Catastrophe

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Catastrophe

by lindahoyland

Summary

When a wild beast invades Ithilien, Aragorn tries to help Faramir and Éowyn with disastrous consequences.
Chapter 1

Catastrophe

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From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties And things that go bump in the night, good Lord, deliver us!

Dedicated to Cairistiona, Lily Baggins and Estelcontar as a belated birthday gift.

"My beautiful foals, this is just too much!" Éowyn buried her head in her hands; she was on the verge on tears. "It is bad enough to lose lambs, but such is nature, and all creatures must eat to survive, but not my horses! What will this creature take next? A hound, a cat, one of our children?" She shuddered. "It grows ever bolder. I have never known the like!"

"My best Rangers are tracking the beast even as we speak," said Faramir. He drew his wife close, attempting to comfort her.

"They have tracked it for days now, but to no avail. They follow its trail as far as the trees and then it seems to vanish into thin air."

"I will join them this afternoon."

"As shall I." Unnoticed by the Prince and Princess of Ithilien, the King had entered the room with his silent, catlike tread.

"Aragorn!" Faramir and Éowyn jumped to their feet to embrace their friend.

"I am sorry to catch you unawares, my friends, but as I was on my way to visit the Elven Colony, to see Legolas' new gardens, I could not pass so near to Emyn Arnen without greeting you. It seems I have just come in time to lend my tracking skills to hunt down this creature."

"But you are on your way to visit Legolas," Faramir protested. "His gardens are beautiful at present with the mallorns he has planted. Éowyn and I visited last week."

"I will send a message that I shall be delayed. One day will make no difference."

Éowyn rose to her feet. "I had best go and tend the surviving foals. What manner of creature can devour one, leave another for dead, and injure four others? One of them is so terrified; she will not let me near her. Even Faramir, who has such a way with horses, could not approach her."

"I have some experience of tending horses, if you would permit me to assist?"

"I suppose it would be worth trying," Éowyn sounded sceptical. Aragorn was a great healer of Men, but horses were a very different matter. He was their friend, though, as well as their King, and she could not deny him. She led the way to the stable housing the injured foals.

Aragorn carefully examined what had been a lovely grey foal. Hideous deep scratches across her flanks now cruelly disfigured her. She shied away from him and neighed in terror. The King stood back and sang softly in Elvish until she came closer to him. Then he gently rubbed her nose and offered her a juicy apple. Only when she was calm did he apply a healing salve to the wounds.
"With time and care she should recover," he told Éowyn. "Now let me see the other injured horses."

"What do you think the beast is?" asked Faramir quietly, as he calmed a jet-black foal.

"No wolf or bear caused these injures," said Aragorn. "I wager it is some sort of large cat. That is no doubt, why it is proving so elusive, but we should be able to track its footprints. Keep the foals well guarded until we catch this beast."

Faramir glanced at the stable cat that was slumbering curled in the hay, almost invisible, so well did its tawny coat blend with its surroundings. Cats were indeed masters of stealth and camouflage.

"That would explain much," he said. "But there are few records of any such creatures in Ithilien. Still, much has changed since records were last kept in my great-grand sire's time."

"This one is more frightened than hurt," said Aragorn as he examined the black foal. "He just has a few scratches."

"The black horses are especially precious," said Éowyn. "The Dark Lord depleted the herds of the Mark of too many of these beauties. My beautiful horses were thriving so well before this monster, or monsters came!"

"They will thrive again, Éowyn," said Aragorn. "You have my word that I will do all within my power to catch this beast. Looking thoughtful, he continued to rub salve on the black foal's wounds.

Aragorn insisted that no special provision be made for him; therefore, the noonday meal comprised simple but tasty fare. The Princess of Ithilien was proud of her kitchens and the good food that the home farms produced.

After the meal, Aragorn and Faramir changed into Ranger clothing and sharpened their weapons. Deciding that horses or further members of the party would only hinder their progress, they set out on foot. Despite the gravity of the situation, both men were looking forward to an afternoon together, hunting and tracking and enjoying using their Ranger skills once more.

Faramir showed the King the paddock where the injured foals had been found. The grass yielded only flattened blades and bloodstains, around which a few flies buzzed in defiance of the autumn chill. Aragorn espied a muddy patch where the ground had been torn up by flaying hooves. He stooped to examine it more closely. "Look!" he said. "There and there are hoof prints, but see that print, as large as a man's foot almost? That is creature we are seeking."

Faramir studied the ground, but could discern only hoof prints and indistinguishable marks. Aragorn looked around until he espied some flattened grass near where the paddock bordered an area of forest. Still following what to Faramir seemed invisible tracks, they walked amongst the trees for some considerable time until the track petered out into a wilder area, where a rippling stream fed the dense undergrowth beneath mighty oaks and slender birches.

"We are still clearing paths through the woods," said Faramir. "As yet, though, this part is almost untouched."

"We will follow the stream," said Aragorn. "See, there is a print! All animals need to drink, so I would wager our quarry's lair is not far from here.

For the first time Faramir clearly beheld a large paw print, the size of a man's hand in the soft earth beside the water. He followed the King deeper into the forest. The undergrowth was so dense here that the men had to cut their way through with their swords.
Aragorn suddenly halted and sniffed the air. "We are close," he whispered to Faramir. The two stealthily moved forward, not speaking again lest they disturb their prey.

