupations, so that they might be able to continue to support themselves in
another manner, had they lost the will or the ability to continue to fight.

Still, Faramir preferred not to linger beyond duty visits at the House of Healing. This stay, his
longest since he was five, had been different. The overwhelming malignancy of Sauron’s presence
was gone, the threat of Mordor all but vanished for the first time in anyone’s memory. More, the
King would soon return to Gondor, and Faramir had fallen in love with the most beautiful and
wonderful woman in Middle Earth, who, miracle of miracles, loved him too. It only made sense to
linger and have breakfast with her on the day of his release, although Faramir smiled at the irony
of his actually voluntarily staying at the Houses of healing longer than forced to. The Warden,
probably seized by the same irony, offered the Slayer of the Witch King his welcome to stay as
long as she wished, should she continue to have a calming effect on one of their most difficult
patients.

“You, my lord Faramir?” Éowyn exclaimed, smiling a little in surprise.

“Aye, dear Lady, to my shame.” Faramir admitted. “These good Healers oft despair of me. I am
afraid I cannot, generally, abide being still once I begin to feel better.”

The Warden patted the young Lord Steward on the shoulder. “You’re a good boy, Faramir …er,
my Lord, but you’re a terrible patient.” The Warden smiled ruefully at the young Captain, who,
like most Númenoreans, healed quickly. Since his brother Boromir had died, the younger son of
Denethor had refused to stay in the House of Healing once he could walk out under his own
power and rejoin his unit. “At least,” the Warden thought in amusement, “until the King bade him
stay, and left him the White Rose of Rohan for company!”

Faramir shook his head. “Please, Warden Del, do continue to call me by name, unless we’re in an
official situation. You’ve known me for far too long for such formality.”

“As you wish, Lord Faramir.” The Warden conceded, smiling fondly at the young Steward. The
Warden Del, as a young healer, had been one of the child Faramir’s allies in his secret comings
and goings to the Houses of Healing to visit the Lady Finduilas. He knew the young Lord of old,
and knew better than to expect him to stay where he had been bid, barring extraordinary
circumstances.

Éowyn, who had heard something of Faramir’s childhood, knew not to inquire further as to how
the Warden and her beloved had come to know one another. Instead, she asked the young
Steward to please join her for dinner that night if he could, and exulted in the delight her request
brought to his dear face.

“You will be staying here, then?” Faramir inquired gently of his intended bride. “You are quite
welcome at the Citadel, there are rooms set aside for visiting dignitaries…”

“Actually,” Éowyn replied, looking to the Warden, “Now that I am recovered I would like to help
others who have been hurt in the war. Provided that your healers could use my help, of course.”

The Warden looked somewhat taken aback. It was not normal for ladies of the city of Gondor to
do more for the Houses of Healing than raising money or occasionally rolling bandages, except, of
course, during this last battle when all of the normal rules of society had fallen by the wayside.
However, the Lady Éowyn could be an asset, as the wounded arrived from the siege of Mordor.
She was physically a sturdy, though slender, lass, now that she had mostly recovered from her
injuries. More, she had shown herself to have a strong stomach and a soothing way about her
when accompanying Lord Faramir on his visits to their wounded comrades. The Warden
considered that, when comforting the terribly wounded, or assisting a healer or wisewoman with a procedure, during her stay the last few days, the Lady Éowyn had never faltered. Lastly, the Lady planned to marry the Steward of Gondor, and Faramir was not the type of husband to care whether his wife was doing a job which “wasn’t fit for a lady,” provided that she found it fulfilling. He was too much his mother’s son for that nonsense. Nodding after a moment, the Warden gratefully accepted the Princess Éowyn’s offer of assistance, soothing himself that he was also guaranteeing the continued visits of Faramir, who could be examined on a regular basis for signs of working too hard and jeopardizing his recovery.

“What about you, Squire Merry?” inquired Faramir. “Shall you stay to keep the lady Éowyn company, or would you like to join those Riders of the Mark who have recovered from their wounds, and are supplementing the number of the city’s remaining guards?”

“Hunh.” Commented Merry, pondering where his duty lay. “My lady, could you use my assistance?”

Hiding a smile, for Éowyn could tell the brave hobbit wished to be out and about after having been cooped up in the Houses of Healing for a ten-day, Éowyn demurred “No, dear Merry. I shall be fine. Healer Engle and Wisewoman Ioreth have offered to have me accompany them on their rounds today, and the House is well supplied with guards.”

“And will continue to be so, despite my departure.” Faramir commented with some asperity, for he had discovered only the previous day that part of the reason for the entire guard patrol of twenty men at the Houses of Healing was the protection of the recovering Steward. Faramir had spoken politely and softly, as was his wont, but the contingent had been permanently reassigned to the Houses of Healing. There they would stay at least until after the King’s coronation, despite the Guard Captain’s and the Keeper of the Keys Hurin’s strenuous objections.

“Say, Merry,” offered the Lord Faramir “Would you like to join me for the morning? I am meeting with the senior Rider of the Mark early this afternoon, to go over guard schedules for the next few days and the King’s arrival and coronation. You could rejoin him then.”

Merry smiled. “That sounds fine, Faramir. If it doesn’t bother you, I’d be very interested to see how one goes about running an entire human city.”

Faramir laughed. “So would I, friend Merry. I suppose we’ll figure it out together.”

Warden Del assured the hobbit that he, too, would be welcome to return to the Houses of Healing for dinner and to sleep, so that he might spend more time with Frodo and Samwise.

Their breakfast was then interrupted by another visitor, not Faramir’s regent during his incapacity, the Lord Húrin (who had been half-expected, despite his agreement that the Lord Faramir could make his own way to the Citadel), but instead a dark haired, dark eyed woman, announced only as Mistress Nessanie of the Lower City. To Éowyn’s surprise, Faramir smiled and rose to greet this visitor eagerly. The Princess of Rohan was not jealous, for the mental and emotional intimacy she had formed with the Steward of Gondor precluded any doubt as to the fidelity of his regard for her. However, Éowyn was intensely interested in this Mistress Nessanie, for she wanted to know everything about Faramir, including who were his friends.

“Ness!” Faramir said, taking the woman by both hands, and looking at her carefully, as friends were wont to do upon meeting in these days when so many had lost so much. “How do you fare? And Tavan?”

Nessanie, called Nessa, smiled in response. “We fare well, my Lord, and my heart is lighter that you seem well on the road to recovery yourself. Tavan and I were so worried when the whole city
thought you were dead.”

“Princess Éowyn, Warden Del, Squire Meriadoc” Faramir introduced, recalling his manners, “This is my friend – and business manager- Mistress Nessanie, daughter of Saelas.” Looking to Éowyn especially, Faramir added “Nessa was a good friend to my brother Boromir, as well.”

Picking up on the subtext, Éowyn realized this woman had probably been Faramir’s dear brother’s lover. Knowing that, and having watched Faramir in action these past few days, Éowyn guessed that the appointment as business manager, while probably not undeserved, had likely been another instance of her husband-to-be matching the skills of those for whom he felt affection with jobs which needed to be done.

Warden Del, for his part, shook his head. “My apologies, Mistress Nessa – had I known you were a friend of Lord Faramir’s as well as his business manager, I would have permitted you to visit him days ago. As it was, I have had to let Lord Húrin disturb my Lord’s rest several times a day, and I did not want to add more disruptions to his recovery.”

“It is no worry, Sir Healer.” The elegant brunette assured. “Lord Faramir is ever wont to do more than his share, no matter the state of his health. I am glad that those who guard his recovery do so assiduously.”

Faramir, smiling at the Warden in mingled affection and annoyance, soon turned to his business manager and asked “How fare the lower levels of the city?“

Éowyn, who had been present during several of Hurin’s debriefings with Faramir, at first wondered why he was asking the same question of Nessa.

Nessa grinned tolerantly at the Steward. “Well, the refugees are overflowing the spaces allotted to them, but you already knew that, since you ordered Húrin to make room for them in the soldiers’ barracks. Incidentally, what are you planning to do when the army gets back?”

Faramir waved a hand. “The soldiers of Gondor’s army are accustomed to living off the land. They’ll be fine with tents in front of the city for a week or so while we get something else figured out. Its harder for the refugees, what with grandparents and small children. What about..”

“The merchants are doing just fine, mostly.” Nessa replied before Faramir had finished his question, smiling more broadly when he gestured for her to continue. “So many refugees means there is always someone to buy their goods. But those who mainly sell outside Minas Tirith are hurting, as trade has been badly disrupted.”

Faramir nodded, then proceeded to ask Nessa a number of detailed questions about different people in the city. Éowyn quickly lost track of who was who, but she did understand why Faramir would want a briefing from Nessa after his daily consults with Hurin. Nessa knew different things about the city than its official regent, and didn’t feel the need to hide any of the problems from her old friend the new Steward.

Glancing at the sun, Faramir winced. “Ladies, Warden, I must beg your pardon. If I do not leave soon, I will be late to meet with Hurin, and then he really will send the guard after me.”

Nessa chuckled.. “Take care, Faramir. And listen to the poor healers’ discharge instructions this time, or there will be no fruit pie for you, the next time you stop by.”

Faramir grinned. “I’ll behave, Ness.” He assured.

The Warden excused himself to oversee the Steward’s departure. Faramir collected Merry, and turned with obvious regret to bid Éowyn farewell. “Until tonight, my Lady.” Faramir kissed her
hand respectfully, his eyes intent.

The White Lady’s eyes followed the Steward until he disappeared from the Garden, then she invited Nessa to stay for a cup of tea, which the dark haired woman readily accepted.

“Faramir asked me in his letters to tell you anything you want to know about his business dealings and his holdings, my Lady.” Nessa explained to Éowyn in a friendly manner. “He is obviously quite taken with you.”

Éowyn smiled softly, amazed to be so content, having known little of such during her life. “We mean to be married as soon as possible, though it may be some months, even a year. My younger brother is now King of Rohan,” the Lady broke off, her uncle’s death still causing her grief.

“I am sorry, my Lady.” Nessa consoled. “You and the Riders of Rohan have all of Gondor’s thanks for your brave rescue of Minas Tirith, but I know it was bought at a dear price indeed.”

Éowyn blinked tears away. “I thank you, Mistress. But please, call me Éowyn, and I shall call you Nessa, for if you call my Lord by name, then we should be friends as well.”

Nessa nodded. “I would like that, Éowyn.” Nessa poured herself a cup of tea, and one for the still-quiet White Lady, then began to explain with a humorous gleam in her eyes. “Your husband-to-be has a good instinct for which businessmen are honest, Lady Éowyn, and for which enterprises will prosper, but no head for numbers, I’m afraid.”

“It is well he has found you to aid him, then.” Éowyn replied, and the two spoke of Faramir’s various accounts and holdings within the city, and in Ithilien and Dol Amroth, for a short time. Then Éowyn could not contain her curiosity any longer “How did you first meet Faramir, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I met him through his brother.” Nessa explained with a sad smile. “To befriend one of the sons of Denethor is to befriend them both, or was, rather.”

“I am sorry for your loss as well, then.” Éowyn offered. “I remember Lord Boromir a little from when he visited Rohan. I was but a child, however he seemed a wonderful man and a courageous soldier, and I know he was very dear to Faramir.”

Nessa took a deep breath. “Boromir was all of that. When I met him, he was barely a Captain, and Faramir only a scape-grace Lieutenant. They grew into wonderful men.” Nessa looked at Éowyn carefully, weighing her, and then spoke further. “About Faramir, Éowyn…you should know that, other than his brother, he has never had anyone to take his side, first and foremost.”

“I had realized some of that.” Éowyn spoke softly. “I assure you, he does now.”

Nessa smiled. “Welcome, then, Éowyn, to Minas Tirith, and welcome to the circle of Faramir’s friends.” Smile turning into an irreverent grin, Nessa expanded, “the few, the brave, the patient.”

Éowyn grinned back. “I thank you. As a friend of Faramir’s, and a woman of Minas Tirith, is there anything you can tell me about what other pies my Lord has his fingers in? If I’m to help him, I must know more of what he does in a day.”

Laughing, Nessa inquired. “All of what Faramir does in a day? Oh my…how much time do you have? Before he even left today, he had sent me several messages, asking for this or that information. That’s not even including the reams of messages he has sent me over the last eight days, asking for special foods and books to tempt the Ringbearers in their recovery, and a recommendation for a Lady of the City to serve as our future Queen’s secretary and personal assistant.”
Éowyn, somewhat taken aback, asked “How did he get you so many messages, my Lady? I had thought the Warden was monitoring how much work my Lord was getting done in any given day…”

Nessa, with an air of frustrated patience, explained “Faramir can get almost anything almost anywhere, Éowyn. He has a secret way of going anywhere in the city and beyond, ‘twas I who had no means of getting in touch with him until today.”

Frowning worriedly, Éowyn asked Nessa, “Does my Lord often disregard the instructions of healers, and sicken again?”

Nessa, sympathy and amusement in her eyes, answered honestly. “Yea and Nay. Faramir often doesn’t listen, but being of a strong constitution, heals nonetheless. Faramir preferred to stay with his command at Ithilien, even if hurt. On those rare occasions when Faramir was so badly injured that his officers felt the need to bring him to the Houses of healing, before my Lord Boromir died, he would hasten to Minas Tirith to care for his younger brother. Boromir used to insist that Faramir stay here until the healers were relatively sure he would be fine recovering elsewhere. Then Brom would bring Fara to my house, and take all of his clothing but a night shirt, and stick him in my guest bedroom. Thus handled, Faramir would generally stay put, at least until he could convince one of my servants to risk my wrath and Boromir’s by bringing him clothes. Even then” Nessa’s eyes twinkled “Faramir would openly defy his brother on rare occasions indeed, for Boromir would not hesitate to register his concern by spanking his younger brother soundly for worrying him, once Faramir was well enough.”

Éowyn smiled, somewhat taken aback by how very much her beloved did not like to be still, even when healing, but delighted beyond measure to have found this woman who had almost an older sister’s perspective on Faramir. “Oh my.” The lady of Rohan said. “I see I have my work cut out for me. Perhaps I shall put a sleeping draft in my Lord’s wine tonight.”

“It might be for the best.” Nessa agreed sagely.
The Last Steward's First Day

Chapter by SusanaR

Chapter Summary

A day in the life of the Steward of Gondor, before the King and his armies return from the feint at the Black Gate.

Chapter Notes

"When he saw the pale face of Faramir he caught his breath. It was the face of one who had been assailed by a great fear or anguish, but has mastered it and now is quiet. Proud and grave he stood for a moment…and Pippin gazing at him saw how closely he resembled his brother Boromir—whom Pippin had liked from the first, admiring the great man’s lordly but kindly manner. Yet suddenly for Faramir his heart was strangely moved with a feeling that he had not known before. Here was one with an air of high nobility such as Aragorn at times revealed, less high perhaps, yet also less incalculable and remote: one of the Kings of Men born into a later time, but touched with the wisdom and sadness of the Elder Race. He knew now why Beregond spoke his name with love. He was a captain that men would follow, that he would follow, even under the shadow of the black wings." —Tolkien, Pippin’s thoughts on Faramir from ROTK

“He had been accustomed to giving way and not giving his own opinions air, while retaining a power of command among men, such as a man may obtain who is evidently personally courageous and decisive, but also modest, fair-minded and scrupulously just, and very merciful.” - J.R.R. Tolkien in a draft letter to a reader, in: The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien

"All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership." - John Kenneth Galbraith

Ethiron, a captain of the Dunedain Rangers of the North, carefully put weight on his left leg, testing its soundness. The tall, white haired man smiled slightly when he felt no pain, enjoying the sensation of being hale once more. A long cut from an orc blade across his side, several fractured ribs, and a sprained ankle sustained at the battle of Pelennor fields had robbed Ethiron of the chance to accompany his Chieftain Aragorn to Barad Dur. Ethiron had merited several brief visits from his leader before the Chieftain left for Barad Dur.

The explanation given to the Healers had been that Ethiron was a personal friend of Aragorn’s, and one of the few Dunedain to be nearly a contemporary in age to their fabled chief. While true, neither of these were the real reasons for Aragorn’s several long discussions with Ethiron. Not many were aware of the fact, but the Northern Dunedain owed many of their successes in the long struggle against Mordor and Sauron not to strength of arms alone, but also to the cunning of a
series of spy masters, of which the current, and most successful, was Ethiron. It had been Ethiron who had passed the word to Aragorn that several of the hobbits were acting strangely, before Frodo and the others had left the Shire. It had been Ethiron who, through his network of informants, was able to share with the Fellowship some of the information about the safest routes to take through Middle Earth to evade the agents of Sauron.

After Aragorn’s timely arrival with the host and the Riders of Rohan won the day at Pelennor fields, it was Ethiron who first suggested to the his Chieftain that something might be gained by distracting the dark lord from the progress of the hobbit Frodo. So it was that Aragorn visited his spymaster several more times to discuss various details for the feint at Barad-Dur. The Chieftain had been accompanied on those visits by his elven foster-brothers, the famous warriors and healers, Elrohir and Elladan Elrondion, and the senior captain of the Dunedain, the venerable Magordan. All of these had desired to make the feint, and the lives that would be lost in the process, count for as much of a distraction as possible. “If I must spend my people’s blood to distract the dark host,” Aragorn had stated firmly, “I refuse to do so in vain. Not when better planning can enable us to give Frodo a better chance to succeed.”

As he listened carefully to the apprentice healer go over his exit instructions with one ear, Ethiron reflected briefly on how much he had missed his Chieftain while he lay in the houses of Healing. Oh, he was sure the apprentice he had sent to Barad Dur was well trained, but it was not in the spymaster’s nature to be idle. More, Ethiron worried over Aragorn as one might a cousin, for all they were not related by blood. In one of his few private moments with his Chieftain and friend before the army left, Ethiron had taken a good look at the man. Aragorn was clearly tired, but there was a new light of purpose in his eyes, one that befit him well.

“You know you cannot ride with our host, that you must bide here?” The Chieftain had explained to his valued spymaster, stern but kind.

“Aye, Aragorn.” Ethiron agreed with a sigh. “I am sorry to let you down.”

“No such thing, friend.” Aragorn disagreed firmly. “You fought well and bravely for mankind outside this city. ‘Twas your secret knowledge of the fastest and surest routes here, and your messenger network, that brought so many of the Northern Dunedain in time to aid Gondor. You have done more than one Ranger’s part, and I thank you. More, your help with designing our deceptive feint towards Mordor was invaluable, as always.” The Chieftain’s gaze became chiding, “Though I think Magordan wants words with you. He is somewhat wroth that you were injured so sorely in his defense, when a better mastery of the sword you have all but abandoned in your spy-work could have bought his rescue without such dear cost.”

Ethiron nodded, resigned. “Aye, so the senior Captain has mentioned.” His thoughts moved back to that conversation.

“That wasn’t the kind of fight you are accustomed to anymore, eh, Ethiron?” Magordan had asked, relief in his eyes that his friend would survive warring with his annoyance at said friend’s arguably avoidable injuries.

“Nay, it was not.” The spymaster agreed.

“Well, then, if we all survive this, we’ll have to work on that.” Magordan planned with a smile.

Ethiron had repressed a shudder, for he knew that smile. “Aye, Captain.” The spymaster gamely agreed, perfectly willing to put up with whatever grueling practice schedule his old friend would assign, if they could all just live through this, or at least win it.

As Ethiron was dismissed by the healers who had been seeing to his case, he effortlessly cataloged
the various details of the House of Healing that were different today. This morning the House’s most important patient, the young Steward of Gondor, would be released. This meant that there would no longer be a parade of various functionaries and messengers coming back and forth between the House and the Citadel, with this or that dispatch for the attention of the evidently diligent and efficient Faramir of the House of Hurin.

Ethiron had a great deal of respect for both diligence and efficiency, developed from his long years of work as a spy. The young Ethiron had been plucked from ranger ranks early, due to both his talent for memorization and disassembling, and his absolute loyalty to his friend the young Chieftain. Ethiron had then been trained by the Lord Elrond of Rivendell and his adviser Lord Erestor, well as by Magordan and other rangers. Ethiron had taken the place of the old Dunedain spymaster when still a comparatively young man. In the many decades that Ethiron had held the position, he had come to have more and more respect for his friend and Chieftain. Though he was frustrated at his injuries causing him to miss being at Aragorn’s side, Ethiron was too much the spymaster to not relish the opportunity to see Minas Tirith again with his own eyes. He had been to Gondor’s capital a handful of times since Elrond had first selected him to be the future spymaster of the Dunedain. But now that Aragorn would come to rule here in the very near future, he had new eyes for this most ancient and sophisticated of human cities.

One of the first subjects of Ethiron’s scrutiny had been the new Steward of Gondor. It was this man who would have to give over rule of the city to the rightly returned King. If Faramir was not inclined to do so willingly, as his brother Boromir had not been, at least not until he came to know Aragorn well, then Ethiron would be Aragorn’s first tool in, ah, persuading the Steward.

Ethiron had his chance to meet Faramir earlier than he had expected, and under decidedly different circumstances than he would have planned. Faramir had entered his room without knocking when Ethiron had been suffering from intense pain, having just overdone one of his breathing exercises. Ethiron had felt a complete fool, as he’d had broken ribs before, though it had been decades ago, and should have known better than to actually follow the idiot apprentice healer’s instructions to take a deep breath. The slender, tall man with the red-gold hair had helped Ethiron to sit up and master his breathing, then had given the apprentice healer strict but kind instructions to fetch the Warden, or one of the other senior healers.

Faramir had waited with Ethiron until his previous physical therapist had been replaced by someone more experienced. Ethiron knew it must be the young Steward, for he knew the man to have his Dol Amroth mother’s red-gold hair, a shade darker than the Lord Boromir’s strawberry blond. To Ethiron’s bafflement, Faramir (as well as the senior healer) had then apologized for the younger healer’s mistakes. “We’re light on experienced staff,” the senior healer had explained, “Most of ours who can ride well, we sent with that other fellow.” Ethiron had winced at hearing his Chieftain referred to so casually, and to his surprise, so had Faramir.

Faramir, good natured but embarrassed, had corrected the healer. “What the Senior Healer means, Captain Ethiron, is that we sent many of the House’s best healers with our future King.”

“That quiet fellow who healed you will be King, Faramir?” The healer had commented in surprise.

Faramir, smiling slightly, had asked the healer whether he had been off duty for anything other than eating the food brought to the house and grabbing a few hours of sleep. The healer, baffled, had shaken his head. Faramir had sighed, and explained that yes, “that quiet fellow” was their new King, Isildur’s heir returned to rule Gondor, after having saved Minas Tirith from Mordor’s armies.

The new Steward seemed sincere. Ethiron breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently, Aragorn’s judgment of men had proven right again. His Chieftain had said “Young Faramir is my man, and a
good one.” And so it appeared. But Ethiron would keep an eye on the youngster, nonetheless. Although Faramir seemed true, he was still young. At thirty-three, the Steward’s age, most Dunedain were not yet promoted to Captain. And Ethiron knew from decades of experience that even promising young officers could do remarkably stupid things, from time to time.

Faramir continued to impress Ethiron over the course of their time as mutual patients of the House. The young Steward was a tireless diplomat, mediating between injured soldiers and demanding healers (including Ethiron and Warden Del, on occasion). Faramir was also a canny administrator, or so Ethiron gathered from the few scraps of gossip he could glean from listening to those servants who accompanied the Keeper of the Keys. Húrin obviously made very few decisions without consulting the new Steward. The Healers of the House also seemed to like their new Steward, though the older ones treated him with an unbecoming familiarity, for Gondorians.

Most importantly to Ethiron, “Captain Faramir” was very well-spoken of by his few surviving Ithilien Rangers. The only time that Ethiron had ever seen the younger man overset was right after he had visited with one of the worst injured of the rangers. As soon as the Steward thought he was out of sight, Faramir had gracefully crumpled into a ball, silently sobbing for a dozen or so minutes. The lad then picked himself up, wiped his face, and summoned a bright expression to go help his friend with learning to walk with a missing leg. It had been impressive as hell, but something about it bothered Ethiron. A northern Dunedain Ranger captain who had lost as much of his command as Faramir had, through no fault of his own, wouldn’t have been left alone to mourn by himself. Magordan or Lord Aragorn would have ordered the surviving captain to see a mind-healer, possibly Lord Elrond himself if the young ranger were as promising as young Faramir. More, how, and why, had Denethor’s second son learned to cry noiselessly, as if he himself were a spy in his own city?

Faramir’s frequent companions were the slayers of the Witch King, the Lady of Rohan and the hobbit Merry. Ethiron heard the rumors, and then saw for himself, that Faramir and Éowyn were mutually smitten with one another. Ethiron silently wished the Steward luck. He himself preferred a less well-armed lass.

When Faramir had discovered that most of the guards at the House of Healing had been stationed there solely for the Steward’s own protection, Ethiron had learned first-hand that the Steward could be a formidable opponent. Dressed in the blue pajamas of the House of Healing, Faramir had faced down Húrin and two captains of Gondor’s guard, all at least twice the Steward’s age. In the end, the guards would stay at the House, and Faramir was the only one of the four not to have raised his voice.

As amusing as the brief stand-off had been, Ethiron found himself even more worried. Everyone the spymaster had personally met (even Húrin and the frustrated guard captains) seemed to be fond of Faramir, if a little baffled by the young Steward’s polite intransigence and clever tongue. But what would happen to Faramir, if someone else in the city was not of that mind, and knew the young Steward would be walking about unaccompanied? If Faramir had been Ethiron’s to command, he would have definitely ordered the younger man to the mind healers at that point, out of fear that Faramir was purposely courting an assassin’s arrow. But most of Gondor’s mind healers had also been sent with Aragorn, and Ethiron had personally witnessed Faramir talk rings around those still in residence, in polite conversations Ethiron had innocuously started between the new Steward and the mind healers who darn well should have noticed they had a patient. Ethiron had the uncomfortable thought that Faramir was somewhat like a younger version of Aragorn, but with no Magordan, Elrond, Glorfindel, Erestor, or twins to ride herd on him. This thought terrified Ethiron, until he realized that, if he knew Aragorn, the Chieftain had recognized Faramir’s merit, and was already planning to take the younger man under his wing. If anyone could deal with a younger Aragorn, surely it would be Aragorn himself?
Still, Ethiron was concerned about those few days in between when Faramir would leave the House and Aragorn would arrive for his coronation. With the few agents he had in Minas Tirith, Ethiron was trying to work out how he might protect the stubborn young idiot from any bright fellows who might have figured out that offing the Steward who was minded to welcome the King would slow down the process of Aragorn’s coming to rule Minas Tirith in fact as well as by right.

In one of those lucky coincidences that Ethiron would later learn to be very suspicious of when connected to Faramir, the Steward himself came to the spymaster, and asked if Ethiron wouldn’t mind, since they were being released on the same day, serving as one of Faramir’s guards until the army arrived back and Ethiron returned to the Dunedain. Since following Faramir around would be a golden opportunity to both observe the highest workings of the government and keep the talented young Steward alive until Aragorn could take over, Ethiron accepted immediately. Ethiron was not sure if Faramir would have made this invitation if knew Ethiron was Aragorn’s spymaster. There was, after all, a difference between recognizing a man’s right to be King, and choosing apurpose to let your future King’s best observer of men note all of your flaws. Though there was a studiedly guileless look in the polite young lord’s eyes when Faramir asked Ethiron to join his guard, that made the spymaster wonder if there wasn’t even more going on behind that innocent expression than he had originally assumed.

Preoccupied with these thoughts, Ethiron still immediately snapped to attention when Faramir stepped into the entrance of the House. The Steward was followed by the chief healer, Warden Del. Faramir nodded to Ethiron in greeting as Warden Del continued to lecture the Lord Steward as if he were an errant apprentice.

“Now remember, Faramir, just because you are discharged does not mean that you can resume your normal 16 to 20 hour days.” The Warden said, in the tone of a man who knew he was giving good advice, which it was extremely unlikely the recipient would heed. “You still need to rest, and drink extra fluids, and continue to wear your sling for at least a week.”

Faramir, wincing internally at the not-so-well-hidden expression of amusement on the northern Dunedain ranger’s face, made a mental note to remind Del not to address him like a child when they were in public. Always fair if he could help it, Faramir admitted to himself that the Warden had good reason to suspect Faramir would disregard his instructions. Faramir had never minded a healer in his life once he felt well enough to be about his regular activities. “I thank you for your excellent care of myself, Warden Del,” Faramir emphasized the other man’s title gently, and was rewarded by the Warden’s wince as Del recognized he had been over-familiar with the new Steward, who just happened to dwell in the same skin as his one-time favorite patient Finduilas’s devoted but wayward child. Seeing the Warden’s apology writ on his features, Faramir softened his tone further, and added “Please continue that care for my dear friends Frodo and Sam, and for the Lady Éowyn as well, though she is now fellow healer-in-training rather than patient.”

The Warden Del accepted this solemn charge gladly, and Faramir turned to his escorts, the Dunedain captain Ethiron and the Squire Merry. After confirming with both of his temporary guards that they were quite fit for this duty, Faramir left the House of Healing to begin his work as temporary Steward in earnest. It was one of the first times that a man of Gondor, born in Minas Tirith, would be about his duties accompanied by a Captain of Lost Armor and a halfling, but it would not be the last.

As they walked on what he noticed was a remarkably circuitous route toward the Citadel, Ethiron mused on his gladness for northern rangers having guarded the hobbits. Their diligence in that duty had been well-paid by these four small folk. Ethiron had developed particular respect for Merry, whom he knew had been the hobbit to so cleverly coordinate Frodo’s flight from the Shire. If not for Merry’s planning, the quest might have ended ’ere it began. Ethiron noticed that Faramir
seemed to have developed a particular friendship with Merry as well. More, the young Steward appeared to enjoy telling the hobbit stories of the people and places in Minas Tirith they passed, which the spymaster supposed might be the reason for their indirect route. Ethiron didn’t mention that he knew of at least 3 shorter ways to the citadel, for he had not become spymaster by revealing knowledge he shouldn’t have.

Faramir, meanwhile, had, in fact selected this roundabout approach for a reason, but it was not primarily to tell Merry more about the city. The Steward’s purpose was to collect a few good men and women for himself and the future King, and to talk to a few others. Faramir had decided to ask the Dunedain (and Merry) to act as guards not just as a gesture of respect and diplomacy to the Northern Rangers and Hobbits, but because they were less likely to notice his meandering route back to the Citadel than the Home Guard of Minas Tirith, who might wonder at the longer walk. The route had been agreed upon by himself and his friend Lieutenant Dervorin, one of the Ithilien rangers under Faramir’s command, and the officer in charge of running the information network in Harad, in order to maximize the number of unofficial contacts Faramir had access to prior to his first meeting with the Council.

Dervorin, or “Dev,” had been one of Faramir’s few contacts who had needed no help sneaking into the Houses of Healing to visit the recovering Steward. Dev had appeared in his chambers during shift change, to bring Faramir word from the King’s camp. Dev had been selected by Aragorn, as one of the few Ithilien rangers who had arrived late to the Battle of Pelennor Fields, to run the messenger relay between Minas Tirith and the future King’s armies. The Lieutenant had also been one of a small number of friends who knew without having to ask that Faramir planned to support Aragorn as King.

“He’s a good man, and even the elves confirm he’s Isildur’s heir. Though they call him something else – “Estel,” means happy in Sindarin, don’t it?” Dev asked through bites, consuming the nutritious midnight snack some industrious healer’s assistant had brought for Faramir.

The Steward and former Captain, marveling at his friend’s ability to eat even the House’s unpalatable food, corrected, “Nay, “hope.” Appropriate enough, I suppose. Must you continue to speak like an Ithilien frontiersman, Dev? The King’s armies may not know you were born and raised in the city, or that we shared some of the same tutors, but I do.”

“Sorry, Fara.” Dev apologized with a smile. “I’m in the habit, but I should make a point of breaking it from time to time, so I don’t get out of practice. I’m not like you with a perfect memory of exactly the intonation and mannerisms this personality is supposed to have. I have to work at it.”

Faramir sighed, for he was not comfortable with what a good spy Lieutenant Faramir had once been, and that Captain Faramir had still been, when his father or Dev’s various schemes demanded it. “So you, too, approve of the future King, I take it?” The Steward asked his friend. Dervorin was one of the very few people Faramir knew who could beat him at chess, and he respected his Lieutenant’s opinion. Faramir was sure, after meeting Aragorn on the strange plane where the King had come to fetch him back from the Witch-King’s deceptions, that Aragorn was a great man. But Dev agreeing would make things go more smoothly, for Dev had contacts all over Minas Tirith, as well as in Ithilien’s hidden settlements and throughout Harad.

“Aye, Fara, I do.” Dev confirmed to his friend’s relief. “If Aragorn were “taking your place,” I might feel differently. Since I know well that you do not want to rule, my friend, I find the King returned welcome indeed. Even did we not know him from saving our city and you, well, the clear sky speaks for itself, and he was the ringbearer’s companion.”

Faramir grinned in answer, pleased to have a friend still among the living who knew him so well. Dev and Faramir had started at the academy together. Dev had followed Faramir to sea when new
Steward had been a young teenage academy trainee. Then, later, Dev had succeeded in being posted to Ithilien a year or so after Fara was. Boromir had always had at least a handful of best friends and bosom companions, but Dev had been Fara’s only close friend of his own age, outside his family.

Faramir had argued with Dev during that visit that it would be best for the new Steward to go about his city himself, and see the the people he meant to see. Dev had disagreed, sighing, for he knew the new Steward very well, and how stubborn Faramir could be when he had made up his mind. Dev had pointed out that such visits would take a lot of energy Faramir might need later that day for dealing with his new staff and Gondor’s council. Faramir had agreed reluctantly, and the two had worked out an approximate route for Faramir to take. Dev planned to spend a few extra hours in the city, letting the folk that Faramir wanted to talk to know when and where he would be available, before riding the relay back to the King’s armies. Only public business could be discussed in the streets, but much of what had to be said could be said in public. More, it would be good for people to see that Gondor’s new Steward was approachable, since Boromir had always been the public face of the brothers Hurin.

Before he left, Dev turned to warn his friend. “Fara, the Dunedain spymaster may be here, in Minas Tirith.”

“The ghost!” Faramir exclaimed in interest. “Really, I thought you had gone back to thinking he didn’t exist.” Faramir couldn’t resist the impulse to tease his friend a little bit. Dev was nearly the consummate spy runner and spy. Though Dev was a good man, and unalterably loyal to Faramir, his mind was twisty, and he delighted in plots, and plans with more than one end. Dev and Faramir between them had easily defeated all of Sauron’s heavy handed attempts to get a spy into the remaining hidden settlements in Ithilien. Sauron and Saruman had not even suspected the Ithilien rangers’ Haradrim network. But someone, not an enemy, had almost succeeded in infiltrating Dev’s network last year. Whoever it was had saved Dev’s life when an orc had unexpectedly tried to kill the annoying “Haradrim” human. Then, later in the year, Dev’s agents had saved a Dunedain posing (quite effectively) as a man of Harad, and helped him get back to his kin.

Dev made a face. “I am sure the ghost is real, now. I’ve coded dispatches from his agent with the King.”

“Dev, please, please, tell me you haven’t been taking advantage of your position to read the King’s mail.” Faramir murmured, closing his eyes in worry.

“Nay, Fara, but only because I knew it would upset you. Quite frankly, I think it in the King’s best interest that I know what he knows so that I can keep him from making mistakes.”

“Lord Aragorn is very lucky to have a clever man like you looking after his interests.” Faramir assured his friend solemnly before they both broke into soft chuckles, Faramir wincing as even that motion pulled on his wound.

“Here, Fara, I should let you rest.” Dev said, retucking the blankets around his friend. “But I did want to let you know that I had, ah, infiltrated the ghost’s message relay network. One of his men is fairly careless, and was sent with the King. That foolish young spy has me scribing for him.”

Faramir muttered a curse at the carelessness of that.

“Aye,” Dev agreed. “So I know the ghost is in Minas Tirith, and corresponding with the King, though I’ve not read the King’s mail, oh suspicious one. There are any number of reasons why Aragorn might have chosen to have his spymaster in our city rather than with him on the feint, but the only one that makes sense to me, having seen the King in action, is that his spymaster must be
injured.”

“Oh,” Faramir said, processing that. “I hope the ghost is alright, then. We owe him your life, after all.”

“Thanks for reminding me.” Dev said with a glower. “Now you rest, while I go about and do all the hard work, liaising with the silent service, making sure none of the Lords of council are going to kill you when they find out you’re the King’s man, that type of thing.”

“Thanks, Dev.” Faramir’s eyes glowed with gratitude. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you are still here.”

Dev turned back to grasp his Steward’s hand. “Neither can I, sad as I am to have missed being at your side for the battle. I am always your man, Faramir. If your next role is to be an itinerant sailor, I’ll follow you even then.”

Faramir laughed, mood lightened though he did not know what he would be doing when the King returned to Gondor. “I’m sure we can find something far more worthy of your time, my friend,” he murmured as Dev left through the window as soundlessly as he had entered.

Faramir shook his head, returning himself to the present as one of the people he had most wanted to talk to this day came into view. Captain Ethiron and Merry had been most tolerant of various citizens of Gondor stopping Faramir for conversation, so this one should not seem remarkable to them. “Captain Arnaut!” Faramir cheerfully greeted the merchant sea captain who had been his friend for decades. With his own wages, Faramir had invested in Arnaut’s first ship, the Burnt Lizard, when Faramir had been newly made a lieutenant.

Ethiron and Merry stopped as Faramir turned to clasp arms with the grizzled old veteran of many wars.

“Lord Faramir,” the man greeted discreetly slipping a note into Faramir’s tunic as he brought the younger man in for a hug. “I am glad to see you so well.”

Faramir, grinning, replied “And I am glad to congratulate you on becoming a grandfather.” Arnaut’s only child, a daughter, had married one of Boromir’s former soldiers, who had retired from the army due to injuries incurred in combat, and walked with a limp too severe to pass Gondor’s strict tests for its soldiers.

Captain Arnaut grinned broadly. “I thank you. My grandson is a fine babe.”

Faramir turned serious. “Is there any chance your son-in-law is now looking for work in Minas Tirith? I know he has been a great aid to you, serving as factor on your ships.”

The captain sighed. “He is. I can’t complain too much, or my daughter will be wroth with me. Are you here to poach him?”

Faramir grinned. “I need a few good men for the King. He has no staff whatsoever, and some of my father’s will be unsuitable for one reason or another.”

The Captain suppressed a smile at the new Steward’s careful wording. “Unsuitable” was a mild epithet indeed for some of Denethor’s staff, who, but for the absence of the entire army from the city, would have been plotting an armed insurrection to keep their power base intact. And but for the absence of a willing usurper, which Faramir would never be. Arnaut agreed to send his son-in-law later that day to the citadel, and asked Faramir what his plans were, with the King due to return in a few days.
Faramir shrugged gracefully, pleased that such movement no longer pained his shoulder. “I shall be retired as a man of thirty-three. Who knows, perhaps I shall come to you someday soon looking for work. Though for a time, I shall stay to advise the King if he has need of me, then settle in Ithilien, perhaps traveling if my Uncle Prince Imrahil has need of me.

The old sea captain shook his head. “I’d be happy to employ you, friend. But I suspect your King will have need of you for some time yet. “ Provided he is not a fool, Arnaut thought to himself. He’d heard that the returned King was the same as Captain Thorongil, whom he had known well when he himself had been a soldier. If that was indeed the truth, he did not see Thorongil failing to put the young Lord Faramir in a position of great responsibility and honor, somewhere in his new kingdom. Thorongil had been very good at recognizing talent and nurturing it. Arnaut himself had been promoted directly to his current rank, before the battle with the Corsairs of Umbar, by Thorongil. He had proved worthy of it, though that service had left him sick in mind and body. Thorongil had taken one look at his dispirited new captain, and had given the wounded man’s keeping to the Prince Adrahil. Adrahil had cared for the young Captain, until the man was well enough, and then had helped him to start a new life in Gondor, to send him away from the home he loved, but found painful. Arnaut had lost most of his family in corsair attacks on the coast. Prince Imrahil had later employed Arnaut as part of his information gathering network in Dol Amroth, and Arnaut was always pleased to be of assistance to his Prince’s nephew.

Ethiron, listening to this conversation, agreed that Aragorn would not be letting this particular young Lord of Gondor escape to the quiet life of an ordinary citizen anytime soon. No, if he knew Aragorn, clever Faramir would be granted a position of honor in the new king’s retinue, and put to work. Ethiron also thought that the name Arnaut sounded familiar, but could not place it.

“My Lord,” Ethiron gently reminded Faramir, “‘Tis time and past that Lord Húrin was expecting you. ‘Twould be best to get to the citadel before he sends out the guard.”

Moving on, the group of three men were stopped again by Faramir’s glad cry of “Dev!” to a man dressed in the colors of a messenger of Gondor, mounted on a fast horse.

The man threw himself from his horse in one fluid motion, catching and embracing the Lord Steward of Gondor. “Faramir! I am glad to see you walking among the living. The healers have guarded you like the creature Smeagol did the one ring.”

Faramir shook his head at the inappropriateness of that, as he introduced one of his very few surviving Ithilien Rangers to Ethiron and Merry. Ethiron sighed, as he realized they would probably not get to the Citadel before Húrin sent out the guard to look for the missing Steward. Still, more support might be helpful, as the Steward insisted on allowing armed men to approach him before Ethiron and the hobbit could get a good look at them, let alone make sure they were not enemies.

Faramir and Dev were conversing with Merry, who was interested to hear how the messenger relay worked. Ethiron noticed an unexpected movement in the crowd, approaching the Steward. “Faramir! I am glad to see you walking among the living. The healers have guarded you like the creature Smeagol did the one ring.”

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Faramir and Dev were conversing with Merry, who was interested to hear how the messenger relay worked. Ethiron noticed an unexpected movement in the crowd, approaching the Steward. So did Faramir, apparently, for he reached out to grasp the hand of a young pickpocket.

The child seemed offended to have been caught. The Lord Steward swatted the boy, too gently in Ethiron’s opinion, before explaining “You stopped to stare at my companions with your hand still in my pocket. ‘Twill get you caught every time.” Faramir then handed the youth off to a passing member of the Minas Tirith guard, stating, “This young fellow has volunteered to help care for the horses of the arriving army, and should be quartered with the others preparing to do so. Make sure he has a chance to eat and is well cared for, but also carefully watched.” The guard, who appeared to recognize Faramir, merely nodded without surprise. Ethiron was pleased by how similar were Faramir’s methods to Aragorn’s, but troubled by something as well. The whole interaction seemed almost too smooth to him.
Dev, as well, was displeased. The child informant who’d approached Faramir had been unpardonably clumsy and needed further training. Dev himself would not be able to protect Faramir during the riots the child’s message had warned them might occur later in the day. More, Dev had not planned to take the risk of meeting Faramir himself, but upon learning that Ethiron had been visited in the House of healing so many times by the King, felt he needed to warn Faramir that Ethiron was probably the Dunedain spymaster. Speaking in a modified version of ranger hand speak, he did so. Faramir, however, was not upset. Murmuring into Dev’s ear as they embraced in parting, Faramir explained, “He will be King, Dev. What does it matter if he knows all we know?” Faramir, Dev thought, was entirely too noble and respectable and honest. It was a wonder of wonders that he had been one of Dev’s better spies before mostly retiring. The demands of being Captain were incompatible with the long and unpredictable absences required for spying.

Ethiron heaved a sigh of relief when they finally arrived at the Citadel, though perhaps it was premature.

The regent and Keeper of the Keys, Lord Húrin looked askance at the presence of the northern Dunedain Ranger and the hobbit. “My lord, may I have a word with you in private?” He asked. Faramir looked his cousin in the eyes, pausing for a moment to read the fears he saw there. “Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of this company, cousin.” He replied gently. “For this Ranger served as one of our King-to-Be’s trusted captains in the North. This hobbit was one of the future King’s, and my dear departed brother’s, brave companions on their Quest. I shall not start out my brief time as Steward with secrets from the allies of he who will soon govern Gondor.”

Húrin, frustrated but not surprised, for cousin Faramir had always been a strange one, nodded his assent. “Fine, well, here are the numbers and information you asked for, what we could get of it, in respect of the guards, food, shelter, rebuilding of the gate, and search and rescue operations.”

Faramir nodded intently, and the two men sat down to business. Ethiron was glad to hear them discuss for nearly an hour the plans to welcome the King to the city, and turn governance of the country over to him. Húrin did later pull Faramir aside, to discuss a personal issue that Ethiron was grimly certain had to do with why Faramir was recognizing this unknown (to Húrin, at least) Dunedan as the King returned. When the two younger men came back, Húrin was frowning thoughtfully, and Faramir seemed more relaxed. Ethiron took that to mean that the discussion had gone well. Ethiron was a man who noticed everything, and he was sure, by this point, that young Faramir was indeed the King’s man.

Before the council meeting, Faramir also conducted brief interviews with Denethor’s staff and secretaries. The Lord Steward looked each carefully in the eye, before deciding either to dismiss them, or keep them on at least until after the coronation. Ethiron made a careful note of who was dismissed, as he suspected Faramir was only firing those unwilling to welcome the new King. Even Ethiron could understand the young Lord’s keeping on those loyal staff who were merely withholding judgment on a man they had never met before, much as Húrin had been.

