Shadow and Thought

by lindahoyland

Summary

Despite being happily married to Arwen and King of Gondor, Aragorn is lonely and despondent at Faramir's shyness and Éowyn's obvious and perplexing hatred. Determined to get to know them better, he invites them to a remote hunting lodge, oblivious of the dangers awaiting which could cost him his life.

Notes

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate. No profit has been or will be made from this story.
Strained relations

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate. No profit has been or will be made from this story.

The rating and warnings for the this story are because of torture, injuries and sexual content concerning a husband and wife. I am in the process of revising and reposting this story.

I first wrote this story in 2004 and since then I hope my writing skills have improved a little. I am ashamed of my early version and have decided to remove it in favour of what I hope is an improved version. Should anyone want the first version, please e mail me.

Shadow and Thought

Chapter One

–

Strained relations

June 3020

The Golden Hall at Edoras was filled to capacity for the Wedding Feast of Faramir and Éowyn. The occasion was even graced by the attendance of the High King himself and his Queen.

Éowyn was wearing a gown of white, embroidered with green and silver, a gift from Queen Arwen. She believed that she had never looked so beautiful as she did today. Faramir's attire of black velvet tunic embroidered with the White Tree of Gondor and black breeches, accentuated his noble features.

Éowyn smiled at her handsome husband. She reflected how blessed she was to have met such a man and gained his affections. As sister the King of Rohan, she had never expected to be fortunate enough to marry for love, but rather for political reasons. She still marvelled that a man such as Faramir would have chosen her, rather than one of the many beautiful ladies of Gondor.

The young couple smilingly greeted their guests. When the High King approached, they both bowed low. Now that she had fallen in love with Faramir, Éowyn was no longer uncomfortable in Aragorn's presence. She had come to realise the feelings she had experienced for him, had been nothing more than infatuation, embarrassing for them both at the time, but now in the past.

Aragorn embraced Faramir and kissed him on the forehead, murmuring words of congratulation. He then kissed Éowyn's hand and said: "It gladdens my heart, lady, to see you in bliss today. It was indeed a happy day when I told Faramir to care for you!"

The smile froze on Éowyn's lips. Her dreams crumbled to dust in that instant. It was all a sham, Faramir's protestations of love for her were nothing more than a political ploy to unite Rohan and Gondor and avoid her being an embarrassment to Aragorn's Queen!

A curious remark Aragorn had made to her brother at Théoden's funeral feast about him giving the
fairest 'thing' in Rohan to Gondor was now all too clear. She was just a 'thing' to be disposed of however the King pleased.

She stiffened, but determined to hide her distress, which passed unnoticed even by Faramir, Éomer called for a toast to round off the festivities.

Éowyn now lay in the carved marriage bed, which had been used for generations by the house of Eorl. Her maid had helped her undress and change into a nightgown of finest linen adorned with lace. The bed had been sprinkled with pink and white blossoms while blessings were said for the prosperity and fertility of their union.

Now all that was lacking was the bridegroom. She had long looked forward to this night. Now the thought of Faramir's embraces was as repulsive to her as if she were a slave, sold to pleasure the highest bidder. Tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

She could not help but still love her husband despite the fact he and the King had deceived her over this marriage. The knowledge tore at her heart. It was impossible to hate Faramir, so quiet, gentle and shy. As for Aragorn: fury blazed within her at what he had done. She vowed to hate him until her dying day.

Éowyn tried to calm herself, thinking that at least, the coming night would show whether Faramir felt any attraction towards her at all, or was just blindly doing his King's bidding.

The door opened to admit Faramir, who entered looking somewhat uncomfortable. She could hear the raucous shouts of the men outside. "Tonight you venture deep into Rohan, Lord Faramir, be sure to leave a colt or at least a filly behind as proof of your visit!" they cried.

Faramir drew off his velvet robe revealing his nightshirt beneath. He climbed into bed beside her. Éowyn took a deep breath, determined not to show her feelings.

Faramir turned towards his bride. He studied her pale features and tear stained cheeks. Always perceptive and gentlemanly, he sensed her obvious distress and determined not to add to it by forcing unwelcome attentions upon her. Greatly though he desired her, he would wait until she welcomed his attentions. He planted a gentle kiss on her brow. "You look weary, my lady, this day has been tiring for us both. I will leave you to your sleep." With that, he turned away from her, blew out the candle, and fell into a deep slumber.

Éowyn lay sleepless beside him, silent tears pouring down her cheeks. She had feared him taking her, knowing he did not love her, but this proof of utter indifference to her charms was even worst. No doubt, his thoughts were with some Gondorian beauty who was his mistress!

A few hours later, Faramir was the first to awaken. He lay gazing at his beautiful bride by the pale light of early dawn. How he loved her! His experiences with his harsh father had made him determined that no one, least of all his wife, should ever think him cruel or unfeeling. Obviously, Éowyn felt uncomfortable about the intimacies of marriage but he was a very patient man.

The next day, Éowyn and Faramir, together with the King and Queen and their attendants, returned to Gondor. That night, and the nights that followed, Faramir spent in his dressing room, determined not to distress his nervous bride.

Having spent his entire adult life in the service of Gondor, he understood little of women. He had sternly suppressed his desires until he met the right woman. He assumed that the intimacies of marriage were something that would come to him as naturally as to his dogs and horses. It seemed,
though, marriage might be more complicated than he had at first assumed. Maybe Éowyn was afraid of childbearing? He hardly raise such a delicate question with her, though. If only there were someone, he could talk to! How he missed Boromir! He had not approved of his brothers dalliances, but at least he would have known what a woman expected!

The Steward buried himself in his work, trying to put aside his feelings of being rejected. He had hoped so much for a wife who loved him and could give him a large brood of children to whom he could be a loving father. He often dreamed of himself embracing his children and playing with them. He could see a little girl, as beautiful as her mother and a boy who resembled Boromir, and they were just the eldest of his large brood. It seemed, though, he was destined to remain unloved. His only consolation was his love for his lord, who treated him with the kindness and compassion that Denethor had denied him. Yet, for all the King's kindness, he feared that one day, he would reject him too, and dismiss him as not good enough to serve one so great.

Éowyn continued to brood over how the King had tricked wondered what Faramir's true love looked like

February 3021

Aragorn Elessar, High King of the reunited kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, struggled to suppress a yawn as the fourth course of the state banquet was served. 'Surely only a Hobbit could enjoy eating so much food,' he thought.

A trade delegation was visiting from the lands of the Haradrim in the South, and this was the third banquet this week that was being held in their honour.

Aragorn was seated beside Éowyn, Princess of Rohan, and now wife of his Steward Faramir, Prince of Ithilien. The lady was engaged in an animated conversation with a Gondorian noble several places down the table, concerning the relative merits of the horses of Gondor and Rohan and was ignoring the King completely. He tried once more to involve her in the conversation. "You have been in Minas Tirith for several months now, my lady, how do you like the City?" he asked pleasantly.

"Not at all!" she snapped. "I detest stone cities, wood is far superior such as my people build with."