There was a sudden rustling above them followed by a thud. A great cat leapt from the trees. It landed heavily on Aragorn's back and ferociously clawed at his flesh. The King gave a cry as the beast forced him to the ground.

Faramir's ranger training fast overcame his horror. Reaching for his bow, he swiftly nocked an arrow. The King pinioned on the ground, the giant cat atop him, the two a tangle of fur and flesh. To shoot the beast carried a grave risk of also shooting the King. Faramir shot several arrows over the creature's head into the trees in quick succession.

The beast panicked and fled. Faramir noticed that it bore an ugly festering wound on its flank, which would explain why it had been seeking easy pickings amongst Éowyn's foals.

The Steward ran to the King's side and dropped to his knees beside him. Aragorn lay face downward; his cloak and upper garments torn to shreds exposing his back, which now resembled a raw and bloody steak. Faramir felt sick.

Aragorn groaned. Faramir swallowed hard and lifted him, turning him over, and cradling him in his arms. He snatched off his cloak and held it against the King's back, attempting to staunch the copious bleeding.

He pressed the cloak harder against the wounds. There was so much blood!

Aragorn groaned again and opened his eyes. "Faramir?"

"Aragorn?"

"My pack - healing supplies."

Faramir looked around him and espied the pack a little way away; it had been torn open and the contents scattered. Now the initial shock was wearing off, the realisation struck him hard that the King's survival lay in his hands and his alone.

After what seemed like an eternity, the bleeding slowed. Faramir dared to gently lie Aragorn down upon his side. He got to his feet and began to gather up the healing supplies. All the while, he remained alert lest the beast return. To his dismay, very little was usable apart from the knives and a metal cup. Most of the bandages were scattered and soiled and the pots of salves shattered to smithereens, including what he recognised as the precious vials of pain relieving poppy juice. He collected anything that looked as if it might be usable and hastened back to Aragorn's side. The King's face was ashen and his grey eyes filled with pain. He smiled wanly when Faramir knelt beside him again.

Faramir showed him the pots of salve. Aragorn weakly shook his head at the first one.

"For rashes," he muttered.

"That is no use then. And this one?"

"For bruises. That pot- Scratches- might help a little. You need -clean wounds." He groaned again and closed his eyes.

Faramir half dragged, half-carried Aragorn to the bank of the stream. He filled the cup with water and held it to the King's lips, all the while wondering what he could use to tend the wounds with. He
suddenly realised he did have adequate cloths. He unlaced his shirt and tunic and pulled both over his head; then replaced his tunic and carefully cut up his shirt with one of Aragorn’s knives. At least the garment was fairly clean having been donned fresh from the laundry that morning.

He would have liked to boil the water, but had nothing with him in which to heat it, At least it looked clean, for the steam rippled constantly over a bed of gravel. He sipped the water. It tasted sweet and pure.

"I shall try to cleanse your wounds, mellon nîn, though I fear it might pain you," he warned Aragorn.

"Do it," Aragorn muttered through clenched teeth.

Faramir washed his hands in the steam then took a deep breath and peeled away what remained of Aragorn’s shirt and tunic. Now the bleeding had slowed, he could see that Aragorn’s back and shoulders were covered in deep ugly gashes. He had seen men’s backs bloodied from a flogging, but these wounds went far deeper than those a lash could inflict.

He began to clean the gashes as gently as he could. Even so, Aragorn groaned at every touch of the cloth. Faramir flinched in sympathy, but forced himself to continue. The wounds started to bleed anew, but mercifully, the blood flow was sluggish this time. Faramir staunched it with more cloth from his shirt.

As soon as the wounds were clean and the bleeding had ceased, Faramir again washed his hands and applied some of the salve. He supported Aragorn against his shoulder and carefully bandaged the injuries with the few bandages he had salvaged from Aragorn’s pack and from what remained of his shirt.

He turned Aragorn over on his side again. The King’s face was even paler and drenched with sweat while his breath came in short pained gasps. Faramir supported his friend’s head and gave him more water to drink. His thirst sated, Aragorn closed his eyes. A little colour returned to his cheeks and his breathing became more even.

Faramir turned his attention to the gravity of the situation that faced him. The Thought Bond he shared with the King made him all too aware of just how much pain and distress the older man was suffering.

Aragorn needed help from a trained healer and quickly. Éowyn was well versed in the healing arts and would know what to do, but how could he get the King to her? If he left Aragorn here to go for help, he would be able to return within an hour or two. But how could he leave a badly injured man alone with that monstrous cat abroad and hungry for his blood?

Aragorn was not just any man either; he was Faramir’s liege lord, and not only that, but the man to whom he owed the life that his father would have snatched from him, the man who had become father, brother and dearest friend to him. He could not leave Aragorn alone to die. To lose him would be like having a part of his soul torn asunder. He would somehow have to carry him to safety.

Faramir’s spirit quailed for a moment. He had been in desperate situations before with Aragorn, but never one quite like this. To be so near to home and yet so far from safety! The Steward was a tall strong man, but the King was even taller. He would be a heavy load to bear, but bear him he must. Love, honour and duty would give him strength. They could not remain here in the depths of the forest. If only he could have shot the beast while he had the chance, he might then have dared leave Aragorn to summon help! Faramir shook himself. It was no good dwelling on what might have been.