As the members of the council entered the council chamber later in that day, Húrin as well as Ethiron were surprised to note that many of them nodded respectfully to Faramir, or conveyed their well wishes for the young Steward’s recovery. Ethiron made a mental note to harangue his Minas Tirith informants, except for the one young fellow who had mentioned that the younger son of Denethor was making allies on his father’s council, even prior to his brother’s death. That informant was an archivist, the son of one of the Arnor Dunedain who had accompanied Aragorn to Gondor as Thorongil. The archivist had related that some of the councilors had recognized Faramir as a voice of reason and a strong proponent of the needs of the armed forces, and had established a more frequent correspondence with Faramir since Boromir’s death. Meanwhile,
Ethiron’s other informants had been under the impression that Faramir was a shy, politically naive army man who rarely left Ithilien. Shy the young Lord might be, but politically naive he was not, Ethiron thought with a snort.

Many of the councilors had never heard Denethor’s second son speak at all, but only whisper something softly to his brother. Others of them knew that Faramir had become a quiet, though effective, broker of power in the city. The few Captains who were still in the city listened closely, for they knew the former Captain of the Ithilien Rangers was a force to be reckoned with, when so he chose.

Faramir opened the informal council meeting by stating clearly that it would be the last under a Ruling Steward. Further, the young Steward established that he was hesitant to make most decisions without the new King’s presence. This prompted a murmur as the other councilors realized Faramir meant to make way for the new king, without consulting them. Faramir waited a moment for the whispers to die down, before continuing to state that some issues must need be dealt with by the council immediately. The Steward then led the group through an exhaustive but efficient survey of those issues, including the city’s readiness to receive the army, the status of the guard, security in the city, and the search and rescue operations being jointly supervised by the stone masons’ guild and the guard, including the order of damaged structures to be secured and emptied (food storage first, then archives, then private homes, then other goods).

Merry, still standing guard behind Faramir’s chair, hid a grin at how Faramir had secured the reluctant respect of the other councilors as they realized the extent to which Faramir had kept abreast of current issues, even though he had been so gravely injured.

Moving to the topic of readiness for the King’s arrival, Faramir was startled by an interruption from one of the few councilors still serving who had been appointed by his grandfather Ecthelion. “The King cannot return!” The old Councilor stated baldly.

Faramir blinked. This was more bluntly than he had expected to have the issue addressed, after having made his own opinion clear at the outset. Gamely, the Steward asked “And why not, good councilor?” Vaguely, Faramir recognized the fellow as the councilor in charge of formal protocol.

The Councilor explained that there was a crisis. His office no longer knew the appropriate tune for the silver horns of Gondor to play to welcome home the King.

Faramir, bemused, suggested that they make something up. They could always change it later. The Councilor in charge of protocol appeared horrified. “That will not do, my Lord.” he pointed out stiffly.

“Well, I’m hardly going to deny our returning King entrance to the city, merely because we can’t remember the correct tune to play. Figure out something you’re happy with by the morn of the day after tomorrow, and go with it.” Faramir commanded.

The councilor glared, but agreed.

Faramir seized the attention of the restive council back, hoping his opponents on the council hadn’t planned too many such sallies to waste his time, and theirs, that day.

Ethiron was further impressed by ease with which this comparatively young, untried politician regained the attention of the room. From what he knew of Gondorian politics (and he had made it his business to know quite a bit, as these would be Aragorn’s people), it would be normal for the councilors to test a new Steward, and all the more one who had been effectively kept out of the
political process by his father. At least, that had been Ethiron’s previous understanding, garnered from occasional visits by Rangers to Gondor, and by gossip over the past few days in the HOH. As a result of following Faramir around the city this morning and hearing updates on various of these issues from citizens of Minas Tirith, Ethiron suspected it was necessary to revise their previous understanding of Denethor’s younger son’s political influence.

Turning back to the topic of how to feed the population, including the visiting armies soon to arrive on Pelennor fields, and the displaced refugees, it became clear that while there was enough food for the next several months, there would not be enough to see the entire population through the winter.

Faramir shook his head. “No, that’s not good enough. We need to be able to feed people now, and through the winter. Increase the amount of aid we are asking for from Dol Amroth. They can trade with the Easterlings and Southrons, if needed. The nations of the South haven’t had to field an official army this year, though many of their men fought for Sauron. Their levies who supported Sauron were not fully mustered until after the end of the first planting season, and their seasons run longer, so they may have a surplus. We’ll figure out a way to pay for it later.”

“With all due respect, my Lord Steward.” Disagreed the Lord Sendar querulously. “Money doesn’t grow on trees. This new King, if you’re indeed determined to hand the reins of government over to the man sight unseen, will not thank you for leaving a huge debt for him to pay at the start of his reign. Its sad, and its not a fair world, but those who can afford to buy food will eat, and those who can’t, will starve.” Lord Sendar, despite his nobility, had long been the head of the merchants’ guilds, giving him effectively two seats on the council. Being only one man, he had ceded his other seat to Allamar, Chief of the Weaver’s Guild.

Faramir took a deep breath to hide his vexation. He knew Sendar was not so uncaring as his position on this issue made him seem, after all, Sendar was one of the most generous supporters of the widows and orphans fund, and of other charitable causes in the city. Sendar was only stating the issue as he saw it…which made a thought occur to Faramir. “What about our exports? Is there anything sitting in warehouses that Gondor’s traders wouldn’t be able to export anyway, given the current state of our navy and the lack of labor for the next few months, until men are relieved from their duties in the army?”

“Aye,” agreed Sendar in confusion. “There are shipments of arms to be sent to Dol Amroth, for their navy, which Lord Denethor embargoed last year. There’s also several shipments of crockery bound for the Haradrim, livestock bound for the Southern lands, plow shares for.”

Faramir interrupted. “So, a sizable amount?”

Lord Sendar and Councilor Allamar both nodded cautiously.

“How would the guilds respond to an offer from the Steward’s office to buy the warehoused goods at a 1/3 discount?” Faramir asked, figuring numbers in his head and wishing he’d thought of this enough in advance to run through it with Denethor’s staff accountants.

Master Allamar, unusually, spoke up first. “Most would be grateful, my Lord. Its gotten to the point of being a concern. War is terrible for business.”

Sendar held up a hand. “What’s your plan, lad..err, my Lord?” He asked of Faramir, suspiciously.

Faramir smiled politely. “These goods will mostly sell for full price, some for more. The Steward’s office buys them for 2/3 price. There is enough left in the Steward’s coffers to do this, and naught will be needed after the end of this week, as the office will cease to exist with the return of the King. Gondor shall ask Dol Amroth for the increased food stuffs, and pledge payment against the
sale of the warehoused goods. Dol Amroth, for a 1/8 fee, ships the goods, except for things like livestock and other foodstuffs, which remain here. The returning guards of Gondor, Swan Knights, and whatever other able bodied labor we can find, load the goods onto the bulk of Dol Amroth’s navy, which is mostly on its way here for the coronation, since it was late for the battle.”

Sendar pursed his lips in thought. Allamar put in urgently. “My Lord Sendar, 2/3 is much better than nothing.”

Sendar nodded to that, but put in. “Lord Faramir, some of the merchants would rather hold onto their goods, as they’ve naught to replace them. Better a full warehouse, in hopes that you can get a full price later.”

Faramir nodded in understanding. “That occurred to me, my Lord. What if Gondor offers our merchants 1/2 the price of rent for these warehouses, for the next six months, to house refugees, and goods for their keeping, over the winter?”

At this, both merchants’ eyes lit up, as the rest of the room erupted in objections.

It was Lord Tyorvond, a retired Captain General of Gondor, and Warden Del, who shouted down the opposition this time.

When the room was quiet, one of Denethor’s accountants, hastily summoned by Faramir, pointed out “The refugee’s fund will cover the first two months of the warehouse rentals.”

“The refugee’s fund?” Lord Tarsten asked in honest confusion.

“Aye,” explained Lord Tyorvond with a smile. “I will refresh the Council’s memory, since the Refugee’s fund was established on the last Yule council, when many of our honored members were unable to be present. It was suggested by Warden Del, and sponsored by Lord Boromir and myself. In the end, a Refugee’s fund was approved. A 2% tax was added to the price of all luxury goods sold in Gondor, and a surcharge to all fines for drunk and disorderly behavior and the destruction of property. This money has been collected and is now available for exactly this type of disbursement.”

The council voiced a number of other objections, and several alternatives were considered, but in the end, the Lord Faramir’s plans were voted into action.

Following the Council meeting, Lord Sendar pulled Faramir aside for a moment. “I know you can’t remember this, though you were there that day, but your mother the Lady Finduilas once bet me a good meal at our city’s finest eating house that charity would work its way around to put money in my coffers someday. I took her up on that, and today, you and your clever machinations proved me wrong. So, here’s a blank draft on my account, I trust you to take only yourself and a few friends out to eat.”

Faramir’s eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly hid it. “I think I do remember, my Lord. Your wife was with you, and she scolded you, for she said my mother never made a bet without knowing she could collect.”

Sendar, in turn, was surprised that such a small child would have remembered the conversation so many years later. “Aye, that she did. Would both ladies had lived to see this day. You take care of yourself, Lord Faramir. I don’t like you, but you wouldn’t be the worst ruling Steward Gondor’s ever had. I hope no worse can be said for this King of yours.”

After the council meeting, Faramir met with the senior Rider of the Mark, who was delighted to have Merry’s assistance.
Ethiron, dismissed for lunch and a rest, later came back to check on the Steward. To his surprise, the young Lord, while still wearing his sling, was also wearing a light sword, likely his own from when he had been a teenager, and a bow from the same era. Faramir was planning another outing into the City.

Ethiron suggested, archly, that perhaps Faramir should rest instead. When the Steward seemed determined to go back into the city, the Ranger Captain sighed and prepared to follow him. Ethiron had been unimpressed by most of the guards that Faramir had inherited from his father. They didn’t seem particularly fond of, nor even respectful of, their new Steward. Apparently, many of the best of the Steward’s guards had also been sent with Aragorn. More, the one guard Faramir was planning to take with him struck the Dunedain as shifty and unreliable.

As it turned out, Faramir shared Ethiron’s perception of this particular guard. Faramir had picked him to go on this jaunt in order to keep an eye on him.

The Dunedain had selected himself to continue following Faramir, rather to the Steward’s bemusement. Ethiron had realized that the rest of Faramir’s guards were either cohorts of the unreliable fellow, or were trusted enough by Faramir to be sent on various errands in the city and beyond, and were serving the Steward in that way. A few were also walking wounded, and of them, Faramir had sent several to the HOH himself, threatening dire consequences if they did not arrive in due course. One had given him a look, and muttered “do as I say, my Lord?”

Faramir had grinned back, and replied. “Now, friend, I just spent exactly the time resting that I was supposed to. Let’s see what Warden Del and his fellows think of your condition, hmm?”

From this Ethiron gathered that strict obedience to the will of the healers was not normally a trademark of Gondor’s new Steward. Undoubtedly a difference of opinion he and Aragorn would later explore at length, Ethiron was sure. Ethiron kept quiet for the nonce, but planned to point out that perhaps Faramir should keep one guard who was in good condition and unlikely to be unreliable…with him in the future, as soon as he had a chance to do so in relative privacy.

Faramir then commenced a dizzying round of errands in the city, visiting businesses and private citizens, as well as the guard offices on each of the levels of the city. Faramir seemed a naive innocent, but Ethiron noticed, in their travels around the city, that the young Steward carefully avoided blind alleys, staircases, and anywhere else where there wasn’t a crowd. Nor did Faramir go into any buildings, except homes and businesses of those with whom he had clearly had a long relationship of trust. The Steward, then, may well know that there was unrest in the city, and that he could be a target himself, since he had declared for the King.

Ethiron took the opportunity to question Faramir closely as to what had been his instructions for release from the House of Healing. The younger man was running the Dunedain spymaster ragged, and he knew Faramir had been injured more severely. Faramir, smiling though somewhat frustrated, explained that they would be done shortly. When Ethiron appeared to be (and was, in fact) considering cutting the Steward’s day short through some more direct means, Faramir gently pointed out that he needed to visit the archives to make sure all the formalities were prepared such that no one would later question Aragorn’s right to the Kingship. Ethiron, suspecting that Faramir knew the appeal of such an errand to him, was suspicious that it had come only at the end of their day, and said so. Faramir laughed, and explained that the archivists had needed all of this time to pull the information together.

During the visit to archives, Faramir reviewed materials which had been gathered as a result of messages he had sent to the Chief Archivist. That official and his apprentices had combed the archives for everything they could find on protocols for the coronation of the King, the wedding of the King, and other information pertaining to the rights and responsibilities of Gondor’s King which had not been needed for many years. Faramir, seated among the archivists, looked more
like one of the apprentices than the ruler of the city, but for his occasional air of authority as he
demanded ritual be followed, or changed in one fashion or another. Ethiron was amazed at
Faramir’s attention to detail after such a long day.

After leaving the archives, Faramir paid one last visit to his friend the sea Captain before departing
for home. The less reliable guard, dragging his feet with weariness, insisted they should take a
quicker route home. Faramir, face unreadable, agreed.

Their path took them directly into a huge riot which had erupted over the price of bread in the city.
Before Ethiron could grab his charge, Faramir had flung himself into the masses. Ethiron swore as
he watched the Steward place himself inbetween armed, angry citizens, without drawing arms
himself. By mere force of his presence amongst them, the young lord Steward, unarmed and bare-
headed, calmed many of the refugees and citizens of the city, as well as the guards who had been
overwhelmed by their numbers, and the angry merchants. Most were at least, if not calmed,
quieted in anticipation of learning what the Steward had to say. The people of the city, with few
exceptions, loved their new Steward well, even if he meant to make way for the return of the
King.

However, there were those few exceptions, as well as a small number of rioters who had not
recognized Faramir, or were too enraged to cease their actions. One of them shot an arrow, which
came within an arm’s reach of the young Lord. Ethiron, deciding enough was enough, and that
Aragon would not thank him for a dead Steward, grabbed Faramir firmly by the upper arm and
prepared to drag him away, willing or not. The Steward was paying him no mind, merely reaching
out his other arm to pluck a second arrow from its flight before it could hit a merchant standing
near Faramir. Ethiron dropped young Faramir’s arm in astonishment. He’d seen like feats, but
only from elves.

“Good citizens of Gondor and visiting friends,” Faramir lectured, gently but firmly, arrow still
held in his hand, Ethiron still guarding his back (the other guard had disappeared in the melee). “I
understand that there is a great deal of fear and uncertainty about the days to come. Many of you
have lost homes and livelihoods, and are unsure where your next meal will come from, through no
fault of your own. Many of us have lost family and friends, shortening our tempers by grief.” The
young lord’s face grew sterner. “However, contretemps such as this do no one any good. The
House of Healing is overworked already, now we have given them more folk to care for through
our own brawling. This shames us, when the King’s armies will arrive in but a few days, carrying
our wounded, and those of Rohan and Dol Amroth, from the assault on the Black Gate.”

There was an uncomfortable shifting of feet amongst the audience. Those who had been rioting,
both the hungry and the merchants and their employees, put down their weapons and make shift
weapons and continued to listen to the young Steward of Gondor.

“I cannot promise that no one shall go hungry.” Faramir explained, honest young voice tinged
with compassion. “But I can tell you that plans have been made to feed all who are currently
within the city, projected out to those who shall not be able to return to their homes and renew
their lives before winter begins.”

“By who?” One voice shouted, no longer angry but disbelieving, as another called out, “How?”

Faramir looked around, and spotting Lord Sendar arriving with his guards, waved the man over.
“Lord Sendar here will tell you, for he as well was present for today’s council meeting and voted
for the measure, albeit as the lesser among other evils. Other questions that you have may be put to
your representative on the council.” Each of the guilds had a representative on the council, as did
each level of the city, and each group within Gondor’s army.

Sendar eyed Faramir with scant favor, but did as he was bid. The crowd calmed further, for
Sendar was an institution. Most didn’t like him, but everyone knew his word was gold, and that he gave it only with great infrequency.

Faramir, stepping out of the crowd, went limp like a puppet with its strings cut. It was such a contrast from the animated Faramir Ethiron had come to expect, that it further alarmed the Spymaster. Making a quick decision and hoping Aragorn would not later take him to task for overreaching his authority, he grabbed Faramir by the arm. The young Steward, for his part, allowed Ethiron to pull him along, back down the street into Captain Arnaut’s home.

The Captain, summoned by the closing and locking of his own front door, merely welcomed them back and asked if they needed anything.

“Some brandy,” Ethiron grunted, “and a place to set your young Lord down. I think he’s in shock.”

“I’m not in shock.” retorted Faramir weakly, sounding rather as if he might be.

Ethiron rolled his eyes. This whole day was reminding him of similar dealings he had once had with Aragorn at a like age, convinced being Chieftain of the Dunedain gave him immunity to the weaknesses of lesser mortals as he went out and did any harebrained thing that he thought Isildur’s heir should be responsible for.

Arnaut gestured up the stairs of the narrow house, and Ethiron tugged a vaguely protesting Faramir to the sea captain’s small parlor, where an hour ago they had discussed trade routes. “Sit, Lord Steward.” The Dunedain spy master commanded.

Faramir, having had enough of this high-handed but well-meaning assistance, instead turned to leave. “Captain Ethiron, I thank you, but I should not leave Lord Sendar alone to deal with that crowd.”

Sighing as he grabbed the younger man’s arm again, Ethiron’s eyes widened as he caught sight of a hole in the Steward’s shirt.

“What?” The Ranger Captain growled. “I thought you unharmed. Idiot, why didn’t you say something?”

“I am fine.” Faramir sighed. “The first arrow but took a bit of my tunic.”

“And it didn’t occur to you that such was a hint from the Valar to leave that place?” Ethiron asked in horror.

“Nay.” Faramir explained, trying to find a way to loosen his arm from Ethiron’s firm grasp, that he might go back about his duties without actively fighting the older soldier. “It gave me a chance to gauge where the next arrow would come from.”

Ethiron, not releasing Faramir, looked up at Arnaut’s beautifully decorated ceiling and counted to ten. Admiring the scenes of the ships at sea and the shores of Dol Amroth, he calmed somewhat. After about thirty seconds, he turned back to Faramir, who was looking at him with concern.

“I’m sorry, my dear Captain Ethiron.” The Steward offered. “Were you injured? I didn’t think to ask. If so, you should go back to the Houses of Healing. One of Arnaut’s men could escort you?”

Ethiron swore softly and turned the young Lord Steward of Gondor about, bending him over the arm of Arnaut’s fuchsia settee. Ignoring Faramir’s rather incoherent protests, Aragorn’s spymaster turned up the youth’s tunic and undershirt, and placed a hand on the younger man’s back to keep him in place. Ethiron then proceeded to deliver a dozen or so sound swats to the seat of the
Steward’s black leggings. Faramir bore this indignity mostly in silence, though his eyes were wide when Ethiron turned him back around to face the Dunedain.

“If I ever,” Ethiron growled “see you do anything so careless of your life as to stand out in plain view of an archer so that you might gauge the path of his next arrow, I will paddle you myself, then take you to our King so that he may explain in great and painful detail the error of your ways. Is that clear, my Lord Steward?”

As Faramir nodded, Ethiron noted with some slight amusement that the younger man clenched his hands into fists to keep them at his side, rather than rubbing his sore backside as he might have done were he alone.

“Good. Now why don’t we discuss exactly why it is that you have a death wish, eh?” Ethiron asked, voice sympathetic now that the first of his anger and concern had been vented.

“Death wish?” Faramir looked startled. “I do not want to die, Captain Ethiron. I am planning to get married, you know.”

Captain Arnaut, re-entered the room with a tray, a decanter of brandy, and three glasses. “Then we must drink to your forthcoming union, Lord Faramir.” The captain called, shoving a glass gently into Faramir’s hands.

Arnaut’s eyes as he handed a glass to Ethiron were filled with respect and appreciation, and Ethiron realized that Faramir’s friend had heard their…disagreement, and recognized Arnaut as his ally against the clever Faramir, who did not wish to discuss his disquiet. Ethiron had been prepared to accept that reticence when the boy was only weeping in out of the way places. Now that he was shoving himself between armed rioting citizens without protection, the spymaster rather felt the issue needed to be dealt with, post-hast, before the promising young officer, now Steward of Gondor, got himself killed.

Arnaut took a seat, gesturing for his guests to do likewise. Faramir blushed, and demurred. Ethiron remained standing as well, the better to catch the young Lord should he decide to bolt for the door.

“Faramir, my friend,” the grizzled old sea captain began gently, “surely there is a procedure in place for the Steward being in the city when a riot is taking place?”

The Lord Steward blushed again, Ethiron absently noting that the color in his cheeks was almost alarming against the paleness of his skin. “Aye, there is, for the Steward’s guards to take him immediately back to the citadel.” Faramir answered at length. “But that policy was not written for times such as this, when even good folk are so unsettled!”

Arnaut held up a hand. “I realize that, but under no circumstances should the Steward go running into a riot. A better tactic would have been for you to find Sendar in the first place, and to have gone to address the crowd once they had calmed, with a full escort.”

Faramir bowed his head, considering. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I am not thinking clearly, but I have no wish to die!” The young Lord said at length, looking somewhat nervously to Ethiron, as he ran a hand through his red-gold hair.

“That’s as may be, lad.” Ethiron spoke up, breaking from formality at how upset the normally calm Lord was. “But as you said yourself, you’re not thinking clearly right now. Hardly your fault, given your recent losses. But I want you to promise me something, Ranger to Ranger.”

“I will if I can, Captain Ethiron.” Faramir promised. “I owe you much for standing by my side this day, as well as for your…erm…advice.”
Ethiron repressed a smile. He couldn’t recall ever having been thanked for handing out a spanking before, brief as this one had been, merely intended to get the Lord’s attention. Turning serious, he met Faramir’s eyes and asked intently. “Will you talk to someone about your losses, my Lord? I will not ask of you that it be a mind healer, just someone you trust. You are carrying too much grief on your shoulders, and it has clouded your eyes at a time when they would best be clear.”

Faramir sighed, and then nodded, meeting Ethiron’s eyes in turn. “I swear that I will, at the earliest opportunity. But now I must get back to the House of Healing, or I will miss supper with Éowyn.”

Ethiron chuckled, clapping the young Steward on the back. “Very well, my Lord.”

“You may call me Faramir, Captain Ethiron, when we are not in a formal situation. I think we shall be friends.” The Steward offered, with a rueful half grin the spymaster found very appealing, particularly in contrast to the Lord’s earlier solemnity.

“Aye, Faramir it is then.” Ethiron agreed. “But before we leave, I would ask Captain Arnaut for the loan of several of his men, seeing as we’ve lost your other guard.”

“Bother.” Faramir muttered. “I wanted to keep an eye on him.”

So Faramir had been aware of the guard’s perfidy. Ethiron merely closed his eyes at this further proof of the Steward’s carelessness. Arnaut chuckled, looking at the Ranger Captain with sympathy. “I suspected as much, Faramir.” The merchant captain explained. “I had my son-in-law and several of our burlier employees forcibly recruit your other guard for the navy. Let Imrahil straighten him out.”

Faramir chuckled. “Well done, Arnaut, although I suppose I should not take such joy in the fellow’s…ah, change in circumstances.”

“After he led you to that riot and deserted you there, he is lucky to get the opportunity to change addresses. I might have just killed him.” Ethiron commented in disgust, taken aback by the amusement in Faramir and Arnaut’s eyes.

“Not exactly lucky, my good Ethiron.” Arnaut explained. “Prince Imrahil is as protective of his nephew as he is of his children, the one way in which our calm Prince of Dol Amroth is entirely fierce Adrahil’s son.”

“Oh.” Ethiron commented, smiling as he realized the fate which awaited the possibly traitorous guard. “That’s all well and good, then. But you, my…Faramir.” Ethiron remarked strictly to his temporary charge. “If you walk about the city, or leave the citadel at all without at least two competent guards, I will hear of it, and I will tell my King. Who will disapprove, given the circumstances, in case you were wondering.”

Faramir nodded, though he looked slightly sick. “I knew you would be giving our future King a report, and I do not mind. But I shudder to think of him hearing of all the mistakes I’ve made, and I’ve only been Steward for one day.”

Ethiron looked at the youth, doubting his sanity, for Faramir had taken very good care of Aragorn’s city indeed. Arnaut chuckled and poured himself another glass of brandy, enjoying the experience of seeing someone else flummoxed by Faramir’s odd standards of perfection.

“Faramir,” Ethiron began gently, “I have seen few mistakes at all, save those respecting your safety which we’ve already discussed. Those few mistakes I’ve witnessed, well, have you ever served as Steward, or as a public official, in the past?”

“Nay, though I helped Boromir when my father traveled,” the mention of his brother seemed to
have only made Faramir look more sick. Arnaut refilled his brandy glass and bid him drink, which Faramir declined.

“My point is that this is your first day, and I think Aragorn would approve of the job you are doing.” Ethiron said kindly. “Mistakes are to be expected on a a first day. Do you not recall your first day as lieutenant, or captain? It takes awhile to learn the ropes. My King is not a fool, he will understand that. And I think he will find himself very well pleased by you.”

“Well,” Faramir commented, looking somewhat comforted. “He need not put up with me for long if he is not. What need has Gondor for a Steward with the King returned?”

Ethiron murmured something non-committal as Arnaut rustled up an escort for them back to the Houses of Healing. The spymaster was entirely sure that Aragorn would not be dismissing this young Steward, at least not anywhere except into the ranks of the King’s most valued advisers.

Ethiron sat composing a letter to Aragorn later that night in the rooms he had been granted in the citadel, after having personally approved the guards who were to accompany Faramir in the morning. After completing his description of the day, he laid down for a moment, and allowed his thoughts to move undirected. Lord Elrond had taught him this technique for identifying problems which he could not consciously solve.

Ethiron’s mind moved from Faramir, to the young Steward’s messenger friend they had encountered on the way to the Citadel. Dervorin had been slender, and slightly shorter than Faramir, though about the same age. The messenger’s coloring had been normal for a man of Gondor, dark hair and skin a bit darker than the pale Faramir’s. However, his eyes were an interesting shade of blue-gray, hinting at some other ancestry, possibly Númenorean. Ethiron recalled seeing young Dev leap off of his horse, and suddenly recalled where he had seen a similarly graceful fall before. It had been in the camp of the enemy, as a young Haradrim had been cleverly sabotaging an alliance between Harad and Rhun. Ethiron had been there to do the same thing, and had been somewhat surprised to see his work so neatly done for him, though more openly than he would have liked. Surely enough, one of the brighter orcs whom Sauron’s captains had sent along to keep the proceedings moving had realized who the obstruction was, and attempted to kill the slender lad. Ethiron and his assistant had spooked a horse, which had distracted the orc, and allowed the clever young Haradrim to get away. It hadn’t been the first time Ethiron suspected that Gondor might have started its own spy network, but it had been the first time that he was nearly sure.

Nor was the spymaster certain that Dev had been that clever young man of Harad, but the build and the gracefulness matched. In spy work, where hair, skin, and eyes were frequently dyed, those were some of the best physical clues. Letting his thoughts wander again, Ethiron realized that Dervorin and Faramir had been using some unknown hand signs to have a private conversation under his nose. More, all of Arnaut, the pickpocket, and Dev had gotten close enough to pass Faramir a paper message. Swearing, Ethiron added “And unwillingly sneaky” to his description of the Steward in his letter to Aragorn, advising his Chieftain “If you don’t want this young one, friend, then I do.”
The Steward's Fierce Lady

Chapter Summary

Eowyn and Faramir have dinner together after his first day acting as Steward outside of the House of Healing.

Chapter Notes

Beta: Thanks to Beth for reading over earlier versions for me, and whose suggestion regarding Chapter 3 I am finally following, albeit well over a year late. Thanks also to everyone who has let me know that they like B&E, and encouraged me to go back to it.

A/N: Please note that the eagles bringing the ringbearers to Minas Tirith instead of to the army is a deviation from canon. For plot reasons that will become apparent, I needed the ringbearers in Minas Tirith. I am hoping to update this story more frequently, now that I have excised the difficult chapter into a different planned story ("The Road to Barad-Dur and Back), as well as decided that since this was really the story I wanted to write, I'll go ahead and focus on it and get the other prequels and stories fleshing-out supporting characters done as I can. This chapter is mostly Eowyn POV, which I did not expect. But that's Eowyn for you.

"And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." - Anais Nin

Every man's life (and ... every woman's life), awaits the hour of blossoming that makes it immortal ... love is a divinity above all accidents, and guards his own with extraordinary obstinacy. - Eleanor Farjeon

Eowyn of Rohan paused in a garden of the House of Healing, a smile on her pale face as she luxuriated in the feeling of the sun upon her skin with a smile on her face. A gentle breeze tugged playfully at Eowyn’s white-gold braid and her dun-colored skirts, and the clean, fragrant scent of the herbs in her collection basket relaxed her.

It was pleasant to have a moment to herself. Eowyn had been busily and contentedly occupied for most of the day. Learning the routines of the House as a student of healing, rather than a patient had been interesting, to say the least. Even fulfilling. Eowyn was an attentive student, when she cared to exert herself, but now her mind felt stretched. In a good way, like her body felt after a practice match during which she had comported herself well with a blade. But still, this errand in the garden was welcome, away from the needs of patients, and the eyes of the curious.

Oh, the healers had all been kind to Eowyn, and quite willing to help her expand her skills beyond those of a competent battle-field medic. Nor had any one else been unwelcoming. In fact, those
patients and citizens who had recognized Eowyn had been alternatively grateful and…almost awed. It was not a reaction to which Eowyn was accustomed, and she did not think that she cared for it, for several reasons. On a practical level, people in awe were not the best at thinking clearly or answering questions, and Eowyn found such dithering quite irritating.

On a more personal level…the people of Gondor knew and respected Eowyn, only for slaying the Witch-King. But that had been merely one moment in time. A duel that had lasted only minutes, such an incalculably small fraction of Eowyn’s twenty-five years of life. True, there had been other moments leading up to that...thousands of hours of practice, learning to match blades against a larger opponent and live. Years of frustration. And years of fighting an even more invidious darkness, with weapons that not were not Eowyn’s best.

She took a deep breath, and lifted her face again to the cleansing sun and wind. Eowyn’s smile widened, as she felt a familiar presence approach from the direction of the House.

“You said that you would be back for supper,” Eowyn told her betrothed, turning to behold him with her cornflower blue eyes, “But I did not know that you would be able.” She had to catch her breath again at how handsome he was, yet she could also see how much more fatigued he seemed just since earlier this morning. Oh, he still stood tall, his fine features etched with focus, and his gray eyes ablaze with affection for her. But Faramir seemed worn, like the elegant sheath on Eowyn's uncle Theoden's favorite sword.

“My Lady,” Faramir said in greeting, and in his eyes Eowyn saw herself to be the most beautiful of all the flowers in the garden, “I will tell you that it was not easy,” Faramir confessed, his mouth widening into an unaccustomed smile as he added, ”But it is a matter of priorities.” And Eowyn was one of Faramir’s very highest priorities.

The two exchanged a smile, grateful and relieved to find themselves still on the same wave-length despite their first day spent apart. Faramir offered her his arm, and Eowyn took it without demur. If they walked perfectly in tandem, no one could tell that today it was her lending Faramir her strength, rather than her leaning on him.

As they walked back into House of Healing, Faramir leaned down to whisper, his breath warm in Eowyn's ear, "I had expected to see you in the robes of student healer by now, meleth-nin."

Despite the seriousness of the topic, Eowyn's heart beat faster just at Faramir's touch and tone, and her heart soared at how well he listened to her hopes and dreams. "I will learn gladly from them, but I cannot take their oath.” Eowyn explained quietly.

Faramir nodded after a moment, his attention still intently focused on her. "The part about never seeking to cause harm? That has been an issue, for a number of battle-field healers, including Del himself when he served my father, Lord Denethor."

"Aye, that part." Eowyn agreed. "I've lost many family to orcs and bandits, including my own father. Even in times of peace, which you and I have never known, there are those who will seek to gain unfairly by force of arms. I do not wish to fight; but I cannot swear to never cause harm." Eowyn paused, reflecting that a lifetime spent in her Uncle's court of Rohan, where every year they had heard reports of not just riders slain by the Enemy's creatures, but women and children also, had made of her a guarded, cautious shieldmaiden. Now she was to be the wife of a man who had been a soldier his whole adult life. Faramir's role in this new era would almost certainly require a sword in his hand. She meant to be often by his side, and perforce, a sword in her hand as well. So, when Healer Del had told Eowyn of the Healer's oath earlier that day, which precluded the bearing of arms and the intending to wield them, even in defense, Eowyn had decided that while she would learn all she could of healing, she would never take that oath, never be a Healer proper. Being a soldier who healed was good enough for Aragorn, and for the half-
elven sons of Lord Elrond Peredhel. It would have to be good enough for Eowyn as well. "There are some that need killing." Eowyn concluded in a dark voice.

"It is just as well," Faramir told her quietly, his arm tightening around Eowyn, as he pulled her closer to press a gentle kiss to her forehead. It was not a passionate gesture; rather one of comfort, affection, reassurance. Faramir had known how important to Eowyn it was to set a new course for herself, one less focused on renewal instead of fighting. He understood that she felt her inability to swear to this new way of life as a fault, that she feared the darkness within herself that saw no solution to some conflicts save sword and death.

"To be honest," Faramir continued, holding Eowyn close enough that she could feel each quiet word as he rumbled through his chest, "I prefer you well able to defend yourself. As a man of Gondor, it would be proper of me to promise you that you shall never have to fight again. That instead, I and mine will protect you from everything that might threaten your safety. And indeed, that would be my hope, to never see you at risk. But I prefer to plan for all eventualities, and given the unexpected dangers that life in a still-wild land like Ithilien can pose, the prospect of a wife who can best me at swordplay reassures me rather than intimidates me."

Eowyn fluttered her eyelashes, flattered, though honesty compelled her to admit, "I think my Lord too modest."

Faramir grinned at her, an honest, open expression that Eowyn found particularly endearing, and one that she hoped she might inspire in him quite frequently.

"When we have time, and not so many tasks pressing upon us, we will have to see, my Lady." Faramir answered her, his smile melting into a serious expression as he added, "In the meantime, I will have one of my staff make a note for the future King that he ought ask the guild of healers to reconsider what oaths they require of their members. We do send soldiers to guard our healers when they venture through dangerous parts of the kingdom, but I have never seen the point in requiring healers to swear not to defend themselves."

Eowyn smiled back at Faramir brilliantly, and tried not to mind as three or four petitioners claimed his attention before dinner. After all, she and the Steward did get to eat supper together, in company with Frodo, Samwise, and the ebullient Meriadoc, who had brought along with him several of the Rohirrim known to Eowyn. She was particularly glad to see Swidhund, a rider and horse-trainer who had long ago put Eowyn astride her first horse, and who had never looked askance at his King's niece training to be a shieldmaiden. But it was still a shock to see Swidhund without his best friend, Harding, who had died during the Battle of the Pelennor. Just as it was a shock for Eowyn to see her young cousin-by-marriage Barden, without his blood-brother Guthlaf at his side. Guthlaf had been her uncle Theoden's standard bearer, and he had fallen defending the King before Eowyn could work her way to his side.

Barden was also prone to taking offense to Faramir's affectionate gestures towards Eowyn, even those as innocent as the Steward's occasionally reaching out to clasp the White Lady's hand. Faramir politely ignored the behavior, but it made Eowyn want to slap Barden. She'd settled for pulling him aside several days ago, and telling him to stop acting like a boor around her betrothed Lord, or else.

"Eowyn, he kissed you, on the battlements, in front of everyone! As if he were a randy stableboy, and you naught more a common scullery-maid! It was undignified, and besides, when Eomer hears..." Barden had protested hotly.

At that point, Eowyn had seized Barden's hand, and twisted it behind his back. When Barden squeaked with pain and tried to dislodge her, she'd knocked him down to the ground, and used a nearby gardening hoe to keep him down as she explained, slowly and using small words which
she thought even a hot-headed young rider should be able to comprehend, "That is my business, cousin, and not yours. You will cease to glower and mutter in Lord Faramir's presence, or else I will tell Eomer when he returns that it was you who vomited in his saddle bags five years ago, and that Theodred only took the blame because he felt guilty for getting you so drunk."

"Eep," said Barden, but after that he did stop glowering and whispering darkly when he and the Steward of Gondor were in the same room. Mostly.

So it was a cheerful group which gathered together for dinner, even if Steward and Lady were both more tired at the end of the day than they had been in the morning. Only one issue truly troubled them, and that was the ringbearer's wan face, and his still fragile state.

Healers came and went, including Warden Del himself, who sighed and clucked at Faramir, until Frodo's growing paleness drew the entirety of his attention.

"Frodo is not recovering as he should," Eowyn murmured softly to Faramir, "It has even the most senior of the healers baffled, and greatly concerned."

"Frodo Baggins is a hero even amongst the greatest hero of this last war," Faramir replied, grave worry in his quiet tone, "For the wisdom of Gondor's medicine to fail to heal him now, after everything, would be worse than a tragedy."

Eowyn nodded, her lips pressed carefully together. Being a hero didn't guarantee that you would come home from the battle. Theodred's death had proven that to Eowyn. Then Theoden's death at the Witch-King's hands...the wraith of Angmar had needed killing, and Eowyn did not regret that she and Merry had been his fate. But nor did it bring her loved ones back from the dead. That Frodo, after all of his sacrifices, might survive their victory by weeks, was so desperately sad.

"Lord Aragorn," Eowyn remarked quietly, "He and the sons of Elrond Half-Elven saved many besides us, the night after the Battle of the Pelennor ended. It may be that he can help, when he returns."

A quick glance between Eowyn and Faramir ensued, and then Faramir's thoughtful gray eyes widened. "You think that the King's return with the army may come too late." He observed softly.

"Most see Frodo fading and cling to hope of improvement, saying that hobbits may heal differently. Warden Del is silent. But Healer Olidhor has said that he fears the army may return only in time to watch helplessly as Frodo dies." Eowyn confessed.

Faramir blinked, "Isn't Healer Olidhor an animal-healer?" He asked, taken aback.

Eowyn nodded, not seeing the point. In Rohan, horses and men were often stitched up by the same healers. But because that might be different in Gondor, Eowyn expanded, "Olidhor has actually spoken in depth with Sam and Meriadoc, as well as Frodo, whereas the other healers seem to be working off of old scrolls which describe hobbits as 'semi-mythical creatures,' while trusting Frodo's protestations that he's 'feeling much better, thank you.'"

Sighing, Faramir confessed with a worried, incredulous smile, "I wish that I had foreseen two eagles coming out of the sky and bringing us hero halflings in need of healing. If I had, I'd never have ordered so many of our best-traveled healers to go with the King's army."

"I don't know as anyone could have foreseen that one." Eowyn murmured with sympathy, remembering the mix of shock and relief that had pervaded the House of Healing when the eagles delivered their precious burden.

At that point, Meriadoc leaned forward to ask Faramir a question about sanitation, and one of the
Rohirrim asked Eowyn to assist him with writing a message to his sweetheart. Faramir and Eowyn had arranged for some of the refugees in Minas Tirith who were literate and capable of riding long distances to join the messenger relay which had been established between the White City and Edoras in Rohan, after the battle. Eowyn was intent on her task, but she still overheard Faramir send away one of his guards, with the curious command that the fellow loudly discuss the healers' concerns about the ringbearer's health in front of the temporary quarters belonging to the Northern Ranger Ethiron.

After dinner, Warden Del insisted that Frodo return to his rooms and rest. Samwise, of course, would not leave Frodo. Since the spring night was pleasant, the rest of the party retired to a garden. The hobbit Meriadoc and the Rohirrim shared stories of the recovering city. Eowyn half-listened to her country-man and her companion Merry, while curled on a bench beside Faramir. The young Steward sat in front of a camp table, speaking with one member or another of his staff or the Council of Gondor, concerning the herding of men and materiel to and fro. In between that work, Faramir pored over documents and scrolls by the light of lamps, moon, and stars. Eowyn herself read from a scroll on recovery from traumatic injury, pleasantly aware of the moments when Faramir paused in his work to give her affectionate glances, or murmur some information about his country that Eowyn would soon call home.

The pleasant conviviality was interrupted by the arrival of a very angry older man, white of hair and stern of face. His cheeks were darkly flushed, almost the same shade as his robes of magenta velvet. A dozen or so other men followed him, some also clad elegantly, others in armor, and some in the simple cotton clothing and leather aprons of tradesmen.

"You must do something, my Lord Steward! A boy just came running into my house and stole my silver!" The angry man protested, slamming the palms of his hands down on the flimsy camp table before Faramir. Eowyn's future husband did not even flinch, although it was clear that this petitioner had his full attention. But no more so than any other who had approached him, this evening.

Faramir's guard stood at attention, clearly torn between protecting his Steward and reluctance to lay hands on the finely dressed man, whom both he and Faramir seemed to recognize, although Eowyn did not.

"Master Burgold," Faramir replied with a calm, tired sigh, "I am sorry to hear of the loss of your property. The city guard is stretched rather thin right now, as I am sure that you understand, since you were present at today's council meeting."

Eowyn recalled hearing of Master Burgold. Specifically, that he was the leader of the powerful commodities guild, the association of buyers of food-stuffs and prosperous farmers who did not rent their lands from Gondor's feudal lords. Burgold was a formidable force amongst Gondor's rising merchant class, and had held his position since some years prior to Faramir's birth. Or so Eowyn had learned from Faramir's friend and funds-manager, Nessanie Saelasiel.

"What USE is there in your ordering Gondor to put bread in the mouths of the poor, if they're busy helping themselves to their betters' valuables!" Burgold boomed furiously in reply.

Eowyn didn't say anything, but she watched as intently as a cat. Intently enough to notice as Faramir's gray eyes flickered almost imperceptibly towards a soberly dressed middle-aged man in the middle of the crowd, one who stood with a soldier's straightness. The man nodded back, and then Faramir stood and said firmly, "I understand the concern. While I cannot order the city guard to be redeployed when they are already working double shifts, looting is a scourge upon our wounded city. Do any of you have a suggestion?"

Master Burgold's jaw dropped wide open, as a stir worked its way through the crowd. Eowyn
heard someone whisper that Faramir would be an easy ruler to maneuver around, as Denethor would never have permitted this type of insubordination. Another man murmured that it was a pity Faramir intended to turn over the white staff to a Northern barbarian, since the new Steward was already proving himself a better listener than his father had been.

It was the tall, spare fellow whom Faramir had silently addressed, who first spoke up, "We've still got the list of pensioned-off soldiers and trained volunteers from the fire and pitch lines," he began, referring to the citizens who had bolstered Minas Tirith's defenses during the siege, trying to minimize the damage from the Enemy's barrage, while deterring assaults on the city walls, "Most of that lot are still in the city. And there are probably more retirees and folk they'll vouch for as regular militia volunteers, amongst the refugees."

"Homeless flotsam and jetsam," Master Burgold sneered. Faramir ignored him, instead answering the man who had made the suggestion, whom Eowyn was beginning to suspect might have been planted in Burgold's retinue by Faramir, or perhaps Boromir or Denethor, if the appointment had been of longstanding.

"A good thought, Merchant Salabros." Faramir praised, "Make it so." Enough of the men of the city guard who had been seconded to the House of Healing had gathered in the garden, clearly giving their support to their Lord Steward and his chosen delegate. Master Burgold, recognizing that he'd lost whatever contest of wills he'd chosen to initiate, scowled, but followed Merchant Salabros from the garden willingly enough.

"The politics of Gondor," Eowyn commented lightly when the group was out of earshot, "seem to have more in common with the politics of Rohan than I ever would have expected."

Faramir laughed, his white teeth flashing in the semi-darkness, while Swidhund made a joke about how a young Lord Eomund, Eowyn's father, had once tricked a boyhood enemy into escorting valuable wagons of manure to grain fields a week's ride from Edoras.

"Impressive," Faramir commented, his gray eyes dancing, "May I ask how Theoden-King managed that feat?" Then someone else needed Faramir's attention, some matter of recovered horses to be apportioned amongst the guard. Faramir murmured a quiet apology to Swidhund, and returned to his duties.

Eowyn turned back to her reading. Her fingertips lightly tapped Faramir's good arm, as she visualized the wounds that the scroll described, and how a healer would prioritize their treatment. The stream of petitioners somehow finding their way to Faramir slowed, and Eowyn was considering seeking her bed. She would have surrendered to slumber hours ago, were it not for her even stronger desire to spend time with Faramir. As the night grew later, and the visitors fewer and less official, Faramir's arm slipped around Eowyn's shoulders, and she put her head on his good shoulder with a soft sigh. Rider Barden, across the garden, gave them a glare, but Eowyn ignored it. Everywhere that Faramir's body touched hers, Eowyn felt as if she were warmed by summer sunlight on a snowy winter's day. As if his very fingers trailed light as he stroked her arm, a feeling that was at the same time soothing and exciting.

Before Eowyn could decide between sleep and Faramir, there was a commotion at the gates of the House of Healing. Injured men and women in foreign clothing were being carried in on litters through the doors, into the rooms set aside for urgent care. Without pausing to think, Eowyn was moving to assist, and Faramir as well. Her beloved was not a healer, nor was Eowyn yet, but both had steady hands and strong stomachs. And both were well practiced at triaging wounds inflicted by orcs.

Soon enough, the most sorely wounded patients had been seen to, and Eowyn looked up to hear Faramir speaking softly but intently with Lord Hurin and Helegair, the acting Captain of Minas...
Tirith’s city guard.