The Gondorians looked shocked at Éowyn's outburst. A deathly silence hung over the gathering as all eyes focussed upon Éowyn. Faramir, who sat on her other side, blushed scarlet; looking as if he wished the floor would open and devour him.

Queen Arwen, ever the diplomat, hastily tried to smooth matters by saying: "It takes a while to learn to like a new home, I know. I too, missed Imladris for a time."

"Yes, my lady, indeed that is so," Éowyn replied pleasantly, much to Faramir's relief. Faramir could not help but notice that the Queen seemed to have put on weight and seemed to have an especial glow around her tonight. Obviously, life in Gondor suited her.

The King smiled proudly at his wife. Trying to put his embarrassed Steward at his ease, Aragorn turned to him and asked. "The silk, which we have been shown is very fine, do you not think, Lord Faramir? Should we ask for a regular supply to be delivered to the city?"

"As you wish, my Lord King." Faramir replied.

"I wondered what you thought," Aragorn persisted.

Faramir flushed. "I defer to your judgement in all matters, my lord," he answered.
Aragorn sighed and gave up attempting to make Faramir express an opinion. He caught the eye of Imrahil, Faramir's uncle, seated across the table. The Prince of Dol Amroth shook his head and started a hasty conversation about the weather in Harad.

"Only one more course and then we can retire," Arwen whispered in her husband's ear.

He smiled and forced himself to continue playing the polite host.

"Why were you so rude to the King?" Faramir demanded of Éowyn, once they were alone in their apartments. Éowyn had just dismissed her maid and was sitting un-braiding her long golden tresses, which she preferred to brush herself.

"I detest the man and his stone prison of a city! He patronises me and has done from the moment we first met!" she replied forcefully, brushing her hair with increased vigour.

"But you owe him your life, we both do!" Faramir protested.

"Had he not scorned me, I would never have despaired so much in the first place. He is nothing but a hypocrite, who pretends to be good and noble while he ruins others' lives!" Éowyn snapped, putting down her hairbrush. "Your gratitude will have to suffice for us both, seeing as you act like the man's lap dog! I'm going to bed now!"

"He is a good man, the greatest and noblest of our age," Faramir protested, "I just do not understand why you hate him so much."

"You are under his spell just like my brother!" Éowyn retorted. "I bid you goodnight, my lord."

"I will leave you to your sleep, my lady," Faramir said quietly, repressing his feelings, as he had been taught since early childhood. Fearful of incurring his wife's wrath by saying more, the Steward retired to his dressing room, leaving Éowyn alone in the large bedroom. Climbing into bed, she buried her face in the pillow, stifling her sobs, as thoughts of how Aragorn had tricked her into this loveless marriage overwhelmed her.

On the other side of the wall, Faramir wept quietly too, wondering why it had all gone so awry with his marriage. He loved his wife so much. Yet, now she hardly seemed to be able to endure being in the same room as him.

Éowyn had looked so happy on the day when they had spoken their wedding vows. Yet, before the sun had set on that same day, she was again the cold and melancholy woman he had first encountered. He had shrunk from her scornful gaze since that day. Often, he wondered if secretly she still loved the King. Was that why she professed to detest him so?

In the Royal Apartments, Aragorn and Arwen lay side by side in the darkness.

"You are troubled, Estel," said Arwen.

Aragorn turned towards her and stroked her hair. "You sense my thoughts well tonight, vanimelda!" he replied. "I was fearing you had lost the ability in these past weeks.

"I expect it will return," Arwen said vaguely. "You will toss and turn all night if you continue to fret so," she said, sitting up to light the bedside candle. "Now tell me what troubles you."

"I did not mean to keep you awake." The King sighed and turned to face her, thinking how beautiful she looked by candlelight, her black hair framing her fair skin and tumbling over the shoulders of her lace trimmed nightgown.
"I was wondering if I made a mistake in keeping Faramir as my Steward and advisor, though no one could work harder than he, nor know more about Gondor. However, I need someone who will give me different opinions and tell me when I make mistakes. Faramir looks as if I intend to beat him every time he is spoken to, and has never once voiced an opinion of his own!"

Arwen listened sympathetically to her husband's outburst.

The banquet tonight was the last straw!" Aragorn continued, "I think he resents me taking his place! Yet at first, I thought we could be friends. Although, I could never hope to fill the place of his brother, I hoped I could be as family to him, or at least befriend him. I truly like the man. Yet, he always acts like a hound waiting to beaten! I suspect he is in pain still from his old wounds, yet if I offer to treat them, he refuses and looks as if I wanted to torture him!"

Arwen shook her head at the despair in her husband's voice. "Faramir loves and respects you, Estel, I see it in his eyes. However, he also fears you, for you, like his father, are his lord. He worries he will do something that irks you and he will then feel the weight of your wrath as he felt Denethor's. Make no mistake, though, however timid he might seem, he would stand up for what he believed to be right, whatever it cost him. For did he not face his father's wrath by letting Frodo go? Then, you told me he was furious when he thought your had uprooted the White Tree. Give him time to get to know you. He will come to see that you are no tyrant like Denethor was."

"I hope you are right, my love," Aragorn said gloomily. "The Lady Éowyn's conduct pains me too. Though, I would gladly have been as a brother to her, she looks on me with hatred! I cannot but help feel sorry for Faramir; the poor man is married to a shrew! I pitied him tonight."

Arwen laughed. "You misjudge the Lady Éowyn," she said. "I like her; she has a good heart beneath that prickly exterior. She and I are fast becoming close friends. No doubt she still smarts from having once loved you"

Aragorn looked surprised.

"She felt discarded by you, so you feel the rough edge of her tongue," Arwen explained. "I see her with the other ladies, where she is much loved and admired, but no woman looks fondly on any man who rejected her, even if it were but a young maid's infatuation! Then she feels caged in the city, after the plains of Rohan. You could not have asked her a worst question!"

"You are wise, my Evenstar, you see things that I do not." Aragorn tenderly nuzzled his wife's cheek.

Arwen laughed, a soft musical sound that her husband never tired of hearing. "You forget I have lived many more years than you and there is little that I have not seen or experienced. I can also see you feel caged and are lonely."

"Lonely? But you are everything I dreamed of and more, Arwen!" Aragorn protested, while at the same time looking slightly sheepish that she could read him so well.

Arwen stroked his dark hair soothingly. "Remember how Ada used to say that love was like a rainbow and one needed to experience all the colours?" she replied. "You miss the freedom; to be able to go out riding or hunting with good friends, where you can forget the pressures of being King for a time. Your fellow Rangers, and the members of the Fellowship, now that Legolas and Gimli are travelling, are all far away. Your good friend, Éomer is busy in Rohan with his royal duties. I have my ladies as companions, while you are surrounded by bickering nobles and a Steward who could be your friend, but acts like a beaten lapdog! You need to remedy that and get away from the Court and the City, which stifle you."
"Maybe if we were to ride out in the countryside, without any retainers and get to know each other better, Faramir would learn then that I am just a man like any other and then be comfortable when he is in my presence." Aragorn mused.