TBC
A version of this story was written for the "Teitho" "animal" challenge where it was placed equal second.
walk on walk on with hope in your heart

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Walk on walk on with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone - R. Rogers/O. Hammerstein II

Faramir knew they would be missed when they did not return by nightfall. Éowyn would send out search parties. No doubt as soon as they reached the path, they would come across the searchers. With this new hope kindled in his heart, Faramir filled both their water bottles and transferred what was left of the healing supplies into his pack.

“We cannot stay here,” he told Aragorn. “We must make our way back to the house.”

“I know, but how?”

“I will carry you.”

“You cannot bear my weight.”

“I shall try. If the strength of Númenor be in my blood, I can do this.”

“Give me a little time to rest and I will be able to walk. I too, have the strength of my forebears.”

Faramir regarded his lord doubtfully. It took all his strength at present to speak, let alone walk. “We cannot delay, mellon nîn,” he said. “The sun will soon set and we cannot tarry here after nightfall.”

“I am ready,” said Aragorn. “If you could just help me up?”

Faramir gripped both Aragorn’s forearms and hoisted him to his feet. Aragorn groaned loudly and promptly swooned. He sagged forward, almost knocking Faramir off his feet. For one dreadful moment, the Steward feared that Aragorn was dead. “Ada!” he cried. He placed a hand on Aragorn’s chest and could have wept with relief when he detected a faint heartbeat.

As a soldier, Faramir had been trained to lift wounded men to bear them from the battlefield. He eased the King up on to his feet. Faramir then bent his knees and hoisted Aragorn across his shoulder. Faramir straightened up, staggering slightly beneath the weight he bore. Aragorn was as slender as a sapling, but he was an exceptionally tall man and well-muscled. Faramir gritted his teeth and concentrated on the task at hand, one step at a time, pushing his way through the undergrowth and between the mighty oaks and birches. How he wished for a horse, or even a friendly dragon to bear them to safety! But his horses were all in their stable and Súlion had returned to the East from whence he came.

Sweat was soon dripping from his brow and his back felt as if it would snap in two. To make matters worse, the wool from his tunic irritated his skin and he itched as if a multitude of fleas had taken up residence in his clothing. Ignoring the discomfort, he trudged resolutely onwards. He would happily have traded everything he owned for a horse at that moment or even the dragon he had befriended!

Aragorn had regained consciousness and was groaning. Every step Faramir took was jarring the angry wounds in his back.
“Stop, put me down!”

“I am sorry, mellon nîn, but I must bear you to safety.” It tore Faramir’s soul to cause his lord pain, but there was no other choice. The pain in his own limbs increased and he felt as if his back would snap in two. Aragorn fell silent again apart from the occasional groan.

The light started to dim. Faramir stumbled onwards until he caught his foot against a tree root and almost stumbled. He could go no further tonight. He looked around him for somewhere they could rest. Fortunately, a mighty oak had fallen nearby, creating a clearing in the forest.

He laid Aragorn down as gently as he could beneath one of the great trees, placing him on his side. It was Faramir’s turn to groan when he straightened up. Ignoring his own discomfort, he knelt beside Aragorn, who lay unmoving, his eyes closed.

“Aragorn?”

“Faramir?” Aragorn’s grey eyes flickered open.

“We can go no further tonight. I will gather wood for a fire to keep the creature, or any other savage beasts, at bay. Would you like a drink?”

“Please.”

Faramir supported his lord’s head and held the water bottle to his lips. When Aragorn had drunk his fill, Faramir gathered branches from the fallen oak and built a fire. Fortunately, he had his tinderbox to kindle a flame and it was soon blazing merrily. Now they had some defence against any wild beasts that might be lurking, Faramir turned his attention to the King. In the firelight Aragorn’s face looked haggard as if he were in considerable pain, but at least the bandages with only a little bloodied.

“What manner of a cat could do this?” he mused aloud.

“A lynx,” Aragorn replied. “Did you not see the tufts on its ears?”

“A savage creature indeed,” said Faramir.

“Only rarely,” said Aragorn. “They are timid beasts that usually live off rabbits.”

“It had a nasty festering gash on its side.”

“Wounded beasts are the most dangerous.” Aragorn then lapsed into silence. He shifted restlessly. Faramir settled himself down beside the King, trying to ignore the throbbing in his back and the itchy wool against his skin.

“You should try to rest now, mellon nîn,” said Faramir. “I will keep watch.” He sighed and tried to scratch surreptitiously.

“Use the salve,” said Aragorn.

“What salve?”

“For rashes. You have one!”

Faramir could not repress a smile. Even as badly injured as he was, Aragorn never forgot that he was a healer. The Steward rummaged amongst the depleted healing supplies and took out the little pot.
He pulled off his tunic and found he was indeed covered in red itchy blotches where the wool had chafed his skin. He smothered them in the soothing cream.

“So cold,” Aragorn muttered.

“You have my tunic,” said Faramir. He cut the seams open with his dagger and wrapped it around the King, together with his blood-drenched cloak and Aragorn’s torn one. As he did so, he placed a hand on the King’s forehead. It was drenched in cold sweat. It seemed that the King was developing a fever.

“Huddle close and you will be warm,” said Faramir. He stretched out beside the King and drew him into a protective embrace. He shifted himself into as comfortable a position as he could for both of them with Aragorn’s head pillowed against his shoulder. He feared it would be a very long night.