"We have patrols guarding the roads and scouring the surrounding countryside in sweeps, and have since the battle." Captain Helegair assured Faramir, "It’s just that they can’t be everywhere, I don’t have enough men for that and garrisoning the city."

"The orcs and the defeated men of the Enemy are more desperate for having lost their master." Lord Hurin added solemnly, "Their numbers have steadily increased as the army makes it way back. They flee before our host like rabbits before a fire, for they know that when our army returns, their chances of survival are very slim."

"What if we were to send someone with each patrol who has a sense for the yrch, for the foulness that clings to them albeit their master’s defeat?" Faramir asked, his right hand tapping idly on his bow as he spoke.

"Such men are few and far between, my Lord, and we sent most of them with the army." Captain Helegair pointed out with a sigh.

"I am one." Faramir reminded them levelly, "I am here, and am well enough to ride with another patrol, and point them to where the land itself most hates the creatures which walk upon it."

Lord Hurin winced, and Captain Helegair immediately protested, "My Lord, that is very brave and noble of you, but we do not have another patrol planned for this night. I mislike the idea of sending soldiers so far afield at night, let alone yourself. After all, we don’t know where the enemies are, or what their numbers are."

"Sensible of you," Faramir observed fairly, "However, my understanding is that we still have not only refugees but also dignitaries on the road tonight, given the full moon."

"That is the case." Lord Hurin reluctantly.

"How many men can be released from the city guard, given that Captain Salabros is reorganizing his volunteers to take over some of the city patrols?" Faramir inquired intently.

"Salabros has been retired for a decade!" Helegair protested.

Faramir didn’t reply, he just waited. After a few moments time, Helegair supplied with a sigh, "Enough for at least half a company, my Lord."

"Faramir, I really don't think that's really necessary," Lord Hurin protested, "Those who travel at night, whether they be allies or citizens, ought to know that they are courting grave danger by doing so, in such unsettled times."

Eowyn could tell that Faramir clearly didn’t agree, an impression that he quickly bore out by objecting, "Hurin, if we are not fit to defend travelers into this city, that is not only to our shame, but truly unacceptable. For what do we even have an army, if not to protect people who have been displaced by war and are coming to the White City for safety? Besides that, the King will be arriving in the next few days, and others of his allies may arrive in between then. The ways into the city must be kept safe, 'lest we risk losing a valued ally and causing a diplomatic incident.”

Eowyn, sensing that the moment was ripe to reinforce Faramir’s authority, leaned toward him and stated loudly and firmly. “My lord, I had thought to never take up arms again, but here and now I promise to you, my sword arm is yours, tonight and always, should you have need of it.” Eowyn’s offer shamed Hurin, and guard Captain Helegair, into agreeing that patrols another patrol that night was needed. More importantly to Eowyn, it brought a light to Faramir's eyes, and a carefully concealed smile to his lips. As she had intended, the offer showed Faramir again that he need
never fight any battle alone, for Eowyn would always have his back.

Warden Del sighed resignedly, "You will return to the House after your little field trip, will you not, Fara...er, my Lord? So that we can check to make sure that you haven't..."

"Yes, yes." Faramir hastily reassured the chief healer. Probably, Eowyn surmised, not wanting to have him again air Faramir's less than battle-ready state to all present. Eowyn was sympathetic to that, as she herself had little liking for displaying weakness before anyone, even close family. But still, she worried over her new trothed lord. He was left-handed, and she knew that his left shoulder was still healing. Besides, she had yet to see Faramir do anything more strenuous than lift a dinner plate with his left arm.

Swidhund, at least, knew Eowyn well enough to read the worry. "We of Rohan who have healed since the battle are somewhat at loose ends, my Lord." He offered Faramir. "I will send down to our lodgings, and see if any of the other men are as bored as Barden here, and would welcome a spot of orc-hunting."

Barden actually grinned at Faramir, for the first time in their acquaintance. "You won't regret taking us with you." He promised the Steward.

"I am sure I will not." Faramir replied, with a grateful smile.

As Helegair and Swidhund left to find and organize men, and Faramir spoke with Hurin, Barden whispered fiercely to Eowyn, "I swear to you, cousin, I will see to it that this man comes back to you alive and well, or die trying."

Eowyn's heart ached, for Barden had been one of the warriors to bear Theodred's slain body back to Edoras. But this was a peace offering, as well an act of love and fealty, and Eowyn accepted it as such. "Thank you, Barden." She whispered, her voice husky with emotion.

Then Faramir was preparing to take his leave, and Eowyn had to take her chance to address him, "My Lord? A moment, please?"

"Of course, my Lady." Faramir answered, with a soft smile for Eowyn despite his evident desire to be about his self-appointed errand.

Left alone for a rare moment, Eowyn asked with quiet intensity, "Are you truly well enough for this, Faramir? If not, you could say that I persuaded you bide. There are others who have a feel for where orcs might be. Barden is one such, as I know are several of your own guards."

Faramir did not take offense to such a question from Eowyn, as Eomer undoubtedly would have. Instead, he just put a gentle hand on her shoulder and explained, "It will be well, Eowyn. My right side is fine. I'm ambidextrous, and the lighter blade and smaller bow I carry do not pull intolerably on my left shoulder."

Eowyn smiled slightly, trying to be reassured. "You can wield a sword or pull a bow with either hand. A neat trick, beloved."

"A necessary one," Faramir replied with a wry smile, "At least for a boy half the size of his academy classmates. And even at that, I still normally lost."

Tilting her head, Eowyn made the reasonable guess, "But not, I think, when it was most important."

With a rueful half-grin, Faramir agreed, "Well, I'm not dead yet. And if I thought that I'd die tonight, I would not go."
Lord Hurin was a good man, but he had a hard time standing up to the most respected of Gondor's Lords, many of whom were not convinced of Aragorn's right to rule Gondor. If Faramir died, there could well be civil war in Gondor, or at the least a large-scale uprising in Minas Tirith or the southern fiefs. Eowyn knew that Faramir would not risk that possibility lightly.

A long moment passed, while Eowyn and Faramir gazed into one another's eyes. Eowyn thought of how Theodred had not expected to die when he rode for the Fords of the Isen, nor Theoden either, when he led the Rohirrim to save Minas Tirith. Faramir took in a ragged breath, then they moved towards one another at the same time. Her arms flung carefully around him, and his tightened around her. The grip of Faramir's right arm was a bit tighter than his left, but the left was still strong, so strong. Then he kissed her, or she kissed him, and the moment seemed both gloriously long and infinitely too short. Eowyn wished that he would leave her thusly more often, but not if it meant she might not see him again.

But then the soldiers of Gondor and the Rohirrim were ready. Faramir departed with them, and Eowyn was left behind to worry. But it was not so much of a burden when there were patients to see to. Warden Del did not remind the Witch-King slayer that she had been up since dawn and should perhaps be a-bed, and neither did anyone else. Perhaps they realized that she could not rest without seeing Faramir safely back, or perhaps they just needed her aid. Some of the injured who had been brought in that night grew worse, for no reason that Eowyn could tell. She had seen men much worse injured recover handily, though she recalled that sometimes those injured by orcs died, despite having suffered only minor wounds.

"Yrch wounds carry a...a taint. Not quite the same foulness that attacked your ladyship, but of the same nature, just reduced." Senior Healer Gailor explained to Eowyn, as they mixed medicines for poultices on the affected weapons.

"You can call me Eowyn." Eowyn reminded him. "Will cleansing the wounds and dressing them again, help?"

"We never know." Gaelor told her sadly, "Some heal, where others, less gravely injured, wither and die. We don't know why, precisely. Folk with Numenorean blood are usually better off...the Ithilien rangers, as well, tend to heal, even from orc-poisoned wounds." Gaelor adjusted the heat on the bowl that Eowyn was mixing, and then continued unhappily, "Still, we lose far too many. The Kings of old were said to have a way of combating it...as does Lord Aragorn, evidently, for the peace he brought to you, Lord Faramir, and Master Meriadoc, when you were afflicted by the black breath."

"He does," Eowyn agreed. Although she could barely remember Aragorn healing her, she she recalled quite well his hands aiding others, after the siege of Helm's Deep. He had driven himself to near exhaustion, before Legolas and the Wizard convinced him to rest. But no man whom Aragorn's hands had touched, died of wounds which should not have meant his fate. "Why were there more survivors from Ithilien, do you know?" She asked.

Gaelor shrugged, "I do not know, my lady. But rangers seem to be hardy folk, whether they be of Ithilien or the North. And some of the old blood survives there, in Ithilien."

Eowyn just nodded, but she would later note that of those similarly injured that night, the ones who were doing the best come morning's first light had all been those whom Faramir had aided, however briefly. And, as the White Lady waited with Warden Del for Faramir's return, Eowyn thought to herself that there was something of the same air about Faramir as about Aragorn.
The Warrior Steward and Meriadoc the Brave: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Lord Steward Faramir prepares to leave the city to discourage the raiding orcs, along with soldiers of Gondor, volunteer Riders of Rohan, an annoying cousin, and one hobbit who is a Squire of Rohan.

Chapter Notes

Warning: There is a relatively harsh punishment in a flashback.

A/N: Thanks to Kaylee for providing lots of background on hobbits. Any mistakes are mine (and there will probably be some mistakes in characterization of Merry; I admire him, but I don't write hobbits often). I did not expect this chapter to be partially from Merry's POV, but that is where the muse went. Also, as a point of distinction from book canon, Merry did not go with the supply trains to meet the army returning from the Black Gate; instead for purposes of this story, he stayed around so that I could write him into this part.

Quotes:

( Denethor to Faramir) "'Ever your desire is to appear lordly and generous as a king of old, gracious, gentle. That may well befit one of a high race, if he sits in power and peace. But in desperate hours gentleness may be repaid with death."
"So be it," said Faramir." - from Return of the King, by J.R.R. Tolkien

"You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin - to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours - closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo." - Spoken by Meriadoc Brandybuck to Frodo, in "The Fellowship of the Ring," by J.R.R. Tolkien

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Courtyard on the first level of Minas Tirith, spring of 3019

[Faramir's POV]

Organized chaos reigned all around Faramir, as men and horses sorted themselves out into a coherent anti-raiding patrol. Faramir, trailed by a single guard, sought out the nucleus of the chaos.

"Orders, Captain...er, my Lord Steward?" Inquired Captain Calarion.
Faramir's lips twitched at the small lapse. Calarion was a drinking buddy of the commander of the Minas Tirith army garrison, Senior Captain Galdoron, himself one of Boromir's best friends. Or had been, at least, since Boromir was now gone. But Boromir had considered all the men of Gondor's army to be his men. And they were still here, so Faramir had a duty to them. To keep them as safe as possible, as they performed yet another dangerous but necessary task. This one, at Faramir's behest.

"I need you to consult with acting Captain Swidhund, Captain Calarion." Faramir ordered quietly, as he nodded to Swidhund to approach. Normally, a Captain of Rohan would have commanded a full Eored, at least a hundred and twenty Riders of Rohan. However, almost the entirety of Rohan's Eohere, their full fighting strength, had followed Aragorn to the Black Gate. Swidhund was the second most senior of the men of Rohan who had been left behind in Minas Tirith, to heal or to care for those who were healing. More than half of those Riders were here tonight, to aid in this endeavor, and Faramir was grateful. He did not know if they were here to continue to honor Rohan's alliance with Gondor, or for Eowyn's sake, or just because they were bored and wanted to go chase some orcs, but Faramir was glad for them, nonetheless.

"We will be just under fifty men, with volunteers from the Riders of Rohan, and from the city watch." Faramir began, nodding gratefully to Swidhund, before continuing, "Our objective is to sweep the main roads and smaller by-ways around the city, looking for yrch. We need to have plans in place, for how best to attack them."

"Killing them, m' lord, or just to the point where they scatter?" Captain Swidhund asked quietly.

Faramir paused, torn. These yrch had been driven away by the combined might of Gondor, Rohan, and the King's company, at the Battle of the Pelennor. Then they had returned, to plague travelers and folk coming to the White City for refuge. There could be no mercy, not for such desperate creatures who were preying upon the refugees of Gondor.

"Kill them if we can," Faramir commanded softly, "But if they scatter, we cannot expend too much effort in chasing them down. We cannot afford to break into smaller combat parties, without losing any advantage we might have over the raiding orcs."

"Our numbers may not be enough, as it is." Captain Calarion pointed out softly, his eyes moving to his men, checking their equipment and their mounts, while the Riders of Rohan did the same, just more boisterously. The party was gathered in the courtyard before the Great Gate on the first level of the city. Faramir suspected that the jocularity of the Riders of Rohan was a bit at the expense of the soldiers of Gondor, perhaps even at Faramir himself. However, they were all volunteers, and Faramir wouldn't begrudge men about to enter a combat situation a source of stress relief. Particularly not when Calarion's point was quite valid.

"For that reason, we should also review strategies for retreat." Faramir agreed quietly. With a respectful nod towards Swidhund, Faramir continued,"While the Riders of Rohan are a more experienced cavalry, in the case of a need to withdraw swiftly to the city, I think that Calarion's lieutenant and his unit should take the lead. They know the best ways to avoid the traps laid out for invading enemies."

"No argument, Lord Faramir." Captain Swidhund agreed in a quiet rumble, before pausing with a perturbed expression to yell something in the language of Rohan. Swidhund's harsh words were directed to the slender, armored figure whom Faramir recognized as Rider Barden, a cousin-by-marriage of Eowyn's, as Lord Hurin was a cousin-by-marriage of Faramir's. And speaking of Hurin...Faramir could see him approaching, a very displeased expression evident on his patrician face.

But Hurin wasn't Faramir's problem, at least not yet. So Faramir continued with preparations for
their foray, "Gondor's soldiers signal troop movements by horn..." He began.

"As do the Riders of Rohan." Swidhund supplied, patting the horn at his side.

"But I do not know if the signals are the same." Faramir concluded, with a rueful half-smile. "Perhaps we should decide on signals between the three of us, and review them with the soldiers and riders 'ere we leave."

By then, Lord Hurin had drawn even with the three of them. "A moment of your time, Lord Faramir?" He requested, but his tone was one of pained displeasure, making it quite clear that he was unhappy with the new Lord Steward.

Faramir resisted the urge to grit his teeth, as he did not want to show how annoyed he was with his cousin. Hurin was a virtuous man, a fine warrior, and a dedicated administrator. He'd done an excellent job filling in for Faramir during Faramir's lengthy stay at the House of Healing, and he deserved the respect of the people of Minas Tirith. Hurin did not deserve having Faramir talk to him as if his presence was a chore.

So, the only possible answer was, "Yes, of course, Lord Hurin," and Faramir said so in a courteous tone, with a polite expression on his face. Then he turned to Captains Swidhund and Calarion, "Please discuss and resolve the differences between the horn calls and battle signals of Gondor and those of Rohan, Captains, and agree on common calls. It would be an unfortunate thing to have trip us up, this night."

The Captains set to that task, as Faramir and Hurin walked to a more isolated part of the courtyard. Faramir waved his guard back, but Squire Meriadoc kept pace with him, stopping just a few feet from Faramir and Hurin, and hovering protectively. It should have been a ridiculous sight, with Merry barely taller than a ten year old, but to anyone who knew what Merry had done, it probably wasn't.

It was Faramir's perspective that since Pippin had saved his life, Merry had rather adopted keeping Faramir alive as some sort of personal responsibility. And Faramir rather had the impression that this was a personal responsibility which Merry found rather challenging, at times, although that did not seem to dim the young hobbit's dedication to his self-assigned duty.

Reaffirming Faramir's impressions, Merry said stubbornly, "You said that you thought Ranger Captain Ethiron's fears that someone might try to kill you were exaggerated, Faramir. You did not say that they were baseless, or that you felt yourself safe."

The skin around Faramir's eyes crinkled as he tried his best to hide a reluctant smile, "Indeed, Squire Meriadoc. I'm sure that your cousin Frodo was grateful for the company of such a perceptive individual, on his quest."

Merry half-grinned at Faramir, as he cheekily replied, "Flattery isn't going to distract me, Lord Faramir. My cousins are both rather skilled at that tactic." Lifting his chin determinedly, Merry stated firmly, "You can count on my discretion, Lord Faramir, regarding whatever you discuss with Lord Hurin, or anyone else. You may not count on me to leave you unattended, when you've sent your other guards away."

Lord Hurin sighed, clearly frustrated by the delay. "Lord Faramir, my cousin, I have words to say to you that would best not be overheard."

Merry straightened himself to his full height, and appealed to Faramir, "Your betrothed is my sword-sister, since we fought and bled together just over that wall. That makes you my sword-brother, and I won't let anyone spring from the shadows to harm you, not when I can be here to
Faramir was almost overwhelmed by the offer. He'd gained a great deal of respect and fondness for Merry during their time together at the house of healing, but he hadn't expected that Merry would claim him as a brother, or be so determined to protect him. Faramir couldn't think of any time in his life, save perhaps in meeting Eowyn, when someone whom he had only known for a scant few weeks would make Faramir such a pledge of support. But Faramir didn't want Merry to be in harm's way, and was aware that he did not particularly want anyone to overhear what he and Hurin might have to say to one another. But neither did he want to spurn such an offer of loyalty and aid from someone he liked and respected as much as Merry, so Faramir met Merry's eyes, considering the matter for a moment. In Merry's gaze, Faramir read mostly only those sentiments that Merry had already shown and spoken. He was determined to defend Faramir; he cared for Faramir, for Eowyn's sake and also for Faramir's own, for Faramir's partisanship of Pippin and his kindnesses to Frodo and Samwise. Beyond that, Faramir saw ghosts in Merry's eyes of a long-ago threat to Frodo, from a hobbit woman who was jealous of Frodo's status as the adopted heir of Bilbo Baggins. What parallel Merry might see between that and Faramir's current circumstance as a Steward who was preparing to hand a city and a country over to a returning King, when a substantial (and powerful) minority did not wish the King to return, Faramir was not sure. But there was some parallel, and the determination and the affection, the loyalty that Merry was showing, deserved honor, not refusal.

So Faramir nodded that Merry could stay, the warmth in Faramir's gray eyes compensating for the thanks he could not manage to say in words. Merry didn't seem to need to hear them, he just straightened and nodded back, clearly pleased with his victory.

Faramir suppressed a smile at that, before thinking that permitting Merry to stay had a practical benefit, as well. Merry was not the most practiced of warriors, but he was brave. And his mere presence would probably be a deterrent to anyone who sought to harm the Steward. Some of the people of Minas Tirith may not like the idea of a King, but all of them welcomed the end of Mordor's threat. And all of them knew what they owed to the hobbits. The King, Prince Imrahil, Lord Hurin, and Faramir himself had seen to that, widely publicizing the Hobbits' roles in the days after the Battle of the Pelennor. With Merry's cooperation, they'd even suggested that he was the ringbearer, that it was for that reason that he was able to defeat the Witch-King, and that after his injury he'd given the ring to Lord Aragorn, to take to the Black Gate. Another ploy of distraction, to hopefully keep the burning eye's attention from Frodo.

Faramir turned back to his cousin, the Keeper of the Keys. Hurin was obviously displeased and discomforted by Merry's continued presence within earshot. Faramir tried not to take a petty pleasure in that, and failed. But he tried at least not to show that he wanted to gloat at his cousin's frustration. Faramir expect that Hurin was just going to try again to convince Faramir to stay in the city this night. Faramir knew that Hurin disapproved of Faramir's joining this foray, because Hurin had said so, earlier that evening. Quite bluntly, in fact, calling Faramir a fool and a glory-hound, and a poor replacement for Denethor. Faramir thought that Hurin's temper earlier had mostly been out of his worry for Faramir, but still. Faramir decided to control the course of the conversation as best he could.

"I've already said all I intend to say about tonight's venture," Faramir told Hurin with quiet certainty, "My mind is made up, I shall ride with the party, and fight with them, if I must."

Hurin's mouth tightened, and he held out a hand to grasp Faramir's shoulder, perhaps to squeeze it, perhaps to shake it. Faramir wasn't sure, and so he caught Hurin's eyes with his own, and let his own lack of desire for physical contact with his cousin be plain. Hurin, to his credit, respected Faramir's wishes and dropped the hand, his temper draining, as he said wearily, "Faramir, you are a good Captain. A fine leader. But you have yet to figure out that you are not merely the Steward's
spare heir, anymore. Your risking yourself in this endeavor when your arm should still be in a
sling to spare your healing shoulder is not only sheerest folly, it is a dereliction of your duties as
Steward to the city of Minas Tirith and the regency of Gondor."

"I've been worse injured, and soldiered on." Faramir retorted quietly, "And besides, it doesn't
matter. I can't ask my men to do something I won't do, and what is or isn't appropriate for the
Steward of Gondor is now my decision, and no one else's. At least until the King returns."

Hurin sighed, but did not argue. His legalistic mind probably agreed with Faramir's last statement,
if nothing else. But still, the Keeper of the Keys seemed unwilling to let the matter lie, and so
Faramir caught his eyes, looking into them and seeing that Hurin felt that Faramir's unwillingness
to take advice was due to the difficult relationship Faramir had always had with his own father.
Hurin knew, from long years with Denethor, how much could be read in a man's eyes, and to
Faramir that night Hurin offered sympathy as well as criticism. His face was stoic, but in his mind
his affection for Faramir and worry over the new Steward were clear. Faramir could hear as
plainly as if Hurin had spoken, that Hurin thought that the lack of his father's love ached in
Faramir's soul like an unanswered question, causing Faramir to make all sorts of bad decisions.

Faramir sighed, thinking sarcastically to himself, "Oh, thank you so very much, Hurin." Faramir
was very aware of how his father Denethor had felt about him, from a very early age. At the end,
though, Faramir knew that Lord Denethor had loved him. Faramir could have done without being
almost burnt alive to learn that, but he knew that it had been, at the last, an act of love, however
twisted by Denethor's own misconceptions. Desperation, but love as well. It made Faramir
wonder whether if he had confessed his suspicious that Denethor's unconstant spy might be a
palantir to someone earlier, if things might have been different, if his father might have kept his
wits about him during the siege, and still be alive even now. But who would Faramir have
told...Boromir did not understand the danger, though Faramir had tried to tell him. Imrahil would
have confronted Denethor, and their relationship had been sometimes fraught, even without what
probably would have amounted to an outright ultimatum from Imrahil, backed by the council, that
Denethor leave the palantir alone.

Faramir's silence encouraged Hurin to speak again, "If you refuse to listen to me as my Lord
Steward, Faramir, then you still owe me a duty as your
elder and kinsman."

Hurin's tone as he made that semi-parental threat was stern, but still somewhat affectionate. It was
as if Hurin was trying to mimic the mannerisms of Prince Imrahil, the only surviving senior
familial relation to whom Faramir would not hesitate to admit he did owe such a duty. But as good
a man as Hurin was, he was no Imrahil. To be fair, Faramir reminded himself, that was not Hurin's
fault. Hurin hadn't been raised by Adrahil, and besides, Imrahil was uniquely protected from
Denethor's authority, as the ruler of the only semi-autonomous princedom in Gondor. Hurin had
been nearly his whole lifetime under Denethor's command, as Denethor's former squire and then
one of Denethor's right-hand men. Imrahil could stand up to Denethor on many issues, and only
be seen as fulfilling his duties as a feudal magnate. Hurin could not.

So Faramir's response was firm, but tinged with empathy. "I respect you, Hurin, but I'm not
willing to give you that authority over me anymore. I don't blame you for... anything you did on
my father's orders."

Hurin winced at that, and Faramir fought his baser instincts again, refusing to blame Hurin for
what had happened that day, or any others. But it did not mean that Faramir did not recall it...quite
clearly.

Minas Tirith, the apartments of the Steward in the Citadel, sometime in T.A. 3018
"I told you not to mention your nonsensical prophetic dreams to your brother, boy, or to the council." Denethor had growled at his son, "At a time when war with Mordor is imminent, I cannot risk my best field commander to go off and chase fairy tales. I cannot even risk you."

Faramir was silent. He had learned at a young age that arguing with his father at such times was counterproductive, to say the least.

Denethor's stoic face twisted in disgust, and Faramir carefully kept his mind blank. In the past, when he'd gotten in trouble for sharing his visions with Boromir or the Lords of the Council, he'd had the temerity to wonder, in the privacy of his mind, how much of Denethor's anger was for Faramir spreading 'fairy stories,' and panic, and how much of it was because Faramir was like his mother, in that Finduilas had often had visions, too. Those reflections had never failed to send Denethor into an even worse temper, so Faramir did not think them again. Instead he met his father's gaze straightly, and dropped gracefully to his knees.

"My pardon, my Lord Father, for disobeying your direction. I will endeavor to serve you better in the future." Faramir said quietly, but with sincerity.

Denethor laughed harshly. "You lie to my face with your careful words, boy."

Faramir had nothing to say in response to that accusation. It was accurate; Faramir really was parsing his words finely. Denethor gave the orders, and mostly, Faramir though they were good ones, or at least that the chaos which could be caused by disobeying the only man with the right and ability to hold Gondor together was not worth the risk. But Faramir would not hesitate to do what he felt was right, if he felt that it must be done. Again, he was his mother's son.

Denethor's face darkened again, and Faramir cursed himself for letting that comparison to Finduilas slip through his mental guard.

"Hurin," Denethor commanded harshly, "Take my son to your office and teach him a lesson he'll be at least several days in forgetting."

"Yes, my Lord." Answered Hurin, not daring yet to reach out and put a reassuring hand upon Faramir's shoulder, though Faramir knew from past experience that Hurin would, once they were beyond Denethor's sight.

"Faramir," Denethor commanded, "Do not speak of this nonsense of elves, and rightful Kings, and halflings, again."

"I will do as my father and my conscience command me." Faramir murmured, not daring to meet Denethor's eyes.

"Get out of my sight." The Steward commanded, and Faramir obeyed. As did Hurin, who grabbed Faramir by both of his shoulders and shook him lightly.

"He is your father. He is your liege-lord. If he says that something is not to be spoken of, IT IS NOT TO BE SPOKEN OF. I cannot believe that you were raised in his household, and yet somehow did not learn such basic rules of courtesy and fealty." Hurin scolded.

"Well, as I am to pay for such lapses, perhaps it is good that I have them." Faramir retorted shortly, not afraid that Hurin would truly injure him. Faramir was done, simply done, with walking the fine line of obedience, conscience, reason, and deception. At least for this day.

"You make things harder on yourself, Faramir." Hurin complained with a sigh, as they walked into his office. Hurin lit a lamp, and then drew the dark shades over his windows, for privacy. He also locked his door, before gesturing to his immaculately clean and organized desk, "You know
Faramir shrugged elegantly, some part of his mind already elsewhere as he began to disrobe. If his
attention hadn't been divided, Faramir did not know if he would have said what he said next.
"Better you than certain other respected members of my Lord Father's staff, Lord Hurin."

Hurin paused in his task of reluctantly pulling a well-worn strap from his desk drawer. Walking
swiftly over to Faramir, he caught the younger lord's shoulder again, and demanded, "If someone
has punished you unfairly, or with excessive harshness, you are to go to the healers, my Lord.
You know that is your father's will."

Faramir wanted Hurin's hands off of him. This whole thing was unfair. Oh, sure enough there
were times that Faramir spoke imprudently in council, or fell asleep, or was late to meetings or
formal meals. Such lapses were well worthy of at least a paddling, for a Lord and Captain of
Faramir's seniority. And when such punishments were carried out by Hurin, or others of
Denethor's staff who saw only duty and not pleasure in the task, Faramir did his best not to resent
them. Faramir did not, in fact, resent such chastisement from his brother, or his Uncle, or even the
late Captain Andacar of the Rangers. Well, not anymore than any sane young man who preferred
his bottom not to be spanked. But his father's men who punished Faramir in Denethor's stead,
because Denethor would not, and for reasons such as speaking of his dreams, which were no
reasons at all... well, Faramir had a hard time telling the difference between punishment for a real
offense and punishment for an offense that Denethor had taken to an innocent act of Faramir's.
And that made him resent any punishment that his father's staff gave him. Even this one, though
Faramir had known that it would be the consequence of his actions today, in telling the council
and his brother of his dream.

When Faramir was silent, Hurin gently shook him again. "Promise me, Lord Faramir. If someone
harms you in carrying out our Lord's orders that you be punished, you will go to the healers, if
you have need."

"If I have need..." Faramir repeated, doing his best to restrain his impulse to jerk away from Hurin.
"If I have need, then yes, of course, I will." A safe promise. Faramir had healed of potentially fatal
wounds under the ministrations of his Rangers in Ithilien. A mere strapping, no matter how
violent, would not be beyond Faramir's ability to endure without "needing" to seek help.

Hurin nodded, relieved. "Very well then. Let's have this unpleasant business over with, my young
Lord, and then I will summon Sergeant Menohtar to help you to your bed. Or perhaps your
brother?"

Faramir laughed, a cynical, broken noise, as he laid himself over Hurin's desk, his leggings lose
around the tops of his boots, and his pale bottom bare under his tunic. "Not Boromir. Unless you
think it would be a good idea to cap off the night with a blazing row between Boromir and our
Lord Father."

Hurin sighed regretfully, "No, perhaps not Boromir." Then he lifted Faramir's tunic and tucked it
gently into the young Lord's belt, baring Faramir's bottom completely.

Faramir felt the cool air around his nether region, and took a deep breath, trying to keep his
buttocks relaxed for the searing, hot sting the strap would induce. After less than a moment, the
first blow landed, and Faramir had to fight to keep himself in place. So he separated himself a bit
more from what was happening...he had no control over the strapping, after all. Faramir did jerk at
every smack of the strap on his increasingly hot and painful backside. How could he not...its
hard, to ignore pain. But it was just the pain...Faramir did not feel the shame. He allowed his mind
to be elsewhere. This was just the price he paid for being the voice that Denethor did not want to
hear. Faramir accepted that, and he tried not to feel guilty over it. He owed his life and his training
and his loyalty to his father, so there was some guilt. But Faramir didn't let himself feel it now. He preferred not to cry, or cry out, if he could help it, during such punishments. Faramir could tell that his numbness worried Hurin, for the Keeper of the Keys laid a reassuring hand on Faramir's lower back.

"You're taking this very bravely, Faramir," Hurin praised him, "It will be over soon."

It wasn't bravery, Faramir thought. It was...knowing what was unavoidable. He had to be who he was; had to speak when he felt the consequences for not speaking were worse than the consequences for keeping quiet when his heart and his sight bade him speak.

At last the strapping was over. Faramir had not cried, though his eyes were red from holding back the tears. And he had only groaned and yelped a little. Which Faramir was pleased with, since his bottom hurt so fiercely that it was hard for him to straighten, at first. Hurin offered a shoulder to help, and since it was that or fall, Faramir accepted, even though he did not want to be touched.

"Let me help you to right your clothing, cousin. And please take a few moments to regain your composure, before I summon your man." Hurin said, offering Faramir an embrace.

At that, Faramir did step away, pulling his leggings into place and straightening his tunic with only a hiss of discomfort, despite the fire blazing on his backside. "It is well, Lord Hurin." Faramir managed hoarsely, although he still kept the tears at bay. "You may truthfully tell my Lord Father that I will not sit easy for several days, which shall perhaps distract me from speaking at council."

"Faramir, please, let me at least call Menohtar to care for you." Hurin appealed, "I was careful not to bruise you, but there are welts."

"I will be fine, Lord Hurin." Faramir insisted, "And since my Lord Father has given you no other orders with respect to my person or the disposition of my afternoon, I will proceed to the library to find the books that my Lord Father had asked me to gather, on historical enlistment numbers from the southern fiefdoms." Which could be done standing up.

Courtyard on the first level of Minas Tirith, spring of 3019

Faramir shook his head, returning himself to the present. Now, he was the Steward. He would not have wanted to inherit by his father's and brother's deaths, but Hurin, at least, no longer had power over Faramir.

"My father is gone, leaving me my own man." Faramir reminded Hurin, "And I will not bow to you or anyone else who served at his bidding in that fashion." In his own mind, Faramir added that he would do his best to never be under another man's authority, ever again. At least not the way he had been under Lord Denethor's.

Hurin was clearly taken aback by Faramir's refusal. He took a few moments to absorb it, before appealing in a tone that was almost pleading, "Faramir, I do care about you. Our last blood connection was some centuries ago, but Denethor always regarded me as a nephew and I always saw you as a cousin."

Faramir's mien did not soften, although there was some empathy in his voice as he quietly related, "I know all about doing my father's bidding. Hurin. To have failed him in anything major would have been treason, or at the least a confusion in a time when coherence is all that kept us from destruction. My father was a good Steward, and even his worst decisions often had a kind of sense. But I do not forgive myself for those actions I took, in following my father's orders, that brought harm to others." Faramir paused, lost in his memories. He'd lost the most men in that ridiculous sortie on the Pelennor, for little gain. They should have just pulled back to the city.
Faramir would never contest the right of any of the kin and loved ones of his rangers who died on the Pelennor to demand satisfaction of Faramir. 'Eru,' Faramir thought to himself, 'If it had not been under my own command that Menohtar, Mablung, and so many others rode to their deaths, I would have to go seeking out myself to demand an accounting.'

His cousin did not read the truth in men's eyes as well as did Faramir. Which Faramir recalled, as Hurin asked him sorrowfully, "You do not forgive me, my Lord, do you?"

There is nothing to forgive." Faramir said, and truly meant it. "But there is no reason for me to allow that you would claim an elder kinsman's right of appeal to my actions. You have not earned that trust, from me."

Hurin sighed again, before telling Faramir with rueful pride and lingering worry, "Denethor never realized that there was a core of mithril, to you." With a gentle, regretful smile for Faramir, Hurin added, "And I never realized how much of it there was. Be safe, this night, Faramir. My Lord."

Faramir nodding back, forcing himself to clasp Hurin's arm, as he'd seen Boromir do with many soldiers. Faramir himself was not given to such displays of physical affection, except with those few whom he trusted. However, he'd seen how Boromir's casual gestures of affection and brotherhood helped to make Boromir's soldiers a more coherent fighting force, and so Faramir had adopted the same practices, in Ithilien. He'd seen how it worked well at encouraging camaraderie, and in time, with his rangers, it became almost natural. But now his rangers were dead, and he had reasons, personal reasons, to be wary of Hurin. But Hurin was a good man, an obedient soldier, and a gifted administrator. And shared Faramir's guilt, over following difficult orders. So Faramir reached out a hand, because it was the right thing to do.

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[Merry's POV]

Merry had done his level best not to listen to the fascinating conversation between Faramir and his cousin, the Keeper of the Keys. Merry knew well how complicated things could get between family, especially when unfortunate deaths elevated younger persons to positions of prominence over their elders. But insatiable curiosity was one of Merry's vices, as much as it was one of Pippin's. Merry was just a bit more controlled, and discreet. Besides, the best part of what Hurin and Faramir had to say to one another, was in the pauses, in what they didn't say.

Merry fell into step beside Faramir as the Steward walked back towards the gathering war party, almost running into Faramir's legs when the Steward stopped walking.

"Merry," Faramir addressed him, kneeling so that he could address Merry face to face, "I am ordering that you be careful, tonight. This is a different type of engagement than you've fought in before, and you're still but a talented novice as a warrior. So have a care, and do what your officers tell you."

"I will," Merry promised, his own brown eyes wide at the depth of the concern in Lord Faramir's eyes.

Faramir squeezed Merry's shoulder gently, "Thank you, Meriadoc. It is a promise that I will hold you to, on your cousins' behalf."

Merry met Lord Faramir's gray eyes again, and nodded, fighting to keep his face serious as the moment seemed to demand. Then he gave up, and smiled brightly at Faramir, who, startled, managed a half-smile back.
"I am quite serious, Squire Meriadoc." Faramir said with fond sternness, "This is no game we are about tonight."

"I understand." Merry assured Faramir, though his grin did not entirely disappear. That the Steward of Gondor, whom both Merry and Pippin had come to respect greatly, would care so much about Merry as to take the time to remind him to be careful, when Faramir had so many other responsibilities...it meant a lot to Merry. It made him feel... safe and warm inside, despite the danger he knew that they were about to leave the safety of the city to go a-seeking.

As the two walked back across the courtyard, Merry could practically feel the tense anticipation in the air. Soldiers and Riders of Rohan alike were readying their mounts and checking their armor and equipment. Merry was a bit anxious about riding into this engagement. Much less so than he had been before riding all the way from Edoras in Rohan to Minas Tirith in Gondor, but still, he'd had Eowyn's help, then. Now he was to ride by himself, on a special modified saddle that Swidhund and several of the leather-workers from Gondor had collaborated together to fashion for him. Merry had spent a large part of the previous day under Swidhund's tutelage. His muscles ached from learning to ride in the saddle, and practicing how to cut the buckling straps and fall from it without hurting himself, at need.

Minas Tirith, a training yard, earlier that same day in 3019

"We got the idea from Lord Eomund's brother, Rider Kenley." Swidhund had explained to Merry earlier that day, as he helped his late King's squire buckle himself into the specialized saddle for the fourth time, tightening the straps that Merry had buckled for himself.

Anxious for a break from learning to fall, but also intrigued, Merry asked, "Eomund's brother...that would be Lady Eowyn's uncle?"

"Aye," Swidhund agreed, his leathered face stiffening with sorrow. "His younger brother. Kenley was barely a teenager when he took an orc arrow to the back. He lived, but he could never move - or feel- anything above his waist, again. He re-taught himself to ride with a saddle much like this, and to fight from horse-back." Swidhund's mouth twisted into a rueful smile, "Almost no one believed that it could be done. I always thought that Eomund and Theoden only agreed to help him try because they thought he would fail, and wanted to be there to help catch him when he did."

Merry tilted his head, reading both what Swidhund had said and what he hadn't. "No one believed...but you?" He guessed.

Snorting, Swidhund shook his head, "Not me. The old Queen, Morwen. My mother was one of her women, and so she asked me to help, long ago when I was just an assistant horse trainer. At first I thought that Kenley had been driven mad by lingering pain from his injury and grief over the death of his dreams. But Kenley was determined, and patient. And if it could be done, I thought that it should be done. So I said yes, and this one's grand-dam," Swidhund patted Merry's horse fondly as she rose from the kneeling position she'd adopted to help Merry mount easily, as he explained, "She was clever enough to learn to heed voice and specialized commands from the reins, without any lead from her rider's knees or base. As were her foals, and this horse."

"She...she was Kenley's horse, wasn't she?" Merry asked softly, running a hand over the horse's velvety neck, and wondering what had happened to her previous rider.

"She was meant to be. But she was born with weak hips, would have had a hard time bearing a man of Kenley's weight for more than a short time. I don't even know why I trained her, but that it was during the days when Grima first came to Edoras and began to practice his black magic upon our King. I was in need of distraction, and Need the Fourth, here, provided that." Swidhund
patted Need the Fourth's neck again. "If Kenley had ever needed a back-up mount she would have served in a pinch, at least for the short-term. We always called his horses Need, after the first we trained to bear him." Swidhund sighed, and continued, "Kenley died in a hunting accident just weeks before Theoden made Grima one of his advisors. I never really believed that it was an accident... Theoden listened to Kenley, and Kenley distrusted Grima. But nothing was ever proven." Swidhund gave the straps on Merry's saddle a final check, and then grinned at Merry, "Ready to try a controlled fall again, Squire Merry? If we keep up at this pace, I think that you might be competent to ride with tomorrow's patrol, provided that you stay within the wing of warriors, rather than in the front lines or rear guard."

Merry couldn't stop a groan, which made Swidhund grin cheerfully, a smile that made Merry think of Boromir. Merry wondered if all trainers had to take a certain joy in their pupils' frustration. Aloud, Merry complained with a cheeky grin of his own, "I don't see how me learning to fall out of the saddle is part of me learning to ride a horse. Isn't NOT falling sort-of the point of riding?"

Snorting, Swidhund related, "The rider in command of his Eored refused to let Kenley ride with our warriors again until he could dismount at a moment's notice, and be taken on another's saddle. Kenley resented every day of learning that skill, but after three weeks, he had mastered it well enough to satisfy even his brother and Theoden. Being able to get out of this saddle saved Kenley's life three times. Once, when his eored was surprised by an ambush; again, when his horse was slain beneath him, and a last time not long before he died, when the girth of his saddle suddenly gave way."

Merry gamely signaled Need to a canter again, and then pulled on the reins in the manner that let the sweet little mare know that he was going to fall off of the saddle, again. Need seemed almost to sigh in resignation, a sentiment that Merry quite agreed with as he fell. But once on the ground, he realized that he'd managed to land with probably only two or three new bruises, a new personal best. He also managed to spring to his feet, sword and shield in hand, almost in time to meet Swidhund's attack.

After he lost that bout (which didn't take long), Merry complained genially, "It took a Rider of Rohan three weeks to learn how to do this, and you expect me to learn it in ONE DAY?"

Swidhund tugged Merry gently to his feet, a broad smile breaking across his leathered face. "Aye, Squire. You have two good legs, a lower center of gravity, and a natural gift for falling down without injuring yourself too badly."

"Not natural," Merry corrected, with a pained smile, "But rather, learned in the course of my time in the delightful company of Saruman's merry orcs."

Swidhund squeezed Merry's knee consolingly with his giant hand, as the hobbit reclaimed his seat on the horse. "Nothing that you've learned is ever wasted, Squire Merry. Or at least that is what Kenley's aunt-by-law the old Queen would tell him, as he was falling from his saddle again and again."

Courtyard on the first level of Minas Tirith, spring of 3019

Merry shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. He picked up his pace to keep up with Faramir and his guards, a task that was made easier as Faramir paused by one of the guards of Gondor, whose mount seemed restive. Before the ride to Rohan, Merry did not even think he would have noticed, but now...the shifting hooves, the slight shudder, from time to time, of the broad equine shoulders.

The guard had already accepted the help of two of the Riders of Rohan, who were examining the horse closely and discussing something having to do with bad grain.
"May I have a look at her, Corporal?" Faramir asked the guard, who blinked in surprise at being addressed by the new Steward himself.

"Of course, my Lord Steward." The guard offered, "She was my cousin's mount, but he...no longer has need of her, and my horses both died under me during the siege. I don't know her as well as I should, perhaps she always gets the shakes before a battle."

Faramir nodded sympathetically, and offered his hand for the mare to sniff. Then he met her large dark eyes, murmuring soft words too quietly for Merry to hear, even though he stood only a few feet from the Steward. To Merry, it seemed...like but not like watching Legolas speaking to an animal. It had never taken Legolas so long as it was taking Faramir to know a creature's mind, but the manner, the eye contact, the intent but quiet words...that was much the same.

After a few more moments, the horse shook it's head, and pawed at the ground, seeming relieved. "Her girth is slightly too tight," Faramir told the guard, who bent immediately to adjust it, while one of the Riders of Rohan nudged the other, and coins exchanged hands between them.

"Also," Faramir explained more quietly, "She is afeared that fire will fall from the skies again, as it did during the siege, singing her tail. I have assured her that it should not, and I hope that tonight will not make a liar out of me."

"Thank you, my Lord." The guard murmured, relieved that his mare seemed more contented.

"Treat her gently, the first few miles that we are out." Faramir recommended, "I think that she should settle even more, after that."

All of the Rohirrim had gathered to look at Faramir with expressions ranging between curiosity and outright awe.

"You're a horse speaker, Lord Faramir?" Rider Barden asked incredulously.

Faramir frowned thoughtfully, before replying, "That seems a special title. I just...have a way with animals, sometimes."

Swidhund gave the Steward an assessing glance, "A man who has such a way with animals would be much honored in Rohan."

Captain Calarion of the Gondorian army chuckled lightly, "A good thing for Lord Faramir to keep in mind, if this whole 'Steward' job doesn't work out for him. Oh wait...you're already set to resign, my Lord..."

As one of Boromir's friends, Merry noted with interest, Calarion seemed to be in the rare position of being able to tease Faramir, and get a laugh rather than a polite smile out of him.

And Faramir did laugh, but then he directed Calarion and Swidhund to give the order to mount up, and the war party moved out of the city gates of Minas Tirith, and into the dark, orc-infested night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I had to break Chapter 4 up because it got too long, the second part of the chapter will focus on the war party encountering orcs a couple of times and then
returning back to Minas Tirith.
Chapter Summary

Lord Steward Faramir finds orcs, and trouble.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kaylee for beta'ing. Any remaining mistakes are mine.

A/N: my most sincere gratitude and appreciation goes out to Firstar, Holly, Minnie, Beth and Rosemarie, who reviewed the previous chapter on group. It means so much to me that you all took the time to let me know that you like this chapter. I'm sorry that I don't manage to say thank you more often.