"You are not just any man, I would have no other!" Arwen said, embracing him. He drew her close, savouring her nearness, her touch, and her scent. "Did you manage to pass the afternoon pleasantly?" he asked, thinking ruefully of the Meeting with the visiting Ambassadors he had endured.

"Yes, I spent it with Dame Ioreth."

"Dame Ioreth?" Aragorn sounded puzzled. "I had no idea you enjoyed that old crone's company!"

Arwen chose her words carefully before replying. She wished now that she had managed to avoid mentioning Ioreth's name. She had no wish to awaken her husband's curiosity just yet. "She is wise and is telling me many things I need to know about mortal women." she replied carefully.

Aragorn yawned. "I could think of many more appealing companions that you could choose," he said. "But, if her company makes you happy, I am pleased you have found a companion for when I am called from your side by affairs of state."

"We should try to sleep now. You have another banquet with the Harad delegates tomorrow." Arwen suggested, anxious not to discuss Ioreth further.

Aragorn groaned as he blew out the candle. "I shall need you with your diplomatic skills at my side to endure it!" he grumbled.

"I will be beside you. In a few days they will be gone, and then you can plan how you can escape for a while and maybe befriend your Steward too," Arwen said, settling down beside her husband and snuggling into his arms. Within a few moments, he was snoring peacefully. Arwen lay awake for a while, pondering the complexity of human emotions, and wondering when the time would be right to tell her husband her secret.
Chapter Two an Invitation from the King

Early March 3021

Faramir slowly climbed out of bed in his dressing room, grimacing at the pain from his wounds. They were always most painful early in the day. He reached for his robe and pulled it on over his nightshirt. He anxiously looked through the selection of clothes his servant had laid out for him, wondering what he should wear for the private audience to which the King had summoned him.

He loved his new lord dearly, venerating him as Gondor's rescuer and the man who saved his life. Yet, Faramir dreaded every audience with the King, always fearful that he might make some mistake, and as result, see the same scorn and contempt in his Sovereign's eyes that was ever present in his father's.

As a lover of lore and learning, there were so many things Faramir would have liked to ask Aragorn about. The King was said to be elven-wise and the most widely travelled of all living men. How the Steward yearned to ask him about the Elves, his travels, and tales of the ring bearer; but always the words froze on his lips. By now, he supposed, the King must think him half witted.

Faramir pulled on his drawers and breeches under his nightshirt. He then carefully selected a shirt of fine linen and tunic of blue velvet and laid them on the bed. He cared little for his appearance, but not to dress properly to speak with the King would show a sorry lack of respect. It was unusual for one of the Steward's rank not to have a servant to help them dress, but why burden another with the sight of his wounded body, or for that matter endure the discomfiture of their pitying and curious looks? Faramir thought sadly, as he pulled off his nightshirt, winching at the ever-present pain in his shoulder, where the Southron arrow had torn into the muscles and ligaments almost two years before. The healers were amazed he could use his arm and shoulder at all. He supposed he had the King to thank for that.

Aragorn had offered him further treatments and not for the first time, Faramir wondered if he should have accepted, but it was so embarrassing to appear weak in front of his Lord, and it seemed doubtful that the offer was ever made as anything other than a gesture. After all, the King had far more important matters to concern himself with than his Steward's old wounds. How could he even remove his shirt in front of him to reveal the shameful and ugly scars, and body so puny that his father had said everyone would laugh if they saw him unclothed? Then, what treatment could there be, to ease hurts he had borne for so long? The King was a skilled Healer, not a magician!

Faramir tried to eat breakfast, but was too nervous to swallow more than a slice of buttered toast.
He made his way to the King's study, aiming to be as punctual as possible. He knocked timidly at the door. A kindly voice swiftly bade him enter.

How the Steward hated this room, which had been his father's! There were new hangings on the walls, tapestries of the Kings of old, brought from Imladris. However, new furniture was still in short supply after the war, and Aragorn still used Denethor's desk. The chair at least, was different, a gift from a young carpenter Aragorn had spared from execution.

The King rose to his feet and smiled as Faramir entered. Aragorn was obviously finishing his breakfast since he had a tray in front of him. "Have you eaten?" he asked Faramir.

"Yes thank you, my lord, I have breakfasted already."

"I am glad someone besides myself still eats breakfast, the Queen says she is not hungry these past weeks, so I must eat it on my own! Do have a goblet of wine and try one of these honey cakes; they are delicious. Only a Hobbit could eat all the food the kitchens provide for me!"

Faramir was unable to resist taking a cake from the proffered plate. It never ceased to astonish him that Aragorn thought nothing of handing round cakes like any servant would. His father would never have dreamed of doing such a thing! The King always seemed to know, too, what delicacies his Steward especially enjoyed. The cakes were quite delicious, although the butterflies in his stomach made it difficult to swallow.

To his relief, Aragorn settled himself on the couch by the window rather than behind the desk that had been Denethor's. He gestured to Faramir to sit beside him. They sat eating honey cakes in silence for a few minutes, listening to the rain outside. Faramir's stomach settled. Despite his awe of his lord, there was something calming about Aragorn's presence. Often when they were working together, they would partake of refreshments thus, and were Aragorn not his Liege Lord and a figure out of legend; Faramir would have enjoyed the occasions. He sensed a kindred spirit in the man sitting beside him.

"Thank you for organising my birthday celebrations so well, Faramir." Aragorn said; brushing the crumbs off his lap after the last cake was finished. He took a sip from his goblet of wine.

"It was my pleasure, sire. It is hard to believe you are ninety, you look scarcely more than half that age!" Faramir replied, hoping that this was all the King had summoned him about. Obviously, his efforts had met with the royal approval.

Aragorn laughed. "Everyone says the same. In the North, the Chieftains never married outside the Númenorean lineage, so I could perhaps live another hundred years, providing I do not fall in battle."

"I wish you many more years, my lord," Faramir said formally.

"I did not send for you to talk about the birthday festivities, though, apart from expressing my pleasure," Aragorn continued.

Faramir's heart sank. He knew he must have done something wrong.

Aragorn rose to his feet, Faramir did likewise.

"Has the couch caught fire?" Aragorn teased.

"No, indeed not, but I cannot remain seated while you stand, my lord!" the Steward protested.

"I have told you many times there is no need to observe protocol on informal occasions. Now sit
down and be at ease!" Aragorn commanded, though there was humour in his tone.

Faramir complied. He could never get used to Aragorn's disregard for court etiquette.

After wiping his hands on a moist towel by the tray, Aragorn picked up a parchment that was lying on the desk and unrolled it. "I have just learned that Duilin of Morthond's last surviving brother has died, leaving no male heir," he said, consulting the scroll. "His widow and daughters inherit the bulk of his lands and property. However, under the terms of his grandfather's will, his hunting lodge now belongs to the State of Gondor, being left it to the male line only. It is situated in the forest about a half-day's ride from here. As there are no pressing affairs of state at present, and the New Year Celebrations are three weeks away, I thought that you and I and our ladies might go and spend some time there."