The last remnants of the sunset quickly dropped below the western horizon and the moon rose, though little of its silvery light penetrated the dense forest. An owl hooted then swooped in search of prey. Faramir could only hope that no less friendly predators were abroad that night. He stretched out his hand and threw more branches upon the fire. The movement disturbed Aragorn. “Thirsty,” he murmured.

Faramir reached for the water bottle and held it to his lord’s lips.

Aragorn drank deeply then muttered. “So cold.”

“I wish I had a better means to keep you warm,” Faramir said ruefully. He was starting to feel cold himself being without shirt or tunic. Cold sweat from Aragorn’s brow dripped on to his shoulder.

“Faramir?”

“Ada?”

“No not leave me!” Aragorn reached out a shaking hand.

Faramir grasped it, his heart lurching. The King must be even more gravely ill than he had feared to plead with him like a frightened child. “I will never leave you,” he said firmly.

Aragorn seemed to settle for a little while then he groaned loudly. “Arwen, alas, Arwen!”

“I will take you to her,” Faramir promised.

“So much pain, so cold- tell Arwen I am sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry about, be easy now.”

“Gave so much- so short a time, alas!”

“You must not abandon hope, Aragorn,” Faramir said firmly. “Éowyn will tend your wounds and you will soon be well again. I will not let you perish! We have survived many misadventures before, you and I. This one will be no different.” Despite his encouraging words, Faramir’s own spirits sank even lower. He did not think Aragorn’s wounds were mortal, but he knew from the bitter experience of losing comrades that the infection that followed was often more deadly than the wound. He had also seen men appear to recover then lose the ability to swallow and die horribly.

The Steward shuddered. Gondor had waited too long for her King to lose him again after so short a time. Faramir had only known Aragorn little more than a decade, but he could hardly imagine life
without him. The King had a larger than life presence that brought light and warmth to all it touched. Faramir had loved his lord since their first meeting when Aragorn had healed Faramir of the Black Breath. To think that such a man might die while trying to help Faramir and his lady protect their herds. It was unthinkable! It would be as if the brightest of stars had ceased to shine over Gondor! He tucked the tattered garments more firmly around his lord and huddled closer.

Aragorn eventually fell into an uneasy sleep, but Faramir tried to remain alert. Eventually, though, weariness overcame him and he slept.

Faramir awoke to the joyous sounds of the birds greeting the dawn. For an instant, he wondered where he was. Then he remembered. Aragorn lay still against his shoulder. His heart lurched. Then the King stirred and opened his eyes. They were filled with pain and glazed with fever, but he still lived.

“Faramir? Thirsty.”

Faramir reached for the water bottle, noting with dismay that there was not much left. As he moved, every muscle in his body protested. Faramir ignored the agony and held the water bottle to the King’s lips. When Aragorn had drunk he said, “I need to stretch my legs for a moment, then we will be on our way.”

“Do not leave me!”

“I will not. You have my word.”

Faramir paced the clearing trying to ease his stiffness with little success. He returned to Aragorn. After tending to him as best he could, he eased him to his feet and hoisted him over his shoulder.

Today the weight seemed twice as heavy. Even worse, Aragorn made no protest at being carried like a sack of stones.

Faramir started off, concentrating on one step at a time. His back felt as if it were breaking and so did his heart.

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The Steward trudged onwards, weary step after weary step. He dared not stop to rest for fear he would not be able to get up again. Only an occasional groan from Aragorn assured him that the King yet lived. His legs started to buckle and he stumbled. He collapsed exhausted on the ground with the King beside him. Faramir cradled Aragorn in his arms. He feared now that they might both be fated to die here in these woods.

The grey eyes flickered open. “Faramir?” Aragorn feebly reached out a clammy hand.

“Ada?”

“You can go no further. Leave me, son of my heart. Tell Arwen I -,” His strength exhausted, he fell silent.

TBC
Any sorrow in the world

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I can't think of any sorrow in the world that a hot bath wouldn't help, just a little bit.

Susan Glaspell, The Visioning, 1911

Faramir swallowed hard. "Never while I have breath in my body will I leave you!" he said. Summoning up his remaining reserves of strength, he willed himself onwards, this time half dragging, half carrying Aragorn.

The sun rose higher in the sky and the woodland started to thin out. At last he had reached the path. Suddenly, Faramir heard the sound of approaching hoof beats. He called out as a rider came into sight. "Stop, we need help!"

The rider halted. Faramir could have wept with relief. It was Beregond.

"My lord!" Beregond stared at Faramir and the King in sheer horror. Only then did Faramir realise what they must look like; covered in blood and only half clothed.

"Are you injured, my lord?" Beregond was already drawing off his cloak.

"I am well enough, but the King is sore hurt. A great cat attacked him. Could you help me get him on to your horse? Never have I been so glad to see you, friend!"

"And I, you, my lord! Every available man is out looking for you. My men are close behind. Your lady organised search parties when you did not return last night."

Faramir wrapped Aragorn carefully in the cloak.

"You mount my horse and I will lift the King up," said Beregond. "Let us prop him against this tree for a moment."

Assisted by Beregond, Faramir gently laid Aragorn down. The King did not stir.

"He appears gravely wounded indeed," said Beregond.