Quotes:

'I have a sword,' said Merry, climbing from his seat, and drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade. Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Theoden King?' he cried. 'Receive my service if you will!' 'Gladly will I take it,' said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, he blessed him. 'Rise now, Meriadoc, esquire of Rohan of the household of Meduseld!' he said. 'Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!' - Tolkien, from ROTK

"To Merry's amazement, Dernhelm was revealed as Eowyn, the King's niece. Pity filled his heart and great wonder, and suddenly the slow-kindled courage of his race awoke. He clenched his hand. She should not die, so fair, so desperate! At least she should not die alone, unaided." - From "The Return of the King," by J.R.R. Tolkien

"He is bold, more bold than many deem; for in these days men are slow to believe a captain can be wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song, as he is, and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field. But such is Faramir. Less reckless and eager than Boromir, but not less resolute." —Beregond on Faramir, from "The Return of the King," by J.R.R. Tolkien

[Merry POV]

Merry kept on the alert as they rode from the city, but all he heard were normal night-time sounds. The wind whistling over the Pelennor, the roar of the Anduin, the singing of insects and the quieter sounds of other nocturnal animals. It could have been the Shire, but for Mount Mindolluin and the white specter of Minas Tirith which receded behind them. Well, that, and the odor of decaying bodies. The people of Minas Tirith had done their best to sort through the dead and give them due honor. Unfortunately, the slain on the battlefield outnumbered the survivors inside the
city, and sorting through the fallen was still an ongoing process. It was an awful job. Faramir and Lord Hurin had left orders that no one who was about it could work on the plain for more than two days in a row, which Merry thought was probably wise. He couldn't imagine how awful it would be to sort through bodies, some of them headless and practically unrecognizable, and suddenly realize that you held the corpse of your neighbor...or worse, your father or your brother.

Because that was less likely to happen to him here in Gondor, Merry had offered to join the party of Rohirrim taking a burial shift on the Pelennor.

"Not today, I think, Squire Meriadoc." Captain Swidhund had told him after a surprised pause.

The riders who had been designated the unpleasant task left quickly, before Merry had the opportunity to protest. It wasn't that the hobbit had any desire whatsoever to join in the grim, heart-rending task. But he did hate being thought of as someone who needed protection, merely for his small size.

"Although I'm impressed that you have the energy to offer your services for any task, after your riding lesson." Swidhund noted, with a nod of approval, and a glint in his eyes that might almost have been teasing, were he a less serious man.

"Short of stature I may be, Captain Swidhund." Merry returned with a ghost of his old insouciant grin, "But I'm not short of stamina, or spirit."

"I don't doubt that, but 'tis your first day away from the healers, young Squire." Swidhund reminded Merry with rough kindness, "I wouldn't accept your offer today, even were you the size of Ogden."

At the sound of his name, the sinewy, six-foot-plus Ogden gave them a wave and a toothy grin.

"That man is built like a mountain." Merry observed with disbelieving good humor, letting go his feeling of insult from his services being declined.

"That he is." Swidhund agreed, "But he's not exactly quartermaster material."

As Ogden was currently frowning over dice, after having lost to a nimble young street urchin three times in a row, Merry could believe that. He suppressed a smile, as Swidhund asked hopefully, "Perhaps you could help Ogden with drafting up lists of the supplies which we of the Eorlingas shall require on our way back to Rohan and Edoras. He seems to get, ah, easily distracted."

With a faint smile, Merry offered, "I've only ever before provisioned a group of four, but I did a decent job of that." And Ogden seemed to need the help.

After that, Merry had spent most of the rest of the afternoon helping the Rohirrim to organize themselves, in regards to determining which supplies they would need for their return to Rohan, and where they might obtain them. Merry didn't know that much about how such things were done in Gondor, yet, but he had a knack for finding the things that he needed, wherever he was. He dearly missed Pippin, for many reasons, but at the moment because Pippin was a fine ally in bargaining scenarios. Ogden, on the other hand, just went out and told the merchants how much they needed and how much money they had, at least until Merry taught him better. Ogden was also illiterate, so Merry did all of the writing.

At the time, it had seemed like a tedious task, though a necessary one. Now, as they rode through the fields of the dead, riding through the swarms of flies and the stench of death, Merry wished that he was back in the market, teaching Ogden how to project how much dried meat a group the
size of the Rohirrim would need to eat in a day.

To Merry's relief, the patrol quickly swerved away from the city and the river. Merry could tell that they were heading in a south-westerly direction, but they avoided the South Road.

"The main roads have been better patrolled, and messengers have been coming back and forth with no incident. The same is true for the river. To the north, the constant stream of correspondence between Minas Tirith and the returning army has scared off most of the surviving orcs." Faramir explained, apparently noticing Merry's questioning glance back at the road. Faramir's expression darkened, "The survivors of tonight's skirmish but barely made it to a patrol traveling upon the South Road, so it seems that a patrol there might be the most efficacious."

"Do you know why they've headed to the south, my Lord?" A young lieutenant inquired of Faramir.

"I do not, Lieutenant." Faramir answered, seeming troubled. "It does not seem a wise strategy, as any escape back to Mordor would require crossing the Anduin into Ithilien."

"Who knows why orcs do anything?" Captain Calarion asked darkly.

Faramir did not reprove the Captain aloud, but he did continue to theorize, "These orcs may have gotten stuck between the bulk of the army, before it left, and the Anduin. The roads, the river, and the city have been adequately patrolled during the daylight hours and much of the night."

Faramir paused, and the young Lieutenant offered, "There may not have been an opportunity for them to sneak back across the river?"

Nodding approvingly, Faramir added, "At least not before the ring was destroyed, and their master defeated. And with him disappeared any hope of succor from their homeland."

Merry shuddered, and then got himself under control. He was a squire of the late King of Rohan; He had hit a witch-King in the knee, helped to slay him. He was a warrior now, like Strider or Legolas or Gimli, and he would be brave, like the men he rode with, Rohirrim and soldiers of Gondor alike. Dwelling on those thoughts, Merry was able to remember the orcs who had held him and Pippin captive with a warrior's eyes, not a victims. Merry was shocked at how cynical, how calm he'd become, as he contributed in a dark, hard tone he hardly recognized as his own, "If the orcs were stuck, they'd probably want to kill as many people as possible. That's what orcs do when things don't go their way." Or that's what the orcs who had held him and Pippin captive would have done, at least.

"What can a halfling know of orcs?" One of the soldiers asked.

A year ago, such a question would have made Merry blush. It would have upset him. Now he just sighed with weary, ironic amusement. But he didn't even have the time to make a joke in order to inspire his detractor to leave him alone, before Barden reached over his saddle to haul the offending soldier off of his horse.

"This is Meriadoc, Theoden-King's last squire." Barden growled, "His was one of the swords that bought the Witch-King's death. And he survived several weeks as the captives of orcs and Uruk-hai, before escaping them to recruit the tree-folk..."

"They call themselves the Ents." Merry supplied helpfully, with light humor and only a little bit of an *I told you so* look directed towards the soldier who was now struggling in Barden's grasp.

Captain Swidhund and Lord Faramir forcibly separated Barden and the Gondorian soldier.
"We're all on the same side tonight, gentlemen." Faramir reminded them, his voice firm and commanding, "All of the members of our party deserve respect, and their opinions will be listened to WITHOUT resorting to physical violence." With that, Faramir gave Barden a mingled look of pride, amusement, and gentle censure. Merry could tell that Barden wasn't sure how to react, but Merry grinned. Lord Faramir know how to give a man pause, get him to rethink something, and act as if it were his own idea.

Captain Calarion glared at the offending Gondorian soldier, and Swidund said something sharp in Rohirric to Barden that Merry didn't quite understand. Faramir evidently did, because his lips twitched ever so slightly as if he were concealing a smile.

After that, Merry's attention turned back to the empty, ruined fields they rode through. The flat landscape was broken up by occasional hillocks, stands of trees, and babbling brooks.

"They flow to the River Sirith." One of the soldiers informed Merry, when he asked.

The night seemed to Merry less frightening than it had ever before, well, at least since the winter before they had left the Shire. He could barely remember a time when the darkness had not been full of dread. Now...there was still some fear. But it seemed...as a trickle to a flood. Small, and something that could be defeated. Merry rode tall in his special saddle, promising himself that whatever the night brought, he would prove its equal. He owed it to his fellows who had gone to the Black Gate and not yet returned, and he owed it to Boromir, who would not return.

As the company moved further away from the city, Merry listened to the conversation between Faramir and Captain Calarion.

"Are you sure that you want me to call the orders for our patrol, when we meet the enemy?" Calarion asked Faramir, a mixture of relief and uncertainty in his voice.

Rider Barden interrupted Faramir's answer, whatever it might have been. "Isn't strategy and command your responsibility, Lord Faramir?" The younger Rider sniped, apparently still stinging from Faramir's earlier reproof, however mild it had been.

"The command is mine. The responsibility for strategy is mine." Faramir answered sharply, "Many responsibilities are also mine, Rider Barden, which have precluded me from practicing with the city guard regularly." Faramir turned back to Calarion, ignoring Barden for the moment, and said less heatedly, "I haven't drilled with the city guard in years, Captain. I'd be stepping on your toes, when I'm not at my best. Once we engage the enemy, you call the orders, I'll back you unless I've good cause to do otherwise."

After that, the group rode on mostly in silence, with Faramir quietly directing them further west and south. The Steward paused every now and then, the expression on his face thoughtful, as if he was turning inward. It reminded Merry of Strider (who would soon be King). Specifically, those times when the ranger had been listening or looking for some threat that the hobbits - and normal men - just couldn't see. To Merry, it seemed both like and unlike the way that Legolas could sense orcs. The elf could detect creatures of Mordor with the ease that normal beings could detect whether it was hot or cold outside at a given moment. It seemed to Merry that Faramir - and Strider - had to search within themselves, kindle some spark, and then it was if they could see more than other men, but less than elves.

About an hour and a half after they had departed Minas Tirith, Merry felt the very tone of the air changing. It was not so bleak, hopeless and terrifying as the horrible dark night before the Battle of the Pelennor. But...it was still...wrong. The air had become thick and stagnant and sharp all at once. It was as if they were simultaneously being stung by bees and stuck inside the thick, disgusting pudding that Lobelia Sackville Baggins had once made for one of Frodo's birthdays,
when she spent the entire time looking at the younger lads as though she would have liked to have eaten them. And maybe she would have, or at least Frodo. Merry shook his head out of thoughts of the Shire, when Lobelia occasionally attempting to conspire to arrange a fatal accident for Frodo had been his only worry. Because the feeling in the air also reminded Merry of the feel of the yrch who had kidnapped them, although not quite that bad. Like a babbling brook of unnatural fear, where as their Uruk-hai kidnappers had been a raging river, and the Battle of the Pelennor had been a seething ocean. Through his fear, Merry felt guilt and shame that he hadn't been able to go with the other surviving members of the fellowship to the black gate, which must have been so much worse, an ocean in tempest.

The Uruk-hai and orcs who had kidnapped them had been bad enough. Thinking of it made Merry set his jaw, determined not to show weakness. The things that he and Pippin had seen had been fairly awful. The orcs had not been permitted to them because Sauron thought that one of the hobbits might be the ringbearer, and needed them alive. But that didn't stop the orcs from torturing, roasting and eating captured soldiers, and worse, women, children and babes, in front of their two hobbit hostages. Merry had been very distraught, but Pippin had seemed to just grow more focused. Pippin had been the one to start leaving his cloak clasps and then bits of their clothing behind them, in case someone was following. Merry had followed his lead, but it had been Pippin's idea. And when the moment came that they could escape into the forest unnoticed, it was Pippin who nudged him, and started crawling forward. Merry had always looked after his little cousin, but when their situation became dire, it was Pippin who had kept his head.

Then Faramir, his face more focused and intense than Merry had heretofore seen it, signaled that there were enemies ahead. Captains Calarion and Swidhund sounded their horns. The patrol then charged forward, sounding like a thunder storm in the night. Merry was at first greatly upset to have been shuffled to the back of the column, but then he realized that Faramir was beside him, and he didn't feel so bad.

Merry was determined to be brave, for all of their companions, but mostly for Pippin, and Frodo, and Sam. And because he didn't know what they would meet when they returned to the Shire... there had been trouble everywhere this last year, not just in Gondor. He knew that he needed to be prepared, and he was determined to do his part.

This first skirmish, however, was over almost before it began. The lead Riders and guards slew the orcs nearest their party, but the other monsters broke and ran as soon as they saw the size of the party of human soldiers from Minas Tirith. Merry, beside Faramir and Rider Barden, only had time to ready his weapons before their enemies high-tailed it further away from the city, leaving their victims and their loot behind.

Some of the riders and even a few of the guards began to chase after the fleeing orcs. Merry, still near the rear of their party, between Lord Faramir and Rider Barden, felt as much as saw Faramir tense beside him. But then Captain Calarion and Captain Swidhund called their men back. Merry was a bit amused that such an action required not just the sounding of horns but also the yelling of loud curses.

"What did I say, you idiotic young hotheads?" Captain Calarion bellowed at his guards, while Rider Swidhund spoke sharply to the sheepish looking Riders in Rohirric, using a few words that Merry had learned from the other Riders after they'd imbibed impressive amounts of ale, and knew were not particularly nice.

"Not to engage once the enemy scattered, Sir." One of the guards muttered bravely, and the lecture was over, at least for the time being. Although Merry suspected from the expression on the commanders' faces that the offending Riders and soldiers would have ample reason to repent of their error during the next few days. There were a great deal of unpleasant tasks to be done in
post-war Minas Tirith, and a soldier on his commander's bad side was quite likely to be assigned to some of them.

Faramir, with one of the citadel guards, Merry and Rider Barden as his shadows, had coordinated the unoccupied soldiers and riders in aiding the wounded civilians.

Faramir quietly ordered, "Calarion, separate a squad under one of your Lieutenants, as an escort for these folk to the city gates. We will go further to the east, the rest of us." with a wry grin for the Rohirrim and the soldiers of Gondor who had forgotten their orders not to pursue the fleeing orcs, Faramir added, "It may be that we will catch up with the, ah, "shy" orcs."

Then their party was moving again, swift as the wind before a storm, through the dark spring night. The mountainous bulk of Mount Mindolluin and the White City, glowing in the moonlight, receded further behind them, as the feeling of dread, of something rotting and wrong, grew even stronger. Soon they saw new lights...they heard no more human screams, but Merry could smell burnt flesh, and hear the grating, horrific noise that was orcish laughter. A few silent hand signals and quiet commands amongst the allied warriors, and Lord Faramir, the two commanders, Merry, and several soldiers were creeping towards the noise. Faramir stopped long enough to wipe dirt on Merry's face, whispering, "So that they don't see your face reflecting the light."

What they found around a bend was more or less what Merry had expected and dreaded to see. A large group of orcs, celebrating successful raids. He could see multiple guards posted, none of which fortunately saw them. And they looked ready to flee, or fight, at a moment's notice.

Barden whispered to Faramir and his commander, "We have enough swords to take them. Even we riders alone could send them running for their poisoned land."

"I don't like it, my Lord." Captain Calarion said darkly, carefully not looking at Barden.

Faramir nodded, whispering in the darkness softly enough that his mouth never opened enough to flash white teeth, "Aye. While our party is more than the equal of those we can see, they are entirely too confident, suggesting that their numbers are greater than we can see in the darkness. The siege tunnels that were built, even as far as this from the city, could permit hundreds to hide."

Rider Swidhund added, "This feels rather like the ambush they set for us, the one that got Prince Theodred killed."

"Perhaps we should....head back." Barden suggested, sounding torn between every instinct he had urging him to go forward, and his promise to Eowyn that he would keep Faramir safe.

The Captains looked like they agreed, but Faramir turned again to survey the orcs before him, his face thoughtful.

"Lieutenant," Faramir inquired, his soft tone intent, "You patrolled often here. There were already small tunnels, from the brooks to the fields, for irrigation, were there not? Ones that would almost certainly feed into the tunnels Sauron's army dug during the siege?"

The Lieutenant nodded, his face going from troubled disappointment at having to turn back to speculative interest, "Aye, m'Lord. There were. We could easily enough put down the flood panels on the streams, sending water shooting through the old underground canals."

Faramir turned back to Calarion, turning slightly on the ground so that his comments were addressed to Swidhund as well, "Well, gentlemen? That should at least neutralize the orcs belowground. Those tunnels are not well built, and were often collapsing on them during the battle itself, without even coming under our fire. Of course," Faramir smiled with bitter
remembrance, "Their numbers were so great that it made little matter."

Calarion and Swidhund both looked intrigued. "We brought fire powder, did we not?" Calarion asked his chief lieutenant.

The lieutenant nodded eagerly, and Calarion continued, "If we flood the old tunnels with fire powder and the light it just as it goes into the tunnels, that should take care of most of the underground orcs. This lot, we can probably handle."

Looking a little sick at the idea of not only drowning but also burning orcs alive, Faramir nonetheless nodded firmly, "Do it."

One of the other soldiers who had accompanied him, Merry thought that he was Calarion's sergeant, objected strongly, "The grass, my Captains, my Lord. The crops...the water will drown them, and the fire...will spare none of them."

"They are already poisoned, Sergeant." Faramir told the man, his musical voice strained with sorrow, "For Sauron had his minions sow salt and worse in the earth, as they went."

With the plan of action agreed upon, events moved very swiftly. Merry had gardened and farmed in the past, so he ended up helping the men who were diverting the brooks into the old irrigation canals. The men of Gondor had set stone barriers into the creek bed at various points, two inch thick slats of steel that could be lowered or lifted depending on where the crops needed extra water. It was an ingenious system, and Merry made a note to remember it. It would be useful in the Shire, where Merry sincerely hoped that they would not have to use it to drown orcs.

After that, everything was fire and chaos. Orcs were thick amongst them, although the patrol had the benefits of higher ground and surprise. Merry found that after the initial terror of seeing a leering, hissing orc bearing down upon him, the actual dancing back and forth on his horse to attack the orc was not so bad. His horse seemed to know what to do, better than Merry did. That, and Faramir and Barden both were experienced fighters, easily covering for Merry when his inexperience would otherwise have cost him the upper hand. The skirmish shifted and flowed around them, with Faramir at one point calling on his horn for the party to watch their left flank.

Time passed oddly when one was simultaneously terrified for his life and fighting orcs, Merry noted to himself. For he couldn't tell if it was a few minutes after Faramir's call or almost an hour, when he saw an orc with a necklace of human scalps. The orc wasn't even near Merry, he was on the other side of a burning ditch. But Merry could see him through the leaping flames, see that one of the scalps he had adorned himself with was different than the others. Even through the fire and the blood which obscured it, Merry could tell that the one scalp was trailing bloody blond hair, of a shade between Eowyn's pale cornsilk and Pippin's dark gold locks. After that, Merry remembered charging through a break in the flames, his horse flying nimbly beneath him. And then a blur of blocking and parrying and slicing, orcs on all sides of him.

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[Faramir POV]

It had been a long night for Faramir, the new (and last) Lord Steward of Gondor. Part of him was glad to be out of the city, and engaged in an activity where there was a clear enemy. And part of him was relieved, as he met an orc's blood-and-gore soaked club with his sword. Faramir had feared that he would have lost his nerve for the arts of war. He'd never had much taste for it to begin with, and after as bad a battle as the last he'd had, well, he'd known it to happen to warriors more seasoned and better-suited than he to the life of the sword. But he felt no fear in his heart, or no more than he had before. He still felt the old distaste for dealing harm to others, even orcs. He also felt a new, more acute, awareness of his own mortality. But it didn't slow him down.
Still, Faramir kept himself to the edges of the fighting. He knew that he was tired, and that his left side was weak. More, it was good to have an officer stay far enough to the rear of the chaos, order to see problems developing, like the orcs regrouping to their left. Or the late King of Rohan’s squire going insane, and charging through the fire to get at the orcs who hadn't yet committed to fight or flight. Faramir suppressed colorful curses and a regret that he’d thought Merry brave but sane, and sounded a call that the main force should attack the orcs on the other side of the ditch. Faramir knew that Captain Calarion was experienced enough to realize that the Steward meant that they should reinforce AFTER they had decided the engagement on THIS side of the ditch. Then Faramir signaled his horse to follow the short hobbit through the flames, prepared to be outnumbered on the other side. Faramir meant to keep Merry alive; but he didn't want to die keeping that promise to himself. Faramir silently promised himself that he'd give Merry a hard time for making those two goals hard to achieve.

Faramir was aware of one of the Riders of Rohan to his left. To his surprise, it was Sir Barden, Eowyn's cousin. So far as Faramir had been able to tell in the past few days, Barden loathed him. But it was Barden who had been guarding Meriadoc all night, so Faramir supposed that it made sense. Faramir had certainly appreciated Barden on the other side of Merry, helping him to keep the small, novice swordsman from being overwhelmed. And he was grateful, now, that he and his one guard were not following Merry alone. And then Faramir had no more time to think; he had to focus on finding a way through the orcs who were enveloping what they probably saw as a lone, small, tasty victim on a delicious horse.

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[Barden POV]

Sir Barden of the Mark made it his business to keep close to his cousin Eowyn's betrothed, as they entered their second engagement of the night. He wasn't particularly impressed by Lord Faramir. To Barden, it wasn't noble to shirk one's duties simply because one was tired, or out of practice with mounted warfare. Lord Faramir hadn't even ventured into the first skirmish at all, leaving all the fighting and all the glory to other men. And now, he was staying on the outsides of the fray, content to clean up the orcs trying to sneak around the back and sound warnings to the Captains. It was the place of some officer to do so, yes. But not the place of a war leader, or one who should be a war leader. Barden had met Lord Boromir, and so he knew that Lord Faramir was by far the inferior of crazy Lord Denethor's two sons.

But Barden had promised to bring Eowyn's Steward back to her, and so he stayed near Faramir, which had the incidental benefit of putting him near Squire Meriadoc, as well. Barden had gone out with new riders before, had been one once himself, so he knew how to fight beside someone still learning the sword. Barden had accepted that the engagement would never become more exciting, when all of a sudden Squire Meriadoc took off like a hound scenting the trail.

To Barden's shock, Lord Faramir signaled his change of position as steadily as a Marshal under fire, and then practically flew after the hobbit. Barden couldn't move for a minute, he just blinked in surprise. Then he cursed, and went after the Steward and the squire.

Faramir moved through the flames as if he sensed where they would next flare, and his horse didn't even pause. Neither did Barden's, but that was because he was a Rider of Rohan. Faramir almost danced through the orcs on his way to Merry, stopping to exchange blows with those he passed, but only enough to make them let him through. Soon enough he was beside the Squire, calling directions to Meriadoc, moving them slowly back towards the bulk of the patrol. Barden observed that Faramir fought fiercely, but precisely. He was obviously shielding Merry, but even in doing that, he fought mostly by trying to predict his opponents' strokes, and not being where they expected him to be. When he had to, he met blows head on, but he turned them aside when
he could. Which made Barden realize...why wasn't the Steward of Gondor in proper armor? He wore only leather armor and chain mail. Fine chain mail, but not the plate armor that could have stood up to real blows from the enemies' fouled weapons. Barden hastened to the Steward's side, not even sure if Lord Faramir realized that one solid blow would mean his death.

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[Faramir POV]

Faramir knew that one solid blow from an orc's blade would cut through his chain mail and leather boiled armor. He had purposely eschewed the heavier plate armor. He'd worn his only complete set in the ranger's last sortie, and he wasn't even sure where that set was, now. Sergeant Menohtar had previously had the keeping of Faramir's armor, including the older sets he'd outgrown or put aside. Boromir, and Faramir's Dol Amroth family, had often gifted him with new armor. But since Menohtar hadn't returned from the Pelennor, and even thinking of him had hurt, Faramir hadn't pursued the question of where his armor was. Faramir could have sent someone to look for his armor when he realized that he'd be going on this foray. He probably should have. Boromir had always hated it when Faramir wore naught but chain mail into conventional engagements. But Faramir's best skill as a fighter lay in being quick, not strong. Particularly not now, when he was exhausted and his left arm was barely strong enough to draw the bow he'd carried as a scrawny teenager.

Faramir dodged and weaved, advanced and retreated in front of the orcs. Anything to confuse them and discourage them sufficiently to let him and Merry retreat. Faramir's kept his voice even and firm, telling Merry where to focus his attention, and where it was safe to withdraw. Faramir was surprised that neither of them had been killed yet; this wasn't his kind of fight. The last time he'd been in close combat such as this (well, before the Pelennor), rather than small skirmishes and ambushes, had been Osgiliath.

There, Faramir had fought beside his brother. Boromir had always been an incredible warrior. Faramir knew that he lacked his brother's skill and grace. But decades of combat had finally made the drills and blows, that Faramir had once only been able to do by rote, into a seamless exercise. Time seemed to slow down rather than speed up, and Faramir was able to keep blocking, keep retreating. The orcs helped, in a manner of speaking. They were not accustomed to fighting as a group, and Faramir took advantage of that. He wasn't strong enough to meet their blows directly; so he sideswiped, forcing one orc to dodge into another. In the end, it wasn't so much that he and Merry managed to survive until reinforcements reached them. Instead, it was that the orcs, inspired by Faramir's sword and Merry's blows, got into one another's way. Then the orcs suddenly broke and ran, and Faramir realized that the bulk of the patrol had shown up just beside them.

Captain Calarion gave Faramir a very dark look. Faramir just smiled brightly back at him, hoping that it annoyed Calarion just as much as it had always annoyed Faramir when Dervorin just grinned after almost getting himself killed. Or any of his men, but it was usually Dervorin. Under normal circumstances, Faramir wouldn't have gone out of his way to be a thorn in Calarion's side. But it annoyed Faramir intensely that Hurin had probably pulled the Captain aside, warning him to keep an eye on Faramir. Faramir used his frustration over that to keep his arms from shaking, and his hand from dropping his sword. Now that they were not in immediate danger of dying, he felt the full extent of the exhaustion and soreness that duty and then sheer adrenaline had only barely kept at bay. Faramir surveyed the patrol, of which the only men still actively fighting were the soldiers with long-bows, who still had the range on the fleeing orcs. Normally Faramir would be one of those, but not today.

"Lieutenant," Meriadoc asked one of the long-bow men, his voice intense, "Shoot that orc."

Merry pointed to a particularly large orc, one having trouble crossing a stream. Less than a minute
later, the orc lay dead, five Gondorian arrows in his back.

"Happy?" Faramir asked the Merry sharply, more than a bit out-of-humor with the hobbit. The Steward kept his voice soft, though. They would have had to deal with the orcs on the other side of the burning ditch anyway. Merry’s way of initiating the maneuver had been worse than stupid, but Faramir didn't believe in dressing down young soldiers in public. Not if he could help it.

Merry didn't even wince. His gaze on the dead orc stayed intense, as he answered Faramir in a dead level tone, "No. It should be seven arrows."

"He is just as dead." Faramir answered softly, grief mingling with sympathy in his heart as he realized that Merry was speaking of his brother's last, brave, desperate moments. "That orc was no equal to Boromir, Captain-General of Gondor’s armies."

Shaking his head, Merry returned to the present. "No," He agreed sadly, before apologizing, "I'm sorry that I almost got you killed."

"Don't do it again." Faramir replied, with a rueful half-grin. Turning serious again, the Steward ordered, "And stay close, on the return back to the city."

Merry nodded an affirmative. Satisfied, Faramir turned to Swidhund and Calarion. "Do we have any wounded who need to be tended to before we return to the city?" Faramir was relieved to find that the answer was no.

"Sound the horns to return to the city," Faramir ordered Calarion, exhaustion overcoming his desire to be irritating.
Chapter Summary

Lord Steward Faramir and his party arrive back at the White City.

Chapter Notes

A/N: And this chapter extends into even more parts. I can't wait to be finished with it. The next (and hopefully final...) part of Chapter 4 will include a D scene, and also a flashback to another D scene between a younger Faramir and Boromir (which will probably not be what most expect).

Thanks to Kaylee and FC for providing lots of background on hobbits. Any mistakes are mine (and there will probably be some mistakes in characterization of Merry; I admire him, but I don't write hobbits often).

Thank you also to everyone who has left feedback on earlier chapters, and encouraged me to keep going with this series! I love to hear when people have enjoyed a story, and constructive criticism is welcomed as well!

Quotes:

If you don't understand how a man could both love his brother dearly and want to wring his neck at the same time, then you were probably an only child.” - paraphrased from a quote by Linda Sunshine

Faramir appreciated that the ride back to the city was fairly quiet. Their group was the greater by some dozen refugees, but even they were quiet. It was the dead of the night, when spirits walked and shadows ruled. To Faramir, the air practically glowed with the weight of ghosts who wandered the fields and hills near the city.

Merry was quiet, too, for the first part of the ride. Faramir was still marveling over the bravery and recklessness of hobbits, although he suspected that there was more than that, underlying Merry’s choices in their last skirmish. Faramir planned to question Merry more closely, but only once they had arrived back at the city. One of Faramir’s most important rules for himself was to always chastise in private, and praise in public, at least as much as a given situation allowed.

But, apparently, as Gandalf had more than once warned Faramir, nothing could keep a hobbit's spirits down for long.

"Faramir?" Merry asked, when the two of them were more or less alone near the front of the column, "Your cousin Lord Hurin seemed to think it was a bad idea for you to come out here, today. Do you mind why you came?"

Faramir found it hard to object to the tone in which the question was asked. Merry seemed as if he was pondering his own fitness for the evening's venture, and Faramir could sympathize with that.
During some of the earliest engagements in his military career, Faramir himself had felt an impediment to the men fighting beside him, who were as much looking out for Faramir's inexperienced blade as fighting their own foes.

Pondering his answer for a moment, Faramir noted that Eowyn's cousin-by-marriage, the annoying Barden, was close enough to hear whatever Faramir were to say. Faramir trusted Merry; he even trusted some of Captain Calario's men, to a certain extent. In that he'd known them, at least by face and name, for many years. Some had served with Boromir, or with Dervorin's cousin Gendarion. Some had until just recently been the men of Captain the Lord Galdoron, who was even now one of the officers coming back from the Black Gate. But Barden...Faramir did not know him enough to trust him. The man had done nothing but try to rile Faramir's temper, ever since they'd met. Faramir understood that he was not what a man of Rohan would consider a fitting husband for a woman as fine as Eowyn, Royal and Shieldmaiden as she was. He didn't understand why that meant that Barden had to spend so very much of his time and energy making snide comments about Faramir, but Faramir had too much going on with keeping the city secure and the country running to worry about one cousin of Eowyn's.

So Faramir chose to answer Merry's question, even though it meant that Barden would hear the answer. Something in Faramir whispered that telling this to Eowyn's cousin as well as to Merry was the right thing to do, that some part of Barden needed to hear it as much as Merry did. Faramir internally grimaced at the thought of providing Barden with more in the way of evidence that Faramir was less brave than the ideal rider of Rohan...but Faramir hardly ever failed to listen to that whispered inner voice. It rung with an irrational, sure-as-the-tides certainty, a sureness that came to Faramir but rarely and always without rhyme or reason. Boromir had called such flights of fancy on his brother's part, "Finduilas moments." But even though Boromir complained, he usually encouraged Faramir to listen to that small voice, meanwhile preparing the both of them to deal with the fall-out from whatever Faramir would do, following where the voice led. Or at least, that's what Boromir had always done, in the past.

"Well, Merry," Faramir spoke, pensively, carefully, as if weighing each word, "It was, in part, that I had to see the state of the countryside myself. I love learning - my books and scrolls - far better than war. But for as long as I am Steward, I must know the state of my lands. My father and my uncle taught me that there is no substitute for seeing with your own eyes, and speaking with the people who live in a place." Faramir paused, and then confessed, "I've never liked war. Part of me was afraid, after our harrowing withdrawal from Osgiliath, that I might have lost my nerve. Part of me was glad to find that had not been the case. Part of me was glad to find that had not been the case. I liked fighting no more than I ever have," Faramir told hobbit and rider with with a wry shadow of a smile, "but I did not flinch from it, as I had half feared I might."

Then they were back at the city before Faramir had any time to worry about the results of his revelation. Faramir was busy upon their return, arranging for additional sweep patrols to protect the major routes to and from the city, to keep travelers safe from roaming orcs.

"How will they know where to go, my Lord?" One of the city guard Captains asked, pushed nearly beyond exhaustion, "At least with the regular patrols, we have the benefit of knowing when our lads will be out and about, and there's no predicting the orcs anyway."

"I can still sense their presence, Captain." Faramir replied softly, "Not as plainly as before, but clearly enough. There are others who can, as well."

"Not enough soldiers, Sir...err, my Lord." One of Boromir's old adjutants pointed out.

Faramir paused, forcing his tired mind to think. "No, you're quite right, Sergeant. Not enough
soldiers...but enough men...perhaps enough people." Pushing a tired hand through his red-gold hair, and reflecting that it, like all of him, could use a wash, Faramir commanded, "Ask for citizen volunteers who have a feel for the darkness. They only need to be able to ride well enough to keep up and get out of the way when they are told."

The Sergeant, Boromir's man, nodded slowly, his thoughts already turning to how that might be done, while the tired Captain objected in horror, "My Lord, you can't mean to send...young boys and women, into war?"

"Not into war," Faramir countered, speaking slowly and distinctly so that his exhaustion would be less evident, "into patrols on and around the Pelennor, under the command of seasoned officers who can see the lay of the land well enough not to engage if they don't have the numbers."

The first Captain was getting set to argue again, while Captain Calarion seemed ready to take Faramir's side.

"It is not an issue for debate, gentlemen." Faramir said softly but firmly. "I am your Lord Steward. You were all sworn to my late father the Steward Denethor, and I am his only remaining heir. Until the King returns, my word is law." Faramir hated having to pull rank like this. There was even some risk to it; Faramir wasn't Denethor. He'd been trained to the authority he now held, but he'd never expected to bear it. It had always been Boromir's place....but now his brother was gone to Mandos' Halls, and it was Faramir who must hold the city, and keep their people safe on the way in and out. Now, if only these hidebound idiots would listen to him.

Boromir's old sergeant suppressed a smile, Captain Calarion seemed satisfied, and the other officers fell into online, however unhappily. Faramir ignored the grumbling; he wasn't Denethor, and he wasn't even going to be here long. If the Captains of Gondor did as he ordered, Faramir didn't particularly care how unhappy they were about it. Faramir wouldn't have to deal with them for very long, anyway.

As soon as he had a moment's peace from his duties, a better peace found him.

"My Lord," Eowyn greeted him, her arms around him just as fast as he turned to her. No soft maid she, Faramir thought with pleased bemusement. Eowyn's body, though lithe and feminine, was as well-muscled as many-a-soldier's. Faramir clasped her back, and for a moment they just stood like that, her bright head under his chin. Man and woman, one another's strength.

Then Eowyn's attention was drawn by an almost-silent conversation between Merry and Swidhund.

"My little sword-brother...," Eowyn said softly, referring to Meriadoc, "Swidhund seems torn between pride and fury with him, for whatever reason."

"The reason is clear enough," Faramir told her, torn between frustration at Merry's dangerous antics and a tired amusement, "Your little sword-brother leapt over a small river of flame to engage...ah," Faramir interrupted himself, not sure if even Eowyn would want to hear that Merry had taken offense to that particular orc because it had taken a blond scalp, so he ended, "an orc whose crimes had been particularly egregious."

Eowyn blinked in surprise, "Well that was rather...foolishly daring, of Merry. But surely discouraging orcs was your purpose...it does not sound so very bad."

Faramir snorted lightly, "Perhaps I forgot to mention the dozens of orcs who had inconsiderately placed themselves in between Merry and his quarry."

After staring at Faramir for a few moments, her eyes wide with surprised horror and belated fear for her friend and fellow, Eowyn managed a choked, "Oh, dear." Another woman might not have
understood the seriousness of Merry's tactical error, but Eowyn did. She'd been raised a Sword-
Maid, and had done a Rider's service and more in this last war. So had Merry, but he lacked even
Eowyn's experience. Swidhund, the commander of the Rohirrim who had gone on the patrol, was
not pleased with Merry, and nor should he be. "Perhaps," Eowyn suggested slowly, "it would be
best if Merry were not left to Swidhund's tender mercies, this night. Swidhund prefers to be a
guardian of horses and a trainer of man and beast. Commanding in the field is not to his taste, even
when all of his men do exactly as they were bade."

Faramir groaned silently to himself. All he wanted to do was find a bed, any bed, and catch a few
hours sleep before the morn, when he needed to be up and herding men once more. But Eowyn
knew her Rohirrim - if she said that Swidhund was in no mood to deal with a novice's mistake,
then Faramir had no doubt that Eowyn was correct. And Meriadoc was Eowyn's, her brother and
comrade-in-arms, the only other being in all the world who truly understood what it had meant to
face the Witch-King of Angmar over Theoden-King's dead body. To breathe in the foul stench of
fear beyond hope, and keep sword in hand and strength in heart long enough to cut the enemy
commander down at last. Merry was Eowyn's brother, therefore Merry was just as much
Faramir's. And even if Merry had not been Eowyn's....Faramir had seen the hobbit in action earlier
that evening. Faramir recognized that upper-cut, that under-cut, that subtle understated dance to
the right to then strike at the enemy's unprotected flank. Movements with a blade that came not
from any Western school of fighting, but from faraway Khand, where small men had learned to
fight those of much larger stature, and win. Skills that Boromir had gone out of the way to learn,
in order to teach them to his slender younger brother. Merry had been BOROMIR'S dear friend
and companion, one of BOROMIR's students. One of Boromir's very last students. And that
alone, even if there had been no dead Witch-King, would have made Merry into Faramir's look-
out. So Faramir squeezed Eowyn's upper arm gently, and walked over to put himself in between
the quietly furious and clearly Swidhund, and Merry, who seemed all of shocky, defiant, abashed,
and timid all at the same time. With rueful humor, Faramir wondered if he was going to end up
taking a fist from a Rider of Rohan this night after all, even though Barden finally seemed to have
abandoned giving Faramir the beady eye in favor of drinking mead.
Chapter Summary

Faramir and Merry talk about intemperance in the pursuit of orcs.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Please be warned that there is a discipline scene in this chapter near the end.

Please note that, for purposes of this AU, Faramir is about five years younger than he is in canon, so approximately 33 instead of 34. That makes him a few years younger than Meriadoc Brandybuck, who is about 37. However, hobbits don't come of age until they are 33, so relatively speaking Faramir would have been counted an adult much longer (men of Numenorean descent are said to come of age at 20).

Thanks to Kaylee and FC for providing lots of background on hobbits. Any mistakes are mine (and there will probably be some mistakes in characterization of Merry; I admire him, but I don't write hobbits often).

Thank you also to everyone who has left feedback on earlier chapters, and encouraged me to keep going with this series! This is finally the end of Chapter 4, but I will be adding part of what I'd intended to have in Chapter 4 to Chapter 5.

I'd love to hear from you if you're enjoying the story. Constructive criticism is welcome too.

[Merry POV]

After the foray was over, after Gondor's soldiers shot the orc at his asking, Merry felt at first as if he was going to fall off of his horse. Fortunately, his specially modified high saddle made falling off almost impossible. As the distance between the site of the skirmish and their party grew, Merry couldn't tell whether he felt satisfaction, terror, guilt...or some other emotion, one that he didn't even have a name for. Finally, he settled on feeling numb. But not incurious. Still feeling guilty for Faramir's having risked his life to save Merry, Merry found himself asking Faramir why the Steward had even come out on this expedition. It came as a profound surprise to Merry that even Faramir, who was so brave and so very composed, could question his own courage and skill as a warrior.

By the time they got back to Minas Tirith, Merry himself had almost forgotten about his ill-conceived charge after the blond-killing orc. Unfortunately, Captain Swidhund had not.

"With me, King's Squire." He snapped a command at Merry, as the stars shimmered above the courtyard of the House of Healing.

"Um." Merry managed, fighting the urge to shrink away from the large, unhappy Rohir. He
managed to keep his back straight, more because he was too exhausted than because he was feeling brave or unrepentant. Meriadoc knew that he had made a great mistake by charging off after that orc. A mistake which could have cost lives beyond his own. Still, Swidhund only seemed angry, frustrated and stern. He was not enraged, as the orcs who had beaten Merry and Pippin had been. Still, Merry was a little afraid. He didn't know Swidhund that well, after all.

Stepping between Squire Meriadoc and Captain Swidhund, Faramir quietly stated, "This matter is mine to address, Captain."

Sвидхунд ломеared over Faramir, his shoulders set. "As our late King's squire, Master Brandybuck belongs to Rohan, though he is the first hobbit to be called Rohir, and Rider of Rohan."

"I do not challenge that," Faramir said mildly, though his back was firm and straight and he did not appear the least bit intimidated by Sвидhунд. "However, Meriadoc is also the sword-brother to my betrothed. Side-by-side they defeated the Witch-King of Amor. Squire Meriadoc's first tutor in the ways of the sword was my brother, so Merry is my sword-brother twice over."

Sвидhунд's craggy face broke into what might almost have been a smile, "I should have figured you for a first-class barracks lawyer, Lord Faramir. Just like your brother."

Faramir nodded to Sвидhунд, but Merry thought it was taking a lot out of Faramir, not to look away in pain. All Faramir's face showed was wistful, mournful, pride. Sвидhунд nodded back, respecting the pain.

Placing a hand on Meriadoc's shoulder, Faramir gently led him away, through the noisy corridors of the patient wards in the House of Healing. Through to the quieter rooms attached to the rear of the House, rooms reserved for patients' friends and family or visiting healers. Faramir ushered Merry into the room which Faramir had been sleeping in, then paused for a moment to speak to Warden Del at the door.

Merry was more concerned with what Faramir might have to say to him, but he still listened with half an ear to what Faramir had to say to the Warden of the House of Healing. Well, tried to, as their voices, while intent, were quiet. At the end of the conversation, Del threw his hands up in wordless frustration, and walked off. Faramir, on the other hand, sighed sadly, but seemed otherwise well-content with the outcome of that discussion.

"So," Faramir asked Merry after closing the stone door of the room, "What happened, Master Meriadoc, that led you to rush headlong into superior numbers of our enemy, without orders or support?"

As Faramir asked the question, he handed Merry a glass of water. To buy some time, and to give his heart a chance to stop pounding quite so violently, Merry took one sip, and then another. Faramir waited patiently.

At length, Merry managed, "I...I'm not exactly sure," wondering if Faramir could see the worries and the thoughts pressing on his mind, could view them clearly where, to Merry, they were nothing but a jumbled muddle.

Faramir didn't reply to that, he just sat patiently alert in his chair, regarding Merry. Later, when they knew one another better, Faramir would tell Merry that he could, to some extent, read Meriadoc's thoughts, but not as clearly as with most folk. For Meriadoc had been a long-time companion of the Wizard, with all that implied, and had stood against the Witch-King of Angmar. Those type of experiences had changed the hobbit, given him mental endurance and defenses that Faramir was quite sure Merry himself did not know of, yet.
Merry lifted a hand and shrugged his shoulders, still struggling with what to say.

"You did well, Merry, except for that ill-advised charge." Faramir reassured the hobbit with quiet sincerity, "You have no cause to reproach yourself for lack of bravery, or skill. You are still learning. You gave a good accounting of yourself, given your experience and training to date.

But Merry knew that he hadn't. "Eowyn," Merry protested, "In the Battle of the Pelennor....she fought like a creature possessed. And...and most of her foes fell before her blade, after only a few blows. Until..." Merry shuddered in memory, "the Witch-King."

"Eowyn," Faramir replied thoughtfully, "Was born to the sword. Some are. My brother was one. They do not learn new drills and attacks so much as they absorb them, like plants drink water. For me, swordsmanship came as naturally as...flying to a pig. I could do drills until my arms fell off, even with a heavier sword. And even then, every time I was in a mock battle, everything that I had learned deserted me. Every time, my limbs became as unwieldy as blocks of wood. Truth to tell," Faramir confided, "You are better than I was, when I had only been learning a soldier's trade for a few years."

That was somewhat reassuring to Merry, but there was still Faramir's first question to answer, as to why Merry had charged into the midst of their enemies like an insane fool. Merry blurted out, "It was the hair. The yellow hair...on the scalps, on that orc's belt. The blond hair...like Pippin's, or Eowyn's, or my cousins'." Pippin had three sisters, each as blond as he.

"Ah," Faramir blinked, and then apparently followed the change in topic, "Well, I can understand why that might cause you to...lose your head."

"And not only that," Merry continued, warming to his topic, "But those orcs could be attacking the Shire as we speak, even with Sauron gone. What will we find when we go back?" Merry's thoughts turned to his parents, whom he knew would defend their family and their lands, despite never having been trained for it. To Fredegar "Fatty" Bolger, the fifth of the Conspirators who had schemed to get Frodo and the ring safely away from the Shire. And to Fredegar's pretty, spirited sister Esmeralda.

Faramir's grey eyes went soft with sympathy, and then, even more reassuring, flinty with determination. "We can and we will help you to plan for whatever you might encounter at your home, Meriadoc. We of Gondor - all of mankind, really - owe you and your companions that much, and more." Faramir's gaze softened again, and he reached out to grasp Merry's shoulders and lightly shake the hobbit back and forth. "But you have to keep your head, Squire of Rohan. Else there will be no point in worrying about what you will find in the Shire, for we will be hard-pressed to keep you alive to return there!"

That was, Merry thought, rather a fine thing for Faramir to say. It wasn't as if Faramir had kept HIS head, upon seeing Merry in danger.

Faramir rolled his eyes heavenward, before releasing Merry with a pat to his shoulder. With a half-grin which somehow reminded Merry of Strider, Faramir said in counter to Merry's silent protest, "I didn't lose my head, Merry. I called on my horn that I was pursuing, and that we needed reinforcements. Only then did I follow you."

"But still you shouldn't have," Merry held to his point stubbornly, "and that is what Captain Calarion was mad about. And probably Lord Hurin too, when he hears of it." Faramir was, after all, not just the Steward of Gondor, but who was also several years YOUNGER than Merry himself.

Lifting an eyebrow, Faramir replied sternly, "I'm a Captain of Gondor. As such, I get to make
these strategic decisions. You are a squire, a young warrior still learning the craft - you do not."