"Sire?" Faramir was at a loss for words, torn between delight at the honour of being invited to spend time with the King, and fear that he was bound to disappoint in some way.

"Custom dictates that we must have an escort to travel there, but we can dismiss them once we arrive," Aragorn continued, "I will be frank with you, Faramir, I miss my old life sometimes and yearn for the freedom of the woods and fields, to eat and dress simply, and pass by unrecognised as a Ranger rather than a King."

Faramir nodded his understanding, accustomed as he was to court life; he still sometimes missed the simple life of a soldier and thought it must be even harder for the King. "But why do you want Éowyn and me to come?" He was unable to stop himself voicing his thoughts aloud.

"Your wife once told me she feared a cage, and she makes no secret that she sees this city as one. I believe that riding out in the open countryside would benefit her while you wait for the builders to complete your new home in Ithilien. As for you, Faramir," Aragorn paused and gave the Steward one of his warmest smiles. "You work far too hard and need a respite. Also, I would like to get to know you better. We work together closely, and yet, I feel I know you little better than when we first met."

Faramir coloured. "I fear you would find me a dull companion, my lord."

"Your Uncle tells me you are quite the contrary. I would know the truth!" Aragorn's tone was stern, but there was a twinkle in is eye as he spoke. "Now, tell me, will you come? I feel you should see the property and help me decide what should be done with it. I assume Duilin's intent was that your family should have the use of it, seeing as the will was made in your father's time."

Faramir bowed deeply. "I am obedient to your command, sire."

Aragorn sighed, somewhat impatiently. "I meant it as an invitation, not an order, but I assume that means you will come?"

"I am honoured to accept, sire."

"It gladdens my heart that you will. You may go now and make what preparations you need. We shall leave in three days time."

Faramir made his farewells, bowed again and left.

Aragorn slumped wearily on the couch. He found every private audience with Faramir somewhat wearing. He felt torn between a desire to shake the man for his over formality and nervousness, or to embrace him as a troubled soul in need of love and reassurance. Imrahil had told him that Denethor had always treated Faramir coldly, reserving his affection and approval for Boromir. After his favoured son's death, Denethor had lost his wits and tried to burn himself and his
surviving son alive. Although, Faramir had been unconscious at the time, such dreadful events had unsurprisingly taken their toll on him. It said a good deal for the young man's strength and resilience that he had recovered sufficiently to act as a most efficient and hard working Steward to the King.

Aragorn glanced out of the window behind him. The rain had almost stopped and the sun was struggling to come out from behind a cloud. He rose to his feet and stood looking out. A beautiful rainbow had formed and stood out in sharp contrast to the black clouds hovering over the city. Maybe it was a good sign for the future.

"I am sorry, my love, but I cannot," Arwen said regretfully.

Her ladies dismissed, Aragorn was now alone with his Queen in her solar where she was sewing a tapestry.

"But, beloved, it was your idea!" he protested, dismayed at her reaction to the trip to the hunting lodge.

"I know and I wish I could come with you, but Ioreth says I must not."

Aragorn looked bewildered. "Ioreth? Whatever is it to do with that old crone?"

Arwen realised she could keep her secret no longer. "She is the most experienced midwife in Gondor," she said quietly.

"You mean, you are…?" Aragorn was lost for words.

Arwen wished she could capture his expression of joyful amazement and cherish it for always. "Yes, Estel, we are going to have a child."

"But when? How?" he stammered.

She smiled at him, wondering why men were so lost for words about something so natural. "The usual way, I believe, and our child should be born in a few month's time, though Ioreth is uncertain about the exact date when the mother is an half Elven and the father a Man."

"Why did you not tell me before?" Aragorn looked hurt. "I expect all of Gondor knows by now when I am the last to be told!"

"I disliked hiding it from you, but I feared something could go wrong," Arwen explained, rising to her feet. "Ioreth assures me now three months have passed, all should be well, and I should carry the babe to term. She may let her tongue run away with her, but never about the ladies whom she attends. She is most discreet on that account. You have not said if you are pleased or not?" Arwen asked in mock indignation. She could already read the answer in his eyes.

Aragorn drew her close in a tight embrace. "Beloved, I am so happy, mere words cannot express my joy! I have dreamed of holding our child in my arms for so long! I will cancel the hunting trip. I cannot leave you at such a time!"

Arwen laughed. "There is no need, Ioreth assures me, I am perfectly well. The babe is not due until at least September, probably later."

A light of realisation dawned in Aragorn's eyes. "So that is why you have not wanted to eat breakfast and have not been able to sense my thoughts of late?"
Arwen laughed. "It surprised me that you did not notice before, not to mention that I am gaining weight!"

"I thought only that your beauty was increasing with each day!" Aragorn replied.

The Queen walked over to her writing desk and picked up a parchment lying there and her expression grew sombre. "I have just had word that my brothers are due to arrive any day. I will have much to discuss with them."

Aragorn's own eyes darkened with a mixture of sadness and guilt. "I am glad that you will see them again before they sail. I still feel guilty that I took you from your family, and soon you will be parted from them for eternity!"

Arwen gripped his hands fiercely and planted a loving kiss on his lips. "It was my choice to make. I would rather follow you beyond this world than sail to Valinor with my family. Soon, I will hold our child in my arms and we will create a new family, you and I!"

Aragorn returned her kiss. "I know, but you love your family dearly."

Suddenly agitated, Arwen broke free of his embrace. "They could stay here for our lifetime if they chose to do so!" Arwen said with sudden anger. She returned to her needlework, sat down, and stabbed her needle into the tapestry with vigour. "But it is their choice not to. I have chosen to be with the man I love!"

"You have given up so much for me, though!" Aragorn's eyes were moist with unshed tears.

"I have all that I ever wanted. Many suitors asked for my hand, but you were the only one my heart desired. Now let us plan your hunting trip, for I hope you catch friends rather than game!" Arwen laughed, her mood changing suddenly. "I will have need of the Lady Éowyn in the months ahead!"

"What use could you have of that sour tongued lady?" Aragorn asked in bewilderment.

"She has become a good friend to me, and she is skilled as a midwife," Arwen replied. "I would have her with me, both as a healer and a friend. Ioreth is very competent, but hardly comforting."

Aragorn was about to comment that comforting was hardly a word to apply to the Lady Éowyn, when he remembered how she had heard she had reassured the women and children at Helm's Deep and safely delivered a babe in the Glittering caves in the midst of the battle. Arwen's choice was doubtless a wise one. He drew her close and kissed her again. "I will miss you, vanimelda!"

Arwen smiled as she returned his embrace. "Once you are out in the wilds again, you will be so happy, you will forget all about me until you return!" she teased. "You might be King, but you are still an untamed Ranger at heart! Maybe, this little one will tame you?" She grasped his hand and guided it to place over her belly.

Aragorn found himself trembling with awe, as he contemplated the miracle of new life growing within her. What he had scarcely dared to hope for was happening at last. He would soon have a child to hold in his arms. For seventy years, his dream of making her his wife had seemed almost impossible. Then, despite the fact they were both descended from the union of Lúthien an Elf, and Beren, a mortal, he had sometimes feared that children might not be possible from their union in this later age. What joy to know such worries was unfounded! Gondor needed an heir, but more than that, he wanted a son or daughter to love and nurture.