"He is, and I must get him to the house without delay." Faramir tried to mount but his numbed limbs failed him miserably. Wordlessly the Captain offered him a hand."Could you lend me your tunic, Beregond?" The Steward asked, suddenly realising his state of undress. "I do not wish to cause offence appearing before anyone else like this."

"Of course, my friend." Beregond was wearing leather armour, which he removed together with the tunic, which he handed to his lord. He replaced the breastplate over his shirt.

Faramir thankfully donned the borrowed garb. It was even itchier than his own.

With some difficulty Beregond lifted the semi-conscious King on to his horse. The animal snorted restlessly, uneasy at the scent of blood, but quieted at a word from Faramir.

Beregond slapped the gelding's rump. "I will follow you on foot," he called, as the horse set off in the direction of the house.
"Have a care, the beast might still be on the prowl!" Faramir called after him.

Faramir gripped Aragorn tightly around his waist and urged the horse into a brisk canter. Roused by the motion, Aragorn groaned.

"Easy, Aragorn," Faramir soothed. "You will soon be safe now."

They had only travelled a short distance when they came upon two of Beregond's troop. Faramir commanded one to ride after the Captain and the other, who rode the swiftest horse, to go and alert Éowyn that the King was badly injured.

Faramir again urged the borrowed horse forward. He had always loved horses, but today especially appreciated that the noble beasts would suffer to bear men upon their backs. A distance, which while carrying the King on foot had seemed endless, did not seem so at all on horseback.

It was not long before the house came into sight and he could hear his hounds barking. Éowyn ran out to greet him, his niece Elbeth beside her.

"Faramir, my love!" Éowyn cried, anxiously regarding his dishevelled and blood splattered form.

"What has happened to you and Strider?" asked Elbeth.

"I am well enough," he assured them. "The King, though, is badly injured, set upon by the great cat that savaged your foals! Help me get him inside!"

Faramir was almost at once surrounded by servants and guards. Two burly sergeants lifted Aragorn down from the horse and carried him within.

"Be careful, his back is injured," Faramir called after them. "Lay him on his side."

Éowyn followed, calling out instructions to the servants. A groom helped Faramir dismount. The Steward bade him care for the horse. He stiffly followed his wife on unsteady legs.

The men carried Aragorn to a spacious guestchamber on the ground floor and laid him on the bed. Éowyn had already ordered a fire lit and her healing supplies were laid out ready. The housekeeper and the maids bustled hither and thither with hot water and towels.

Éowyn was already unwrapping Beregond's cloak from around the King when Faramir entered the room. Elbeth was expertly laying out her Aunt's healing supplies upon a table.

Aragorn groaned and opened his eyes trying to focus on his surroundings. "You are safe now at my home, mellon nîn," said Faramir, gripping his lord's hand.

Éowyn frowned as she caught side of the blood stained makeshift bandages that covered Aragorn's upper body. She felt his pulse, then laid a hand on Aragorn's brow and sighed deeply. The King moaned softly at the lightest touch.

"We will tend your wounds now and all will be well," Faramir soothed.

"You, Faramir, are going to have refreshment, a hot bath, and clean clothes," Éowyn said firmly. "The servants have them waiting for you."

"I cannot leave him," Faramir protested.

"You are half dead on your feet and in no fit state to be in a sickroom!" said Éowyn. "I need to give him poppy juice before I attempt to remove these bandages and it takes a while to take effect. All I
Faramir could see the sense in her words and made to leave. Êowyn moved across to a table and filled a glass with water, to which she added several drops of poppy juice. She supported Aragorn's head so that he could swallow. After he had drained the glass, she replaced it on the table and covered the King with a warm blanket. Elbeth tucked it around him.

"Do not leave me!" Aragorn muttered feverishly and clutched frantically at Faramir's hand. "Arwen, where is she?"

"I will return very soon and I will send for your lady. You have my word." Faramir reluctantly freed himself and made his way to his study, where he scribbled a note to the Queen telling her that her husband was injured and needed her. He gave the message to a servant, telling them to despatch a messenger to the City with all haste.

A steaming bath awaited Faramir in his bathing chamber. On a tray beside the tub were jugs of wine and of cordial and glasses, together with a plate of thinly cut bread and slices of cheese and fruit. Faramir poured himself a drink. He had not realised just how thirsty he was. He thankfully discarded the itchy woollen tunic followed by the rest of his stained garments and eased his aching back and limbs into the soothing warm water.

Faramir had little appetite, but forced himself to eat while he soaked in the tub. He had succeeded in getting Aragorn to safety, but he was still desperately worried about the man he loved dearly as a father. He finished his ablutions swiftly and donned the clean clothing laid out for him. It felt good to have linen rather than wool next to his skin again.

The bath somewhat eased Faramir's many aches and pains and he walked back more easily to the King's chamber. Aragorn lay much as he had left him, though his features looked less haggard now the pain relieving draught was taking effect. Êowyn had dismissed the hovering servants and was bending over the King, taking his pulse. Elbeth was holding his other hand.

"How is he?" Faramir asked.

"A little easier I think," said Êowyn. "We will tend his wounds now."

"Elbeth should not see such sights," said Faramir.

"She is no longer a child and if she desires to be a healer she will see much worse," said Êowyn. "She has a strong stomach, she helped deliver our child."

"And do not forget I helped tend Strider when he was tortured by the rebels," said Elbeth. "What could be worse than that?"