Merry sighed, fighting the urge to squirm. "I know. I'm sorry... I lost my temper, and just...went ahead."

"Endangering yourself and your horse, and putting my men in danger as well." Faramir concluded softly, his voice concerned and gentle, rather than condemning.

Merry slouched in his chair, wracked with guilt. "Putting yourself in danger, as well, Lord Faramir."

"Yes, but I don't count a bit of aid, amongst sword brothers." Faramir told Merry, gently rubbing the hobbit's suddenly cold hands in his own.

The pledge of brotherhood and gentle affection helped Merry to relax, at least enough to look up and meet Faramir's eyes. "You are...to punish me, then? For disobeying your command to be careful, and for...endangering the lives of others?" Merry was kicking himself for acting...well, for acting more impulsive than his younger cousin. Pippin wasn't crazy enough to go charging into a pack of orcs, without anyone beside him. At least not of late. The last time that Merry had seen Pippin, before the army left for the Blackgate, Pippin had been taking care of him.

Faramir regarded Merry with kind empathy, as he began, "I'm not sure what I should do with you, Merry, to be honest. Certainly, you need more training, and trust me, you will get it. But I'm not sure that I have the right to dictate consequences to you, beyond that."

Merry swallowed nervously, fighting guilt and worry. Guilt, and his determination to do the right thing, won out, so he offered, "I...I will accept that you have that right."

Faramir sighed, and reached out to gently squeeze Merry's shoulder, "Do me a favor," The Steward of Gondor appealed, "And never give someone who hasn't your fealty the right to discipline you, before knowing how they intend to do so."

"I know you, well enough, after these past weeks." Merry countered, his voice faltering, "I know that you will be fair."

"I can do what I think is fair." Faramir agreed, "But I would feel better if I could turn you over to your own people, young as you still are, and as...sympathetic, as I am, to your errors of this evening. However, Frodo is...in no state to hear of it. And Samwise needs no other worries now, save Frodo. And the four of you are very much alone here in the lands of Men, save for one another."

"We are not alone." Merry retorted, his eyes burning with conviction, "We are not alone while Strider, Legolas, and Gimli yet live. I am not alone while Eowyn still breathes. And not while he who is both Boromir's brother and Eowyn's betrothed is here, in this very house."

At that, Faramir pulled Merry hesitatingly into his arms. Merry stilled for a moment, and then allowed himself to rest his head on Faramir's shoulder, crying bitter tears for the things he'd seen as a captive of the orcs, and during the battle, and over his worries for how the Shire fared and Frodo's continuing weakness. After his tears had run dry, and his composure returned, Merry flushed as he got up quickly, "Sorry, Lord Faramir. I...it was all..."

"All too much," Faramir finished for him, with an understanding nod, "I have been there, Merry. There is no shame in tears, after surviving such horrors, and worrying for those left behind, and those who still bear wounds." Faramir sighed, "But your death would not have improved the situation. And you very easily could have died tonight. So I am planning to do with you what I
would do with a young Ranger-in-training who had made such a mistake. Give you a sound spanking, so that you have a reminder to heed your commander and a reason not to 'lose your head,' again. And assign you to certain chores, at Warden Del's Rider Swidhund's discretion, for very much the same reasons.

Merry squirmed uncomfortably, "Um...maybe just the chores? I really do hate washing things." Merry explained sincerely.

Faramir chuckled lightly, "Good try. I recall that one of my brother's squires, Derufin, once made a similar request of Boromir."

Merry made a face. "I can just imagine what he said. Boromir wasn't above applying a swift whack on the arse with the flat of his blade, when he thought that Pip or I weren't paying attention to his training. Or letting us take a hit that was hard enough to bruise. Although never so much that it slowed us down, or hurt much beyond the next few hours."

"That does sound like my brother." Faramir agreed, the twinkle in his eyes subsiding into grief for a moment, before he rallied, "In fact, Boromir was of the opinion that the best way to learn not to repeat a mistake which could have been deadly, is to give the erring soldier a serious spanking."

Merry made a sound that was a cross between a groan and an 'eep,' at that. Faramir squeezed his shoulder again, "Take heart, dear Merry. I promise that I shall use only my hand, and that I will not be too hard on you. Your anger was understandable; your means of dealing with it was not, but I can tell that you are most sincerely repentant, and I think that your mistake stems more from inexperience as from a will to disobey."

Nodding jerkily, Merry tried to rally himself to accept again the consequences that Faramir had set out.

"You do not need to accept any consequences from me, besides continuing to train as I know you had already intended to do." Faramir reassured Merry gently, "I will not think less of you for it, I swear. But nor will I permit you to continue to ride forays with the guards and the Rohirrim, because I will not be able to assure myself that you took this mistake seriously, and learned from it."

At Merry's uneasy, reflective silence, Faramir offered kindly, "You may take a few minutes to think about it, Meriadoc. The spanking would be best done now, so that you have the night to sleep it off before beginning your chores in the morning. However, I would be willing to address your errors of this night at any point in time that you feel comfortable entrusting me to do so." In a neutral tone, Faramir diplomatically offered, "Or, alternatively, you may wait for the return of the King, who may feel differently on the matter."

Merry sighed forlornly. He was fairly sure that Strider's solution to Merry's idiocy this evening would have been along the same lines as Faramir's, except quite probably more stern. "Umm...yes, allright."

Faramir quirked an eyebrow, "Yes...what?"

Blushing, Merry explained, "Yes, I trust you, and I want my mistake dealt with between us so that I can keep acting as the squire of Rohan's late King, and riding in the patrols with his men."

"Brave hobbit." Faramir squeezed Merry's shoulder again, the Steward's gray eyes gleaming with approval. "But then, in my experience, all hobbits are brave." Faramir continued.

Merry had to laugh at that, long and loudly, much to the bafflement of the Steward of Gondor. At
length, with tears of merriment streaming down his face, Merry explained, "Oh, Faramir, that just isn't true. Just wait until you meet the Sackville-Bagginses."

"I think I'll pass, if I might." Faramir replied solemnly, but that twinkle back in his gray eyes for a moment, before it faded to sympathy. "Now, if you will, Squire Meriadoc, doff your britches and come to my side."

That was a very unpleasant instruction to hear, at any time, Merry thought to himself. But there was nothing for it but to do as Faramir asked, so the Squire of Rohan took a deep breath, pushed down his trousers, and allowed Faramir to help him position himself over the Steward's lap.

Faramir paused for a moment, then patted Merry's back gently, before flipping up the end of the hobbit's long shirt and apply a sharp smack to the center of Merry's white bottom. Merry gasped at the sudden pain in his rear. It wasn't awful, but as the second smack to the curve of his left buttock and the third on the right side of his bottom settled into a rhythm of spanks heating up the entire surface of his backside, the hobbit's breath became ragged as he struggled to remain still. Faramir quickly moved to focusing his swats on the undercurves of Merry's bottom, and Merry couldn't help but squirm and kick a bit at that. Still, sooner than the hobbit had expected, he was back on his feet, with Faramir kneeling before him and helping him to right his clothing.

Merry accepted the dry, fresh smelling handkerchief Faramir offered him. After only a few deep breaths, Merry was able to gain control of himself well enough to offer Faramir a ghost of his normal cheery grin. "I think that you don't know much about hobbits, my Lord Faramir. For I received worse smackings than that from my mother when I was but a lad of ten."

Faramir huffed in amusement, before gently swatting at Merry's warmed bottom. Then, with another gentle squeeze to Merry's shoulder, Faramir gestured him towards a well-cushioned settee, and went to answer a quiet knock at the door. Merry brightened to see that it was Eowyn, with a tray of what looked promisingly like a late supper.

Chapter End Notes

Please do let me know if you enjoyed this chapter! Constructive criticism is welcome too! Many thanks!
Tea Leaves & Time

Chapter Summary

It's hard to know someone's true strength, until they've been in hot water. Sometimes, more than once.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you to everyone who has left feedback on earlier chapters, and encouraged me to keep going with this series! The next chapter will be a flashback to twenty-three year old Faramir and twenty-eight year old Boromir.

Excerpt from previous chapter:

"Faramir huffed in amusement, before gently swatting at Merry's warmed bottom. Then, with another gentle squeeze to Merry's shoulder, Faramir gestured him towards a well-cushioned settee, and went to answer a quiet knock at the door. Merry brightened to see that it was Eowyn, with a tray of what looked promisingly like a late supper."

[Merry POV]

Giving Merry a penetrating look that fell somewhere between approbation and affection, Eowyn set the tray down, before exchanging a few words with Faramir. Faramir then left the room, urging them not to wait on him. Merry needed no further encouragement to address most of his attention to the ham, cheese, and dried fruits on the tray. He even managed to encourage Eowyn to eat a bit, though she wrinkled her pretty nose at the ham. The Rohirrim had few pigs, as Merry recalled.

After a few moments, Faramir returned with a flask of something at his waist and what looked like a full tea service. The Steward of Gondor took a travel brazier - which he evidently knew quite well how to use - and started three different pots of tea, each with different herbs from a selection on the tray which Eowyn had brought.

"Are we really that thirsty?" Merry asked in surprise, squirming a bit on the settee. Even with the soft cushioning, his sore hindquarters were causing him a bit of discomfort.

"Hmm?" Faramir remarked, tearing his attention away from the flames in the brazier. Meriadoc saw ghosts in the Steward's eyes for a moment, and thought of Lord Denethor who had almost burnt his son to death, and who had succeeded in burning himself to death. Eowyn reached out and laced her fingers through Faramir's, squeezing her betrothed's hand and then not letting go.


"Don't trouble yourself." Merry replied. He could drink three pots of tea if Faramir really wanted to.
Huffing a laugh again, and with the twinkle back in his gray eyes, Faramir explained, "It's not just tea. It's a metaphor."

Merry had never heard of tea being a metaphor. But it sounded better than thinking about his other worries, so he nodded encouragingly. Eowyn, as well, appeared intrigued, if a little bemused.

Faramir, however, declined to explain further. When the tea kettles whistled, he poured just a few teaspoons full of the different teas into each of three cups, for Merry and Eowyn, and a larger cup of the sweetest smelling tea for himself.

Eowyn and Merry exchanged questioning glances, but gamely drank of the sweetest smelling tea at Faramir's prompting.

Merry wrinkled his nose at it. The tea tasted entirely too sweet to him, but he supposed it might be pleasant for those with more of a sweet tooth.

"Mmm," Eowyn murmured with surprised, almost child-like pleasure. "This is wonderful, Faramir. It tastes like the tea my grandmother used to make for us on holidays."

Faramir smiled softly at her, before explaining, "It is aesa tea, grown only in and about Dol Amroth. I believe that grandfather Adrahil sent it to your grandmother, whose own mother was a Princess of Dol Amroth." Teasingly, Faramir offered, "I will give you a full cup of aesa tea, beloved, but not until after you taste the other teas as well."

Eowyn made a face back at Faramir, and mock-commanded that if she must wait for her tea, then Faramir must offer her biscuits as well. Merry ducked his head into his cup, to hide a smile. Then he tried the second tea, which was more to his taste. A fine black tea, similar to those preferred in the Shire. It tasted almost like home, but not quite strong enough. The hobbits of Brandy Hall preferred their tea black and sweet, with each cup almost strong enough to hold the spoon up on its own.

"It's well enough, Faramir." Eowyn said of the second tea. "Rather plain, though."

Faramir merely nodded, and gestured towards the last cup.

Both Eowyn and Merry made a face of disgust at the last of the three teas. Merry struggled to find something nice to say about it, while Eowyn bluntly observed, "That's horrid. I hope it was a joke?"

Faramir laughed aloud. "No jest. It truly is horrid." Faramir agreed, putting aside a cup of aesa tea on a warming plate for Eowyn. "But if we turn the heat back up..." Faramir added, starting the brazier again, re-heating the three pots of tea to strengthen them.

The kettles whistled in chorus again, and again Faramir poured them each a sample. Eowyn took a cup of the Aesa tea eagerly, and Merry with an internal sigh. Both spat out the tea, as Faramir hid a smile and offered the each a kerchief.

"Some teas, although sweet when just warmed by the flame, do not withstand well the heat in earnest." He told them, gesturing to the second cup.

Eowyn murmured something which had Faramir flushing and ducking his head. Merry hoped it had been something foul, but he still took the stronger black tea with a smile on his face. It was perfect; hot and sweet and strong, just like they made in the shire. With an understanding smile, Faramir filled a full cup of the black tea for Merry, while Eowyn shrugged. "It's well enough, Faramir. Probably just the thing for patients in shock."
"My Lady attends her lessons well," Faramir told her. The Steward's face was somber, but Meriadoc was fairly sure that there was a teasing twinkle in Faramir's eyes. Eowyn tossed her hair and murmured something about foxes and horse-riders. Faramir choked on a laugh, before making the point, "Some teas taste well-enough when heated once; and become even stronger when tested again by the flames."

Faramir favored Merry with a slight smile, and Merry realized that Faramir was speaking of him. He smiled back, shy at the praise. Then Faramir gestured them to the last cup of tea. Both Merry and Eowyn picked up the third cup hesitantly. Last time, this tea had tasted of dirt and grass to Merry. He did not like to think what it would taste like stronger. But, to his surprise, he found himself drinking it all with a smile on his face. Now, reheated and concentrated, it tasted like a fine fall day. There was still a hint of grass, perhaps, but there was also a hint of pipe smoke, and apple cider, and bracing autumn wind.

"You never know how strong tea leaves are," Faramir said quietly, "Until they have been in hot water, and some of them," Faramir added with a rueful half-grin, "multiple times."

At that, Merry had to laugh a bit, thinking of Pippin, and how his cousin had, after many trials, come to show his great strength of character and bravery in a consistent manner. Then his mirth disappeared, for when they were the orcs' captives, it was Pippin who had protected him. And again, after the Battle of the Pelennor, it had been his younger cousin, not even of age, who had half-carried Merry from the field to the House of Healing. Merry was too preoccupied to notice Faramir's and Eowyn's gazes falling upon him. Nor did he see Eowyn's cornflower blue eyes turn to Faramir.

[Faramir POV]

Eowyn's eyes were eloquent. 'Merry is so very sad. Do SOMETHING, my Lord.'

Faramir wasn't exactly sure what else he could do, if the tea hadn't made his point for him. But there wasn't a problem under the sun that he wouldn't try to solve for Eowyn.

As Faramir pondered what to do, a light, musical voice began to whisper through the corridors of his memory. It was like the sea breeze rippling the bellwood chimes found on the balconies of the old sandstone castle of Dol Amroth-by-the-sea. Like his mother Finduilas' voice, the day she had told him and Boromir that nothing stayed the same, not the seashore, not even the friendship between brothers.

"I'll always take care of Fara. He'll always be mine. And my friend." Boromir had stubbornly disagreed, while Faramir thought silently over his mother's words. He knew that he was meant to take care of Boromir just as Brom took care of him, love Boromir as Brom loved him. So Faramir knew that his mother couldn't mean that they wouldn't still be friends.

"If you remain friends with someone, my sunshine son," Finduilas told Boromir, curving one thin arm around her elder son, "then the relationship between you must change; it can still be good, and strong, a comfort and support to you both. If you are both lucky and work hard to appreciate one another, then not only the love between you, but also the understanding can deepen over time. But the relationship between friends must change over time; change, or the friendship die."

"That doesn't make sense." Ten year old Boromir argued, and Finduilas merely sighed, and stroked his golden hair. Her eyes met Faramir's, and he knew that this - well, this whenever it happened - it would be another time when he had to help Boromir. Like Brom helped him, with his weapons practice and riding. He nodded back to his mother. Faramir would do his best; there wasn't anything under the sun that he wouldn't do for his mother Finduilas.
Faramir took a deep breath as the memory loosed its strong hold on him. Then he thought to himself, 'Mother, I love you, but get out of my head. I lost you too soon...but your voice still whispers through my mind, prompting me to be the better man when I just want to keep my pain private.'

But there had been no arguing with Finduilas when she was alive, and there was no arguing even with the whisper of her shade. So Faramir leaned forward, and shared a story of Boromir with Merry, to whom it might mean something. For if strong Boromir could bear for his relationship with his brother to change, for him to change...then it would be no shame for Merry to do the same. Even if sharing the story brought the grief of Boromir's death again to Faramir, much like probing a wound which had not even begun to heal.
Chapter Summary

Everyone needs a helping hand, sometimes. Faramir shares a story of a time when Boromir once did, during Faramir's early days as a Captain.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left feedback on earlier chapters, and encouraged me to keep going with this series!

Quotes:

If you don't understand how a man could both love his brother dearly and want to wring his neck at the same time, then you were probably an only child." - paraphrased from a quote by Linda Sunshine

"Yet between the brothers there was great love, and had been since childhood, when Boromir was the helper and protector of Faramir. No jealousy or rivalry had arisen between them since, for their father's favour or for the praise of men." - J.R.R. Tolkien, the Appendices.

"It is in the shelter of each other that the people live." - Irish proverb

Excerpt from previous chapter:

"[T]here had been no arguing with Finduilas when she was alive, and there was no arguing even with the whisper of her shade. So Faramir leaned forward, and shared a story of Boromir with Merry, to whom it might mean something. For if strong Boromir could bear for his relationship with his brother to change, for him to change...then it would be no shame for Merry to do the same. Even though sharing the story brought the grief of Boromir's death again to Faramir, much like probing a wound which had not even begun to heal."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Citadel of Minas Tirith, Approximately a Dozen Years Previous

A tall, slender grey-eyed man stood in front of the thick wooden door of the Lord Steward's office. Being the Steward's younger son, one might think that Faramir would have less trepidation than the average petitioner. And perhaps he did; it was often said that Denethor was a hard man but a fair one. By the latest years of Gondor's long struggle against its ancient enemy, Lord Denethor sometimes seemed warped and off, even to those whom he knew and loved well, such as his heir and his younger brother-by-law the Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth. Still, Faramir did not have the same fearful trepidation of a man who had never entered the rarefied surroundings of the Lord Steward's offices. On some days, Denethor remembered that he thought of Faramir as a loyal and competent, if somewhat uninspired, Captain of Gondor. On other days, he remembered that
Faramir's birth had bought the long, lingering death of his wife Finduilas. Or, sometimes worse, that Faramir listened to his own heart and mind above the orders his Steward and Father gave him.

"Please,' Faramir importuned Eru, the Valar, and any of his ancestors who might be listening and inclined to look kindly upon him, 'Please let this be one of those days when he is charitably inclined towards me. Please let him have just reviewed the reduced casualty lists from Ithilien, or the amount of weaponry and other largess we have captured from the enemy. Please, do NOT let this be one of the days when he has been poring over the intelligence reports, and based on information from some source that he will tell NO ONE of, he has decided that I am hiding things from him. Or worse yet, have been reminded of Mother, and that but for me, he would still have her.'

Then a deep voice, one more suited to the field of battle than the hallowed halls of the Citadel, called 'Enter,' and Faramir had to empty his mind of any thoughts but the one indulgence he had come to beg of his father.

Lord Denethor snapped briskly, "What do you want, Faramir?" He had barely glanced away from the scrolls spread across his desk.

Faramir sighed in relief. That wasn't his father Denethor's truly irritated voice; it was merely the tone that indicated that the Lord Steward was busy and had little time for interruptions. So Faramir came directly to his point, "My Lord Steward, I have come to ask another month's leave from my command in Ithilien."

At that, Denethor did look up to meet Faramir's eyes. As his gray-eyed gaze met Faramir's and held, the Steward's eyes narrowed, and then the stern lines on his face softened. "Ah. To keep Boromir from overdoing."

"Yes, my Lord Father." Faramir agreed. One of Boromir's dearest friends, Lord Tavasond the heir of the Lebennin, had been killed in action recently. He'd met his death taking an arrow for Boromir. The Steward's heir had taken his friend's loss hard. Faramir had been recalled from Ithilien at around the time of Tavasond's death, not so coincidentally, he thought. There were few subjects on which the Steward and his second son were in complete accord, but loving Boromir was one of them. Another was that Boromir was a bit of a hothead, as demonstrated in his recent reckless charge and subsequent injury. Boromir was also an awful patient, and still grieving his friend's death. Denethor wasn't good at dealing with anyone's grief, even that of his beloved eldest son. But Faramir was. And Denethor was a big enough man to let him be.

"You can have another two weeks." Denethor allowed, even going to the trouble of explaining his decision, "I need you back in Ithilien in good enough time to take a trip into Harad yourself before the campaign season really begins. I've some intelligence on changing alliances between the Beys in South Gondor which we might be able to take advantage of, if you and your spies play your roles well."

The reasoning was sound, so Faramir nodded.

"Don't tell Boromir the nature of the task you must return to finish." Denethor added.

"It would not do to upset him." Faramir agreed. Boromir hated Faramir's secondary career as a spy with a passion. Upon receiving that reassurance, Denethor quickly dismissed Faramir, and Faramir lost no time in tendering his farewells.

Faramir spent the next week in and out of the House of Healing visiting Boromir and several others of his men. As needed, Faramir cajoled his brother, amused him, nagged him, and harassed him. It seemed to do the trick, as Boromir was out of the House and back in his own chambers in
record time. Faramir also spent time talking with the grieving mother of Tavasond's unborn child, the brothers' childhood companion Nessanie.

A week before he was scheduled to return to Ithilien, Faramir sat perched on the table beside Boromir's bed, playing cards with his grumpy brother. Both young men were unusually quiet. Boromir characteristically so, after Tavan's death. Faramir, pondering how to approach a sensitive issue.

"My hand." Faramir announced with the shadow of a grin.

"You always win." Boromir grumbled back.

Faramir snorted, following the pre-set pattern of a thousand arguments. "I've tried and tried to teach you how to count cards. If you won't lower yourself to it than you won't win."

"It's cheating," Boromir shot back, now beginning to smile a bit himself, "And I ought to thrash you soundly for it, cheeky little knave that you are. Even if you are my own obnoxious baby brother."

Faramir nodded somberly, but with a twinkle in his gray eyes. "Yes. My many faults reflect poorly on my teachers. Who include, oh wait, you, my dashing elder brother."

Boromir chuckled, before swatting idly at Faramir's red-gold hair. "Such a jester. Now, out with it."

"Hmm?"

"Out with it, Kit. What's really eating at you?" Boromir elaborated, while gesturing for Faramir to hand him the grapes.

Momentarily nonplussed, Faramir gaped and blushed before asking, "How do you even know that there is something on my mind?"

"You may know almost everything in the world," Boromir replied, with an elder brother's lazy grin, "but I know you." Then Boromir snapped his fingers, "Grapes, Faramir, or have you gone deaf as well as dumb?"

Faramir handed his brother the fruit, and then decided just to go to the heart of the matter. Boromir appreciated bluntness. Well, he did once he'd finished getting angry over it and shouting at the insult.

"You should go slowly with Nessa," Faramir managed, "And you shouldn't blame yourself for Tavas' death. It wasn't your fault that he fell in battle, achieving the goal of protecting his Captain-General and future Steward. And its not your fault that you love Nessanie. Love just happens, Brom."

The grapes fell, plop plop plop onto the stone floor of Boromir's bedchamber, as Faramir's older brother stared at him, mouth open wide in shock.

If the subject hadn't been so serious and heart-rending, Faramir would have been proud of himself. He took pride in being one of the few people in Gondor who routinely shocked their valiant Captain-General.

"How...in the name of Eru and all the Valar, did you know of that, Faramir? I haven't told a soul!" Boromir protested, once he had found his tongue.
Faramir started to answer, only to stop as Boromir irritably waved him to silence. "Never mind." Boromir put his head in his hands, and Faramir leaned forward to squeeze his brother's nearer shoulder supportively.

"I arranged to have her visit tomorrow, when the Lord Steward our father will be out reviewing repairs to the Rammas Echor." Faramir said quietly, "Was that ill-done of me?"

"No!...Yes...I don't know, Faramir! What in Eru's name can I possibly say to her?" Boromir answered.

"Tell her you blame yourself for Tavas' death. That's true enough, wrong-headed of you as it is. There was nothing you could have done to save him."

"But I've never been so undone by a soldier's death before, not since I was a beardless boy...." Boromir objected.

Faramir sighed, "Brom, don't be a nitwit. This is the first time you've lost a close childhood friend. That is enough to be undone even without the complicated situation with Nessa."

"But if you suspected, others may have, as well. What if she knows?"

"I know you very well," Faramir replied in a bracing tone, "And I began to suspect that there was...someone, a year prior." Faramir remembered the occasion well. He had been accustomed to teasing his brother Boromir about his womanizing ways, as had a select number of Boromir's friends. At a certain point during the previous year, Boromir's flirtations had changed, becoming more an exercise, a cover. Faramir was in a unique position to realize that, being intimately familiar with both Boromir and the mechanics of putting on a front. Quietly, Faramir added, "I doubt that anyone else has guessed, nor need they. It is perfectly understandable that you will be there for Nessa during this time. If things develop later, than that will not be looked at much askance. Just be patient."

"Oh, what do you know of it, virgin that you are?" Boromir mocked irritably.

To Boromir's surprise and fascination, his younger brother blushed. "Why, Faramir," The Steward's heir crowed delightedly, "You've been holding out on me. Tell me, who was the lady who at last overcame the pure virtue of my baby brother, the perpetual virgin?" Anticipating a good story, the Steward's heir popped another grape into his mouth.

"It, um, it wasn't one woman..." Faramir mumbled, still blushing furiously. "She had friends..."

Boromir choked on the grape, and Faramir had to pound his brother's back until Boromir caught his breath again. "Tell." Boromir ordered, once he could speak again.

And so Faramir did, leaving out many of the details. Boromir did not approve of Faramir's occasionally playing the spy in Harad. As he spoke, Boromir's gaze turned from fascinated and teasing to a bit sympathetic.

"Not all that you had expected, eh, little brother? I am sorry for you. For me, every night spent in passion was a fine one, until I realized that I wanted more than that. And with my dear friend's love, of all women." Boromir stopped to sigh in bitter irony, before turning his attention back to his brother, "But you, you were born knowing that love was more. I had always expected you to take the Uncle Imrahil route. But we cannot all marry our common-born true love at a bare, beardless twenty years of age."

"Among other things, our father would have killed us." Faramir agreed somberly. That got a laugh from Boromir. Faramir continued more seriously, regret and resignation and affection mingled in
his voice and his heart, "You were right. I had thought to wait until I was wed, or at the least betrothed. But around us there is so much death..." That, and Gondor had needed the information that Dervorin's contact Sayyida had possessed. Sayyida had wanted Faramir as well as Dervorin in her bed, and one thing had led to another. Faramir couldn't bring himself to regret all of it. In his twenty-three years of life, he'd done much worse things for Gondor than sleep with a willing woman, and Sayyida had become a friend of sorts, besides an invaluable resource.

Faramir had gone quiet to long, so he added, "Dev was there," to distract his brother, elaborating, "It was actually his idea."

"Of course he was, and of course it was." Boromir drawled, "Any trouble you get into, he's always there."

"Him or you." Faramir teased, before growing serious again, "Don't mention it to Gendarion, or Ynithe." Gendarion was Dervorin's cousin, the heir to the Ringlo Vale, and also one of Boromir's good friends.

"Of course I wouldn't, Fara." Boromir assured, shaking his head, "I did my best not to tell Gendan of all of my exploits. Especially since marrying Ynithe, he's been almost worse than Father. For all I know, he'd go running to his father, to complain of Dev corrupting you. And no one wants to deal with a disapproving Lord Tyorvond." Tyorvond served as Denethor's Captain-General, after Denethor himself left the field, and since Boromir himself had yet to gain sufficient years and experience.

Boromir leaned back against his pillows, considering his brother. "You know, Faramir, if I didn't know you better, I'd think that you had just made up all of that, to distract me."

Faramir grinned, half-embarrassed, half-rueful. "I didn't. I did choose now to tell you, to distract you."

"Ai," Boromir sighed deeply, "What am I going to do? She could never love me, and I can't afford the distraction."

"You can't afford to give up, either." Faramir argued.

"What do you know of it? Just because you've slept with someone doesn't mean you've had to struggle with a hopeless love." Boromir retorted.

Faramir regarded his brother silently for a moment. At last, he said, "I know a lot about trying to win someone's love, Boromir. And I judge your case not to be as hopeless as mine."

The two exchanged a long, speaking look, and then Boromir nodded. "I'll see Ness tomorrow. Thank you."

"What are brothers for? You've certainly cut through the knot of my problems often enough."

"Well, you are more problematical than I." Boromir drawled, with an elder brother's superior grin.

After that night, Faramir worried less about his brother, although perhaps he should not have. A scant few weeks after returning to Ithilien, he was summoned home by the news that his brother had been injured, repulsing a band of orcs who had been having a go at Gondor's borders. Denethor was worried enough to call Faramir back, although he probably should not have. But Faramir's lieutenants held Ithilien well enough, and it was a relief to Faramir later, to have learned that they could.

Boromir was seriously injured this time. He'd led a dangerous sortie to rescue an overextended
squire. Then Boromir had stayed in the rear of the retreat, even after he was identified as the Steward's son, and all the arrows loosed by the other side were aimed at him. He'd taken several arrows, and a long slash up his leg.

Faramir would remember for the rest of his life how scared he had felt, waiting in a room at the hated House of Healing beside his father for news of his brother's condition. He thought that Lord Denethor would remember it, as well. When the healer came to tell him that he held out hope, but that the Steward's heir had lost a lot of blood, he offered to let one of them go in.

Faramir would have deferred to his father, but Denethor had other ideas.

"You go." The Steward ordered. "Tell him that you need him. Tell him that I'm being unfair to you. Tell him that you're planning to go dance naked in Harad. Tell him anything, to make him stay out of the Halls of Mandos. I cannot - we cannot - lose him."

Faramir's jaw dropped, but none of those were bad ideas. He spoke to Boromir for hours. Boromir got stronger, and after a day of Denethor and Faramir taking turns at his bedside, the healers declared Boromir out of danger.

"Go bathe." Denethor ordered Faramir, at that point. "You smell like a cave in the woods."

Faramir huffed a slight laugh, forgetting, for the moment, with whom he was speaking. "I wonder why that is?" Faramir jested.

Denethor smiled slightly, his gray eyes alight with immeasurable relief and even a touch of rare amusement. "You did well, today, boy." He praised Faramir, "Now go get yourself cleaned up, and you can come back to sleep beside him. I must herd men, and our Boromir should not wake alone."

After Boromir was well on the road to recovery, Faramir realized that he was quietly furious at his brother. Not unsympathetic, but enraged. "If you think, in that rock of a head of yours, that either Tavasond or Nessanie would be pleased by your death, then you are a greater fool than I have ever thought you to be. And I was the one who re-wrote most of your essays at the academy."

"Nag, nag, nag." Boromir muttered, stroking his barely healed leg uncomfortably.

Faramir suppressed an urge to kick him. "Brom, what were you thinking?" Faramir demanded instead.

Boromir blustered, and would have rejected the criticisms, but for that they came from Faramir, and Boromir had had naught but time to think, the past few days. "I'm not sure," he answered, "I was thinking that I had to make up, for Tavasond and all of the others who can't fight with us anymore. And feeling guilty for Nessanie's babe, who will grow up without a father."

Faramir was sympathetic, but unwilling to lose his brother due to misplaced guilt. "I understand, but it was foolish, brother. Should you be so thoughtless again, I will deal with you as you would with me." Faramir promised.

"I'm the older brother, Fara."

Fara grinned at his brother through his worry and concern. "And I'm of age now, as well. And of equal rank, I'll have you know, with the both of us Captains."

"Still," Boromir blustered, well aware that Fara, who had been helping him move about, could easily take him now. "Its not right."
Faramir's smile slipped off his face. "Oh? Do I love you less than you love me? Or is my dignity less valuable than yours?"

Boromir groaned. "Of course not."

Fara gently grabbed his older brother 'round the waist and lowered Boromir over his own lap. "Fara?" Boromir asked in concern, "I thought you said next time, little brother."

Faramir pulled his brother's nightshirt up. "I had. But then you insulted me, and I changed my mind. Well you know that had our positions been reversed, you would have spanked me soundly for my foolishness. So I shall you, that you need not feel I am incapable of taking care of you when you have need."

Boromir yelped as his brother's firm hand crashed down on his backside for the first time. "But Fara," he argued grumpily, deciding not to struggle as he was still weak as a kitten. "You know Father shall chastise me thusly as well, 'ere he sends me back to my regiment."

Faramir didn't pause in his spanking of his brother, but it was there nonetheless in the room, the normally unspoken of Oliphaunt that was Denethor's lack of care for his youngest son. Denethor had never once personally disciplined Faramir, preferring to hand the child off to a guard with instructions for punishment. Such occasions, so far as Boromir knew, had been blessedly rare, for Faramir had not by nature been a difficult child, save in ways that were normally quiet and difficult to observe without careful and perceptive attention. Attention his father had never paid, though his brother had. 'Twas a somewhat embarrassing reversal of roles for him to be over Faramir's knee, Boromir reflected, but still he preferred the embarrassment and the pain to thinking of how his Father had failed his brother, or of how foolish he had been to fight so recklessly, caught up in grief over Tavis's death and his emotional turmoil over Nessa.

Boromir stifled a yelp as Faramir quite skillfully and sharply targeted his sit spots. "I'm sorry, little brother." The elder offered, starting to squirm. The pain, though relatively mild to one accustomed to feeling his father's paddle, was cathartic for his guilty conscience. "I am sorry for worrying you, and sorry that ...ow...curse you, you have uncommonly large and firm hands considering your scrawny frame..."

Faramir chuckled a bit at that, but it was a watery chuckle, leading Boromir to believe Faramir was no more enjoying punishing him than he had ever enjoyed punishing his younger brother.

"I'm sorry that you have not had the safety of our father's regard these years, as well as my own," Boromir got out between muffled yelps, feeling rather sorry for any disobedient rangers under his little brother's command.

Faramir sighed, ending the spanking and helping his older brother up, then to lay on his bed, where Faramir curled around his half-reclining brother. "You can be sorry for worrying me by nearly dying, Brom. And for worrying Nessa and your other friends and even our father as well, for that matter. But 'tis I should apologize to you, who had to act as father to me when most older brothers were cheerfully tormenting their pesky younger siblings."

"Nay, fool." Brom reassured, catching the rising Faramir off-balance and pulling him back into an embrace. "I was glad to be your friend and protector as well as your brother. Always, except when it involves causing you pain. And I'm honored to have you as my friend and protector as well. Though to be fair, you have been ever since you first taught me how to stop reversing my letters, back when you were just a tot."

Faramir returned his embrace, murmuring "There are many different ways to love and protect..."
someone, I suppose.” The younger brother then kissed the elder softly on the forehead in farewell. "I must head back to my post tonight." Faramir apologized. "Your recovery is assured if you do not overdo, and Ithilien is being pushed from every side. Nessa will visit tomorrow, and Uncle Imrahil at the end of the week. I leave you in good hands, besides our Father's."

"Have a care, kit." Boromir instructed sternly. "I hear of your antics getting much riskier up there, I'll take leave that I might ride up and supervise you. And I'll bring Sergeant Menohtar with me, and leave you to him." Boromir grinned, "And you can ask Erchirion, or even Uncle Imrahil, whether it matters to old Menohtar whether one of his Swanlings is a newly-made Captain or a raw recruit, when it comes to foolish risks."

Faramir winced. "Aye, I'll be careful." For well Faramir knew that rank and station mattered little to Menohtar. The old sea salt might only be a sergeant in Imrahil's navy, but he was also Imrahil's uncle-by-marriage. Because of that, Menohtar seemed to view himself as the protector of all of Imrahil's children and his nephews. On top of that, though the new Captain of the Rangers always welcomed his brother the Captain-General of Gondor's armies to Ithilien, Boromir's visits more often than not resulted in headaches for Faramir. Or rather, a sore backside, although often a headache as well. In addition to a strong arm and a stout paddle, Boromir possessed a loud and booming voice. Even his whisper was loud and penetrating.

Boromir looked at his brother sternly, crossing his arms in a paternal fashion even as he squirmed on his recently-spanked bottom. Faramir had to cough to hide a smile, and then decided not to bother.

At first Boromir's eyes narrowed at the grin, and then the humor of the situation got to him, too, and he had to smile back. The brothers shared a moment of perfect camaraderie, before Boromir fixed Faramir with a serious look. "I mean it, Fara. About being careful. I might only be able to visit, and at that not frequently, due to the distance of your posting and the fact that, crazy spy network aside, you run it quite well. But I CAN ask Imrahil for the indefinite loan of Menohtar to serve as your personal sergeant."

"Oh, for the love of...Boromir, I swear to you, I will be careful." Silently, Faramir amended, 'As careful as I CAN be." Then he gave his brother a final, reassuring smile, and left.

Boromir sat on his bed for a few more moments, before carefully rolling onto his side. Which allowed him to not only rub his sore arse, but also pick up a lap-desk to compose a letter to his Uncle Imrahil, explaining Faramir's need for a responsible and PRACTICAL sergeant. Boromir knew that he didn't even have to mention names...he and Imrahil had discussed this matter before.

Minas Tirith, Spring of 3019, House of Healing

Faramir blinked, clearing his mind of the past and then smiling slightly at the pensive Merry, back in the House of Healing in the spring of the Great Year 3019. "It has been my experience," Faramir summarized, "that the nature of the relationships between friends and family changes over time. Differences in age, among other things, start to mean less and less. It won't be the same, between you and Pippin. It shouldn't be the same. But your cousin growing up and becoming a greater person than he was when he was younger, does not make you a lesser person, not even in comparison. If you can look at him and see him as he is now, instead of seeing only him as he was when he was younger, than you will both be stronger together."

Merry nodded, remembering certain moments in his own past. First, when Frodo had come to stay with his family again. Merry had been very, very, small, and Frodo had been a lonely, bookish, day-dreaming lad of twelve, who had taken the time to read to Merry, and tell him stories, and go on long rambling walks with him. How Frodo had patiently played with Merry, despite the fact that Merry's little child's games must have held little interest to him. Merry's surprise, at learning
that Frodo was passed around to different family homes, truly no one's child because he was an orphan. How Frodo had tripped over a table during a family party, accidentally breaking a valuable vase. How Merry had taken the blame, even though Frodo tried to object, because on some level Merry knew that it wouldn't be held against him for long, and not so for Frodo.

Poor orphan Frodo, who suddenly became the adoptive son of old, strange, wealthy cousin Bilbo Baggins. Merry remembered the hair-raising unease he had felt around Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, the first Yule after the family knew that Bag End would likely go to Frodo. The special pie that Lobelia had made for Frodo, that baby Pippin had accidentally ruined by pulling on the tablecloth until all the desserts fell to the ground. How that pie had made the dogs sick. Merry's strange panic the following rainy day, when Lobelia had taken Frodo on a walk by the river. Saradoc Brandybuck had noted his son's preoccupation, and on learning why Merry was upset, had followed Frodo. Afterward, Merry remembered his father's drawn, worried face, and Bilbo having a rare serious discussion with Frodo about not going anywhere alone with certain family members. Merry even thought it likely that Frodo had gotten a smacking from Bilbo that day, which was a rare thing for the two of them. Bilbo wasn't the usual type of father figure, and Frodo's only form of naughtiness, most of the time, had been day-dreaming. Which had rarely bothered Bilbo.

During the Quest, Frodo had carried them all. But it had cost him dearly, and now it was time for Merry, and Pippin, and as always Sam, to carry Frodo for awhile. Maybe a long while.

Merry would never know how many of his thoughts Faramir had followed, but Faramir spoke up again, "Family and friends - we all support one another when we're weak, cover one another where we're naked. No one can be strong all the time."

"Yes," Merry told Faramir, after a long few moments, "Yes, I understand what you mean." And Merry met Faramir's eyes, and no longer blamed himself for failing Pippin. Because he hadn't, anymore than Boromir had failed Faramir by needing his aid. Anymore than Frodo had failed Merry, for needing Merry's protection from avaricious members of their family. Merry smiled at Faramir, more at peace despite his renewed worry over Frodo, "Thank you."

Faramir just nodded back, and then Merry applied himself again to the tea tray. Faramir and Eowyn continued talking quietly, something about supply trains. Normally the topic would have interested Merry, but it had been a long day. He fell asleep to the reassuring murmur of Faramir's and Eowyn's voices, his belly full, and his mind more at peace than it had been in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, Faramir tells Eowyn what is troubling to him, keeping a promise he made to Ethiron in chapter two.

Please review! Thanks!
Chapter Summary

An interlude between Faramir and Eowyn, in which confessions are made, promises are fulfilled, and burdens lightened.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Please be warned that there is a brief discussion of attempted rape in this chapter. Also, an unexpectedly seductive Eowyn.

Thank you to everyone who has left feedback on earlier chapters, and encouraged me to keep going with this series!

Quotes:

"There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness but of power. They are messengers of overwhelming grief and of unspeakable love." - Washington Irving

"My friends, you had horses, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours... who knows what she spoke to the darkness, alone, in the bitter watches of the night, when all her life seemed shrinking, and the walls of her bower closing in about her, a hutch to trammel some wild thing in?" - Gandalf, in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings Trilogy

Excerpt from Chapter 2:

"'Turning serious, [Ethiron] met Faramir’s eyes and asked intently. “Will you talk to someone about your losses, my Lord? I will not ask of you that it be a mind healer, just someone you trust. You are carrying too much grief on your shoulders, and it has clouded your eyes at a time when they would best be clear.”

Faramir sighed, and then nodded, meeting Ethiron’s eyes in turn. “I swear that I will, at the earliest opportunity. But now I must get back to the House of Healing, or I will miss supper with Éowyn.”

Ethiron chuckled, clapping the young Steward on the back. “Very well, my Lord.”"

[Eowyn POV]

"Did you see Merry settled?"

"Aye.” Faramir answered with a fond, tired smile. He watched Eowyn, still smiling, as she brushed her hair. Feeling a bit of a tease, she took extra time with it, sometimes looking under her
lashes coyly. He could clearly see that in the mirror, for his smile became less tired and more...well, Eowyn didn't have a word for it, but it made her catch her breath. She felt lit up from the inside, practically glowing.

"Every time I think that I have become accustomed to how beautiful you are, My Lady." Faramir whispered, "You overwhelm me again."

She dropped the brush and went to kick the door shut. Faramir made a slight sound of protest- he was of the opinion that they should not be in her guest chamber in the House of Healing alone, or at least not alone without the door open. But then Eowyn kissed him, and he forgot about his objection. He held her against him, his strong arms taking some of her weight when she went limp. But it left him unbalanced enough that she could use her weight to pull him onto the bed.

"Temptress." He whispered into her ear, half scandalized, half delighted. Entirely in love with her, as she was with him. So in love that they had both going without sleep, spending that time getting to one another. Eowyn realized that they would have to sleep at some point, but she couldn't stop touching him.

"Let's get married now." She suggested breathily, in between kisses.

He moaned, kissing her still, but trying to put some distance between them. Eowyn persisted. Fortunately for her agenda, it was a narrow bed.

"Eowyn!" He objected, "I can't...you can't...mphph." After that, time went faster and slower and sometimes seemed to stop entirely. Eowyn didn't particularly want to be a virgin anymore, but Faramir would not oblige her, not on that one point.

"We can't." He told her, and she knew that he was more-or-less right. More rather than less. Her Rohan and her brother needed her; Gondor needed him. At least for a little while more. They weren't even formally betrothed, as of yet. Her brother had to consent, first. And if Eomer gave her trouble over it, then Bema help him. For Eowyn was more than capable of making her brother regret it. He had already denied her heart's desire once, and lived to regret it. Eowyn would not let him make another decision which they would both regret. If she needed to, she would marry Faramir without Eomer's consent. And if Faramir were no longer Steward but merely custodian of his ancestral lands in Ithilien and the Pelennor...the scandal would be not be so very bad. And Eowyn did not really care about scandal. Not after Grima, and Theoden's illness. Not after Theodred's death, and Helmsdeep. Not after the Witch King, and her uncle's death. What was a little scandal, after that?

"But there are many other things that we can do." Faramir murmured, his voice low and husky in her ear. Eowyn grinned saucily, because Faramir had already shown her that there were.

Time passed. She was sure that she would always remember their first nights together. It was a strange time, just after the end of the war. Normal rules pertaining to behavior and propriety had been abandoned, like the burnt out shells of villages emptied by Sauron's orcs. Faramir and Eowyn took full advantage of that. They kissed and cuddled in darkened corners of the Hall and the gardens. Faramir seemed to know every single quiet hiding place. And, despite Faramir's noble attempts at objecting, her door was closed every night.

Eowyn had never known that her body could feel like this, aching with desire and glowing with pleasure. Or that afterward she would feel as energized as if she had just ridden at a gallop over the plains of her native Rohan.

"Is it always like this?" She had asked him, curled around his body by the soft candlelight, that first night he spent with her.
"Not like this." Faramir had answered, holding her close against his chest. She'd asked him about that, another night. Another night that they hadn't slept when they should have. He'd been with other women, that was not the surprise. What amazed her was that he was ashamed of it.

"You are thirty and three." She had told him, "If you had not been with a woman already, men would question your virility."

But Faramir did not care about that. Like Eowyn did not care about scandal. And she tried not to mind, that he had been with other women before her. It was certainly to her advantage, now. He knew exactly what to do. And she loved him. Those other women might have been in his past. But she was his future.

