

Aragorn and Elboron eat pastries

Aragorn looked fondly at Elboron. The boy was gangly, all elbows and knees, and at that moment, rather sulky. When he grew into his body, he would be striking-looking, but now, he was just awkward. They were sitting in Aragorn's study at a small table, drinking tea and eating pastries.

"How is your first week at school going?" said Aragorn.

Elboron frowned as he ate a pastry. "It is awful, Uncle Aragorn. The food is bad. I have to sleep in a dormitory with all these other boys. I have already studied all the material in the classes years ago. Why are my parents punishing me like this?"

Aragorn laughed. "Your mother's exact words were, *He needs to know how normal people behave—*"

"I have now seen how they behave. There is one boy who is a vile bully, and it is all I can do to restrain myself. Can I go home again?"

"No. We want you try to last a year."

"But you don't understand, Uncle. It is torture!"

Aragorn put on a stern face. "I understand entirely, Elboron. You know that I was raised in Rivendell? Until I was twenty, other than my own mother, the only people with whom I had interacted were Elves—"

Elboron's mouth dropped open. "I did not know. What happened then?"

"I met Arwen, and fell in love with her," said Aragorn.

Elboron smiled. "Oh, that is nice."

"She laughed at me," said Aragorn. "She thought I was just a child, which was true."

Elboron stared. "Really?"

Aragorn leaned back in his chair, and pushed the tray to Elboron. "Have another pastry. You look hungry. I got them just for you."

"I am always hungry."

"In any case, I spent the next thirty years with normal people. I rode with the Rohirrim, fought for your great-grandfather Ecthelion, then went to Rhun, Harad and Khand, spent times in the wastes of Eriador, met with the Dwarves of the Iron Hills—"

Elboron's eyes were round. "Thirty years! Did you find it hard?"

Aragorn nodded. "Very hard at first. I was even more sheltered than you. But it is necessary to understand the people that you will come to rule; to know what their cares and burdens are, and to see that people can be good, even when they are very different to you."

"There are a few people at school who seem decent," said Elboron.

"Have you spoken to them?" said Aragorn.

Elboron looked away. "I do not know what to say. I am not very good at idle conversation—"

Aragorn laughed. "Your father says the same thing. Apples do not fall far from the tree. But he has learned to at least mimic pleasantries."

Elboron looked sour. "My father is the perfect man. I do not know that I can live up to that standard—"

Aragorn snorted. "Faramir would be surprised to hear you say that. Can you say it to him one day while I am there? I want to see his face."

Elboron looked at Aragorn suspiciously. "You are serious?"

"Aye, I am serious." Aragorn leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. "How much do you know of your grandfather Denethor?"

"I know nothing other than the name, and he died in the War of the Ring, along with my father's older brother. My parents do not speak of him."

"Ah. That explains much," said Aragorn. "Poor Faramir—"

Elboron looked startled. "Why?"

"This tale is a sad one," said Aragorn. "Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Elboron shrugged. "It is always better to know than not to know."

"Your grandfather Denethor was a proud, stern and dominating man. He had two sons, Boromir and Faramir. Boromir was strong, handsome and brave, and delighted in deeds of arms. He had no interest in book learning. I knew him well; he was a member of the Fellowship of the Ring. But he was tempted by the Ring, which led to the sundering of the Fellowship and his own death."

Elboron's eyebrows rose. "I had not heard that. The way my father tells it, Boromir was a paragon of virtue."

Aragorn laughed sadly. "Hardly, but I have no doubt that your father prefers to remember him that way. I know that Faramir knows the truth, and also that he could resist temptation where his brother could not."

"Why does Father want to remember Boromir like that?"

Aragorn sighed. "I suppose because he was brought up to think so, and he loved his brother. Your grandfather Denethor favoured Boromir strongly. He made it clear to everyone that he thought very little of your father, his book learning and his quiet, gentle nature."

Elboron blinked. "But—*everyone* loves my father!"

"No. Denethor frequently publicly derided him and shamed him."

Elboron's face was white and pinched. "I did not know this."

"No. You will understand that he does not like to be reminded. His mother died when he was five, and there was only one person in his family who showed him affection: Boromir." Aragorn sighed. "The next part of the story is unpleasant."

Elboron's jaw was set. "Tell me."

"After Boromir died, your grandfather was inconsolable with grief. Denethor apparently told your father that he would have preferred him to have died rather than Boromir, and then said that your father must defend Osgiliath to show his love and loyalty—" Aragorn paused.

Elboron stared at Aragorn. "Go on."

Aragorn put his fingers to his temples. "It is hard to explain. I have been told by others what happened next, including your Great Uncle Imrahil. In organising the retreat from Osgiliath, your father was hit by a Haradric poison dart, and collapsed unconscious. He would have been trampled to death had Imrahil not fetched his body from the field. Imrahil took your father to Denethor's chambers—"

"That is when they took him to the Houses of Healing?"

Aragorn leaned back. "No. Your grandfather kept your father lying beside him, unconscious, and your father began to die slowly from fever. Denethor wept. Then ... then he—"

Elboron's eyes were huge. "What—?"

"You would know, of course, that I took ships from the Corsairs of Umbar? Denethor was convinced that Minas Tirith was about to be overrun; he had been shown the ships in the *palantir* of Minas Tirith—"

"What was he doing in defence of the city at this time?"

Aragorn sighed. "Nothing. He stopped doing anything once your father's unconscious body was brought to him. Anyway, your grandfather in his madness decided to burn himself and your father alive. Faramir was rescued by Beregon, Pippin and Gandalf, but your grandfather ... perished."

"Burned to death?"

"Yes. It was at that point that your father was taken to the Houses of Healing."

"I know about that, and about Mother and the Wraith King. There is no way in which I could not know. Mother says all those songs are inaccurate."

"Verily. I think the same when I hear songs about me." Aragorn passed his hand over his brow, remembering the weariness which had beset him at that time. "I healed them. And then your father met your mother—"

"I know that part too." Elboron made a face. "The Warden and loreth once insisted upon showing me the place on the Wall outside the Houses of Healing where they first kissed. *Ugh.*"

Aragorn laughed. "The Warden and loreth feel personally responsible for your existence."

There was a long silence. Then Elboron said, "Why was my grandfather like that?"

Aragorn raised his eyebrows. "Denethor was jealous of your father, and angry because Faramir dared to question him, whereas Boromir always did what he wanted."

"My grandfather sounds awful."

Aragorn grimaced. "Aye. I met him before your father was born, and he did not like me either—"

Elboron put his head in his hands. "Why did Father never tell me this?"

Aragorn put his hand on Elboron's shoulder. "Because he finds it very painful. I think he and your mother have resolved it should be left in the past."

Elboron put his head up, and took another pastry. "Poor Father."

"Yes." Aragorn picked up a pastry too, and inspected the plums embedded in custard.

"That one is good," said Elboron, through a mouthful. "Not as good as the apricot, though."

Aragorn took a bite. It was good. "You needed to understand why your father drives himself so. He still thinks he is very far from perfect, even though he is quite extraordinary." He gave Elboron a look. "Again, can I mention apples and trees?"

Elboron's face was grave as he dusted pastry crumbs off his hands. "Maybe I need to tell him that I think he is extraordinary."

"Maybe you do."