"Very well, you can stay," Faramir conceded.

"We have removed his boots, but will leave you to put him to bed once his wounds are tended. I know he would prefer that." Êowyn dipped a cloth in a bowl of warm water and began to soak off the bandages. Elbeth did likewise. It was a slow and laborious process as the blood had dried hard. Aragorn groaned and shifted restlessly on the bed. Faramir knelt beside the bed in front of him. He gripped both his lord's hands. Easy, mellon nîn," he soothed. "It will soon be over."

Éowyn bit back a cry of dismay when the wounds were finally revealed. Elbeth closed her eyes for a moment then resumed concentrating on her task. Aragorn's back and shoulders resembled a chunk of raw meat and were crisscrossed with deep angry scratches, which oozed pus and blood. "This is even worse than what befell my poor foals!" Éowyn exclaimed. Gritting her teeth, she began to clean
the wounds as gently as she could. Elbeth held the bowl for her aunt.

Aragorn moaned softly, his features contorted with pain. He gripped Faramir's hands tightly.

Éowyn then regarded the wounds critically. "They are all deep enough to need stitching," she said. "I think it is better to leave them open to drain, though. I dare not close them, lest I trap poisons within."

She smothered the wounds in honey and covered them with clean bandages, Elbeth deftly handing her the things she needed.

Aragorn never released his grip on Faramir's hands. He groaned softly, but did not otherwise cry out.

"There, there, Aragorn, all over now," Éowyn said at last, relief evident in her tone. Her pale blue gown was now splattered with blood, giving her a somewhat alarming appearance. Elbeth's gown was only slightly less splattered. "Thorongil's feed is due and Elbeth and I must go and change before we alarm the household. I will leave Faramir to put you to bed."

"Thank you, my friends," Aragorn murmured. He lay back exhausted against the pillows.

Faramir straightened up, grimacing at the pain in his back and legs.

"Are you well, my love?" Éowyn enquired. "Maybe the servants should aid the King?"

"I am just a little stiff," said Faramir. "I will tend him."

A sudden thought struck Éowyn. "We could find no trace of you in the fields or the wood," she said. "Where was the beast?"

"Deep in the uncleared forest. The King followed its tracks to its lair where it attacked him."

"You took no horses. However did you manage to bring the King home?"

"I carried him."

Éowyn's jaw gaped. "You carried him? But how? Such a feat would take several men or a horse."

"Uncle Faramir!" Elbeth's eyes were full of admiration.

"He is as a father to me, my friend, and my lord," Faramir said simply. "To him have I sworn both love and fealty. He once brought us both forth from the dark vale, so how could I leave him to perish alone in the dark forest? I carried him hence on my back."

"You are a remarkable Man, Faramir of Gondor!" Éowyn planted a tender kiss on Faramir's lips, and then bustled from the room with Elbeth.

A servant brought fresh water and cloths. As quickly and gently as he could, Faramir removed the rest of Aragorn's blood stained clothing, bathed him, and dressed him in clean linen drawers. He then pulled the bedclothes over him and fluffed up the pillows.

Aragorn looked unhappy at needing to be tended like an infant, but bore the ministrations patiently enough. He then asked for water, and by the time Éowyn had returned, he had drifted into an uneasy sleep.

"I have persuaded Elbeth to amuse the children," said Éowyn. "She has seen enough horrors for one day."
"She is a remarkable girl, as one would expect from Boromir's daughter. How do the children fare?"

"Elestelle was fretful when you did not return last night and Elboron missed his bedtime story. Thorongil is too tiny to notice anything amiss though he woke earlier than usual for his feed," said Éowyn.

"I will see them as soon as I can," said Faramir.

"You should go and rest now, husband," said Éowyn. "I will sit with Aragorn."

"I will stay with him until the Queen gets here," said Faramir in a determined tone.

"Just as I thought you would, I know you to be a stubborn man," said Éowyn. "We will both sit with him then."

"How will he fare, Éowyn?" There was fear in Faramir's voice."

"Such hurts would have killed a lesser man," said Éowyn. "The King, though, is of pure Númenorean descent and exceptionally strong. He is sore wounded and has a fever, but I can detect neither broken bones nor hurts within. We can but wait and hope."

"May the Valar protect him!" said Faramir. He kissed Aragorn lightly on the brow to emphasise the blessing.

"The Queen's presence should help him," said Éowyn. "If she rides a swift horse she should be here before nightfall."

TBC
She approaches to heal me

She who my wound
will finally close,
like a hero approaches,
she approaches to heal me!

Die mir die Wunde
ewig schliesse, -
sie naht wie ein Held,
sie naht mir zum Heil! Tristan und Isolde - Wagner

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien. This story was written for pleasure and not for financial gain.

With thanks to Raksha

The sun was low in the sky, its fading scarlet rays illuminating the far wall of the bedchamber, when the barking of the hounds in the yard alerted Faramir and Éowyn to the Queen's arrival.

Aragorn's fever had risen and he had become increasingly restless as he alternately sweated and shivered. Éowyn had given him willow bark tea, but it seemed to be to no avail. The King had become increasingly exhausted and his breathing became laboured. He now struggled even to open his eyes. Faramir was sponging his lord's face and coaxing him to swallow more water when Arwen glided silently into the room, startling the Steward and his lady.