And oh, did she love him. How he set her above him, just perfectly above his strong thighs. Her hair fell down her back, and then forward to tickle his bare chest. And how he smiled, sweet and admiring and masterful all at once. How he didn't mind that she was on top...but he would sometimes flip them both over. She would be suddenly on her back, wondering how that had happened, until his kisses and caresses removed any such abstract thoughts from her mind. How he made her laugh even at the strangest times, kneeling naked on the bed together, his forehead against hers. He made her unafraid of being embarrassed, unafraid to be honest about how she felt. He made her feel safe, free to be herself, a freedom she'd never had before. He was her future, too.

They fell asleep together again that night, their bodies intertwined. In a nod to propriety, he wore his leggings, and she had re-donned a shift. Normally she slept well and soundly, surrounded by Faramir's arms. His very scent and steady heartbeat beneath her head made her feel safe, even though sometimes he stirred and cried out in his sleep.

But this night, before Faramir's return, Eowyn had served as the assistant healer for a woman suffering the aftermath of a horrible attack. And that triggered memories. Memories of a nightmare figure, moving through the dark shadows of her past. Eowyn didn't scream, but she awoke terrified. Her breath was rapid and shallow, but she was safe. Faramir's strong arms were around her. He whispered soft reassurances, his voice tender but capable at the same time. Held safe in his embrace, Eowyn's nightmares slowly receded. Like a cleansing rain chasing away a fire on the grassy plains of Rohan, the feel and the scent of his bare chest under her cheek extinguished her fears.

"You smell a little bit like freshly cut grass." She told him. "And salt, and maybe a little bit like oranges. And like something I can't quite put a name to, but its nice, too. Very nice."

"Well." Faramir replied, tenderly brushing a strand of blond hair back behind her ear, "No one has ever told me that, before."

Eowyn huffed a laugh. "Good. I like being first."

He kissed her lips gently, the salt of her tears mingling with the taste of him.

"What haunted your dreams?" He asked.

Eowyn knew that he had to be tired. She was exhausted. But he still took the time to talk to her, and she found all of the foul memories spilling out of her. She told him about the poor woman who had been brought to the House of Healing by several of the men the merchant Salabros had drafted to keep the peace at Faramir's direction. And about how the middle-aged seamstress had been violated, by a drunken soldier from the Celos River Vale. One who had deserted his levee before the army left for the Black Gate.
Faramir's lips tightened. "And this happened, in my city?" Something rumbled in the soothing tenor of his baritone voice. Something like distant thunder on the plains, the sound that foretold a deadly storm aborning. Eowyn suddenly feared for the vile man, if he were to end up in the same room as Faramir.

"Lord Sendarion of the Celos River Vale said that he would deal with the matter. The way in which he'd said it, Eowyn had taken it to mean that he had a permanent solution in mind. She hadn't entirely been able to hide her approval, although her focus had never left the traumatized lady in her care. Out of the corner of her eye, she'd seen Lord Sendarion scrutinize her, and nod as if to say that she'd pass muster, but not by much.

Faramir nodded slowly. "And the survivor? How is she?"

"As well as could be expected." Eowyn answered, "The Lord has pledged to pay for her care, until she is ready and able to return to her occupation as [seamstress]."

"Such would be granted her in any case, so he need not. Although I would expect no less of him." Faramir replied, absentmindedly stroking her arm, "Lord Sendar has no fondness for my family, but he is a good man."

"I don't know as it is true that he doesn't like you." Eowyn commented quietly, "More that he is a bit of a curmudgeon, and thinks that you...ah...."

"That I am a complete idiot." Faramir drawled, "Yes, yes, I have picked up on that." He straightened up, and settled her more securely on his lap. "Now, my Lady, my heart. What is it which still troubles you? There is something more, I think."

Eowyn paused, and then confessed in a rush, "I fear that I am unfit for marriage. Grima Wormtongue....he...he....he attacked me." She finally managed, forcing herself to go on, for she could tell that Faramir was angry. Not at her, for though he clutched her hand fiercely, his eyes focused on hers were sympathetic, loving, supportive. But there was a note...and underlying note of roaring fire.

"He didn't rape me." She assured her husband-to-be. "I kneed him in the groin and left him moaning in the hallway like a bleating sheep."

"Good." Faramir said shortly.

Eowyn managed a tiny smile, before shuddering again. "But he tried. Grima did. And he...he bruised me, there, with his foul, grimy little hands. And hurt my breast. I was too shocked at first, to do anything." Her expression hardened, "But that didn't last for long. I'm a shield maiden, and he was, at heart, nothing more a puling wretch. It was a hardly a fair contest, once I started fighting back." Eowyn hated it, but tears had come back to her eyes. She wiped at them angrily.

"My fair warrior." Faramir praised her, before taking her hand in his again. "And that would never make you unfit for marriage, Eowyn. Not that, or...worse. Being hurt in such a terrible way is NEVER something that a woman should be blamed for. At least not in the mind of any man who would deserve her hand in marriage."

"Well, the only opinion which really matters in my case is yours." Eowyn said tartly.

"Yes." Faramir agreed, with a smile that mixed lingering horror and sympathy with a kind of pride, in her and in himself for having won her love. Eowyn found that she didn't mind that, from him. In fact, she rather liked it. And she was about to tell him so, before he added more thoughtfully, "This may shock you, dear Eowyn, but I would still wed you with no reservations.
even had you loved another man in earnest, and given all of yourself to him of your own free will, and later lost him, through fate or circumstance. No matter what had transpired in your past, provided that you love me, I shall marry you.”

Eowyn saw shadows in Faramir’s eyes that she now knew from House gossip bore Nessa’s name, and Boromir's, who would have wed Nessa, but for Denethor’s objection. “It does not shock me,” Eowyn replied, smiling through her tears. “Nor would I want to marry any man but you, who is willing to look beyond what foolishness is expected of women.”

"My Mother's ghost would haunt me if I failed to do so." Faramir told her, and Eowyn had the strange impression that he meant that quite literally.

Eowyn twined her fingers in his. "No one knows - not even my brother. Please don't say anything."

Faramir sighed. "I would never break your confidence, Eowyn. Not unless your life itself were at risk. But I do think that you should tell your brother. " Faramir paused for a moment, as if struggling for words, or pondering what to say. "It can help, just telling someone you love what happened."

"I just did." Eowyn protested, "You."

That won her a smile from Faramir. Well a half-smile at least, an expression that reminded Eowyn of Aragorn. She pushed that thought aside quickly as Faramir continued, even more thoughtfully, "It might help your brother, to understand. So that he will understand what may trouble you, returning to Edoras."

"Eomer would just lose his temper." Eowyn retorted, "Which does no one any good. And besides, he was never interested in anything that happened to me in Edoras. He never listened, he just kept saying it was 'safer.'" She complained bitterly.

Faramir winced. "Men are idiots, sometimes." He apologized, on behalf of her brother.

Eowyn huffed in frustration. Eomer could be more than just a bit of an idiot, at times. But something else was bothering Faramir, and she wanted to know what it was.

“What sadness darkens your eyes, my Lord, for you were sore troubled ‘ere I shared with you my tale of pain.” Eowyn asked, reaching out her own pale hand to stroke Faramir’s cheek.

Faramir sighed, and then haltingly explained, "I'm...having some trouble. With how many of my men died, in Ithilien and especially following me on that last charge." Faramir struggled for words again. Eowyn waited patiently.

"My Rangers were almost criminally misused, in the last battles."

"By Denethor." Eowyn countered.

"The command was mine." Faramir disagreed, "And so was the fault. I could have told my father nay. I have before. I didn't, not just because the time was desperate and it would have been dangerous to have contested the Steward's authority. But also, in part, out of my own despair and weakness. The prospect of my own death did not bother me. If it had, perhaps I could have done a better job of persuading my Lord Father towards a less wasteful course of action."

"From what I've heard, Lord Denethor not particularly amenable to persuasion." Eowyn objected. "By anyone, and, I'm sorry Faramir, but particularly not by you."
"He was not." Faramir conceded, "And he grew worse, 'ere the end. But still," Faramir paused to draw a ragged breath, "The Ithilien Rangers' specialty was in stealth, sneak attacks. My Father either forgot that, or didn't care. He sent us, only 500 strong, to defend Osgiliath. Less than half of us had proper plate armor, or experience fighting beside regular infantry on a conventional battlefield. My men fought valiantly despite that, using the ruins of Osgiliath for camouflage to ambush individual squads of Orcs. But we were too few. Nearly seventy-five thousand composed the enemies vanguard. Groups of my rangers fought and died together, slaughtered man by man. The orcs even made a sport of it, trapping a ranger on top of a building and then taking shot after shot at him."

"The darkness only made it worse. It emboldened the enemy, for even rangers do not see as well in the dark as do orcs. Then the morning brought not relief but rather reinforcements for the enemy. Fellbeasts. I ordered the retreat then, acting as if there was some hope in it. Madril, my second officer, was cut down by Gothmog, the Witch-King's Lieutenant, while he was trying to aid me in rallying our men."

"Then came the worst part. Not long after, Lord Denethor ordered a sortie to recapture Osgiliath. It was impossible. I knew that it was impossible." Faramir clenched one hand into a fist, "I could only find horses and armor for two hundred Rangers. Those I left behind in Minas Tirith were mostly our wounded or our youngest. The rest of us rode to our deaths, and we knew it. Mithrandir begged us not to go, to defy my Father's orders. I should have heeded him, for the sake of my men. There were over 200,000 enemies approaching the city. We were annihilated, Eowyn. I was the only survivor, and that only because my loyal Sergeant Menohtar gave my wounded body into the keeping of my Uncle Imrahil, when he and the Swan Knights rode to our rescue. Menohtar died, they all died."

"So few of them survive." Faramir's voice now was hoarse, with pain and un-shed tears. "And of those who live, save for the few who were hale enough to follow the King, they are badly off. Probably too sorely wounded, either in body or spirit or both, to ever return to the army."

Eowyn merely nodded, reaching out a hand to support Faramir, as he had her.

"I must...I will do my best for them." Faramir continued, as Eowyn realized how heavily this must be weighing upon his mind and his spirit. She'd known that it troubled him, how could she not, as they had walked together in the Hall from wounded man to wounded man, comforting and aiding as they could? But she had been too caught up in her own pain and revelations, in exploring their new love and her new interest in healing, to truly see how tormented the man she loved had become. She wouldn't make that mistake, again.

"And of those who are well on their way to being healed...Eowyn, I've asked them to risk their lives for me, AGAIN." Faramir accused himself bitterly, "Asked some of them to ride with the sweep patrols to warn of orcs, even if they can't hold a sword or draw a bow. And I've asked the same of their wives, and their daughters. And I'd do it again, and again. Is there nothing I will not do, to achieve an end?"

"There are things that you would not do." Eowyn staunchly assured her future husband, "You would not have tried to hold Osgiliath, if it weren't for your father's command. You don't waste lives stupidly. And Faramir, you should remember that they are soldiers and the wives and women-kin of soldiers. They understand." And Eowyn knew of what she spoke. At least Faramir was honest and truthful enough to admit what he did need of womenfolk, rather than trying to protect them when he was unable.

Faramir sighed, "I...Eowyn, that is not all." Her dearly beloved Steward met her gaze squarely, his eyes more troubled than the lady of Rohan could remember ever seeing them. since the night when Sauron had been defeated, and the shadow lifted from their lands. Faramir continued, "I
must ask for your word that you will never divulge what I am about tell you to a single soul. I hesitate to burden you so, but I know your word to be true and your soul strong, and I...I cannot bear this alone any longer. I am weak."

Faramir. " Eowyn scolded sharply. "I swear I will not share what you are about to tell me with a soul. And if I ever hear you say you are weak again, for that stupid reason or any other, I will give you a sword lesson you will not forget, my beloved archer. Do you understand?"

Faramir's eyes danced with appreciative mirth for a moment before he became solemn again. "I...thank you. I would not ask for your word, Eowyn, for I trust your discretion, but that some of what preys are my mind are state secrets of Gondor, and not my own to tell."

Eowyn's lovely blue eyes widened. "I will be your wife, my Lord. And you talk in your sleep. It is probably best that you tell me now, whilst you have discretion over the telling."

Sitting up and pulling away slightly, Faramir began, "The Enemy realized, 'ere the end, that something... odd and different was going on in Ithilien. We were...err...getting information we shouldn't have. Ah.." Faramir paused as if not sure what else he could say, or should say.

"The Palantir?" Eowyn asked sympathetically.

Faramir struggled for a moment, "That...and other things. The end result was that we became much more efficient, in Henneth Annun. Despite our garrison being drawn down again and again. It had to be, there was no choice, even I could see that. The need for armed, well-trained men in the more populous parts of Gondor was just too pressing. And the Enemy had to know that, too. That we were fewer than we had been. He - they- knew our numbers, in generalities." Faramir's face hardened. "Perhaps in part because of the palantir."

There was really nothing to say to that. Faramir's father had been unconsciously betraying information to the Enemy, for no reason other than paranoia and mistaken trust in his own abilities. So Eowyn just waited.

"I don't know...I may never know, all of what my father saw and shared, when he gazed into the orb." Faramir told her, his gaze distant, though one of his hands had come to rest again on hers. "But I do know that he...did not have a good opinion of me. Of what I could do. And that helped us, I mean the Rangers. At least at first. The Enemy almost seemed to discount us, which made, ah, information gathering, much easier."

Faramir was being very careful of what he said, Eowyn could tell. She wondered at that, but having sat in or at least served drink and provided food at many of her uncle Theoden-King's strategy sessions, she understood.

"Later...well, later Father began to think differently of me. Not that he held me in greater esteem, so much as he knew that I was not an ineffective commander." Faramir smiled humorlessly, "Which would have made him think better of most men, but he often fairer in his evaluation of others. But his changing his opinion of my command, it ended up making of us a target. More of a target."

Faramir shifted into lecture mode. Eowyn sighed internally, but didn't interrupt. Faramir seemed more comfortable lecturing. Maybe it would help him to eventually get to his point, whatever that was.

"The Rangers of Ithilien have been for many generations stood as the guardians of the road to Minas Tirith, entrusted with securing the long, unfriendly border between the Enemy's land of horrors and our own country. And we had always gone over the border from time to time, to
harass the Enemy and the Haradrim by making their scouts and advance parties disappear. But I pushed us to expand our mission. At first without orders from my father, or even my brother."

"We found that we could, if we...planned carefully, take out an entire battalion of Haradrim or even orcs. Faramir shuddered lightly, "It was not pretty. Not something that I am proud of. The pits that we had to dig for the poor mumakil, and even the slaughter at the end. Several hundred of us with our bows and quivers full, and orcs and Haradrim being cut down like fish in a barrel. The unfavorable terrain we had lured them into ran with their blood."

Faramir took another deep breath, "After several successful such excursions, my father expanded our mission parameters. We were no longer to merely stop the Enemy at the border. Lord Denethor ordered us to overextend ourselves Faramir turned to meet her gaze, self-loathing clear in his own, "And Eowyn, I let him. More, I encouraged it. While I was in command, we tripled our forays into their lands. We didn't just stop them at the border. We didn't just kill their scouts and advance parties. No, instead we took out entire battalions, a thousand or more strong. And delayed and disarmed others. We went out of our way to hinder and humiliate them and their allies within their own territory." Faramir took a deep, ragged breath, remembered horrors flickering within his eyes, "And they retaliated. My men died in greater numbers because I made of them a target. And that influenced my father, and...made the Enemy somewhat...more aware, of us."

Eowyn almost spoke, then. She certainly had things to say. But something about Faramir's manner told her that he had had more to add, so she remained quiet. Listening.

"It was almost as if...as if the Enemy had me marked, personally. And so the men around me died. While I always lived, by the grace of their blood and sacrifice."

Now Faramir was done. Eowyn was sure of that, even though she could not have explained in words how she knew. She was beginning to realize that to read Faramir, you had to pay attention to the man instead of just the words.

"First, that is a lot to be carrying around." She told him bluntly. "Second, don't be a fool. Of course Sauron hated you and made a target. You were, are, a highly-ranking officer of a kingdom at war with Mordor. That just means you were doing your job. How could you have predicted that doing your job would make your men, all of them, a target? More, what could you have done differently? Just let Sauron and his allies tromp unimpeded on their merry way through Ithilien to Minas Tirith? That certainly wouldn't have helped, Faramir. You did your best. Your men were soldiers. They understood the risk. They accepted it. You didn't take conscripts into the rangers. Nessa told me yesterday, how you, Boromir, and several other captains threatened to resign until Gondor's council agreed not to put conscripts on the front lines in Osgiliath or Ithilien. You did your best, my brave soldier. It is time to let yourself come home. Your war is over."

At that Faramir laid his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking quietly. Eowyn didn't know what else to say, she curled herself around him, comforting him as he had comforted her. He wept for a time, for all of the fallen whom he had not saved, and for himself, a bit, too, Eowyn thought. She knew what it was to live when you had expected to die, when many others had died, and to not know what you could do to make up for that. She could only imagine what it had been like for Faramir, to live that again and again. And to have asked for more from those who had survived, and ensured his own survival. She didn't think that it could be easy, and she didn't envy him it.

When Faramir had calmed, she kissed him. She hadn't meant anything by it save for comfort, but intentions or not, things became interesting again. Different from earlier, the fire between them softer, but more long-burning. An apology and a promise. Catharsis in a kiss, and hope in a caress.
Chapter 7 Part II: Morning Chat: Bankruptcy and Sea-Kin

Chapter Summary

Faramir and Eowyn get ready for the day, and Faramir tells Eowyn about his Dol Amroth family.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I had to break Chapter 7 up, since it became too long. But it was always supposed to be the same chapter, so I'm posting it together. The next chapter will be more of Faramir in the city. Its the last chapter without Aragorn in it.

After that they both fell back asleep, at least for a little while. For Eowyn was always up with the sun, and Faramir woke to her movement.

Sleepy still in the cool sweetness of the early morning, he told her, "Oh, I almost forgot to mention - it is a good thing that the Steward's office will cease to exist within the week, for I have bankrupted it."

Compared to Grima's machinations, the siege of Helm's Deep, and facing a Witch-King in battle, this statement from her husband-to-be didn't faze Eowyn. She did make a mental note that it was lucky Faramir had not picked a delicate flower of Gondor for his wife. Such a woman might have felt overwhelmed by her fiancee's bankrupting his office. Eowyn merely inquired "Oh?" with a calm smile. "And how did you manage that impressive feat, my Love? You have only been acting fully as Steward for one day."

Faramir suppressed an answering smile, appearing pleased at Eowyn's equanimity. "I used what is left of the Steward's budget to purchase most of the goods standing in Gondor's warehouses at a discounted price, the profits upon eventual sale to be used to pay for the additional food I insisted be ordered by the council for the winter, to feed the populace. No matter how good the harvest is this early this fall, it will not make up for the...recent disruptions."

Eowyn nodded. "That sounds needful to me." Eowyn's dimples flashed as she commented, "Though I do see some nepotism involved here - it is a good thing your Uncle Imrahil is said to be fond of you, since I expect you will be commandeering his ships."

Faramir smiled back. "My cousin Erchirion's ships, actually. Chiri will be grumpy, but philosophic. It shall give his navy an excellent excuse to go poking about in all sorts of foreign ports and markets. Who knows what they may learn?"

"Erchirion?" Eowyn asked, "He is the Prince Admiral, correct? The one who is closest in age to you?"

"That is Chiri." Faramir confirmed. "Elphir is the oldest of my cousins, a few years older than I. He is Imrahil's regent and right hand man in Dol Amroth. Lothiriel is the only lady of the six of us,
and fulfilled the function of my uncle's chatelaine until my cousin Elphir's recent marriage to Aliisa, a cousin of Lord Golasgil of Anfalas. Amrothos is the baby of the family, and newly made a Captain of the Swan Knights."

"Amrothos is the one who travels with your uncle, Chiri is the one who is at sea, and Elphir and Lothiriel, and now Aliisa, guard Dol Amroth?" Eowyn clarified.

"Aye," Faramir explained, "Uncle Imrahil is accustomed to visiting Gondor several times a year, to coordinate the activities of Dol Amroth's navy with Gondor's army. That, and to provide a more, ah, diplomatic perspective on foreign affairs. My father had many strengths as Steward, but diplomacy was not one of them."

Eowyn sighed. "My brother Eomer is much the same, in that." She explained. "I am somewhat concerned about the coming months as he settles in as King of Rohan, though at least Rohan is, ah, more accustomed to blunt leadership."

They had spoken at length of her brother, but Eowyn did not know much of Faramir's remaining family save that his Uncle Imrahil had saved her life and his own, and that Faramir was quite fond of them.

"What are they like, your Dol Amroth kin?" Eowyn asked, toying with the laces of the tunic he had just put on, "I mean, beyond what they do."

"What are they like?" Faramir mused back, stilling her fingers by catching them and kissing them, so that he could keep dressing for the day. "My Uncle is wise, and kind. He came to leadership in the navy very young, as my grandfather Adrahil was well into late middle age by the time my Uncle was born. He is quiet, save when he has something to say. Fiercely protective of his children, and of his sisters, and of...of Boromir, and I."

Eowyn made a face at having her nefarious plot for early morning affection thwarted, but then gamely began to dress herself. Faramir rewarded her with an amused half-smile, his own desire plain in his eyes, but banked. Self-control was very important to Faramir. To Eowyn as well, in some ways, but she was younger, and less concerned with being perfect.

"My Aunt Lorias," Faramir continued, a ghost of old and aching sorrow in his voice, "Was the quintessential mother. Pretty and plump and unashamedly proud of her children and all of the princedom. She never forgot to ask one of us about how we had come by a hurt or arrived at a triumph, and she remembered every birthday, graduation date, promotion, well, any milestone really." Faramir turned his gaze again to Eowyn, smiling in fond remembrance, "She was practical, perhaps more so than anyone else I've ever known. Aunt Lorias and Uncle Imrahil were the only ones who insisted that I let myself be a child when I was with them. And it was Aunt Lorias who stood up to anyone who tried to involve me with responsibilities beyond my years. She even stood up to Mithrandir, one summer when I was spending most of my free time helping him with research."

Eowyn hid a smile of her own. She would have loved to have seen that. Faramir grinned back, as if reading her mind. Then his smile faltered, as he added, "She died of a fever thirteen years ago this spring. My cousin Lothiriel was just nineteen years old, then. But she took over her mother's roles, in Dol Amroth and in our family. She is much like her mother, but more fond of hawking and hunting a-horseback." Faramir smiled a bit mischievously, "She is also more of a cheerful flirt and match-maker. But then, I did not know my Aunt when she was that young, so perhaps that last distinction is incorrect.

Listening with interest, Eowyn mis-tied her own bodice. Faramir huffed a laugh, and reached down to fix it for her. "Does she have an intended, your cousin Lothiriel?" Eowyn asked, when
she'd gotten her breath back.

"Nay. She has never found anyone who captured her interest. And until Elphir's marriage, her duties in Dol Amroth consumed most of her time." Faramir paused, "Perhaps she will, now. Many things are possible, now."

"And Elphir, and his new wife?"

"Elphir is stone-steady." Faramir told her, "Always responsible beyond his years. He and Boromir got on very well." Faramir shook his head with a smile, while pulling on a boot, "They both lorded being the eldest over the rest of us. But it was Boromir who most often lured Elphir into trouble, him or Erchirion. And Aliisa...she is lovely, but shy. She will do well once she gets her feet under her, I think. And she has Lothiriel, until then."

"Erchirion?"

"If Elphir is stone, then Erchirion is fire." Faramir told her, "Fire which burns on water. And like so is his temper - quick to ignite, difficult to defuse. But he's fierce and loyal and the best sailor of us all." Another sad smile, "Of us all, Chiri is the most like Boromir in temper. Eru forgive anyone who threatens any of us should Erchirion learn of it, for he will not."

"And Amrothos, the new-made Captain?" Eowyn asked. She already felt some sympathy for the youngest Prince of Dol Amroth. She had been the baby of her family as well, and knew it to be a frustrating thing, at times.

Faramir laughed, "Amrothos is trouble. And speaking of which, I'm in some of my own."
Blushing a bit, he told her more of what he had been up to yesterday, and of the lecture - and more - that he'd gotten from the King's Man, Ethiron.

"Oh," Commented Eowyn brightly, "And look who has joined us for breakfast." A clearly annoyed Ethiron sat at the breakfast table in the garden, right between Samwise and Nessanie.

Faramir put on his most serene smile. "Ah, yes. Time to play Steward again." But Eowyn rather thought that he did not mind being Steward, and having the power to do what he thought best to protect his people, a power he had long been denied by Denethor. Eowyn even thought that Faramir did not mind Ethiron. She'd already observed that Faramir liked people who could keep up with him. And she felt honored to be one of them.
Chapter 8: All the Steward's Men and Women, Part I

Chapter Summary

Ethiron isn't thrilled about how Lord Faramir spent his evening, but there's not much he can do about it. Yet.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter will be broken up into three sections, with an excerpt separately posted which focuses on Ethiron and Nessanie. Rarely for me, I already have almost all of the parts of this chapter entirely drafted, so I'll be able to post them sooner rather than later.

Quotes:

A noble person attracts noble people, and knows how to hold on to them.
Johann Wolfgang von Goeth

Excerpt from Chapter 2:

“If I ever,” Ethiron growled “see you do anything so careless of your life as to stand out in plain view of an archer so that you might gauge the path of his next arrow, I will paddle you myself, then take you to our King so that he may explain in great and painful detail the error of your ways. Is that clear, my Lord Steward?”

For the second day in a row, the Steward of Gondor and the White Lady of Rohan breakfasted with their hobbit companions in a garden of the Houses of Healing. The enticing smells of a very hearty breakfast mingled pleasantly with the mild scent of irises and other early-blooming flowers, dew-speckled in the pale morning light.

It was a peaceful sight. Bucolic, even, save for the dark lines under the young Steward’s gray eyes. Despite appearing tired, Faramir looked very pleased with himself. It made Ethiron want to shake him. Instead, Lord Aragorn’s spymaster and old friend merely smiled, and helped himself to a plate of sausages as he sat down to join them. He’d found that smiling whilst plotting someone’s demise - or at least their comeuppance - was far more alarming to your target than indulging in a display of temper. No matter how warranted.

"Captain Ethiron!" Merry greeted him enthusiastically, pleased to see his companion of yesterday morn. The others all extended their welcome as well, even Faramir. Although the Steward did seem slightly concerned by the angry gleam Ethiron knew to be in his eyes. And rightfully so, after the Steward's ill considered excursions of the previous evening. Still, dignity and the proprieties must be observed, so Ethiron waited until he could pull Faramir aside for a moment to start upbraiding him.
"I'm somewhat confused, my Lord Steward. What part of the healer's instructions for you included going on patrols to look for orcs?" Ethiron asked mildly. From the wary look in young Faramir's eyes, he understood that Ethiron was Not Pleased with him. Faramir was a bright lad, and probably even remembered Ethiron's threat of the previous day. It had been a good threat, and Ethiron was loathe to let it go to waste. However, he wasn't really in a position to give the young Steward the sound paddling which Faramir so richly deserved, and then send him to bed afterwards. However much Faramir might need the rest, not to mention the firm reminder to take better care of himself.

"The good Warden's instructions did not say anything specifically about patrols, or orcs." Faramir pointed out with level, amused patience, as if he were humoring Ethiron just by answering his questions. Which the northern Dunadan rather supposed that he was, since Faramir ruled here in Gondor until Aragorn returned. So using force to get the young Steward to have a care for his own skin was out. Ethiron held onto his patience by the skin of his teeth.

"If it were a man under your command who had behaved thusly, Lord Steward, would you have approved or taken him to task?" Ethiron asked pointedly, remembering that such an intellectual exercise had worked well with a younger Aragorn, and for that matter, with Ethiron himself as a junior officer.

Faramir pondered that for a moment, then explained gently, "I would not have been pleased with a junior officer who had acted thusly. But I am not any other man. I am the Steward, and I have an example to set. These are not ordinary times, Captain Ethiron."

"You keep that justification in mind, lad." Ethiron grumbled, "I'm sure that my King will be fascinated." Well, fascinated wasn't really the correct word, Ethiron thought to himself. "Infuriated," more like. Aragorn had been very favorably impressed by the young Steward in the brief time that he'd known Faramir, before leaving with the army. In fact, Aragorn had told Ethirnro that that Faramir was one of the best men that he'd ever met. And Ethiron knew his King well enough to know that Aragorn was not going to let one of the best young men he'd ever met get killed because Faramir was too heedless and reckless to realize that he shouldn't go running off after orcs with a poorly-healed shoulder.

The Steward did look a bit worried by Ethiron's remark. More than he should have been, in fact, before he quickly concealed the concern. Ethiron had little time to consider that additional little clue to young Faramir's complex personality before two new arrivals claimed their attention. A woman and a boy. Ethiron's eyes widened at the sight of the tall, elegant, sable-haired beauty. Faramir introduced her as Nessanie Saelasiel, and the child as her son, Tavan.

'Ah. The late, lamented Lord Boromir's mistress. Well, she is certainly pretty enough to have caught and held the Captain-General's famous wandering eye.' Ethiron thought cynically to himself, even though it was an understatement. Mistress Nessanie's elegant, dark-haired, pale-skinned beauty was stunning enough, in a quiet way, that she could have modeled for one of those 'Numenorean woman in exile' portraits in Elrond's home. Her son, on the other hand, while an attractive child with his dark curls and bright brown eyes, could have been one of the enemies in those same portraits- the Numenoreans who had turned to the dark ways in the southern lands such as Umbar. Boromir was clearly not the boy's father, which was a good thing, from Ethiron's perspective. Boromir's bastard could have confused the line of succession.

Ethiron watched out of the corner of his eye as the boy enthusiastically greeted Faramir, jumping into the Steward's arms, and then shyly met Eowyn, apparently overwhelmed at meeting the heroine who had slain the Witch-King. Then dismissed the lass and her son as no more than a sentimental friends of the Steward's, and left them to their greetings while he sought out the Warden.
"Warden Del," Ethiron said sternly, "I would like to know what you were thinking, letting your Lord Steward ride out to hunt after orcs last night. Did I not hear you say, but twenty-four hours ago, that Lord Faramir was not to put undue stress on his healing shoulder?"

The Warden, the most senior healer of the houses of healing and the charged with their administration and guarding, frowned at Ethiron. "There is some value to your criticism, Northerner. However, Faramir - our Lord Steward - was sound enough to ride. Although Faramir's participation in the venture was not preferable, it still might have been the least of multiple evils. Had he not led our army patrols afield, there would have been more victims of the orc attacks, and Lord Faramir's excursion did at least prove that the guards can be effective in warding the outside of the city. As more and more guests and people return to Minas Tirith, that is important."

Ethiron snorted, "You're thinking like a soldier rather than a healer." Looking at the long, still-muscular lean of the man, Ethiron deduced, "You were an army healer."

The Warden nodded. "I was. In fact, for a time, some fifty years ago, I was Healer to another Northerner. A Captain Throngil."

Ethiron raised his chin to get a better look at the man. Warden Del -then Healer Del - had kept the injured Aragorn alive all the way from the foothills of the white mountains to Minas Tirith itself. No small feat. Ethiron nodded to the Warden with reluctant respect. Still, he did not think that the man's decision to permit Faramir's heroism the previous night had been a good one. Warden Del assured Ethiron that because Faramir was of Numenorean descent, he healed faster than other men and had already been sound enough for limited military contact.

Ethiron left it at that, but he resolved to keep a closer eye on the young Steward himself until Aragorn could join them. More, Ethiron reflected that Aragorn would have his work cut out for him with this young Captain and Lord, as Faramir had most of his city trained into seeing him as some sort of symbol, rather than a flesh and blood young man. If Aragorn had been Faramir's healer, the youth would not have had the opportunity to go riding on a patrol with his wounds but half-healed. If he had somehow managed such a feat without the King's permission, he would certainly not be sitting comfortably the day after having done so. More, Aragorn probably would have prescribed several days of rest after Faramir's thus pushing his recovery, while the Warden Del merely seemed resigned.

Ethiron sighed. If he couldn't make Lord Faramir take more care, and he couldn't convince the Warden to insist that Faramir do so, then..., "Good Warden," Ethiron requested politely, "I am sure that my King would wish his young Steward to have the support of the North during these challenging during which Faramir is acting in his interest. I would like to volunteer myself for this duty."

"That's very kind," Began Faramir, whom Ethiron hadn't even been addressing, "however,..."

"To that end," Ethiron continued, interrupting Faramir, "I would like to ask if I, too, might enjoy the hospitality of your guests' wing, Warden Del, that I might be able to be present to support Lord Faramir during the morning and the evening, as well, of course, as any time during the day when I might be of assistance to him." Essentially, Ethiron wanted to keep a close eye on Faramir's nocturnal wanderings. He might not be able to prevent the Lord Steward from doing idiotic but brave things like going off to harass orcs while less than fully fit, but he could at least go with him, and protect Faramir, with or without Faramir's permission.

"Of course you may stay here," Warden Del accepted with relief, "I shall have a guest chamber prepared for you right next to the Steward's."
The Warden was clearly pleased. Lord Faramir appeared resigned. 'Good.' Thought Ethiron.

Faramir, evidently considering that a battle lost, moved quickly onto something else. "Ness," He addressed his brother's former mistress, "I think that it would be a boon to Captain Arnaut if you were to spend the day assisting him with his accounts, and the readiness of his cargoes for their next voyages." Faramir smiled ruefully, "I fear I've deprived the man of his best assistant at a difficult time."

The tall beauty raised a skeptical eyebrow, "I rather doubt that Arnaut is desperate for help, even with his son-in-law working for you and his daughter recovering from childbirth. He has a fine and capable staff, Faramir. Many of whom you know."

Ethiron chuckled, "What your good Lord Steward means, Mistress, is that it might occur to some bright bulb that offing Faramir's friends would be a good way to get to Lord Steward."

"Faramir? Is...that....YOUR concern?" Nessanie asked, annoyance and concern plain in her smoky black eyes.

The Steward waved a dismissive hand in Ethiron's direction, and dodged the question, instead answering, "I just don't want to take that chance, Ness. Please, just stay with Arnaut or perhaps with your cousin Ynithe. Or with the Lamedon family in the city, or Captain Calarion's sister."

Ethiron took that to mean, somewhere with a lot of people, including sturdy armed men.

"Faramir," Nessa protested with a sigh, "I have a great deal to do today. Many meetings to arrange, and various other matters which require my attention. It is a very dynamic time for investing and preserving the value of previous investments in goods and businesses, and I cannot be hiding behind a friend and accomplish those things."

"All of which you would oh-so-effective at accomplishing, tied up in someone's cellar." Ethiron pointed out in a droll tone, straight faced.

Nessanie looked outraged. Faramir appeared upset with Ethiron, but almost resigned to disaster. Nessanie's little son, whom Ethiron hadn't paid much attention to, jumped out of his seat.

"NO ONE is going to tie my mother up, or put her in a cellar! I WON'T LET THEM!" He yelled at Ethiron, small fists clenched at his sides.

Ethiron didn't quite know what to do. He was impressed by the boy's fierceness, if a bit taken aback. He'd once been so protective of his own mother. Still missed her, even though she had passed years ago, when Ethiron had been but a child himself. Ethiron absently wondered who this boy's father had been, even as he considered what he ought to do about the angry child. He didn't have much experience with boys too young to start their training as rangers, and this one seemed only perhaps eight or at the most nine years old.

"Calmly, Tavan." Faramir recommended, getting up to go over to the boy and kneel by his side, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Tavan's mother, with another heated glance towards Ethiron, also placed an around her son. "No one will hurt me, Tavan." She reassured him, "And to be absolutely certain, we will do as Faramir has suggested and visit Captain Arnaut for the next few days."

Tavan seemed pleased by that notion, "Can I play with the kittens?" He asked eagerly.

Nessa sighed. "There are kittens?" She asked Faramir, a scolding look in her dark eyes.

The Steward hid a smile. "There may be kittens, yes. Just old enough to leave their mother, I
believe."

Nessanie regarded Faramir skeptically for another long moment, much as older sister might a mischievous younger brother. Then she sighed again. "Well, we could use a mouser, I suppose, as the fall-out from the damage to the city continues. Come, Tavan-my-love. After breakfast, let us go visit Arnaut."

The conversation moved onto more pleasant topics for a time. Faramir, Eowyn, and Nessanie all took pains to draw out the weak ringbearer, asking for his assistance in learning how to greet their future Queen in proper Sindarin. Ethiron could have helped with that - he'd been forced to learn some, during his many residences in Imladris. However it seemed to be increasing Frodo's interest and appetite, so he let it be. Nor was the ringbearer's constant companion, Samwise, left out of the breakfast discussions. Faramir asked for his assistance as well as Frodo's in making the Lady Arwen feel welcome in their city, going so far as to extend an invitation for Samwise to take a look at the citadel gardens with a view towards beginning their renovation in the direction of something an elleth might like.

"Nessa," Faramir said thoughtfully as the last cups of tea and coffee were poured, "I'm thinking to find a, hmm, a guide of sorts to introduce to the Lady Arwen upon her arrival. Someone who can serve as personal assistant and lady-in-waiting in addition to cultural translator."

The dark-haired woman raised an eyebrow. "Are you looking for suggestions, or an opinion?"

"Ynithe?" Faramir asked.

Nessanie sighed. "She didn't just lose Duinhir and the twins, Faramir. Gendarion, too, died on the Pelennor."

The Steward froze for a moment, before bowing his head. "Ah. I had not seen him, but I had thought him likely with the army. I did not make further inquiries, and I should have."

Boromir's former leman shook her head, then she and Faramir excused themselves and walked away to a fountain near the border of the garden, talking softly. The Lady Eowyn narrowed her eyes a bit, but changed the subject to draw attention away from her husband's abstraction and private conference. Ethiron, despite his best attempt to overhear, didn't catch much more than that someone hadn't told Faramir something that he should have, and separately, that a "Lord Galdoron" or "Galdron" was the last surviving member of a group Faramir referred to as "the golden set."

Ethiron knew the name Galdoron. He was the most senior surviving Captain of Gondor's regular army, its acting Captain General. Ethiron supposed from the context that the Lady Ynithe might have been the daughter of the late Lord Duinhir, and the sister of his fallen twin sons, the archers Duilin and Delufer. If so, that made this Ynithe the heir apparent to the prosperous Black Root Vale.

When the Steward and Nessanie returned to the table, Faramir was asking, "That still does not invalidate Ynithe as a possible companion for the Lady Arwen."

Nessanie looked like she wasn't sure that she agreed, but the hour had come for Faramir to return to the citadel for meetings. Ethiron somehow found himself escorting Mistress Nessanie and her son to the home of Captain Arnaut, which he didn't mind as much as he otherwise would have. Faramir's morning guards seemed a competent set, and Ethiron had contacts in the city to meet himself. Safeguarding Boromir's mistress on her way to a safe haven seemed as good an excuse for disappearing as any. And maybe he could even learn something. Most women, in Ethiron's experience, were not good at guarding their tongues. A woman of loose virtue, thought Ethiron,
might be particularly inclined to being loose-lipped as well.
Chapter 8: All the Steward's Men and Women, Part II

Chapter Summary

Faramir and Ethiron take one another’s measure again, as the ripples of damage caused by the war continue to be felt.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This is the second of three parts of Chapter 8. I've separately posted an excerpt which focuses on Ethiron and Nessanie, and post-war Minas Tirith. It can be found here:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/681343

Quotes:

"The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just."
Abraham Lincoln

"If you want to see the true measure of a man, watch how he treats his inferiors, not his equals."
J. K. Rowling

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Ethiron meeting with Archivist Hallas, Ethiron POV]

Ethiron was late to meet with his man, a retired ranger named Mallor who now worked in the city doing a variety of odd jobs. But apparently, being late wouldn't matter.

"Archivist Hallas won't even notice." Mallor explained. "Hallas is a smart man, but a little vague on things happening in the real world. Oh, he can explain current events well enough, but he might not remember to wear a cloak when its raining. And he's not usually quite straight on what day it is, let alone which hour."

Ethiron sighed. "THAT type of fellow." There were a number of elves like that in Rivendell, and humans who were the same, both at Imladris and at several villages outside Bree. It was almost as if someone had been running a breeding program for absent minded but intelligent and creative scholars and scientists. (Which someone in fact had, although Ethiron was not aware of it. Lord Elladan of Imladris had a long standing interest in bloodlines, and preferred to keep his students and their offspring and descendants close).
Mallor led Ethiron up through the noisy streets and quieter byways of Minas Tirith, up from the third level where Ethiron had escorted Mistress Nessanie and her son to the home of Captain Arciryas. They passed the gate into the fifth level, where the stately stone Archives played host to the greatest living scholars amongst the race of Men. Mallor brought them to a well-kept stone townhome only a few paces' walk from the gate. A shy young man came to the door, summoned by their knock.

Ethiron recognized the young man from the meeting at the archives yesterday. And even a bit from when Hallas had visited Arnor as a teenager. Hallas' father Lennart had been a cousin of Magordan's, and Lennart's widow Sion, a distant relation of the Lord of Anfalas in Gondor, had maintained that connection with her husband's kin after he died. The sharp-eyed Sion met them with tea and biscuits, and a discerning expression that made Ethiron think that she, at least, realized that they were late. Sion's faded pale blond loveliness had been passed onto her son, who greeted them brightly and chattered cheerfully. Between the two of them, Ethiron thought Sion the more discerning, even if she did not have her erudite son's education and training. It was only reluctantly that she left them alone with Hallas.

Who was much changed from when Ethiron had known him as a boy. Hallas had been miserable on that visit to Arnor - trees were mostly not to his taste, as Ethiron recalled. Ethiron wondered why his mother had sent him, though he was sure the youth had been glad to meet his father's family. For all his homesickness, he'd seemed a polite boy, and one happy to meet his other relatives. Bregolas, who now commanded the rangers of the north in the absence of Aragorn, Halbarad - Ethiron said a silent prayer to the Valar for his departed comrade - and Magordan, had seemed particularly fond of Hallas, as Ethiron recalled.

This grown Hallas seemed much more at home in his own skin. Although shy with Ethiron at first, he spoke cheerfully to the more familiar Mallor, whom he knew as a seller of parchment and ink as well as an agent of the Chieftain of the Dunedain. Hallas seemed very confident as he spoke of the details of their Chieftain's approaching confirmation, and the historical precedents underpinning such ceremonies.

"Do you know Faramir well?" Ethiron asked the archivist, wondering how it was that the evidently absent-minded Hallas had realized some of the true breadth of Lord Faramir's influence when all of Ethiron's other agents had missed it.

Hallas smiled pleasantly, and answered. "Of course. He loves the archives, and we talk every time he's in the city, about one thing or another. He always comes to me first to help him with his research, even if he needs to go to the Chief Archivist in the end." Hallas was clearly proud of this, and Ethiron felt he had good reason. From what Ethiron had seen of the Steward so far, Faramir seemed to have a gift for identifying and seeking out the most competent persons in any given organization. Aragorn had the same ability, it was part of what made him such an effective leader.

"On what basis did you evaluate the relationship between the brothers?" Ethiron continued.

Hallas seemed a bit confused. Mallor clarified. "Did you know Boromir as well? Seeing him in the archives was a rare event, as I understand it."

"Not really," Hallas corrected. "I mean, he wasn't there long, but he would often come by to collect Faramir for lunch, or dinner, or some other engagement. He called all of us - the archivists and scholars -"dust-covered moles," but in a friendly way, and he would sometimes treat us all to lunch at a nearby tavern. Unless Mithrandir was there as well, in which case he and Lord Boromir exchanged veiled insults, and Lord Boromir would glare at his brother for doing the Wizard's bidding. But there wasn't much rancor in it. I've seen Lord Boromir angry..." Hallas broke off for a moment. "And, well, he didn't seem angry at Mithrandir, or at Faramir for helping Mithrandir. At
least, not really."

"When did you see Boromir angry?" Mallor followed up. Ethiron might have left it, as Hallas seemed uncomfortable telling them more, and Ethiron needed the young archivist in a cooperative mood, for future information gathering sessions, more than he needed to know that detail. If Hallas had mentioned having seen Faramir angry, that would be relevant to today's issues, and important enough to risk following up on despite Hallas' reticence. But Boromir's temper, or lack thereof, was sadly no longer an issue of great relevance.

Hallas thought for a moment. "Umm, well at least the time that Master Burgold - he's the Master of the Commodities guild, the one that brings in food and such to the city - when he tried to refuse to honor vouchers from the army for food for soldier's widows and orphans. I recall quite clearly that Lord Boromir was furious. He threw a chair through a window."

Mallor stared. "In the ARCHIVES?" He marveled.

Hallas nodded, wide-eyed in memory. "Aye, the Chief Archivist was furious. All of the volumes in that gallery had to be moved, as it was a damp spring.

"Why was Lord Boromir in the archives?" Ethiron asked, intrigued.

"He'd just come from the council meeting, and he wanted me to help him find some legal precedents against Burgold's actions. The Chief Archivist was less angry after he got the whole story, so after we moved the books with help from men in Lord Boromir's regiment and some of his other friends, the Chief Archivist and I helped him find what he needed. I think Boromir normally would have asked Faramir for such aid. And Faramir probably would have known to keep him away from, umm, furniture and windows, until he calmed down, but Faramir was in Ithilien, and not due back for some time." Hallas explained.

Ethiron leaned forward. "So, Faramir normally would have been Boromir's first stop, if he needed information, or help strategizing against rival members of the council?"