"Beloved!" he murmured again and kissed her tenderly.
Éowyn was furious when Faramir told her of the King's invitation. "What?" she cried, "Spend weeks in the middle of nowhere with that despicable man! I will not go!"

"You should not speak of the King so disrespectfully!" Faramir chided. "You must come with me, Éowyn, the King especially requested it, and he is our Liege Lord. We owe him our duty."

"Has he not done enough to ruin my life already?" she raged.

Faramir sighed. As he feared, she was still in love with Aragorn. How could he ever compare with his lord? "You need not see much of the King if you do not wish to," he said, trying to placate her. "It will be an opportunity for you to leave the confines of the City and ride out in the countryside to your heart's content."

"I love riding, but not if he is within ten miles of me!" she snapped, storming out of the room.

Faramir let her go, wondering sadly if she would ever again look at him as she had done during their courtship. He wanted nothing more than to clasp her in his arms, smother her with passionate kisses and tell her how beautiful she was. He was certain though, if he tried any such thing, she would most likely repulse him and recoil in disgust from his embraces. He could only hope that spending time away from the Court with her might soften her heart towards him.

Éowyn wept in the privacy of her bedroom. This was the last straw. Not only had the King trapped her in a loveless marriage, but now was even forcing her to spend time in his company. Maybe, he even planned to try to make her his mistress. She knew such was the custom of past kings of Gondor, and of Rohan too, or so rumour told.

Drying her eyes, she came to a decision. She went into Faramir's study, aware that he kept parchment and ink on his desk and helped herself to both. Dipping the pen in the ink, she began to write a letter.

'Dearest brother,

I beg you to come and take me home. Faramir does not love me and cares nothing for my honour. I can endure it no longer.

Your loving sister, Éowyn."

She addressed the missive and put it to one side, awaiting a chance to slip it amongst other documents destined for Rohan.

Feeling better after having decided to complain to her brother, Éowyn washed her face, changed her gown, and went down to prepare for the midday meal.

TBC
Chapter Three

Comfort and Conversation

A small detachment of Royal Guards, resplendent in their livery of the White Tree, had already assembled the next morning when Faramir and Éowyn joined them in the sixth circle.

There was no sign yet of the King and Queen. The horses were beginning to get restive by the time Aragorn finally appeared on his own. "Greetings, my friends!" he said. "It gladdens my heart you are coming with me today. The Queen sends her regrets that she is indisposed and cannot accompany us."

"Can't we wait until she is better?" Éowyn challenged rudely.

Ignoring her tone, Aragorn replied. "She bids us go and enjoy ourselves in her absence. Come, my friends, let us be on our way!"

"I'm sure she is very happy about her husband leaving her for weeks while he goes off in the middle of nowhere!" Éowyn said sarcastically, supposedly under her breath, but loudly enough to be heard.

"Be careful what you say!" Faramir hissed, pulling his mount up beside his wife's. "Remember to whom you are speaking, my lady!"

Éowyn tossed her head defiantly, but said no more.

The company passed through cheering crowds, as they descended through the circles of the City. Several people presented flowers to their King and Steward.

Once they had left Minas Tirith behind, they passed through several villages. The houses gave way to farmland, which continued until they reached the forest. They rode through the trees, along winding woodland paths for several hours. The scenery was pretty enough, but the travellers found the journey somewhat tedious. They rested briefly and partook of refreshment when the sun was directly overhead, then continued on their way.

Aragorn initially made pleasant, albeit somewhat stilted conversation with Faramir. He tried to include Éowyn, but her sullen replies were monosyllabic. Eventually, he abandoned the attempt. They rode on in uncomfortable silence.

It was late afternoon before they reached their destination, a large house, standing in a forest clearing. It was built of grey stone and had a slightly dilapidated appearance, though the small garden was tidy and the courtyard had been recently swept, no doubt in anticipation of their
"Will we be expected, sire?" Faramir enquired of the King.

"Duilin of Morthond kept this Hunting Lodge in constant readiness for visitors," Aragorn replied, "There should be sufficient servants to keep the house running in good order. I sent a messenger to inform them of our coming."

A middle-aged woman, who appeared to be the housekeeper, suddenly appeared on the threshold, no doubt alerted by the clatter of hoof beats on the stones. The woman curtsied, and after introductions were made, led them inside. She despatched the guards to the kitchens for refreshments and showed the King and his companions to the main apartments.

The Housekeeper threw open a door to reveal a chamber dominated by a huge bed. The walls were covered by heavy tapestries showing hunting scenes. A few uncomfortable looking chairs and a table completed the furnishings. A log fire, blazing in the hearth, softened the somewhat austere surroundings. "The rooms are all like this," the woman explained. "I'm afraid they are few, and somewhat lacking in elegance, sire, but when the late master came here with his companions, they would hunt all day and then feast and retire, to sleep six or eight to a bed. They would rise again at dawn for the chase. We have not had a lady here in a long time."

"The rooms will suffice, for our needs, mistress. We too, plan to be out riding most of the time." Aragorn replied.

"Dinner will be served when you are ready, sire," she informed him. Curtsying again, she look her leave.

Aragorn took the first of the chambers and then left Éowyn and Faramir to choose where they wanted to sleep. Arwen had teased him before he had set out that morning that it would be a good thing if he were to share a room with Faramir. She was certain the sound of her husband's snoring would convince the nervous Steward that his King was human. Aragorn wondered if maybe they could go hunting overnight together to put Arwen's suggestion into practise, though he was certain his snoring could not be that loud. How he wished his Queen were with them! Even the prickly Éowyn liked her and she had the power to calm even the most anxious individuals, such as his Steward.

Faramir chose the room next to Aragorn's, which was almost identical. He asked Éowyn to make her choice from amongst the three remaining rooms.

It was on the tip of her tongue to retort. 'Can you stand my company so little, you would not even share a bed as vast as this with me?' but she remained silent sullen. Little did she know, that nothing would have pleased Faramir more than to have her sleep at his side, but her grim demeanour made him certain she would instantly refute any such suggestion.

Dinner was a gloomy affair for them all. Aragorn again struggled to make conversation, Faramir was too ill at ease to make other than polite replies, while Éowyn sat in glowering silence. Had she not been so hungry after a hard day's riding, she would have stayed in her room and refused to attend the meal at all.

000

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, and even Éowyn felt in a better mood when she came down to breakfast. After they had eaten, the Captain of the King's Escort came to inform Aragorn that the men and horses were rested and ask for further instructions.
"Take your men and return to Minas Tirith. You may then take leave before returning to escort us home for New Year celebrations," Aragorn replied.

"May I speak freely, sire?" the Captain asked.

Aragorn nodded his consent.

"I thank you, my lord, but surely some of us should stay to guard you and the Lord Steward and Lady Éowyn?" the Captain protested.