"How is he?" Arwen demanded as she hastened to the bedside and lovingly kissed her husband. Aragorn's eyes flickered open with a mighty effort. "Vanimelda!" he whispered, a weak smile lighting his pale face.

"My lady, I am so glad that you are here!" Faramir greeted her.

"Have you brought a healer?" Éowyn enquired.

"I brought two assistants from the Houses of Healing to help with nursing care if need be," said Arwen. "Estel has little time for healers who know nothing of Elven arts. There is nothing any of them could do for him that you have not done already."

"My skills do not seem to be helping him," Éowyn said sadly. "His fever is getting worse."

"Uncover his wounds that I may see them!" said Arwen, "and tell me exactly what happened."

"They are a distressing sight," Faramir warned.

"Am I not Elrond's daughter? I have seen far worse."

Faramir and Éowyn exchanged a glance and nodded. Faramir recounted all that had happened to the Queen.

Éowyn called for hot water then pulled back the covers and started to soak off the bandages. Aragorn groaned in protest.

"Easy, my beloved," soothed Arwen.
"So ugly for you to see," Aragorn protested.

"You have been wounded before," Arwen said calmly. Even so, she blanched and swallowed hard when the lacerated flesh was bared to her gaze. She quickly collected herself and said. "These hurts need treating with athelas."

"I will send one of my maidservants to gather some from the herb garden," said Éowyn.

"The children are with me," said Arwen. "The herb will be more potent if Eldarion gathers it, young though he is. For the blood of Lúthien runs twofold in his veins. Maybe one of your maids would show him where it is?"

"Of course," Faramir responded while Éowyn was still shaking her head in bewilderment at such a strange request.

Arwen studied her husband intently for a few moments. Then she held her hands a little way above his wounds and concentrated intently as her hands moved slowly from his neck to his waist.

At last she opened her eyes and pronounced. "The wounds have gone deep and he has a cracked collar bone and ribs."

"I examined him thoroughly." Éowyn sounded defensive.

"I do not doubt it. Only an Elven healer can detect changes in the energy that surrounds all living creatures. Even I have only fully learned this art since I came to dwell amongst Men. My father and brothers always tended the sick in Imladris and saw no need for me to practise healing too."

"Naneth, I have it!" a boyish voice called from outside the door.

Éowyn swiftly pulled the sheet up to Aragorn's chin as Eldarion burst into the room, followed by a dismayed looking maid. The boy skidded to a halt beside the bed and regarded his father with dismay. "Ada!"

Aragorn opened his eyes and managed to smile at his son. "It gladdens my heart to see you, ion nîn," he said. "Take care of Naneth and Farawyn." He swallowed; studying the lad's frightened face, and then added, "Until I am well." He closed his eyes again, exhausted.

Arwen took the athelas from the boy and kissed him. "Thank you, Eldarion. I will use this to make Ada well again. Now go and have your supper with your sister, I will come to you as soon as I can."

With a last anxious glance at his father, Eldarion permitted the servant to lead him away.

Arwen called for more hot water and asked that the kitchens keep a constant supply in readiness. As soon as the water was boiled, she took two leaves of athelas and bruised them between her palms, murmuring something in an ancient tongue as she did so. She cast the leaves into the bowl of steaming water and at once, a living freshness filled the air.

Faramir found himself inhaling deeply and his heart felt strangely lighter. Arwen held the bowl in front of her husband's face. Aragorn's breathing deepened and some of the tightness left his face. Arwen sang softly, which seemed to further ease her husband.

After some little time had elapsed, she called for a fresh bowl of hot water into which she cast two more of the athelas leaves.

"Faramir, take off your tunic and sit on the side of the bed and support Estel against your shoulder,
while I treat his wounds," Arwen instructed.

Faramir hesitated for a moment, mindful it was considered highly improper to be less than fully clothed in front of any lady save his wife. He then recalled that such was the Elven custom and that the embroidery on his tunic could cause Aragorn further pain. Without further ado, he pulled the garment over his head.

Arwen began to bathe her husband's wounds with the athelas mixture. She continued to sing as she worked, a sweet haunting melody, which appeared to be a prayer of healing to the Valar.

Faramir held the King fast, at first in a gentle restraint as Aragorn flinched at the touch to his wounds. Then marvel of marvels, he felt Aragorn's heartbeat strengthen against his own and saw the tense body gradually relax as the wounds drained their poisons away, washed clean by the healing athelas.

"We should bandage his back again now," said Arwen. If you would assist me, Éowyn? We need to use more honey to prevent further infections. And mix him a draught of poppy juice. Sleep will be his best healer if his body is to recover from the shock and loss of blood."

Faramir continued to hold and soothe his lord while the two women worked. As soon as they had finished, Arwen and Éowyn gently eased the King down on to the pillows and pulled the covers over him. Faramir tried to assist them, but his stiff and aching arms refused to comply.

"You should rest now," Éowyn advised them. "Go and lie on the bed in the adjoining chamber. I assume you wish to stay close to Aragorn."

"What about Lady Arwen?" Faramir asked.

"I shall sit beside Estel during the night," said Arwen. "My kind needs far less rest than the younger children of Ilúvatar. But first I will treat the damaged muscles in your back, Faramir. I have seen how stiffly and painfully you are moving."

"My lady!" Faramir protested. "I am well enough."