Hallas smiled and patiently explained, "Yes. Lord Boromir TRUSTED Faramir. A lot of folk who saw them on a daily basis but didn't know them well probably didn't realize that. Boromir was awfully bossy, and always telling Fara what to do, or teasing him, or what not. But when Faramir spoke up about military tactics or what Gondor should do to help prepare for the war, Boromir LISTENED. Faramir was the one who normally did the research in the archives, but it was both of their research. He was sometimes looking into things that NEVER would have occurred to him, like past precedents for giving extra rations of ale, or, um, vouchers to visit certain establishments, as rewards to soldiers with excellent service records. 'Twas Boromir who did the speaking for both of them, but the Brothers Hurin were working from the same set of notes, and a lot of the ideas were Faramir's. Like food vouchers for the family of every solider who enlisted, and bonuses for every soldier whose wife bore a live child, as a welcoming gift for the baby, and having Gondor's state purse reimburse soldiers with good service records for the cost of upgrades and repairs to their weapons and armor. Boromir was the elder, and he usually made the ultimate decisions after getting Faramir's input. But that was because of Boromir's higher rank and because Faramir trusted him, too, not because Faramir didn't have opinions of his own.

"I've observed that, of the new Lord Steward." Ethiron added dryly, repressing the urge to ask the quiet Mallor how on earth their other men had missed that.

Hallas smiled. "Yes, it is quickly apparent if one actually spends time with Faramir," Hallas lost his smile, "particularly without Boromir around, as Boromir used to speak for both of them. I...that's still, hard. They were hardly ever apart when they were both in the city and at liberty. Its hard to think we'll never see them walking one place or another together again. I didn't know
Boromir as well, but he was a good man. I miss him."

Ethiron thought that he might miss Boromir, too. The former Captain of Gondor had clearly been a better man than Ethiron might have imagined, from what he'd known of him before the past few days. Ethiron patted the young archivist's arm in sympathy. Before he could think of something to say to ease the young man's pain, the silver horns of Gondor rang out, signaling the departure of the Steward of Gondor from the city. Ethiron cursed fulsomely.

"Oh, you'll quickly become accustomed to the noise." Hallas commented. "That's the horns calling the Steward's departure."

"Yes, when he had told me that he wasn't going to leave the city." Ethiron replied, thanking Mistress Sion for the meal and picking up his cloak.

"Oh, they must have found Menohtar's body then." Hallas looked even more grieved. "Faramir said that he was planning to ride out to the Pelennor if they did."

Ethiron mentally counted to ten in Quenya. "Who is Menohtar, and why would Lord Faramir go to identify his body, and how did YOU know of it, when Lord Faramir's staff and guards were unapprised?"

Confused, Hallas nonetheless helpfully explained that, "Sergeant Menohtar was Faramir's sergeant - he usually rode with Faramir to and from Minas Tirith, and sometimes came with him to archives, even though Menohtar was not much interested in books." Hallas paused to frown thoughtfully, "In fact, I'm not completely sure that Menohtar was capable of reading. But I always had the impression that the old sergeant had been some kind of old family friend - retainer, rather. He was from Dol Amroth. His posting in the rangers after Faramir became Captain was his first in the army, which was unusual. Until then he'd been in the navy, and soldiers hardly ever go from the navy straight to the rangers. And Faramir mentioned it yesterday, when you were talking to the Chief Archivist about Lord Elrond's various proofs of Lord Aragorn -the-future-King's- identity."

Of course he did, Ethiron thought to himself. The one time Ethiron's attention hadn't been firmly focused on Faramir during that entire dull three hours.

Ethiron nodded tightly, planning to join the Lord Faramir on the Pelennor. He moved quickly through the levels of the city, Mallor aiding his way by revealing some of those hidden ways to move more quickly between one level and another.

"There are more of these hidden tunnels and byways." Mallor told Ethiron with certainty, "The wind whistles through nowhere here and there, and voices sound oddly from above and below. But Valar help me if I can find them. Even after thirty years here, I am still not entirely one of these people.

"I suspect the Steward knows all of them, or nearly all." Ethiron said darkly. For how else had Faramir gone so quickly up, and so quickly down?

"Most likely." Mallor agreed, "If anyone does."

The northerner Captain caught up with Faramir near one of the partially open tents that had been set up across the Pelennor, to protect those who sorted through the bodies of the slain from the worst of the sun and the flies. The stench was overwhelming, even with great progress having been made at identifying the poor souls and laying them to peaceful rest, or in the case of the Enemies, burning their corpses.

"I can still see him in my mind's eye, Calasilas." Faramir's voice said quietly, tight with pain, to a
companion whom Ethiron could not see. Ethiron's heart ached for the Steward, for he was not a young man who easily shared or even showed his heartache.

"He handed me up to my Uncle." Faramir continued, "It was one of the last things I remember, before the pain and the poison took me. Menohtar lifting me onto Uncle Imrahil's saddle, and then returning to the fight with the Swan Knights beside him. He never returned. None of them did."

"I know, Captain." The unknown woman replied, her soprano tones laden with shared sorrow. "Osdir did not return, either. Arradon does not know what to do, without him. My husband..." The woman's voice broke.

"Anborn lives, Calesilas." Faramir hastened to assure her.

She must have nodded, or otherwise acknowledged it. "Eru be praised, yes." She agreed, "He left Arradon in Dervorin's care, when they left. Arradon survived the battle at the Black Gate, at least in body. We will have to watch him, all of us. Osdir would have wanted it."

"We will." Faramir agreed softly, "The living must have a greater claim to our time than the dead. But if you think that one of these corpses is Sergeant Menohtar's, then I would return him to my kin in Dol Amroth, for burial."

"A noble and worthy goal." Ethiron drawled, deciding that it was time to make his presence known, "and how clever and forethoughtful of you to bring all of one guard with you." The one guard gave Ethiron a neutral look, although the northern spy master detected something of gratitude to it.

"Ah, Captain Ethiron." Faramir smiled mildly, but it was clear, at least to Ethiron, that he'd been hoping to have more time before his erstwhile self-assigned guardian reappeared. "How lovely of you to join us."

Ethiron must have looked ready to scoop up the Steward of Gondor and head back into the city with him, with or without Faramir's permission, (which Ethiron in fact was), since Faramir spoke very quickly indeed. Quickly and quietly, stepping close to Ethiron so that only the Northerner could hear, "I will return to the Citadel directly enough. But I need to see to the body of the man who was my sergeant-at-arms, and who may well have been my own half great-uncle."

That stopped Ethiron in his tracks. He didn't even know what to say to it, so he just irritably waved Faramir on ahead. Led by Calesilas, the four of them proceeded to a blanket upon which was laid a body. Or part of one. The face had been savaged beyond recognition, and several limbs were missing. But Faramir didn't seem to need them for identification. His face tightened. "It is he." The young man sighed, and knelt beside the corpse on the mucky, blood-stained ground. "Mandos grant him peace. He should never have been a ranger. He should still have been at sea."

Calesilas reached out to put a gentle, supportive hand on Faramir's shoulders. "He passed the tests, Capt...my Lord. He did everything you asked of him, and he chose to make his stand with you. He would smack you himself if he knew you were feeling this guilty for his death."

A smile flickered over Faramir's face. "Aye, he would at that." Then Faramir seemed to remember Ethiron's presence, and blushed.

Ethiron shook his head in sympathy. "You may count on my discretion, Lord Faramir." Was all he said aloud, although inwardly he was glad that someone had cared enough about Faramir the person to see beyond Faramir the Lord and Captain, and lovingly correct him. And a part of him mourned with Faramir, that the man had been lost to him, as had so many. "I am sorry for your loss." Ethiron said, well aware that the simple words were not enough. But no words could ever
be enough, and those few would satisfy as well as any others.

Faramir nodded imperceptibly.

"NOW may we go back to the city?" Ethiron asked with sharp impatience, his shoulder blades itching. If he was someone planning to assassinate the Steward of Gondor to make Aragorn's life more difficult, he could hardly ask for a better place in which to accomplish the foul deed. The Pelennor was littered with abandoned siege tunnels and engines, and tents dotted here and there. The populace who so loved and supported the Steward were few and far between on the killing ground, unlike in the tightly packed streets of Minas Tirith.

"Yes, Captain Ethiron." Faramir said, wrung out but still managing to find a tone which was so soothing that it fell just short of patronizing. "Now we may go back to the city."

Ethiron gritted his teeth, but he almost had to work to be annoyed. He preferred Faramir to be as he had come to know him, calm and kind as well as strong, and sometimes covertly cheeky in a rather amusing way, rather than sad and sick, as he had seemed here on the Pelennor. If it took Ethiron being aggravating to push Faramir into forgetting his pain, even for a moment, well then. Ethiron had a positive gift for being aggravating. One he'd cultivated over the years with great pride. After all, if someone was infuriated, they were more likely to give their true feelings away. It didn't seem to work with Faramir, but that was alright. Ethiron didn't mind a challenge. And neither did Aragorn. Ethiron grinned to himself, even as he tried to expedite their path back into the safe(er) walls of the city.

Unfortunately, that plan, like so many of Ethiron's others for the day, was foiled by a young, frustrating child.

Darting across the Pelennor was the slender body of Beren, the 'twelve year old,' aiming for the tent with the bodies laid out on their sad blankets. Just as he quick as he'd been the previous day, trying to lift Faramir's purse, and today, darting into the ruins to rescue a compromised explosive.

Ethiron moved to catch him, but Faramir was faster. With an arm about the boy's slender waist, the Steward pulled the child into his arms, kneeling on the muddy ground with Beren right in front of him.

"I am so sorry, Beren," Faramir said with infinite compassion, "Your brother was a good man, but I doubt that he lies here."

"You...you know my name?" The boy said, eyes wide with gratified surprise.

"I do, and of the fine services you have done Gondor throughout these last few years." Faramir answered softly, glad he had asked Dervorin about this boy. Generally, Faramir and Dev were in agreement that only their spynetwork's man in Minas Tirith needed to know the names of the Minas Tirith informants. "But it is time for you to come away from here, little friend. and me as well."

"We're going in the wrong direction, for where I need to go. You said yesterday I'm to be helping with the horses." Beren replied, confused.

"I'm promoting you and reassigning you." Faramir said softly, but within Ethiron's hearing. "For your timely warning about the bread riot. You're going to work for Castellan Belecthor as a page, until you're old enough to go to the academy, or choose some other trade that appeals to you."

Beren was clearly flabbergasted. "It takes money to be an apprentice!"

"Your brother's death price will cover it, little one. And that was what he wanted it to go to. Now
come along, we'll get you settled with Belecthor the Castellan." Faramir said with kind firmness. The boy went ahead, in the custody of several citadel guards whom Faramir evidently trusted.

Ethiron moved to walk beside Faramir, "So....you do not mind that I have become aware that boy is one of your spies."

Faramir flashed him a slight, reckless smile. It made Ethiron's stomach flutter with nervousness, even though Ethiron should be the one making Faramir uncomfortable. "I figured that you knew."

Faramir continued, still not much discomfited.

"Hmph." Ethiron scolded, "You should never give something like that away unless you're sure."

"In that moment, I deemed that Beren's peace of mind was more important than that particular secret." Faramir remarked, "Besides, I think it's more likely that young Beren will go for cavalry rather than stay with spywork, anyway."

Ethiron frowned thoughtfully, "I doubt Beren's brother's death benefits cover a horse.

"That's really not your worry." Faramir assured Ethiron blandly.

Elrond huffed in reply, but was distracted by the devastation surrounding them. "I don't know as I understand you lot. You men of Gondor." Ethiron said to Faramir, "You were willing to blow your own city up, destroy it piece by piece, to make taking it a trap rather than a triumph for your enemies. You tore up your own fields even before the enemy did, to cause their lines trouble as they approached. You'll be years recovering from this damage, and some of it, a fair part of it, you inflicted upon yourselves."

Faramir, walking beside him, did not hesitate, "The fields are replant-able. The city is repairable. This last year was the worst, aye, but we've been making of ourselves a fire breach for a generation. If we had not made the sacrifices we did, Mordor would have occupied this land for nigh on seven years. Do you understand what that would have cost?" Faramir spoke passionately, now. It was a quiet kind of passion. It, too, reminded Ethiron of Aragorn, as the Steward continued, "The House of Healing is our greatest remaining human compendium of the learning and skills to keep our people healthy and heal their hurts. The archives in this city compile the sum knowledge of Numenor remaining to us, and that which we have created since. The economy of Minas Tirith powers all of Gondor, and even part of Eriador and what was once Arnor. Do you know how many would starve, had we fallen?"

"Not in exact numbers." Ethiron replied.

Faramir huffed a laugh, "Neither do I. But I think that they'd be big numbers. which is why I think that it was the right thing to do, awful as it was. As were so many things we've done...I've done, in the past twenty years."

Twenty years ago, Faramir would have been just thirteen years old. Ethiron wondered what awful decisions the boy had been making then, but he didn't want to ask.

Feedback always welcomed!
They managed to return to the citadel with no further diversions. Ethiron took up a post outside Faramir's office, as the Steward saw men. During a lull in the proceedings, when Faramir was busy ignoring lunch and paying attention to various scrolls, one of Faramir's other guards caught Ethiron's eye. It was the fellow who had followed Faramir down onto the Pelennor, and he was half-grinning, so it must not be too serious of a matter.

"You've been stepping on Faramir's - his Lordship's - toes, an awful lot in the past few days, Captain Ethiron." The guard said, with some amusement.

Ethiron raised a cool eye brow, "Well, your Steward is a menace to his own safety. And he doesn't seem the type to blacklist subordinates for doing their job." Ethiron wasn't afraid of Faramir; he'd been in Aragorn's, Magordan's, Elegos's, Dirhail's, Lord Elrond's, and even Lord Glorfindel's black books. Faramir was young, and a mere tabby-cat, compared to those steely-eyed leaders of men.

The guard chuckled, "Well, yes, but its generally best just to let Lord Faramir go on with whatever he's about."

"Oh, and why is that?" Ethiron inquired with patient cynicism.

"He's not vindictive, and he doesn't blacklist. But he REMEMBERS everything. Sooner or later, some 'opportunity' will come along, and all of a sudden, there's Faramir, recommending you for a horrifying honor." The guard explained.

Ethiron was amused, but not worried. "You sound like the voice of experience." He said, to the somewhat rueful guard.

The man nodded. "Aye, to that. I had thought I'd retire as a sergeant. Had a nice patch of farm all picked out. I ended up at the academy, you see, for my last posting. No one there had taken much note of me, but I used to make sure that one," nodding toward Faramir, working industriously in
his office, "had a fair shake of things, starting at the academy as little as he was. Was a full-time
job, at first, and I couldn't tell if he appreciated it or resented me. Then he made friends amongst
the older boys, and it was fairly easy, and we got along better. So, time comes for me to retire,
only a month away. Then Lord Boromir offers me this job, and his lass talked to my wife about
what an honor and a privilege it would be to live in Minas Tirith as the wife of a officer of the
Citadel Guard. Now, here I am, and I have my patch of earth, but I have to pay a cousin's friend to
till it whilst I'm in the city."

"And this was all Faramir's doing?" Ethiron asked, only a little bit dubious of that.

"I'm near sure he instigated it." The guard said earnestly, "Now, I grant you, it sounds ridiculous
to complain about. He got me a promotion and a pay-raise, after all. And I'm happy, and my wife's
happier. And my children have had more opportunities - the daughter who wanted to farm married
m' cousin's friend, the rest are in the army or the guilds, or married army or guild. But it wasn't
what I wanted, you know."

Ethiron, thinking of his friendship with Aragorn, and the plans he'd had to serve a ten year hitch in
the rangers, then retire to a farm, murmured. "Oh, I know, friend. I know."

Ethiron stayed just outside Faramir's office as Lord after powerful merchant went in, monitoring
their faces and mannerisms again as they left. Based upon the raised voices within, Lord Faramir's
most difficult interview of the afternoon was with Lord Tarsten of the Lebennin (yes, him again),
and his vassal Lord Morcocano of the Serni Vale. Lord Morcocano seemed almost apologetic, but
something in Ethiron still didn't like him.

Faramir had no further scheduled appointments, but that did not stop an officious white-haired
older gentleman with a limp from approaching the Steward's office as if he had absolutely no
doubt that he would be admitted. He looked angry. Extremely angry. Ethiron followed him into
Faramir's office.

"Lord Tyorvond." Faramir greeted the man, as Ethiron mentally filled in the blank of 'Tyorvond,
the Lord of the Ringlo Vale,' a former Captain-General of Gondor who had commanded some of
the defending forces during the siege of the city.

"I did not think that we had an appointment." Faramir continued, trying valiantly to hide his
exhaustion, and also his surprise at the older Lord's poorly hidden rage.

"We don't, but I hope that you'll hear me anyway." Tyorvond said, anger and some more
complicated emotion simmering behind the command which was only framed as a request.

"Of course." Faramir agreed, gesturing for Tyorvond to take a seat, before noticing that Ethiron
was still there. "You are dismissed, Captain Ethiron."

"No, my Lord." Ethiron disagreed quietly. "Lord Tyorvond seems...unbalanced. I think it is best if
I remain."

Faramir looked at the northern ranger incredulously.

Tyorvond waved a hand in permission. "Faramir, the man is just doing his job. If I were him, I
wouldn't let me talk to you alone, either. I don't care. I just want my nephew to speak to me again.
I trust that you will help me with that."

Faramir sighed, forgoing another glare at Ethiron in favor of dealing with this new problem. "Lord
Ty, I don't think you know how hearing your words, at the desperate time that you spoke them,
struck..." Faramir interrupted himself before he could say a name with a slight flicker of his eyes
towards Ethiron. "Struck my friend," Faramir finished his sentence vaguely, before continuing, 
"He was already grieving, already blaming himself when it was on my orders that he was...far
afield, and could not arrive in time to guard your son Gendarion's back during the battle. He does
not wish to speak to you, and I will not make him."

Lord Tyorvond shook his head and put a hand over his heart, looking to be in pain. "My Lord,"
Faramir said gently, "Perhaps you should see a healer. You do not look well."

"I am fine, Faramir." The Lord disagreed. "Please talk to Dervorin, if you would." Faramir sighed,
undoubtedly at yet another matter that he deemed his private affair being aired in front of a relative
stranger who was probably reporting to the future king. The older lord appeared too upset to care
that he was using his nephew's name in front of an unknown northern ranger. Ethiron frowned
thoughtfully to himself as a he recognized the name 'Dervorin.' They were speaking of Faramir's
ranger friend, the one whom they had encountered yesterday. The one who might have passed
Faramir a message, and who resembled closely in build the talented individual whom Ethiron
suspected as being a Gondorian spy.

Meanwhile, Lord Tyorvond was continuing his appeal for Faramir's aid.

"I was out of my head with grief, when I saw Dervorin after the battle. He looked...fresh as a
daisy." Lord Tyorvond said desperately, "I...he's always taken things so light. He's there when
you need him, usually, but he acts like nothing bothers him. I said terrible things that I did not
mean, and I must apologize to him. He needs to know that I still love him, I still want him as my
heir."

Faramir looked less than sympathetic. "Taking things light is just the way Dev is. I've seen him
come out of a week at the alarm, with no time to even wash his face, looking fresh as a daisy. All
that when I KNOW he fought hard every one of those terrible days, because he was usually at my
side, or if not at mine, at Gendan's or.. Boromir's. Going through terrible days and looking fresh -
is just how he is, a gift or a curse. If you don't know that yet, then you don't know him. Maybe
you never knew him. He's my friend, I do know him, and I'll stand by him. And he doesn't want
to speak to you. He doesn't want to inherit Gendarion's place, not while he still blames himself,
WRONGLY, for Gendarion's death. And I won't make him."

Tyorvond looked pained and guilty, but that didn't stop him from trying another tactic. "Faramir,
the Ringlo Vale cannot go without an heir."

Faramir went quieter. "I am sorry that you used that argument. It is beneath you."

"I am not a young man, Faramir!" Lord Tyorvond barked. "I have no son, and my nephew now
refuses to stand my heir!"

Faramir's tone was neutral. "We have a King now, my Lord. If your lands go without heir, then he
will appoint them a dutiful and caring custodian."

Tyorvond's shoulders sank a little. "Please, Faramir. My family is in pieces. My daughter-by-law
grieves, and she will not let me comfort her whilst my nephew and I are still on the outs."

"Ah." Faramir murmured, as if something had just fallen into place. "So, you are here because
Ynithe isn't speaking to you either, til you make things up with her 'baby brother'?"

"No, curse your fox-like mind and quick tongue!" Tyorvond snapped back. "I am here because I
love my nephew, and I wronged him with cruel words, in my grief at seeing my only son dead!"

Faramir raised an eyebrow, though his expression held some sympathy.
"And because Ynithe won't speak to me until I've made things up with Dervorin." Tyorvond added in reluctant honesty. "But mostly for the former."

Faramir sighed, and his tone was softer. "I will say what I can, when he is ready to listen, Ty. I cannot promise more than that; he has wounds on his soul which you know of, and which you ripped open again, knowingly or not, and he will not come near you for the nonce. I'm not happy with you myself, though I grieve Gendarion's death near as much as I grieve Boromir's."

Tyorvond took a deep breath and nodded. "That is the best I can hope for, then. But please do speak to him. I know I have wronged him, but I am not your..." Lord Tyorvond cut himself off abruptly. "I beg you pardon, Faramir. I am not a man who makes mistakes again and again. I promise I shall never speak to him thusly again."

Faramir nodded carefully. "I've a question for you, if you've a moment?" He asked Lord Tyorvond.

"Aye, lad. For you, always." Tyorvond replied, to Ethiron's eyes appearing strained but obviously still fond of Faramir, as well as his mysterious nephew Dervorin, Faramir's friend.

Faramir nodded, and said "Speaking of Ynithe, she's agreed to interview with the new queen for a position as lady in waiting. Is, is she doing well enough, for that, do you think? I've not actually spoken to her, and I'm worried. Ynithe normally likes to be busy, but if she needs more time, I can find someone else. I would not press her."

Lord Tyorvond pursed his lips in thought. "I think that your instincts are, as usual, right on the mark, my lad. I'll ask my daughter-by-law on your behalf, and let you know."

After Tyorvond left, Faramir turned back to the multitude of reports and books on his desk with a discontented expression. It reminded Ethiron strongly of Aragorn, when faced with a rare afternoon of paperwork.

So Ethiron did what he would have done, if it had been Aragorn. "Its been a balrog of a day, Faramir my friend. Let's knock off, and go find dinner."

Ethiron was rewarded by a surprised chuckle from his companion. "I had planned to eat with Eowyn." Faramir said wistfully, "But alas, it is already long past the luncheon hour."

"True enough, but I'm sure that she'd be happy to see you, anyway. Even if she's eaten already, the hobbits will be willing to eat again. She will join you, I'm sure, as all of the House is trying to encourage Frodo to eat and be of good cheer."

"Of course." Faramir murmured absenty, before fixing Ethiron with a penetrating look, "How is it, Captain, that you have come to know so much about hobbits?"

It couldn't hurt to explain that, Ethiron thought. "The northern rangers have guarded their shires for many years now." He explained, continuing with a crooked smile, "And if you go to eat and relax," and have the Warden look him over again, perforce, "Like a good Steward, then I'll tell you more about that."

Faramir's expressive mouth twitched into a half smile again. "Very well, Ethiron."

As Faramir was getting up to leave, Ethiron was startled by a large silver-and-black striped cat which thumped onto the Steward's desk from its previous perch on a high bookshelf behind several large tomes. The spymaster only just managed to restrain himself from swinging at the creature, or pulling Faramir away from it, by recalling the fine layer of silver and black hairs which had developed on the carpet in front of the sunny window between yesterday morn and this
afternoon.

"Smaug," Faramir greeted the creature with wry cheer. "Perhaps you would care to accompany us?"

Apparently, the cat did indeed desire to do so. It trotted at Faramir's heels down through the city to the House of Healing, occasionally departing on some errand of its own, but returning promptly enough. As it followed the young Lord, Ethiron was reminded of what he heard in the city of Faramir, that Denethor's second son had power over men and beasts. As the cat rejoined them one time or another, she and Faramir exchanged glances and pats and nuzzles, almost as if the disproportionately large feline was reporting to the Steward about things she had seen in the city, and did or did not approve of.

Just before they arrived at the Houses of Healing, Ethiron pulled Lord Faramir aside into a quiet garden of the House for a quick word.

"You have a list of guild leaders and Lords who might cause problems for Lord Aragorn, do you not, Lord Faramir?" Ethiron inquired.

Faramir paused, as if in surprise at hearing the topic broached so openly, before nodding cautiously. "I do."

"Is Master Gladring of the Coopers' Guild on that list?"

"Gladring?" Faramir repeated, with a frustrated frown. "No. He isn't - or wasn't." The young Lord paused. "Should he be?"

Ethiron nodded grimly, less pleased than he had thought he would be to finally know something which Faramir himself was ignorant of. Ethiron decided that he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and added, "So my men suggest. He has been in conference today with Master Burgold of the commodities guild...."

Faramir cursed softly under his breath. "Burgold. Now HE was on my list. Near the top of it, in fact." Faramir paused, looking a bit ill. "I missed that, the connection between them. How did you see it? As many informants as you might have here, you are a man of the north. This is my city."

"Master Gladring's wife has a gambling problem. Burgold learned of it, and has been blackmailing them." Ethiron answered shortly, "I have a man who works at the parlor where the gambling takes place."

The Steward nodded slowly, quite evidently still kicking himself for being unaware.

"You can miss things, when you're too close to them." Ethiron told him kindly. "I might not have seen it either, save that I was looking for corruption amongst you soft men of Gondor."

Faramir gave him a faintly chiding look. Ethiron had to chuckle. Many a man would have been offended by such an insult to his people. Faramir seemed to handle almost all things in stride.

"To be fair, I've found more than I had thought to look for, in the people of your city." Ethiron added, "But not everyone is brave and noble, young Lord. Do not dwell on this one mistake of yours, or any others. Keep your eyes on what you've yet to accomplish."

The younger man's lips beneath his red-gold mustache twisted into a faint smile. "Aye, Captain." He replied, half-teasing, as if it were Ethiron rather than he who was the senior ranked.

Ethiron frowned at Faramir quellingly, although the spy master let his eyes give away his
amusement at the young Lord's cheekiness. "If you will take a suggestion, Lord Faramir, I think
that it might aid us both to share information."

"I think that you might be right." Faramir agreed, after a thoughtful pause. "Although, to that end,
I would like to ask you to leave my personal friends and their private affairs out of any briefings
you might happen to give your King or his officers."

In whose number, Ethiron thought to himself, Faramir would soon find himself included. But he
didn't bother to say so, since it was Aragorn's place and not his. But he did give Faramir his
agreement before they went to join the Lady Eowyn and the hobbit heroes within the House. In
Ethiron's opinion, Mistress Nessanie and her son had earned a bit of peace and privacy. Lord
Tyorvond's nephew Dervorin, on the other hand, might be of interest both as a potential heir to his
uncle and as a possible suspect for one of Gondor's southern spies.

Ethiron kept that last thought to himself as they supped with the hobbits, who were indeed happy
to eat again. All except poor Frodo, who seemed even more listless this evening than he had in the
morning. Smaug-the-cat took a great deal of interest in both Samwise and Frodo. The stouter
hobbit greeted her gladly, apparently remembering her from Faramir's camp at Henneth Annun.
What a cat had been doing there Ethiron didn't even dare guess, but even Frodo seemed to perk up
at the sight of her. Smaug preened and took this attention as her due, although by the time dessert
was served she had made her way onto the Lady Eowyn's lap. The White Lady, apparently, was
more likely to have chicken to spare for the tabby.

Warden Del joined them as the evening fireflies came twinkling into the garden. After Samwise
had left with several junior healers to see Frodo to bed, the Warden spoke in quietly with Faramir
and Eowyn. And with Ethiron, whom Faramir had silently gestured might join them.

"Samwise heals well. I am now both pleased and satisfied by his progress." Warden Del
explained, "But Master Frodo remains listless and withdrawn. He has become weaker and more
fatigued, less able to stay awake for appreciable time during the day."

Faramir accepted this news solemnly, a hint of some idea showing in his gray eyes. Ethiron waited
until Warden Del had left them, before confronting the young Lord.

"Don't give me that act." Ethiron said sternly to Faramir.

"I beg your pardon, Captain?" Said Faramir, doing an excellent job of pretending to have
absolutely no idea what Ethiron might mean. The Lady Eowyn turned more convincingly
confused cornflower blue eyes in Ethiron's direction.

Ethiron smiled with exaggerated patience. "Look, my Lord, don't try to act the innocent with me. I
know what you're doing; I used to be just like you. Just tell me what you're planning and get it
over with."

Eowyn turned her wide eyes to her love, and Faramir sighed and gave in with a rueful smile. An
hour later, the governing of Minas Tirith had been left in the capable of hands Lord Hurin, with
the Lady Eowyn and several of Faramir's other confederates to assist him. Ethiron himself, along
with Lord Faramir, Squire Meriadoc, and a mere two guards, were well on their way through
hidden tunnels in Mount Mindolluin. If Faramir's estimates were correct, then they could reach
Aragorn's army in a mere few hours, using navigable waterways down the mountain and fresh
mounts from Gondor's messenger relays. There they could consult with the future King and his
learned brothers in person, gaining knowledge about how to aid poor Frodo, and sharing what
they had learned of resistance to the King's return within the city.

Ethiron thought to himself that it was a good thing Faramir had invited him to go on this
excursion, as Ethiron wouldn't have allowed the young Steward to hare off otherwise. As it was, the spymaster figured there was a great deal of merit in letting Aragorn know of the possible problems likely when he arrived in the city, and that it would be good to get a second, more experienced opinion on the young hobbit hero's health. It occurred to Ethiron belatedly that Faramir had probably realized his odds of leaving without the spymaster were poor, and had invited Ethiron along for just that reason. The spymaster suppressed a sigh as he followed the Steward through the long tunnel leading to the river. Soon enough Aragorn would get to deal with this particular bright young officer, and he would be out of Ethiron's hair.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of three parts of Chapter 8. Next is chapter 9, wherein Aragorn and Faramir meet again, finally.

Thank you for reading! Reviews are very much appreciated, if you are so inclined. This story is my white whale.
A Midnight Ride & A Meeting with the King-to-Be

Chapter Summary

Faramir rides out to meet the King, to warn him of Frodo’s illness and several truculent Lords and powerful men of Gondor. Faramir meets with his Uncle Imrahil, and his cousin Amrothos, for the first time since the end of the war.

Chapter Notes

Quote:

“Suddenly Faramir stirred, and he opened his eyes, and he looked on Aragorn who bent over him; and a light of knowledge and love was kindled in his eyes, and he spoke softly. ‘My lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?’” - J.R.R. Tolkien, Return of the King

Excerpt from Previous Chapter:

An hour later, the governing of Minas Tirith had been left in the capable of hands Lord Hurin, with the Lady Eowyn and several of Faramir's other confederates to assist him. Ethiron himself, along with Lord Faramir, Squire Meriadoc, and a mere two guards, were well on their way through hidden tunnels in Mount Mindolluin. If Faramir's estimates were correct, then they could reach Aragorn's army in a mere few hours, using navigable waterways down the mountain and fresh mounts from Gondor's messenger relays. There they could consult with the future King and his learned brothers in person, gaining knowledge about how to aid poor Frodo, and sharing what they had learned of resistance to the King's return within the city.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Faramir POV]

Despite his exhaustion, some part of Faramir thrilled to be outside the city, under the moon and stars. They had moved quickly through the dark, smooth stone tunnels of the hidden passages which led from the Citadel up into Mount Mindolluin. A raft and several poles secreted near the exit of the tunnel were swiftly made ready for use by Faramir and one of his guards, Gorn.

Meriadoc's eyes gleamed excitedly, and he readily leant a hand to putting the raft in the water. Faramir thought that Captain Ethiron looked amused, but then he often seemed to.

"Have a need of fast exits often, do you, Lord Faramir?" Ethiron asked Faramir wryly.

"From time to time." Faramir said quietly, not feeling it needful to mention that he had never himself used this exit save when training, or long ago while playing with his brother as a boy.

Soon they were on their way down a tributary of Anduin, a fast flowing ribbon of water tumbling over white rocks on its way down to meet the great broad river. It was navigable, yes, but only by
those who knew well what they were about. Gorn, fortunately, was one such, and Faramir let him take the lead in directing their shallow vessel. Faramir himself manned the oar on the left side of the raft, nearer the more difficult of the two shores. His other guard took the third oar, and Ethiron had ended up with the spare. Faramir hadn't even known that there was a spare oar, until Ethiron found it near the camouflage webbing.

They moved from white, frothing rapids to calmer water, clear enough to reflect the stars, sending wavering light shining back up towards the sky. Merry kept his weight well-balanced in the middle of the raft, whether by dint of native skill or hard-won experience from his recent adventures, Faramir was not sure. The young hobbit's evident joy increased Faramir's, helping the young Steward to ignore his own exhaustion and the pain from his still-healing shoulder. Merry looked up at Faramir, his heart and his thoughts shimmering in his bright blue eyes.

Faramir did not try to read the minds and hearts of men, not unless there was some pressing reason. Most often, he did not have to try; it was there for the reading. He had to look away, in order to avoid it. It was not a comfortable gift. It had not been, even for Denethor, who for all his lack of concern over their secrets of others, had been a very private man himself. If Denethor had ever learned a way to reliably meet a man's eyes politely without sharing whatever was passing o'er the surface of that mind, he had not shared it with his second son. Faramir's uncle Imrahil had taught him some defenses, but Imrahil was not as sensitive as Faramir, and his tactics did not always work for the younger of his sister-sons.

Fortunately, Merry's thoughts were nothing the hobbit would have been unwilling to share. Although worried about Frodo, Merry was pleased with their mission, which in Merry's mind was 'sneaking out of the city quietly so as to let Strider know which humans might be ornery about him claiming the Kingship and ask what else might be done to ease Frodo and Sam.' Merry was amused by the only half-concealed tolerant, put-upon expressions on the faces of Faramir's two guards, who had both looked, at the outset of this journey, as if they would have liked to have protested Faramir going himself. But Faramir was the Steward, at least for now, and the obedience of the Tower Guard ran deep. How much courage it must have taken for Beregrond to break that oath humbled Faramir. He was glad that Aragorn had already promised him that Beregrond's life and honor would be spared.

Merry might not read minds, but he was an insightful young being, and he read faces just fine. Faramir's expression must have darkened as he contemplated the circumstances behind Beregrond's current confinement. He put those thoughts from his mind, and summoned a reassuring smile for Merry. Faramir knew that the hobbit was trusting in Faramir's alert eyes and ability to sense orcs. Faramir placed some trust in those, aye, but more, after they left the water, they would be riding on the message relay remounts, and on the same trails frequented by the Steward's - now the King's - messengers. What orcs remained in this part of Gondor mostly preferred to prey upon the helpless, and took no interest in frequently reinforced parties of armed men on swift horses.

To Faramir's relief, the journey went as he'd anticipated. The first waystation they came to after they stowed the raft was well-provisioned with more than enough horses and remounts, and they encountered no orcs and no other resistance of any sort.

The King's camp was massive. Faramir couldn't help but stare at the sheer numbers of the muster, a greater host than any in living memory. He'd been too ill to see the army before its departure, when it had been even larger. That sad thought wearied him, so much so that when he swung down from his horse, he nearly faltered.

A hard hand grabbed Faramir's good arm, holding him upright until he was steady on his feet again. It was Ethiron, and seeing the concern writ clear on the northern ranger's face, the stream of
time before Faramir parted.

He saw a slightly older Ethiron, more lines on his forehead, standing in the main courtyard of the Citadel in Minas Tirith. He was greeting Faramir, who was getting down from a horse, but not alone. Dervorin was with him, and the tilt of Dev's chin told Faramir that he was about to make up a very interesting tale, one likely only thinly leavened with the truth. Faramir - in the future- hoped that he had enough wit to keep up with whatever was about to come out of his friend's mouth.

Future Ethiron looked at both of them, worry receding from his eyes and then being replaced by laughter. "Want to take a moment to get your stories straight, eh, my Lads?" He asked.

Then Faramir was back in the present, stumbling again, only to have Ethiron catch him. Again.

The man cursed quietly in Sindarin. "Lord Steward or not, I shouldn't have let you ride out here tonight."

Well, that was amusing and insulting all at the once.

"You really couldn't have stopped me, Captain Ethiron." Faramir pointed out, making sure to keep his voice light. Much of having authority was appearing to have authority, and the only way to have authority over someone whose loyalty was to a higher authority was not to directly contradict him.

"I could cursed well have slipped a sedative into your dinner wine, and maybe I should have."

"I thought of that." Said Faramir, with a rueful half-smile, "I drank Eowyn's."

"Aren't you the clever boots?" Ethiron asked drolly.

Everyone had always said that Faramir was, but right now....with so much done, and so much yet to be done, and so many things that could potentially go wrong and which had to be accounted for, and a sick ringbearer.....

"I'm really just tired, actually." Faramir confessed.

"I just bet you are, lad." Ethiron said, with no small amount of sympathy. "Just get through tonight, and then you can rest."

The northerner Captain seemed very certain of that. Faramir felt almost like crying on the man's shoulder, whether in relief at finding someone who seemed to almost understand, or in exhaustion and despair at how much he still had left to do. However, that reaction would not be particularly helpful, so Faramir just smiled, nodded, and kept on walking.

Their small party lost Merry to a crowd of celebrating Rohirrim. Based on the fondness all of the Riders in Gondor had for Merry, Faramir figured that his small friend would be safe amongst his adopted countrymen. Ethiron seemed to feel likewise, as he made no protest, and then later slipped away himself.

Surprisingly, Faramir found that he thought he'd miss the man.

Faramir went first to Imrahil's camp. It was not that he felt unsure of his welcome with Aragorn, not exactly. The time he'd spent with his future King had been very brief, but...intense. It had left Faramir with no doubt that Aragorn would hear him out. But he didn't know any of the future King's men, and he did not want to alarm them. And he also wanted to see his Uncle again, and his cousin and his many friends amongst the Dol Amroth levies. The first thing that Faramir heard upon arriving was his cousin's loud, cheery voice, teasing one of his retainers.

"No matter how much you polish that breast plate, Bellasaer, it's not going to look like it wasn't in
"I live in hope, young my Lord." Bellasaer reprimanded in a friendly fashion, "And I like to think that I'm a better hand with armor than you."

"Well, that must certainly be the truth." Said Faramir, Gorn and his other guard at his sides. "For every one knows that Amrothos would rather be commanding from the deck of a ship, with only chain-mail to protect him. If even that!"

"As I live and breathe," Amrothos crowed, his handsome bearded face wreathed in a broad smile, "It is cousin-the-Lord-Steward Faramir, of the House of Hurin, alive and well, in the flesh!" Amrothos walked to Faramir and hugged him soundly. "Well-met, Cousin!"

"Well-met, indeed." Said Faramir, and if his voice was a little husky with joy and relief at seeing his youngest and most impetuous cousin again, Amrothos and Bellasaer and their interested audience of Swan Knights and support staff pretended not to notice.

Amrothos and Bellasaer made an odd contrast together. Bellasaer was built large and sturdy, a mountain of a man, with curling chestnut hair and Numenorean gray eyes. Amrothos resembled his grandfather Adrahil. He was tall, but slender and wiry. He had the Dol Amroth red hair, so deep a red as to be nearly the shade of carmine. His flowing shoulder-length locks had been hastily tied back with a leather thong, while a beard as neatly trimmed as Faramir's own decorated his lively face.

"Are you not supposed to be in the White City?" Amrothos asked, after Faramir had greeted Bellasaer and the several other knights and Dol Amroth men whom he knew.

"I have news for the King." Said Faramir gravely, "And it would be best if I could speak to him directly, and ah," He looked around, briefly but carefully meeting the eyes of each of the Dol Amroth men, "Quietly. No one is to know that I have been here."

"A messenger from Lord Faramir was here, Captain." Bellasaer said firmly, also looking around his men. "Not, of course, the Lord Steward himself."

A rumble of agreement and some winks and nods went around the semi-circle of attentive observers.

"I'll fetch Ada for you, Fara. He's with the King, and the King's men." Amrothos pledged, suiting words to action and setting off. Bellasaer sent several men with him, and then plied Faramir and his guards with food and well-watered wine. Faramir himself ate sparingly.

"How fare you, Faramir? Dervorin said that your arm was still in a sling, the last he saw you, but a few days ago." Bellasaer observed levelly, his insightful gray eyes lively with interest.

"I am recovering well." Faramir said, almost automatically. Then his eyes widened. "Blast, the sling! Gorn..."

"Yes, my Lord." Said the long-suffering guard, pulling the forgotten cloth sling out of his belt pouch, and helping Faramir to put it back on, just before Imrahil arrived at a swift pace, Amrothos but a few steps behind him.

"Well-met, Nephew." Said Imrahil, echoing his son as he pulled Faramir into an almost uncomfortably tight embrace, whispering into his ear, "You are a valiant, stubborn, reckless young man. It is so very good to see you again."

"It is good to see you too, Sir." Said Faramir, knowing that the unwanted familiarity would push
Imrahil into letting him go at least long enough to scold him.

"Faramir...." Imrahil began, exasperated, and keeping his hands tight on Faramir's shoulders even as he put just enough space between them to look Faramir in the eyes. The depth of love and worry in those mist-gray eyes shook Faramir. The affection and good opinion of his Uncle was a touch-stone of the young Steward's world. Dol Amroth had been a haven for him, as a child. With his grandfather Adrahil, his Uncle Imrahil, his Aunt Lorias, his four cousins, and his beloved brother, many of Faramir's best memories came from the time he had spent in the old rose-colored sandstone castle by the sea. Nothing was condemned, there, unless it was actively harmful to himself or others. Anything was possible, and he had always had four - well, three, as Elphir was normally too responsible - willing accomplices in any plan or game he'd cared to think up.

"How are you, sister-son?" Imrahil inquired after a long moment, that deep worry still evident in his eyes, though he kept his tone and expression merely fond and lightly concerned.

"I...well enough, Uncle. Still recovering, as you see." Faramir gestured with his free hand towards the sling. He felt somewhat unsettled, as that same mix of emotions from his uncle had more than once ended with a young Faramir receiving a memorable lecture and then an even more memorable spanking.

"Hmm." Observed Imrahil skeptically, as Amrothos hid a grin at the newly-appeared sling.

"You do look better than the last time I saw you, Fara." Amrothos spoke up, "It is good to see you on your feet, in fact. The last time I laid eyes on you, I was a little offended that you slept through my entire visit."

"And when was that, ion-nin?" Asked Imrahil, sounding somewhere between bemused and mildly vexed that he had not been informed. Faramir wondered, absently, what it was that Amrothos had been supposed to be doing, when he'd taken the time to come to the House of Healing before the army left. Faramir was grateful that Amrothos had, and wished that he'd been awake. Fervently, he thanked the Valar and Amrothos' own skill for sparing his cousin's life.

"Oh, you know, the last time we were in Minas Tirith." Said Amrothos innocently, "We were so busy, the hours seemed to blur together...."

"I'm sure that they did." Said Imrahil wryly, before gesturing for his men to give him and his son and nephew some privacy.

Faramir was grateful that he had, as what Imrahil apparently wanted to do was express his displeasure at his nephew's risking such a ride with only a hobbit, a ranger, and two guards for escort, with Faramir newly risen from his sickbed.

Adopting much the same light, eminently reasonable tone he'd used with Ethiron, Faramir soothed, "It was necessary, Uncle."

"Was it really?" Imrahil questioned, carefully neutral.

"Yes." Said Faramir, sure in his decision, and sure, in this moment, of himself.

His Uncle decided not to press the point, instead asking, "How fares the city? Do they have enough armed men, or should some of the army be sent ahead?"

"Just enough, I believe." Faramir answered. "I let Salabros go ahead with his home guard idea, so that I could take some of the other soldiers and use them in sweeps to handle the problem of marauding bands of deserting orcs."
Imrahil grinned at his nephew’s cleverness. "Well-played, Faramir-nin. I have heard other reports of your cleverness these past days. Erchirion will be vexed to have his fleet so committed without his say-so, but Elphir and I shall be glad for the opportunity to send the fleet far and wide looking for trading opportunities and information."

Faramir smiled. "I thought you'd like that, though I'm sorry to presume on our relationship."

"Dear child," Imrahil interrupted, "You presume not at all. My ships are your ships, sister-son. And your people must be fed. I knew the man who will be our King well once, and I know he will agree with such a decision."

Faramir sighed in relief. "I had thought so, from when I met him." Faramir paused, then asked, "How much does he know of Gondor's customs? From his letters I have not been able to entirely tell."

"He should know them well." Imrahil answered shortly, "For he served your your grandfather Ecthelion in his youth." Instead of explaining that, Imrahil said, "Oh, Faramir, I must warn you. The two dark-haired elves are the King's foster-brothers and future brothers-by-law, the sons of Lord Elrond of Imladris, and their mannerisms are a bit odd, at times. They seem well-intentioned and are impressive warriors and healers, but they act, ah, alternatively inquisitive and impertinent, and sometimes simply odd. The rule seems to be, that if the King does not take note, do you not take note, neither."

Faramir nodded, a bit bemused.