"I know you mean well, Captain, but the purpose of this trip was that we could be alone," Aragorn replied. "The Orcs are no longer a threat after Sauron's defeat, and there are few wild beasts in these parts. I have lived in the wild before we enjoyed this safety and peace. I came to no harm, and Lord Faramir is an experienced Ranger too, so you need have no fear. Go now, and enjoy your leave!"

The Captain bowed and departed, still looking worried.

Aragorn then sought out Faramir and Éowyn. "I have been greatly looking forward to returning to my old Ranger days and casting off the demands of kingship for a little while. Shall we enjoy our freedom and go out riding this morning, my friends?"

"Yes, my Lord King, I will see that the horses are saddled," Faramir replied.

Aragorn sighed inwardly at the formality but hoped matters would improve over the coming days.

"I have a headache. I would be excused," Éowyn said coldly.

"Maybe some fresh air would do you good, my lady? I could give you herbs to ease it," Aragorn told her.

Éowyn realised her mistake and wished she had pleaded some female malady instead, which she knew the men would consider too delicate a matter to question. "Rest and solitude are the best remedies, my lord. I have need of neither your herbs nor your company," Her snub was coldly intentional.

Aragorn looked at her, the hurt obvious in his eyes. "I wish you a speedy recovery, my lady," he said, bending to kiss her hand and brushing his fingers lightly across her forehead.

"Leave me alone!" she snapped. "I do not want your help. You think you can solve everything, but you are not omnipotent, my lord!"

Aragorn's grey eyes flashed with sudden anger. "You forget to whom you speak, my lady!" he said coldly.

"You pretend you want us to be your friends and forget about protocol, yet you don't hesitate to remind us of who you are if we speak freely!" she retorted, her eyes flashing.

Faramir wished the ground would open and swallow him. He pretended to be occupied in adjusting Iavas' bridle. The fine chestnut mare had been a wedding gift to him from Éomer. She was Faramir's pride and joy. Never before had he owned such a magnificent horse.

Aragorn and Éowyn stood glaring at each other, for what must have been but a few seconds, but felt like hours to Faramir. He watched apprehensively out of the corner of his eye.

The King inclined his head slightly. "You speak the truth, my lady. I ask your pardon. I would ask
you to treat me with neither more nor less courtesy, than any other man you encounter in future.” He suddenly looked her straight in the eye again.

"I will endeavour to remember that, my lord," Éowyn retorted icily.

"We will leave you to rest then, Éowyn." Faramir said, anxious to depart before Éowyn further annoyed the King. "If you feel well enough to ride out later, take care in these wild places."

"You, my lords, are not armed, so why should I fear?" Éowyn replied, blushing slightly, embarrassed that Faramir had so obviously guessed her intention of taking Windfola out once they were gone.

"A woman needs to protect herself more carefully than a man does," Faramir replied, bending to kiss her cold cheek.

"Farewell!" said Éowyn. Without a second glance, she went back inside the house.

"I must apologise for Éowyn's behaviour, sire." Faramir said ruefully, as they rode away side by side.

"It is not your fault, Faramir. She did, I fear, speak the truth, albeit somewhat bluntly. Obviously something makes the lady unhappy," Aragorn said calmly. "I hope her health and spirits will soon improve."

"I do not know what ails her, even less how to aid her," Faramir replied gloomily.

"She is usually happy on horseback," Aragorn replied soothingly. "Maybe, we will eventually see her smile. Now let us forget the lady's troubles for a little while and enjoy our ride!"

King and Steward let their mounts choose their own pace on a winding path that led uphill. Both were excellent horsemen. Faramir always felt more confident when astride a horse, that being one of the few areas in which he had openly outclassed both his father and his brother. The wind blew on their faces, carrying the scent of early spring blossoms.

They halted upon reaching the brow of the hill and admired the view in silence for a few moments. Faramir was the first to break the silence. "I used to ride out here with Boromir on the rare occasions we both had leave," he told the King. "It was one of the few places where we could enjoy ourselves away from our father's strictures. I believe Boromir visited the Hunting Lodge too. He knew Durin of Morthond well."

"I did not know you came here with your brother," Aragorn said. "I did not wish you to have sad memories today."

"The memories are happy ones," Faramir replied. "Our father never knew we came to this place. We felt free for a while."

"Shall we dismount for a while and let the horses graze? It is a pleasant spot to sit and admire the view," Aragorn said. He swung easily from the saddle. Faramir followed, but jarred his shoulder as his feet touched the ground. He visibly winched from the pain.

"Does your shoulder pain you still?" Aragorn's voice was full of concern.

"I just feel occasional discomfort, sire," Faramir replied, inwardly cursed himself. Just as he was managing to acquit himself well for once with his King, he had to show some weakness again!

Aragorn seated himself on a fallen tree trunk and gestured for Faramir to sit beside him. They sat
in silence for a few minutes looking towards the White City, which was just visible on the horizon, her towers gleaming in the sunlight.

The King studied his Steward unobtrusively; his keen healer's eye noticing the younger man was in obvious pain. "The arrow damaged your shoulder muscles and tendons, if I recall rightly. Let me ease it for you." Aragorn said, his voice gentle but firm.

Faramir immediately recoiled. "It is nothing, sire, just a slight ache which has passed. It has been a while since I have ridden so far in one day. It would not be fitting for the King to tend his subject."

Aragorn sighed. "It is surely fitting that one friend should aid another," he said. "There is no need for you to be so formal, Faramir. We are not in the Council Chamber. You may call me by my given name when we are alone."

"You do me great honour, sire, but it would scarcely be appropriate, sire if…" Faramir shifted uneasily on the only to jar his shoulder again, which caused him to hiss with pain.

"It is hard to watch another suffer when you have the means to give them ease. Come; let me give you what aid I may!" Aragorn's tone was kindly and almost pleading, to Faramir's surprise. "There is no need to remove your shirt, just let me see your shoulder."

Realising if he continued to refuse, his behaviour would be as ungracious as Éowyn's; Faramir nodded, and then reluctantly loosened the lacings on his shirt and tunic. He slowly pulled his clothing away from the injured shoulder and bared the heavily scarred flesh, repressing an inward shudder as he did so. He so hated having any part of his body exposed. He could not bear Aragorn to regard his puny frame with the same contempt, as his father had shown in his eyes for the son who failed to match Boromir in build and strength. He supposed he should be thankful that his back was still covered, as the scars left by Denethor's madness distressed him far more than honourable battle wounds. It still shamed him to remember that Aragorn had seen them in the Houses of Healing, despite the King's kindness to him then.

Aragorn moved closer to him and Faramir looked away, not wanting the King to see his pain and discomfiture. The Steward became aware of warm fingers gently probing the old wound in his shoulder. He tensed in anticipation of the pain that would follow. To his surprise, instead of agony, he felt a great sense of warmth and comfort enveloping the injured joint. He recalled the sensation from when Aragorn had tended him before, but afterwards had wondered if he had dreamt it. Faramir stole a furtive glance at the King. Aragorn appeared to be almost in a trance, his eyes closed. After a few moments, the King opened his eyes and blinked in the bright sunlight. He looked strangely weary.