"You need not worry about propriety," said Arwen. "I know Estel would wish me to ease your hurts. It is not as if it is the first time! And would it not pain my lord, if he had to call upon strangers to tend to his needs?"

Faramir looked again at the still figure upon the bed, studying Aragorn's still face. He did look less drawn, though and a little colour had returned to his pale cheeks. He was breathing deeply too, and did not seem to be in too much pain, though he looked exhausted after so many hours of being tended. Faramir gently kissed Aragorn's forehead and straightened up again with difficulty.

The Steward then looked at his wife, her lovely face shadowed by exhaustion and worry. The past day had taken a heavy toll upon them all. He glanced down at his shirt, which clung limply to him, soaked with Aragorn's sweat and the athelas mixture. "Very well, my lady," he said.

"Goodnight, my love," Éowyn said. She placed a tender kiss upon his lips before settling down on the chair by the bed.

"I will be back soon, and then you can seek your own bed," said Arwen.

Faramir pulled off his sodden shirt and lay face downwards upon the narrow bed in the next room. Arwen's light tread made him unaware that she had followed him inside until he felt the light pressure of her cool fingertips on his aching back. Faramir relaxed despite himself. Within moments he was fast asleep. He knew no more until the sun streamed through the window the next morning.
For a moment, Faramir wondered where he was and why he was wearing only his breeches. The covers were drawn snugly around him. Then he remembered Arwen's ministrations from the night before and his cheeks reddened. He got up as quickly as he could, his heart filled with anxiety as to how the King fared. He was still a little stiff and sore, but not nearly as badly as the day before. Arwen's healing arts had worked their magic. He pulled on a shirt and tunic that he found by the bedside and hastened into the next room. Arwen was still sitting in the chair. It was as if she had not stirred from the night before. Aragorn had not moved either. He lay so still that Faramir's heart lurched.

"How is he?" Faramir enquired.

"He is still sleeping," said Arwen. "The fever has abated. Would you sit with him for a moment, please, while I look in on the children and wash my face and change my gown?"

"Of course, my lady."

"How do you fare this morning, Faramir?"

"My stiffness is much eased, my lady. I thank you."

Faramir took her place by the bedside. Aragorn must have sensed his lady's departure as his eyes flickered open.

"Ada?"

"Faramir?"

"How do you fare, mellon nîn?"

"Well enough, apart from having a sore back and feeling as weak as a new born kitten! I feel as if I have not eaten for an age!"

Faramir was overjoyed to hear Aragorn speak in a near normal tone of voice rather than a pained whisper. There was more colour in the King's face and his eyes were alert.

"Shall I fetch your lady, Aragorn, and order the cook to prepare some refreshment for you?"

"In a moment. Come here, Faramir, I have not yet thanked you."

"For what, ada?"

"For saving my life."

"It was I, alas, who could not shoot the beast while my lady and the Queen tended your wounds," Faramir protested. "Had you not offered to help protect our lands you would never have been injured."

"I freely chose to hunt the lynx," said Aragorn. "You brought me here safely by carrying me for miles, a feat worthy of the songs of old. Thank you, ion nîn." He held out his hand, his eyes were filled with love and gratitude as he smiled at Faramir.

The Steward clasped his lord's outstretched hand. The grip was not as firm as usual, but the hand was no longer clammy and shaking. Aragorn was on the way to recovery. His heart sang with joy and gratitude.

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Autumn had turned to winter and life had returned to normal for Aragorn, Faramir, and their families.

Faramir was staying in the City for a few days to take part in some important trade negotiations. They had concluded for the day. As was his custom, he had joined the King and Queen in their private sitting room after partaking of an evening meal with them.

A blazing log fire burned in the hearth and the room was brightly illuminated with candles. The wind could be heard moaning outside, but no chill draughts penetrated the cosy room. Aragorn was sprawled on a chair by the hearth, absently stroking one of the nursery cats, a young ginger tom that often found his way to wherever the King happened to be sitting. Aragorn's favourite hound reclined on the hearthrug at his feet. Arwen was in the nursery, telling Eldarion and Farawyn a bedtime story. Faramir was seated the other side of the fireplace perusing a message he had received earlier that day.

"A message from your lady?" Aragorn enquired.

"Yes, she has good news. I will read it to you. The horses are all thriving and Swiftmane foaled last night- a beautiful little filly. Aragorn's suggestion that Legolas should hunt the lynx was a good one. He came two days ago with an Elven hunting party and they managed to kill the creature. It is a relief not to have to post a guard over the foals now winter is drawing in. I told the Elves only to kill the rogue lynx that threatened my foals. If there are more, I believe Ithilien has food enough for them. Elestelle sends her Uncle Aragorn a hug while Elbeth exhorts her Strider to get plenty of rest." He smiled and folded the parchment into his tunic pocket. "I hope we never again get a rogue beast," he said thoughtfully. "Yet it would gladden my heart if all creatures could thrive now that we are free from the Shadow."

"Indeed so," said Aragorn. "I would have my realm be a place where creatures of all kinds can flourish alongside Man, Elf, Hobbit, and Dwarf. We owe much to animals. They are our companions, they bear us on their backs, they give us food and clothing. My kingdom could not prosper without them."

The two men lapsed into companionable silence. The dog gently wagged its tail while the cat purred loudly.

The end.

A/n This story was written for the Teitho "Animals" challenge where it was placed equal second.

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