Aragorn looked up as his Steward entered carrying a sheaf of parchments. Faramir's usually calm countenance looked agitated and the Steward was frowning. "Is there a problem, Faramir?" the King enquired.

"I have been studying the details of the agreement you are about to make with Ambassador Tahir and I feel I must respectfully protest, sire," said the Steward.
Aragorn raised his eyebrows as this unusual show of defiance from the young Steward. "Sit down and tell me what troubles you," he said, gesturing towards the study couch. He got up from his desk and joined the younger man.

Faramir sat on the edge of the couch; his posture seemingly reflecting his state of mind. He shuffled the papers and cleared his throat.

"What is it you wish to protest about, Faramir?" Aragorn asked again. "Speak! I do not bite!"

"This agreement declares that unlimited numbers of merchants from Harad are to be allowed to trade in Gondor," said Faramir, pointing to the offending item on the scroll. "Forgive me for speaking plainly, sire, but I do not believe that to be fair."

"And why not?" asked Aragorn. "The agreement will also allow our merchants to trade in Harad."

"I very much doubt our merchants would wish to go to Harad," Faramir replied. "You told me that the climate is well nigh impossible to bear for any not born and bred there and that their language is difficult for many, though I did not find it especially so."

"You took to it as if it were your mother tongue, Faramir," Aragorn said with a smile. "I would have thought you would welcome more visitors from Harad to try out your linguistic skills on since Ambassador Tahir prefers to speak our tongue."

"It is not what I think that troubles me," said Faramir. "We have fought the Haradrim for as long as I can remember. I was one of many wounded by their archers. I have lost good men to them and many have lost much-loved sons, husbands, brothers and friends. How will the bereaved feel when they are unable to walk through the market place without seeing men they believe could have slaughtered their kinsfolk? The people mostly accept the need for an Ambassador, but they will not be happy to see Haradrim everywhere! I know, as do you, that the merchants and warriors mostly come from different castes, but others do not. Then, is it not dangerous to have so many former enemies wandering freely around the City? Those two would-be assassins who tried to kill you may not be the only ones to hold such views."

"Those who tried to kill me were from the warrior caste, not the merchants," Aragorn replied. "We need this trade agreement, Faramir. The Houses of Healing scarcely have enough poppy juice to ease those in pain even in peacetime; we need ginger to treat digestive ailments and many other herbs and spices that only grow freely in Harad. We need silk if our tailors and dressmakers are to produce fine garments. They have many rare and beautiful flowers too. I hope to be able to send some to Samwise Gamgee to grow in the Shire."

Faramir set the papers in his hand down upon the table rather sharply. He took a deep breath. "Much as I would like to see Master Samwise happy," he said, "Gondor has suffered too much at the hands of the Haradrim to welcome an invasion of their merchants, whatever wares they might have to sell. What will men like my Ranger Anborn, who lost a brother to the Haradrim on the Pelennor feel? They would curse any man from Harad they encountered. And there are hundreds more who will say the same. Their hands will fly to their swords if they see Southrons swagger proudly through the streets of the White City or on the fields they tried to take?"

"The market place is well guarded," said Aragorn. "The Citadel guard will not allow any to draw their swords there."

"How can it be fair if the Guards are forced to turn on our own people to protect our enemies!" Faramir rose to his feet. "Sire, I must protest most strongly! It cannot be allowed!"
"Faramir, you forget yourself!" Aragorn said sharply. He stood up and stood almost nose-to-nose with his Steward.

"My apologies sire. It will not happen again." Faramir bowed his head and looked deeply troubled.

"Peace, Faramir, I expect you to disagree with me at times. It is what a good Steward should do. Let us sit down again." Aragorn's tone was much gentler. "My kinsman, Halbarad, who was dear as a brother to me, was felled by a Southron. Andúril swiftly despatched the fellow, but nothing can bring Halbarad back. I can feel nothing but hatred for the man, but no doubt someone grieves for Halbarad's slayer now as I grieve for my kinsman. The Haradrim lost as many men as we did. They now want to live in peace with their neighbours. I feel I can best honour my kinsman and others like him by trying to ensure peace." The King fell silent, lost in memories.

"I desire peace too, sire," Faramir replied. He perched uneasily on the edge of the couch. "I would liefer there were no more weeping for slaughtered brothers, sons and husbands. Most people of Gondor, though, will find it hard to forgive the Haradrim so soon after the Haradrim invaded Gondor. The Southrons' losses came about through that invasion of a land that was never theirs; while our men died defending that land, our homeland, from invasion."

"I know, Faramir, I know, and I share your concerns." Aragorn got up again and paced the room restlessly. Faramir stood again. "No, Faramir, you do not need to stand every time I do." Aragorn smiled for the first time that morning. "Sit and be easy. I think more clearly when I am pacing. It tends to somewhat annoy my good lady."

Faramir managed a wan smile in reply.

Aragorn continued to pace for several moments lost in thought. "We need peace with Harad, but not at the expense of the peace of mind of Gondor's folk," he said at last. "What if I were to tell Ambassador Tahir that the merchants from his homeland were welcome in Gondor, but only in limited numbers? Also they will be restricted where they can travel within our land. We can tell the ambassador that if all goes well, the restrictions will be eased in a few years' time. He will listen, for he is a good and sensible man. If only there were more like him in Harad!"

"That is a fair and just solution, sire." Faramir beamed at the King. "You too are a just and wise man."

"As is my Steward!" said Aragorn. "It is decided then. I will send a servant with a message to Ambassador Tahir."

"There is no need for that, my lord," said Faramir. "I have been invited to play chess with the Ambassador this evening after dining with him and his lady. I have some good news for him about the mare he seeks for his lady, as Éowyn thinks she has found one in Edoras that would be perfect for Lady Adiva. I will take the agreement to him myself. I can explain to him our reasoning in person."

"It gladdens my heart that you and the Ambassador have become friends," said Aragorn. "My Arwen and Lady Adiva have also become close. Arwen is busy embroidering a dress for Lady Adiva's new baby."

"Never did I think I would count a count a man of Harad as a friend," said Faramir, but it seems now that all things are possible."
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