"That should have eased the pain," he said, looking at Faramir, his grey eyes full of compassion.

Faramir gingerly flexed the joint and smiled. "How did you do that?" he asked, curiosity overcoming his embarrassment.

Aragorn shrugged. "I scarcely know. It is a gift those of Eänil's line possess. You should have told me long ago your wound still pained you. I can see now that it has not healed well. I can sense that the nerves are damaged, while the muscle is badly scarred."

"You have too many affairs of state to concern you, my lord, to be troubled over me," Faramir replied, knowing full well he had disobeyed his King's instructions.

"The health of my Steward is a primary concern. Obviously you do not know me very well!" Aragorn replied in a somewhat irate tone, which he immediately regretted, when Faramir reacted
as if struck. "Peace! I am not angry, Faramir, just saddened that you seem unable to approach me. I might be your lord, but that does not mean you should fear me."

"I am unused to such kindness from my liege. You have always been most gracious to me, my lord. I am your most humble servant." Faramir replied with downcast eyes.

Aragorn inwardly cursed Denethor for having raised his younger son to have such fear of his lord. At times, he felt like shaking his Steward. Yet, he sensed under the nervous exterior, was a man of great courage and honour, whose trust he could win over the coming weeks if he but tried. Ever since Aragorn had taken the crown, he had tried to reach out to Faramir, but apart from a few occasions when they had briefly seemed more at ease with one another, Faramir had remained aloof. "I do not eat my Stewards for breakfast, and though I lose my temper at times, I do not bite! You are quite welcome to reprove me when I merit it!" Aragorn said, grinning at Faramir. "Now let me massage your shoulder. It should ease it further."

"Yes, my lord." Faramir said obediently.

Aragorn controlled his rising exasperation when his Steward looked at him a way reminiscent of a trapped mouse waiting to be devoured by a cat. The pulse in the younger man's neck throbbed far too rapidly.

"I am not going to hurt you," the King said gently, as he started to work on the damaged shoulder.

"I know that, sire " Faramir replied. "It is just that …" His voice trailed off. He could hardly tell the King, that now he stood in Denethor's place, he kept expecting him to treat him as his father did, that sounded so irrational.

"This will work far better if you relax." Aragorn instructed. "Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Remember, I was a healer, long before I became a king!"

Faramir strove to do as he was bidden, all the while remembering the attentions of the Healers from the Houses and the pain they had caused him in the past. To his surprise, the King's touch was so gentle he felt no pain, even though it felt as if the damaged joint were somehow being remodelled. He relaxed, finding the soothing movement of Aragorn's exceptionally warm fingertips oddly comforting. He even started to feel drowsy and only forced himself back to full wakefulness by thinking how embarrassing it would be to fall asleep with his head on the King's shoulder!

"Is this another gift Elendil's line possesses?" he asked in a bid to stay awake.

Aragorn laughed. "No, it is a simple Elven art that any could learn. Arwen is far more skilled at it than I am."

Faramir remembered the Queen was unwell. "I hope your lady's indisposition is not serious," he said.

To his surprise, Aragorn smiled. "No, not at all! I will take you into my confidence, Faramir, I can trust you not to tell anyone else yet, Arwen is expecting our child!"

Any lingering doubts Aragorn might have felt about Faramir, resenting being supplanted as ruler, vanished at the other's immediate and delighted reaction.

"That is wonderful news! I am so happy for you both." Faramir turned and beamed delightedly at his King.

"Thank you, Faramir. We are keeping the news private for some weeks yet, but I wanted to share
such glad tidings with you. I have waited so long to be a father!"

"You will make a most excellent one, I am certain. You are truly blessed!" Faramir exclaimed rather wistfully.

"I am sure you and Lady Éowyn will soon become parents too," Aragorn replied.

"I don't know, Éowyn and I, we haven't …" his voice trailed away in embarrassment at the turn the conversation had taken.

"Does she not desire to be a mother?" Aragorn asked. "Many women are nervous at first."

"I do not know." Faramir replied "I would not have her think me a brute by forcing my wish for children upon her! I love her far too much." He blushed scarlet and wished the ground would swallow him, realising the implications of what he had said. Why did he always say and do the wrong thing when he was with the King?

"My lord, I am so sorry, I did not mean …"

Aragorn said nothing for a few moments, calmly continuing to ease Faramir's damaged shoulder. He was beginning to understand now much of what had puzzled him before.

"I know you meant no insult," he said reassuringly. "I am also certain that you know Elves only bear children when they wish to. Though, it is not my place to tell you how to conduct your marriage, I do suggest that you talk to your lady. It is better not to surmise what others think, especially women. Arwen never fails to surprise me even though I have known her for seventy years now. Remember that women easily feel rejected, and then blame men for not knowing the reasons why!"

"I will take your advice, sire, though sometimes I fear Éowyn does not love me. I wonder if…" His voice trailed away, too embarrassed to voice his suspicions.

"Well she certainly has no love for me. I see only hatred in her eyes." Aragorn replied, as if reading his thoughts. "That saddens me, as I have always loved her since our first meeting."

Faramir stared at the King shocked.

"As I would a sister, naturally. Arwen is the only woman I have ever been in love with and always will be," Aragorn said calmly. "However, I would not lie by pretending I shared Éowyn's hatred for me. Put your mind at rest on that count, for I doubt she would have become close friends with Arwen, were she still in love with me!"

"I apologise, my lord for speaking thus." Faramir said awkwardly.

"I hope you will continue to speak your mind," Aragorn replied, hopeful that he was finally putting his Steward at his ease. "If you wish for a friend to confide in, I would be honoured to listen."

Faramir rewarded his King with a shy smile then remained silent while Aragorn continued massaging his shoulder.

"Your wound should pain you less for now," Aragorn said at last. "This is all I can do for this morning."

Faramir stirred reluctantly, he had actually been enjoying the King's ministrations much to his amazement. 'Pleasant' was not a word one associated with Healer's treatments usually.
"I was trained by Elrond to use Elven techniques," Aragorn explained again with that uncanny ability to sense what he was thinking. "I can treat you further during the coming weeks if you wish, but I would need to examine you more thoroughly. But there is no need to decide that now."

"Thank you, sire. It already feels so much better." Faramir said as he re-laced his shirt, relieved Aragorn was not pressing him.

Hoping fervently that Faramir was finally going to accept his offer of friendship and healing, Aragorn impulsively laid a hand in blessing on the younger man's head.

To the Steward's horror, a dreadful vision came into his mind just like it had happened two years before. This time he saw Aragorn sprawled across a bed; his naked flesh bloodied and torn. The vision could not have lasted more than a few seconds, but its intensity left Faramir feeling faint and dizzy. He would have fallen from the log had not the King caught him.

A/N This chapter refers both to "Comes the Moment to Decide" and "Facing the Darkness" also on this site.

"A Hunting we will Go" and "Mask of Virtue" are now complete and chapter 29 of A Time to Reap has been posted.