"Also, if they ask you any questions that make you uncomfortable," Imrahil explained further, "just change the subject - the one who stand to the King's left can be distracted by talk of military tactics or armament, and the one who stands to the King's right by talk of how best to treat any wound, or anything that might interest your friends who are healers."

Faramir nodded again. "Rather like Chiri when it comes to sailing, I suppose."

"No where near as bad as Erchirion," That worthy's younger brother Amrothos complained with a grimace. "He's going to make me serve as his flagship Captain, Fara. If he lectures me as if I were still a green lieutenant, I may toss him into the Bay of Belfalas."

Imrahil sighed. "Do try to wait until you are not on duty, Amrothos. Your middle brother is your superior officer, and I will not intervene to save your backside from his rightful wrath should you do something like that as his junior officer."

Amrothos grinned. "Yes, Ada." He agreed, but with a worrisome gleam in his eye.

"'Amrothos," Began Imrahil sternly.

"Oughtn't we go give our greetings to the King?" Faramir interrupted, hiding his smile. It truly was a balm to his spirit to see his kinsmen again.

"Yes." Agreed Imrahil, but with the too-patient look in his eyes that said more eloquently than words that he knew his son and his nephew were up to their old game of concealing one another's mischief from him. Faramir supposed that was fair enough.

As they walked closer to the King's tent, Faramir's attention moved to that meeting. A tall, sturdy man with dark hair which had just begun to be threaded by wise white, Aragorn came to his feet as Imrahil approached. Faramir heard his uncle introduce them both, and saw and noted the other men, elves, and hobbits around the King's fire. But his eyes had met Aragorn's, and he had little attention for anyone else.
Faramir knelt gracefully, in that moment feeling none of his aches or pains. He bowed his head before this man he'd pledged to serve with his life. Aragorn spoke, and Faramir's eyes looked up to meet him. In those eyes he saw warmth and kindness as well as strength and valor and hope. Faramir wanted to live in that light, and felt as if all things were possible now. Faramir wanted that future, for Gondor. He even wanted to be a part of it, and was almost sad that his time as the King's servant in Minas Tirith was nearly at its end. It would be hard to leave the city, but he could still serve the King, even from the wilds of Ithilien, the plains of Rohan, or the shores of Dol Amroth. He vowed to himself again that he would do anything this man asked, anything he could to help him bring to Gondor a future that was both great and good.

The light in the King's heather-gray eyes grew warmer and more compassionate still, and Faramir remembered in a moment of mortification that the King could read the truth of a man in his eyes, just as surely as could Denethor or Faramir himself. Perhaps even more so. But the embarrassment passed, and Faramir straightened. He meant all of it, and so what harm, if the King knew?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I've been working on this story for many years. Encouraging words are definitely appreciated if you are so inclined, and will likely help give me the impetus to finish more chapters more quickly!

You can read about Faramir's first intense meeting with Aragorn in the first chapter of The Road to Barad-dur and Back:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/755581/chapters/1412081

They briefly meet one another again in chapter four of that story (link just below), and then not again until the end of this chapter immediately above. That meeting will be covered in the next chapter of this story.

http://archiveofourown.org/works/755581/chapters/1929279

This is a link to my friend Beth's drawing of Faramir, which comes pretty close to my mental picture of him.

http://bethannng.deviantart.com/art/Faramir-3-496303405
A Midnight Ride & A Meeting with the King-to-Be, Part II

Chapter Summary

Aragorn and Faramir meet again. Faramir offers the King his loyalty again, and warns Aragorn that not all in Gondor feel likewise.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you so much to everyone who has commented and encouraged me to continue with this story. If you want to know what Aragorn has been up to between the Battle of Pelennor Fields and just before this chapter starts, then check out “The Road to Barad-dur and Back,” link here:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/755581/chapters/1412081

Quotes:

“Begin with the end in mind.” – Anonymous

"For myself, I would see the White Tree in flower again in the courts of the kings, and the Silver Crown return, and Minas Tirith in peace: Minas Anor again as of old, full of light, high and fair, beautiful as a queen among other queens; not as a mistress of many slaves, nay, not even a kind mistress of willing slaves. War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Númenor, and I would have her loved for her memory, her ancientry, her beauty, and her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise.”- Spoken by Faramir in The Two Towers – J.R.R. Tolkien

There is sublime thieving in all giving. Someone gives us all he has and we are his. - Eric Hoffer

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Army of the West, the survivors – and victors – of the assault on the gate of Mordor – were encamped an easy half day’s ride from Minas Tirith. Aragorn himself was sharing a pipe with the Wizard Gandalf, listening with half an ear as a baffled Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth described the foods which would likely be served at his coronation feast to an enthusiastic Pippin. The youngest and most irrepressible hobbit hero had recovered well from the wounds he received at the Black Gate. Aragorn could only hope that Frodo, Samwise, and Meriadoc, all in Minas Tirith, were doing anywhere near as well. He worried for Frodo especially, for he could tell that Gandalf was deeply concerned over the Ringbearer’s health.

Prince Imrahil’s youngest son Prince Amrothos joined them, pulling Aragorn’s thoughts
temporarily away from Minas Tirith. Imrahil’s merry son reminded Aragorn of the old Prince Adrahil, and Aragorn was truly enjoying getting to know the young man. More, he was most grateful that Imrahil seemed to have mostly forgiven his old mentor Thorongil for leaving Gondor, those three and a half decades ago. Or at least so Aragorn gathered, from Imrahil’s more frequent – and more informal – presence amongst them, and by his bringing Amrothos with him more often than not when he visited.

The elder of Aragorn’s two elven foster brothers, Elrohir, had been quite favorably impressed with Amrothos for having intervened after the battle to save the lives of a dozen surrendering Southrons. Elrohir had been making something of a student out of the young Dol Amroth prince, teaching him some elven tracking skills during the day’s sweep rides and sword drills in the evenings.

Observing this the previous day, Elladan had raised an eyebrow at Legolas and Aragorn, and teased, “No jealousy from either of you this time?” Elladan was referring to when Legolas had first met Aragorn, and both had found it somewhat challenging to share their favorite elven mentor in the arts of war.

Aragorn laughed. “I wasn’t really jealous of Elrohir’s attentions to Legolas, I just didn’t understand why the great archer prince of Greenwood seemed to think I was a malodorous idiot.”

“And I,” said Legolas loftily whilst hiding a smile, “Am not jealous because Amrothos is just much more likable than Aragorn was at a similar age.”

“Really, gwador,” said Aragorn dryly, with the ease of long friendship, “Do tell.”

“Yes,” Legolas replied innocently, “You were too perfect, Aragorn. Young Amrothos, on the other hand, is a character.”

That much was certainly true, reflected Aragorn with a smile.

Just now Amrothos did not appear minded towards a long visit. He bowed quickly to Aragorn, and then immediately sought out his father. Imrahil’s eyes widened at the Amrothos’ whispered comments, and then the Prince rose to leave, giving the King his apologies.

"What do you suppose that is about?” commented Elladan, who, like Legolas, found the Prince of Dol Amroth fascinating. Legolas shrugged, and signaled that he would follow, silently exiting after Imrahil at Aragorn’s nod.

"You trust Prince Imrahil, do you not, Estel?” Elrohir asked in concern.

"Of course, brother,” Aragorn replied calmly, determined to ignore Elrohir’s continuing suspicion of anyone he hadn’t known well for at least two decades. "But Imrahil is not easily overset - I would merely have Legolas follow to ensure that whatever has startled him has no ill designs.”

“No ill designs,” commented a dear, familiar voice from shockingly near the fire. It was Ethiron, Aragorn’s spymaster and a Captain of the Northern Dunedain of lost Arnor.

“I knew that you were there,” Said Elrohir disgustedly, though he couldn't entirely hide the fond gleam in his eyes upon seeing Ethiron again.

“Well, hello,” said Aragorn, grasping Ethiron’s forearm and then bringing him into a fierce embrace.

“’Tis a surprise to see you, Ethiron,” commented Elladan, also embracing the white-haired spymaster, “Estel had said that you were to remain in Minas Tirith until we arrived.”
“Plans changed,” Ethiron commented shortly, his gray eyes dancing with the suppressed amusement of a small child with a secret. Aragorn hid a chuckle as his twin foster-brothers glared. The irony of Ethiron treating them as they so often treated others was quite evident to Aragorn, and to Ethiron, who covertly winked at him and Mithrandir.

Aragorn scrutinized his friend, looking for any sign that the injuries which had prevented Ethiron from joining them on their way to the Black Gate still troubled him.

“I am fine, oh suspicious one,” Ethiron replied in answer to Aragorn’s unspoken query, “And I’ll even hop on one foot later to prove it to you.”

Aragorn shook his head, hiding a smile. Growing up with the twins had been good practice for dealing with Ethiron, but it didn't do to let on to any of them that you were amused before they’d demonstrated their good health to your satisfaction.

It turned out that Aragorn didn't even have to strain himself to come up with a sufficiently quelling reply, as Magordan did it for him.

Placing a heavy hand on Ethiron’s shoulder, the senior surviving Dunedain Captain asked, “How about you spar with me – or Elrohir – to prove it?”

Elrohir grinned fiercely. Ethiron didn’t even flinch, brave man that he was.

“Oh, no, I have entirely too much to be doing tonight,” Ethiron replied glibly, “I will make sure to find the two of you when I am at liberty, though.”

Aragorn rather doubted that, but he was sure that Magordan would insist, likely with Elrohir’s inimitable assistance. But Ethiron’s answer begged another question….

“What do you have to do that is more important than briefing me, oh brother of my heart?” Asked Aragorn, with affectionate incredulity.

Ethiron’s eyes narrowed, “I need to go yell at Orohael….have a chat with him, I mean,” he amended himself, upon catching the reprimand in Aragorn’s gaze. Then Ethiron’s mien darkened with sorrow, “I know that we lost two of my men at the Black Gate, but curse it all, even Orohael should be better at running the lines and playing your scribe than this!”

“Be nice to poor Orohael,” Aragorn said sternly.

Ethiron’s reluctant, torn expression was not promising, but in the end he acquiesced, “Only because you asked, Aragorn. But I am going to transition him out, he’ll make a happier guard than a scribe. May I borrow one of your new people to replace him?”

Aragorn raised an eyebrow. Ethiron must mean to help him with his spying and with Aragorn’s related confidential correspondence, so the future King was understandably surprised that his spymaster would be willing to trust someone of Gondor whom he’d only recently met with such a role. But he had a great deal of trust in his friend’s judgment.

Magordan and Elrohir, on the other hand, immediately answered, “No.”

Not even sparing an irritated glance at both of them, despite wanting to, Aragorn focused on Ethiron, “Yes, you may. Just let me know who it is you want before conscripting him.”

“Of course,” Ethiron promised, almost as if it had never dared occur to him to go off script in the past.
With another embrace for Aragorn, Magordan, and the twins, and a grin exchanged with Mithrandir, he prepared to take his leave, promising in parting that, “What has distracted Prince Imrahil will soon become clear. It isn’t a problem, at least not mostly, and it may even be the solution to several. I am sorry that I’m going to miss the show, but….needs must.”

“You really aren’t going to forewarn us, are you?” Asked Elladan, bemused.

Ethiron laughed and clapped the peredhel on the back. “Some surprise is good in life.”

“That is a novel attitude for someone in your position to have,” Said Aragorn, torn between censure and mirth.

Ethiron grinned at him and clasped his forearm, "I'm trying to keep you from becoming too stuffy, Chieftain-mine. It’s been my calling in life since I was a stripling of twenty."

“Nineteen,” Elladan corrected absently.

“It seems to be everyone’s calling in life, these days,” Aragorn wryly, not actually discontent with that. Outside of the circle of the Dunedain he had known since his youth and his friends of the fellowship, he was receiving a respect bordering on awe that he found positively unnerving. Stories he had been told as a small child of great Kings of elves and men replayed in his memory, his foster-father's rich, empathetic voice telling him of the loneliness suffered by rulers. And of how important it was, to keep close to you those who were friends and speakers of truth.

Ethiron had slipped silently away before Aragorn finished his ruminations, a skill entirely learned by training and not at all native to the brash, cheerful young farmer-turned-ranger who had once been the twenty-year old Aragorn's first true friend amongst his Dunedain.

Legolas returned to their fire even more soundlessly than Ethiron had left it, grinning broadly, "'Tis the Lord Faramir, and Merry with him," he reported to Aragorn, "Several of the Steward's guards and your man Ethiron, as well."

"Yes, he's been and left already," said Aragorn, his amusement with Ethiron's keeping Faramir's appearance a surprise, and his pleased anticipation at seeing the young Steward again, warring with concern. Concern first and foremost as to what might have motivated the new Steward of Gondor, soon to be Aragorn's Steward of Gondor, to ride here so quickly and covertly from the city, both newly risen from his sickbed and without proper escort.

Aragorn was also concerned about his brothers' reaction to the news, and how they would behave when they met his new Steward. The twins looked downright eager, Elladan in a fascinated way and Elrohir more....well, Elrohir and Magordan had gotten it into their heads that Faramir might very well be plotting some kind of coup. Aragorn had told them to stop, but both were suspicious by nature and unlikely to entirely let go of their fears until they had seen for themselves that such fears were groundless.

Faramir was already dear to Aragorn, but to his brothers, as Elrohir had put it when talking to Magordan, Faramir was still just "the man who could provide their much younger dearly loved foster brother Estel with either a helping hand to begin his reign as King, or a hindrance that might require further blood shed." Despite Elrohir's suspicion, Aragon knew that Faramir was his man. But Aragorn, too, understood Faramir's political importance at this moment in time, as did all of his friends, both the Northerners and the members of the Fellowship.

Elrohir appeared quite pleased that he would be able to judge Faramir himself before the army's entry into Gondor. Aragorn briefly met his brothers' eyes in approbation, the younger brother's plea not to embarrass him strengthened by the iron will of the King. Elrohir wouldn't meet his
eyes, and Elladan just shrugged gracefully, as if to indicate that the elven sons of Elrond were only interested in Faramir as Imrahil's nephew. Aragorn sighed internally. His brothers were a blessing, but a burden as well, at times. He could only hope that Faramir would continue to show his uncle's patience, rather than Denethor's. And that Magordan and Elrohir would behave themselves. Aye, and Elladan as well.

Whatever they did, Aragorn was fairly sure that Faramir could handle it, although Aragorn would of course step in if needed. The future King was more worried about how the abuse the youth had suffered as a child might still affect Faramir. Aragorn had worked with abused children and adults in the past, but primarily only in their rescue and the immediate treatment of their physical wounds. After discussing the matter over with Imrahil, Aragorn had decided to leave the issue of speaking to Faramir about the abuse and deciding what should be done to help him entirely to Imrahil, at least for now. But that didn't stop Aragorn from worrying over it, or seeking to learn more about the matter so that he could help Faramir if such help was needed.

Elladan was quietly known as an excellent mind-healer. Aragorn had worked with him sporadically over the years, particularly in respect of rangers suffering from war sickness, but Aragorn was still not anything near an expert in that area of the healing arts. So, Aragorn did what any self-respecting younger brother with a problem would do; he went to Elladan.

"The important thing to remember," explained Elladan in his patient-but-enthusiastic-teacher voice, "Is that your Faramir is still the same person, still just as courageous and wise. This information changes only your knowledge of him; he is no different. And he already knows what happened to him."

"Does he, though?" Aragorn asked, recalling that children of similar ages, and even strong men, can suppress the memories of such traumatic events.

"It doesn't really matter." Said Elladan, in the same tone tinged with a touch more empathy, "Not for now. He either remembers, and even if it does impinge on his daily thoughts, he's found a way to handle it. Or he doesn't remember, and now is not the time to help him reclaim those memories. In fact, if he doesn't remember on his own and the hidden past does not trouble him in the present or the future, then it may be best to let it be."

"How can it not affect him?"

"I'm not saying that it doesn't affect him; he's just found ways to compensate." Elladan replied, "Even if he were younger, and the memories were greatly burdening him, this would be unlikely to be the best time to address it."

Elrohir entered, as Elladan paused in the way that indicated he was running through several thousand years worth of memories in an attempt to find a relevant example. Then Elladan thought of something, and nodded, "It only ever annoyed Melpomaen, at least at first, when we told him that he was only acting a certain way because he'd been beaten and bullied by his birth father and his father's associates."

"Even when we were right." Agreed Elrohir, while Aragorn processed in shock that his brothers' best friend, one of Aragorn's own favorite elves, had been abused as a child.

"Melpomaen?" Aragorn questioned, thinking that he'd never seen in any evidence of such past trauma in the graceful and kind young elf he'd known all his life.

"Oh, ah, we probably weren't supposed to tell you that, Estel." Elladan concluded, as he and Elrohir exchanged guilty looks. "He doesn't like for people to know, and it is not something which he shares often."
"I will not say anything." Aragorn promised, "Of course I won't. But...."

"Don't worry, Glorfindel took care of everyone who had anyone to do with hurting Melpomaen." Elrohir assured him.

"And Rumil kept Glorfindel from actually killing anyone." Elladan added, "Which was probably for the best in the long run, even if the tiger was disappointed that he didn't get to eat the merchant."

"The tiger...." Repeated Aragorn, who was realizing that however it had started, this was going to be one of THOSE anecdotes.

"Glorfindel borrowed the tiger from Lindon's zoo." Elrohir explained, as if unconcerned, "Ada wasn't pleased about it, but I have complete faith in our Captain's judgment. I'm sure that whatever that particular merchant had done was tiger-worthy."

While Aragorn pondered the use of the phrase "tiger-worthy" as an adjective describing anyone's behavior, let alone the behavior of an adult elf towards a good friend when that friend had been a child, Elrohir asked, "How did this even come up?"

Elladan shook his head and looked to Aragorn. The twins told one another almost everything; one of the few exceptions was information that Elladan possessed in his role as a healer, when Elrohir was not also one of the patient's healers.

Aragorn considered the matter for a moment, then nodded his head fractionally. Elrohir was not the mind-healer that Elladan was, but he was very good at keeping confidences, and he showed up here and there more unexpectedly than a cat. It was usually easier to just read him in, and Aragorn could use his advice.

Elrohir's serious gray eyes softened for a moment in sympathy for what the Steward of Gondor had endured as a child, "Where will Lord Faramir bide after you are crowned, Estel?" he asked.

"His Ithilien Rangers wish no one else for the commanding officer, however his uncle Prince Imrahil has invited him to join Dol Amroth's navy," Elladan offered, "And I think that might be best for him, at least for the nonce. Dol Amroth's mind-healers are excellent."

"How can you tell that solely by correspondence!?!" Elrohir demanded, almost outraged. It was a long-standing argument between the twins.

Aragorn interrupted by rapping his knuckle sharply on the camp table. "Faramir will not be going to Dol Amroth. I'm going to keep him on as Steward." It was the first time that Aragorn had announced his plan aloud.

The twins stared at him.

Aragorn couldn't help but smile. It wasn't that often a man got to surprise two age-old brothers.

"Well, we'll have to think of something else, in case he does need assistance of the mind-healer variety," said Elladan.

"You're not keeping him on, so it doesn't matter," Elrohir told Aragorn sternly.

Fighting the urge to snap back as a younger brother instead of a future King, Aragorn took a deep breath, and then another.

"Brother," Said Elladan to Elrohir, visibly torn between amusement and censure at both Elrohir
and Aragorn both, "Do you remember what happened the last time Adar tried to dictate what Aragorn should do as Chieftain of the Dunedain, rather than advise him?"

"Yes," Admitted Elrohir, "And I was proud to stand behind him then, but, Estel, it's simply not safe."

"Have your say, brother. I will always listen, for I value your counsel." Promised Aragorn, "But I do not anticipate changing my decision. I know Faramir; I healed him, and saw his heart and his mind. I will need help, ruling Gondor, and there is no one better to be my first officer."

"But, Estel, Faramir already commands in Minas Tirith; as did his father before him," Elrohir argued passionately, "If you allow him to remain Steward, the people's allegiance will be to him, and you will be no more than a figurehead. How secure will you be then? Or your bride who is our sister?"

"You will have to trust my judgment at some point, Elrohir." Replied Aragorn, patient despite his exasperation, "Faramir is no threat to Arwen or to my rule as King. I would blunder about without some native guide; Faramir is ideal, if he will serve."

"What about Prince Imrahil?" Asked Elrohir, "He is older, that position would not otherwise be his, and he is the better choice."

"He is not of Gondor; he is of Dol Amroth." Explained Aragorn gently, "The people of Minas Tirith see a distinction there. Imrahil has already expressed his willingness to be amongst my foremost councilors, and I will treasure him as such. But Faramir is my first choice for Steward."

"Dol Amroth is in Gondor." Said Elrohir, almost sulking.

Elladan chuckled, and hummed a few bars of a sea-chanty. Whatever it meant to the twins apparently encompassed all the shades of Dol Amroth being a semi-autonomous principedom whose first ruler had not withdrawn his fealty from Anarion and his son for their arguable betrayal of Valandil, but who alone of all the lords and powerful of Gondor had not endorsed it, either. Imrazor had been an exception, in the Gondor of old, first by his foster-father Elendil's decree and later by his own choice. Dol Amroth had always gone its own way, and had a culture distinct from that of Minas Tirith and most of Gondor. It was both more elven and more tolerant, and what was of Dol Amroth was not only of Gondor. Faramir might be accounted a Swan Prince of Dol Amroth as his mother's son; but his father and his upbringing meant that he was of Minas Tirith, while his uncle never would be.

"I need to win the city, Elrohir, not just the shore," said Aragorn gently.

"I don't like it." Snapped Elrohir, as much of a concession of Aragorn's right to make his own decisions as his youngest brother would ever get, before continuing, "And the poor man might not even be mind-sound after his recent losses, especially if one takes into account the trauma he endured as a child. The mind-healers from Minas Tirith are nothing to write home about, and Ada will likely not be minded to take on a new patient."

Elladan shook his head, "Ada really is not the first mind-healer I would choose for someone with childhood trauma. He was only Melpomaen's mind-healer because most of the better mind-healers sailed at the end of the Second Age. And because Daeranath, Erestor, and Glorfindel were trying to get him to heal the wounds of his own childhood."

Elrohir uncrossed his arms and glared at his twin, "Elladan, your sense of discretion is abominable! Not only once, but twice, just today!"
"Oh, by Lorien's Gardens, this is entirely different than that!," said Elladan exasperatedly, "Estel is Ada's youngest son. He has every right to know something important that Ada won't tell him about Ada's own past!"

In answer Elrohir just waved for Elladan to go on, whether that meant that he thought that Elladan was right, or just that he knew that Elladan was going to do whatever Elladan felt was right so he might as well give in, Aragorn was not sure.

"Ada's arm was re-broken several times by one of the followers of the sons of Feanor, whilst he and Uncle Elros were the wards of Maedhros and Maglor." Explained Elladan.

"Their healer told the sons of Feanor that Ada's injuries were the result of accidents."

"Ada has never fully explained all of what happened, or who was the author of his hurts."

"Much to Glorfindel's displeasure."

"I'm....sure." Said Aragorn, trying to assimilate that with what he knew of his wise and steadfast foster-father. Aragorn found it hard to even imagine the Great Lord Elrond as a small child, solemn and dark-haired and gray-eyed, at the mercy of cruel elves.

Several days later, Aragorn was still struggling to do that, although the thought had occurred to him that if Melpomaen and Elrond had survived such terrible events without showing it in all the years he'd known them, that Faramir might well be likewise untroubled by his past.

Elrohir was still applying his considerable determination to trying to persuade Aragorn to change his plans for Faramir. The elder twin believed Faramir to be dangerous, or at the least an unwise choice for Aragorn's most trusted officer, and he'd gotten Magordan to agree with him, based on what Aragorn imagined to be Magordan's own distrust of anyone he hadn't personally known for several decades.

Out of all of Aragorn's northern Dunedain, it was Ethiron who had spent the most time with Faramir. Ethiron was, under most normal circumstances, even more paranoid and difficult to please than Magordan. And yet, by going off to see to other affairs before Faramir's visit, Ethiron had just voted in the most definitive way possible that he trusted Faramir.

Aragorn himself was determined that Faramir would stay in Minas Tirith, and have an important role in forging the future of the newly reunited Gondor and Arnor. There was ample evidence that Faramir could do the near-impossible job. He'd been an excellent Captain of the rangers, holding Ithilien even under the dark shadow. Faramir was intelligent, as one of the late Adrahil's pupils he'd have to be. Aragorn himself had seen evidence of not just intelligence but also a facility for administration in his correspondence with Faramir since the end of the war. And he had seen an admirable flair for creativity in Faramir's creation of a moor and establishment of weapons stashes throughout Ithilien. Indeed, all that Aragorn had learned of Faramir indicated that he was a very wise young man who knew a great deal, both of war and of more peaceful pursuits. But more than that, that Faramir was a man who knew that he did not know everything, and that the wisdom of any man was limited. It made Faramir humble though he was bold, and more of a listener than a talker, though when the time came for talking, Ethiron had testified in his letters that Faramir did have the gilded tongue that his opponents described in such scathing terms.

Faramir was clearly a man whom other men would follow, even when he could not be amongst them. That was evident from how his rangers had stayed cohesive and loyal to him even though so many of them had died in their last action under his command. The depth of their respect and loyalty for Faramir was awe-inspiring.
Aragorn was returning to Gondor as much an exile and a stranger as a King. He wanted the men and women of Gondor to see that he valued them, that he intended to keep the best of Gondor even as he reunited the two ancient Kingdoms of men. The best way that Aragorn could think of to do that was by retaining Faramir as his Steward.

Magordan and especially Elrohir were still dubious. Elladan seemed more ready to endorse Aragorn's decision, but that might just be due to his nearly inexplicable fascination with Faramir and all of the Dol Amroth princes.

The twin sons of Elrond, impatient for their advanced age of between two and three millennia, fortunately did not have to wait much longer to meet the Lord Steward Faramir. Less than half an hour had passed between Legolas' return and when Prince Imrahil begged leave to re-enter the King's camp, followed not only by his guard and son, but also by a tall, slender man in the uniform of an Ithilien ranger, who moved with an archer's grace despite his evident weariness.

With a mixture of fondness, pride, exasperation, and concern, Imrahil presented his nephew Faramir, explaining that the younger man had decided to ride out to meet the King, in order to see if aught more could be done for the brave wearied halflings who had saved them all, and to discuss how best to accomplish the return of the King to the land of Gondor, and the city of Minas Tirith.

Faramir dropped gracefully to one knee in respect for his new King.

Elladan stared at Faramir intently, even for Elladan. Aragorn silently wondered how to apologize for that - 'I'm sorry that my brother is looking at you as if you are a prized cow on the way to market. Don't worry, it's just that he finds your tolerance to the black breath truly remarkable, from a medical standpoint.... He's not crazy, he's a nice peredhel, really.'

Then Faramir looked up, his heather-gray eyes bright with devotion. Aragorn was both awed and touched by the youth's loyal fervor and sincere affection. If someone believed in Aragorn this much, then yes, perhaps he could be King. In fact, upon meeting Faramir again, Aragorn felt less alone. He and Faramir had several things in common that few other humans shared. They were both of Numenorean descent, as were a significant minority of the humans in Gondor. But more, both Aragorn and Faramir were throwbacks to almost the first generation of Elendil's children. All Numenoreans must deal with the alienation that comes from being mostly like human, but not exactly like, and a little like the elves, but not enough like. Aragorn had been trained gently in the mental arts by his foster-father and the priests of Eru at Imladris, and then later by his grandmother Ivorwen and grandfather Dirhael. Faramir seemed to have far less training….that, too, Aragorn could see was remedied.

Then, Aragorn saw in those expressive grey orbs a testament to Faramir's sorrow that he would soon surrender his office and leave Minas Tirith and Aragorn's new kingdom.

'Oh, you foolish youth,' thought Aragorn fondly, though all he let Faramir see was his esteem and affection, 'Do you really think that I do not recognize your worth, and want you to be a part of that future? Do you not know that it was your vision of the future after the Battle of the Pelennor which reminded me that it was the future we were fighting for, and not merely an end to war. Without you, and without Arwen, none of this might even have been possible. Ah, well, I shall let you know soon enough. But not now, when you are too tired to appreciate the knowing.' Aragorn was, in fact, not overly pleased with Ethiron for letting Faramir ride out, no matter how important his message might be. But there would be time later to privately reprimand Ethiron and Faramir both. For now, Aragorn would make the young man welcome.

Those thoughts in his mind, Aragorn greeted the Steward warmly, taking Faramir's hands and bidding him rise off his knees.
“I am glad to see you again, my young Lord Steward. But how is it that you came to be here tonight?”

"There are ways to leave the city quickly and quietly, Your Majesty, if it is needful. I will teach them all to you, after you are crowned." Faramir explained, his hand still captured by Aragorn's, "I felt it needful to bring several matters to your personal attention. As my Uncle mentioned, Frodo's condition has begun to deteriorate rather than improve, and....there are other issues it would be best to discuss in person, 'ere I surrender my staff of office to you, to make it clear that the time of the Ruling Stewards of Gondor has passed, now that the King has returned."

Aragorn scrutinized the young Steward carefully, thinking again of all this man had already been and done in his short life. Boromir's brother, the Captain of the Ithilien Rangers, a helping hand to Frodo and Samwise in their time of need.

"That is a diplomatic and princely gesture, Lord Faramir." The King responded at length. "If I am minded to dismiss you with my thanks, Lord Steward, what reward would you have for your years of loyal service to Gondor?"

Faramir shook his head, and laughed a little in wonder. "Sire, I care not for reward or prizes. I had not thought to live to see the darkness which has threatened to choke out all of men defeated. That alone is all I have ever wished. I will stay to help you however I may in Gondor until you no longer have need of me. Provided it meets with your approval, I will then journey to Ithilien. I would like to try to make that beautiful land, which is so dear to me, safe for men and," the young Steward looked around at Aragorn's companions, who included elves, a dwarf, and a halfling, all of whom had been instrumental in their victory, "other ah, ... non-orcs... once more."

"I see." Aragorn replied, a twinkle in his eyes as he mulled over a scheme of his own. Another commonality between him and Faramir was that for both of them, the world had changed completely the day that Sauron was defeated, in a way that few others could appreciate. For the destiny of both had been unalterably set against the Dark Lord, and harsh responsibilities had been borne by both from an early age. With Sauron gone, many things were now possible that had previously been only distant dreams. And Aragorn knew that Faramir might be lost, without something new. Like Aragorn, he'd lived - he'd even been born - to defeat their ancient enemy. Faramir needed something new and hopeful, a new purpose. His dream for Ithilien sounded like a good one, and Aragorn thought that a man of the highest caliber merited a high honor, as well as occupations that would demand of him all he had to give.

"A noble plan," Aragorn commended Faramir, keeping his other thoughts to himself for the nonce, "In the more immediate future, Lord Faramir, should I gather from your planned gesture that there are those who are ... uneasy, at the thought that I shall rule in Gondor?"

Faramir nodded, a look of frustration coming over his young face. A face which was, Aragorn realized with some surprise, somehow so very familiar, despite their short acquaintance. Aragorn noticed out of the corner of his eyes that Elladan's fingers were flickering and then Elrohir's were doing the same in answer, in a way that was too clear to be easily unnoticed, all the while staring far too intently to be polite at Aragorn's new Steward, and at Prince Imrahil, Prince Amrothos, and Aragorn himself.

Faramir, to his credit, managed to ignore the byplay between the peredhil after no more than a glance to Imrahil in search of guidance. Faramir answered Aragorn's question, seemingly relieved the King-to-be was choosing to be amused and patient rather than angry. "Aye, Sire. Not so much yourself, as any King again. A King is to be preferred to a ruling Steward, no matter how efficient or well-liked, and most people would have thrown open the gates to Isildur's heir without any further knowledge of the man. Having known your courage at Pelennor Fields and your kindness
as a healer, most are quite ready to enthusiastically welcome you as King."

"And others?" prompted Elrohir, protective of his baby brother the King.

Faramir looked somewhat ashamed. "Others simply fear change, my King, gentle Lords. I make no excuse for them, save that these have been difficult and dangerous times, and men are apt to distrust that which they do not know well."

Aragorn nodded, accepting the counsel. "Be easy, Lord Faramir." He soothed. "None here hold you accountable for the more hide-bound councilors of Gondor, among whose number I would hazard a guess are the Lord Tarsten, and Master Burgold of the Commodities Guild."

Faramir looked taken aback, then gave a crooked half-smile that warmed Aragorn's heart, as it so resembled the Lady Finduilas' smile when amused beyond frustration at the antics of the councilors of Gondor. "Mayhap I could have saved myself a journey, Sire." His new Steward murmured "You seem well informed, for all you are newly returned to your land."

"And you should have spared yourself the ride, my Lord." Aragorn scolded gently. "When I commanded you remain at the house of healing for a ten day, I did not intend for you to be up and about your normal duties, plus midnight rides to save your King trouble, scarce days later. You should be abed resting, as befits a man who survived your ordeal with the Nazgul."

Faramir blushed, making him look younger, closer to his real age. "But you did not say so, Sire." Faramir protested ineffectually, causing Aragorn to laugh loud and long, joined by the other members of the fellowship, particularly Pippin, who seemed to admire the young human's audacity in talking back to the authoritative Strider.

The Steward's momentary uncertainty made Aragorn recall that Faramir was actually quite young, even for a human. In years walking Middle Earth, the new Steward of Gondor was almost as young as Peregrine Took, despite his solemn manner. It made Aragorn feel almost paternal for a moment. If he and Arwen had started a family when first they determined to wed, they might well have children Imrahil's age, let alone Faramir's.

Aragorn wondered if Elladan had just realized the same, as the younger twin's fingers were flickering again. Whatever Elladan said caused Elrohir, who had been eyeing the Steward as a hunter might its prey, to moderate his gaze.

Aragorn, by dint of long practice, ignored his brothers, and focused on Faramir's defense of his actions. "No, Lord Steward, you are correct that I did not think to specifically tell you that men who were near death and practically crippled by grievous wounds should undertake only light duties for several weeks. I see that I will have to be very exacting in my instructions to you in the future, at least in so far as they pertain to your own health and well-being."

Faramir blushed again, and Prince Imrahil commented wryly. "If you would, Sire, it would relieve my worries," sparing another glare at his wayward nephew.

Aragorn nodded, still chuckling. "Lord Faramir, Prince Imrahil, Mithrandir, brothers, if you will follow me, we will check to make sure Gondor's Steward has not harmed himself in his pursuit of duty, and go over a few items outstanding for our arrival. Dear friends, please excuse us, and continue to take your ease."

Withdrawing into the tent, Aragorn waved the young Steward of Gondor to a camp chair by a table covered in maps, including one of Minas Tirith. He had the somewhat reluctant Faramir disrobe so that he and Elladan could examine the younger man's healing shoulder. While doing so, Aragorn was somewhat shocked to see how slender and wiry the brother of Boromir was.
Boromir himself had been a bulky man, well-suited to wearing the thick plate armor of Gondor. Faramir was built more along Aragorn's lines, but several stone thinner even than the former Dunedain Ranger. Perhaps it was the result of grief and wounds, but it was still somewhat of a shock, having come to know Boromir well. More, Aragorn was struck by a sudden overwhelming need to protect this young man. To feed him until his cheeks looked less hollow, to see that he slept until the dark circles under his eyes disappeared, and most of all, to tease him until a smile came into his eyes.

Aragorn shook his head, surprised despite himself by the strength of his protective feelings for Finduilas' surviving son. All of that would have to wait. Faramir was ready to pledge his loyalty, but he was not Aragorn's retainer yet. They had a coronation to get through, and the swearing of formal vows, between King and honored liegeman. Then, there would be time to see the wounds on this young one's soul healed. Aragorn pledged it silently, to Boromir, to Finduilas, to Imrahil, to the rangers who had died and the rangers who had lived, and even to a younger Denethor. But the King knew he would have to tread gently, lest he outrage his reserved young officer.

Faramir's wound was raw but not reopened. "He is more wearied than I would like, Estel, so soon after being wounded, and with a big event tomorrow and a ride tonight." Elladan reported. Aragorn nodded, and Imrahil looked torn between being relieved that his nephew was no worse off, and annoyed at his foolish ride. Imrahil had more reason to worry than just Faramir's recklessness this night, for all that Faramir's sorrow was little evident, focused as he was on his duties. Everyone present had lost someone in the war, but few had lost so much - brother, father, and nearly all of his brothers-in-arms.

"Very well, my Lords, we shall be brief." Aragorn stated, with a faint smile for the Steward of Gondor, who had risked much to bring him this forewarning. "From what quarter do you judge the trouble most likely to come, Lord Faramir?" Aragorn asked, as Elladan excused himself to brew a restorative tea.

Faramir nodded and started to rise, before heeding his uncle's hand on his shoulder, keeping him in place. "The most problematic elements, who include Lord Tarsten of Lebennin, Lord Andasond of the Stone Wain Valley, and Lord Calimehtar of the Lefnui, as well as Guild Masters Burgold and Gladring, are unlikely to make a move tomorrow, Sire. They'll want to see what the lay of the land is like before committing themselves to a course of action. In the unlikely event that there is armed opposition despite your clear qualifications and my stated will," the Steward explained, "I have given orders for mixed companies of the surviving Ithilien rangers, the few northern Dunedain who came late for the siege of Mordor, and a company of late arriving Swan knights to be stationed here, here and here." Faramir pointed to locations on the map of Minas Tirith. "I think it would be best for you and your party to withdraw here, to this side gate-house, in the event of a disturbance."

"There really isn't a good fall-back point, that close to the city." Aragorn commented, studying the map himself. "As your enemies learned to their peril."

"Nor is there a good place to make a sally." Commented Faramir sadly.

"Nephew, what of the tunnels by the Old Guesthouse?" Asked Imrahil, peering over Faramir's shoulder.

"The side gate-house is just as close, and the Guesthouse is for foreigners. I would prefer that the King not be thought of that way."

After their discussion of contingency strategies should Aragron's entry into Gondor provoke an armed response, which all hoped would be unnecessary, Faramir concluded "If anyone does raise a purely verbal objection to your entry to the city tomorrow, I would expect it to be either Lord
Sendar or Lord Hurin."

"Hurin?" Aragorn asked in surprise, looking to Imrahil and wondering why he had selected the man as regent for Gondor during Lord Faramir's incapacitation.

"From a purely legalistic standpoint," Lord Faramir quickly assured, "I believe I've convinced him not to, and he is even less likely to do so after I preempt his objection by officially resigning, but he is a cousin of mine by marriage twice over, the late Lord Ecthelion's sister's husband's great-nephew, and is very fond of rules," Faramir continued apologetically, "If Hurin were still in charge, you would be welcomed into the city as the General who led the forces which saved us from Mordor, and as a claimant to the title of Isildur's heir, subject to the provision of proof."

Aragorn nodded. He had expected something of the sort, and was pleased that he did not have to go through that with Lord Faramir, as the experience they had shared in the House of Healing had provided for both ample evidence of the other's personality and history.

"And Lord Sendar?" The King-to-be inquired intently, remembering the man as a shrewd Council opponent of Ecthelion's and Denethor's, long ago.

Faramir shrugged, and then winced, as the movement pulled at his still healing shoulder. "Sendar is simply very set in his ways, Sire. I have always found him to be an honest man. If he has opposition, he will voice it. If he says he will let a matter lie, he is as good as his word. He, too, feels you should be welcomed to the city, but not crowned until you can prove your descent from Isildur. Lord Andasond will probably follow Sendar's lead, as he is merely suspicious that you are not, in fact, Isildur's heir. Once he realizes that the Lord Elrond will swear to your descent, I suspect he will withdraw his challenge, and find other ways to annoy you."

"Very well," Aragorn said with a nod, "And we shall have to wait for future days to see how Tarsten and Burgold will challenge me." The King-to-be gave the Steward a sardonic half-smile, not relishing the challenge, but prepared to deal with it if needed.

Faramir confirmed with a similar crooked grin. "Aye, and their followers on the council who are quieter, but no less obdurate, such as the Lord Morcocano."

"Speaking of trouble," Aragorn mused, "Why did you bring Merry with you? I am glad that you did, for it eases all of our hearts to see him well, but he seems an odd choice of guard."

"Well, I was shy a guard...." Faramir began, blushing faintly.

"Or six...." Murmured Imrahil, giving his nephew another fond glare.

"And he was worried about Frodo, too, of course," Faramir continued, the faint deepening of his blush the only sign that he'd even heard his uncle, "Once we were out of the city, we followed the path of the message lines. It seemed safe enough for a halfling apprentice warrior. From long service in Ithilien, I can usually sense orcs well in time to avoid them, and the scattered bands of orcs still in Gondor are avoiding the main roads and paths."

"That was not necessarily wise, Faramir." Mithrandir lectured, in a vast difference from his previous words of welcome and praise for Faramir. Aragorn thought it likely that the wizard still felt very protective of the hobbits he'd brought so very far from home.

"The orcs may feel very different now that Sauron is gone." Mithrandir concluded acerbically.

"They do seem somewhat different," Said Faramir carefully, "But not so different that I cannot sense them. Still," He continued quickly before Mithrandir's darkening expression, "I would not have risked Merry, save that I did think it would be safe, and he had already heard what we would
be about, so I thought that it might be better for him to be where I could watch him."

The storm clouds on Mithrandir's face dispelled, and the old wizard chuckled, "In other words, you thought that he might ride out on his own, otherwise. You have learned something about hobbits, I see, dear pupil."

"Indeed, Mithrandir." Faramir acknowledged with a smile. "I think you are entirely correct that they are a remarkable race."

Aragorn let Mithrandir and Faramir converse a short while longer, until the future King judged Faramir to be as recovered as possible from his ride. "Brothers," he commanded respectfully, looking to Elladan and Elrohir. "I would have you accompany the Lord Faramir to Minas Tirith, and look over dear, brave, Frodo and Samwise before the morn, if possible."

"It will be our pleasure, Estel." Elrohir replied, appearing quite content for the opportunity to get to know Faramir better, and eager to have Elladan care for the ringbearer and his companion. Also, the journey offered the possibility of being able to kill any orcs who might try to hinder their progress, which always made the twins happy.

"I thank you, my Lords," Faramir nodded to the elves.

Dismissing his brothers to prepare horses and satchels for the journey, Aragorn pinned the young Steward of Gondor with a fond, but very firm, gaze, "You will ride with each of my brothers in turn, Lord Faramir, and will obey their instructions for your well-being as you would my own." Aragorn ordered, "Directly to bed with you when you arrive back at Minas Tirith, and you shall sleep until whenever you need to get up to prepare yourself for the day." The future King's tone was amiable, but it made it clear that he expected his will to be obeyed, as healer as well as leader.

Faramir looked at first as if he might object, and he had ridden the distance to the King's camp under his own power, but upon his uncle's hand tightening on his shoulder, Faramir instead nodded shyly. "Aye, my King."

"That being said," Aragorn continued kindly, "I appreciate your efforts on my behalf more than I can say, and I promise, on my part, to return your loyalty with loyalty, and to give everything I have to the rebuilding of Gondor and the establishment of peace, safety, justice and prosperity for its people."

Faramir's intent young gaze, wise beyond its years, met Aragorn's and held it. "I know that you will, Sire. And we are grateful."

"Please show your gratitude in the future by having a greater care for your own health and well-being." The King admonished again, looking to Imrahil in sympathy. "Were I your uncle, Faramir of Gondor, I would warm your backside for you for this night's deeds, well intended or no, Lord Steward or no."

Imrahil chuckled as Faramir blushed deeply. "I would, my King, but he has miles yet to ride tonight, and is, I judge, sore enough already from aggravating his healing wounds," The Prince of Dol Amroth scolded affectionately, swatting his nephew's rear none too gently as he helped the younger man to rise.

Aragorn suppressed a chuckle of sympathy at Faramir's embarrassed surprise that his uncle felt comfortable enough with the King and his company to thus scold his nephew in front of them. The King-to-be promised himself, as he accompanied Lord Faramir and Prince Imrahil to the horses being readied for Faramir's return, that he would inspire Faramir to come to view him as
family, as well, in time.

Despite the blanket of secrecy, word had spread at least among the Ithilien Rangers that their Captain was in the camp. Faramir paused briefly to greet each one, with personal words for not just his surviving lieutenants Anborn and Dervorin, but also for the most humble of his soldiers. Including the teenaged Kasim, whom Faramir reprimanded for going to the Black Gate when he’d been commanded to stay in Ithilien due to his tender years. All of it, and particularly that last, made Aragorn like his Steward even better.

“I have already lingered past when I should,” Faramir asked, as the rangers went on in the direction of their assigned watch, “But I would like to speak with Eomer-King, if it please you, Sire.”

“He is not here.” Aragorn informed Faramir, “He is with some of his Rohirrim on a sweep patrol. You may give me – or your Uncle - a message to leave for him, if you wish.”

“No, thank you. It is not the type of thing that ought be put in a message. But please, do give him my regards,”

“Of course, nephew.” Agreed Imrahil, appearing almost as baffled – and curious- as Aragorn felt.

Aragorn saw Faramir off, unhappily mounted before Elladan, after meeting his brother’s eyes to make sure that the peredhel fully understood the importance of his charge to Aragorn. As he watched Faramir ride away, Aragorn thought to himself that marriage to Arwen would not be his only consolation for becoming King.

Chapter End Notes

Parts of this chapter I wrote over 10 years ago, so positive feedback to encourage me to keep going is definitely welcome! Thank you so much for reading, either way, I hope that you enjoyed.

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