I am revising this story as I hope my writing skills have improved since I first posted it almost four years anyone wants the original version, please let me know.
Greater Love

Chapter Notes

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

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends."
The Bible: John, 15.13

With grateful thanks to Raksha for her help with revising this chapter.

Warning this chapter contains torture. Please do not read if you are likely to be distressed

Faramir had a dark vision of Aragorn sprawled across a bed. The King's naked flesh was bloodied and torn. The Steward was standing helplessly by the bedside, his sight veiled by tears. The vision could not have lasted more than a few seconds, but its clarity left Faramir feeling faint and dizzy.

He would have fallen from the log, had not the King caught him.

"What is the matter?" Aragorn enquired, his voice full of concern. "Are you unwell?" He placed a comforting arm round Faramir's shoulders and steadied him.

Faramir tried to compose himself, and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I will be well in a moment, sire," he said. "I sometimes experience visions. One came upon me just now."

Aragorn nodded sympathetically. Many of our people are gifted, or sometimes cursed with them. What did you see?"

Faramir hesitated, wondering what he should say. He decided he should warn Aragorn. "I saw a vision of you, my lord, lying on a bed, badly injured. I know not when or how, but I beg you to be careful."

Aragorn forced himself to smile reassuringly at his troubled Steward. "I will do my best, but you could be seeing the aftermath of a battle far into the distant future."

"I do not know," Faramir still sounded troubled. "When I last foresaw danger for you, I was wrong, praise the Valar!"

"When was that?" Aragorn enquired. "Your visions that I know of have come true. You foresaw my coming and that the White Tree would bloom."

"It was when you tended me before you rode out to Mordor. I had a vision of you badly wounded, maybe dying, with your friends weeping by your side." Faramir said.
Aragorn felt his blood run cold. "Your far-sight did not lie, Faramir. I was indeed badly wounded then, and lived only by the grace of the Valar. I decided that it was best that few knew about it, as we needed to keep up the spirits of the men. Then afterwards, I did not speak of it to spare the feelings of the Hobbits. That time was hard enough for them."

Faramir shuddered, lost for words. Aragorn patted his arm reassuringly. "We cannot prevent such visions and just have to interpret them as best we may," he said. "Are you able to stand up now?"

The Steward nodded. His head had stopped spinning, but the fearful images lingered in his mind. Still feeling slightly dazed, Faramir permitted Aragorn to help him to his feet.

"Are you able to mount your horse?" Aragorn asked.

"Yes, thank you, sire, I am quite recovered now," Faramir replied, feeling somewhat foolish. He swung himself into the saddle, amazed at how much less painful his shoulder was now.

They rode on through the forest until they reached the outskirts of a small settlement. It comprised of a handful of dilapidated huts, of the kind used by charcoal burners. An old woman was sitting outside a hut watching them intently. She called as they made to ride past, "Well, I never did, if it isn't the King and the Steward! Greetings, my lords!"

Aragorn and Faramir felt it was only courteous to respond to her salutations. They brought their horses to a halt and dismounted. The old woman dropped a deep curtsey. "Arise, good lady!" Aragorn said, smiling at her kindly. "How did you know who we were?"

"I watched your coronation with my family." she replied. "You must be thirsty after your ride, my lords. Will you do me the great honour of tasting my home made wine?"

Aragorn hesitated, if past experiences were anything to go by, the wine would probably taste worst than vinegar. However, as King, he had a duty to respect his subjects' feelings. After all, wine, unlike water, did not carry the risk of coming from a contaminated well. There could be no harm in tasting it to please the old lady. He took the proffered goblet, thinking as he did so, that it was fine workmanship for a poor woman to own, no doubt a family heirloom. He gestured to Faramir to do likewise. Apart from having a slightly bitter flavour, the wine tasted better than expected. They drained their goblets thirstily before returning them to the old woman. After thanking her they remounted and rode away.

Something compelled Aragorn to glance back. The crone was still staring after them, a strange expression on her face. "That old woman unnerves me," he remarked.

"I suppose she might act strangely as has never spoken to a King before," Faramir replied, urging his horse forward.

They rode on for about a mile or so before Faramir started to feel unwell. His head was spinning and his vision was becoming blurred "I think I need to dismount," he told Aragorn, dismayed at showing yet another sign of weakness.

"The trouble with drinking wine is that nature always calls soon afterwards," Aragorn said wryly. "I think we had better dismount." They had fortunately reached a clearing surrounded by trees. Faramir half slid, half fell from his horse. He tottered behind the nearest tree where he was violently sick. He stole a furtive glance at the King and was alarmed to notice he seemed unwell too. They stumbled back into the clearing.

"I will have to sit down," Faramir mumbled, sinking to the ground. Everything seemed to be spinning alarmingly.
Aragorn strove to collect his befuddled wits. "The wine must have been drugged!" he exclaimed. "We must get away from here! We should have brought weapons." He tried to remount Roheryn but his legs refused to obey him.

"Can't keep my eyes open!" Faramir murmured sleepily. Aragorn tried to go to his aid but could only take a few unsteady steps before he sank unconscious at his Steward's side.

000

Aragorn had no idea how much time passed before he regained his senses. At first, he thought he must have fallen asleep on the grass. He wondered why his mouth was so dry, and his head pounding. He tried to get up, only to find to his furious dismay that his hands and feet were bound securely. A groan alerted him to Faramir's presence at his side. He could smell the smoke from a nearby fire.

Before he could fully gather his wits, a rough voice said with mock courtesy: "Let me introduce myself to my Lord Elessar and my Lord Steward. I am Fennas and this is my brother in law Calardan. We were waiting for you to wake up, as we didn't want you to miss any of our surprise!"

"I have not had the dubious pleasure of making your acquaintance before!" Aragorn snapped, wishing his voice sounded less hoarse. "Now let us go immediately, then maybe I will not deal with you too harshly!"

"I remember, you, Fennas, why are you doing this?" Faramir's voice, sounding equally husky broke in.

Fennas laughed. It was an ugly sound devoid of mirth. "You should already know the answer to that, Faramir. For forty years, my father served as Porter to your father, only to be slain to save you, the worthless whelp of a great man!"

"I grieved for your loss, but I cannot be held responsible for it" Faramir said with dignity. "Your quarrel, if there be one, lies with me, so release the King at once!"

Calardan spoke for the first time. He was taller than Fennas and carried a bow on his back. "You both have a lot to answer for!" he growled. "I was married to Fennas' sister and a right fair woman she was too, and about to have our first child when the Black Breath came upon her. She lingered for days growing weaker by the hour. I lost all hope. Then, I heard tidings that the King had come and had the power to heal her malady. I went off to find you, my lord, but you were far too busy with that useless weakling there, and your other fine friends, to save my poor wife and our babe! She was the daughter of that poor old woman who gave you the wine just now. He brushed away a tear with a dirty sleeve.

Aragorn looked at him with genuine compassion. "I would gladly have helped your wife had I but known," he said. "I feel for your losses and will pardon your behaviour if you release us at once!"

Fennas gave an evil grin as he opened a bag, which had been lying on the grass. Several knives and a horse whip fell out on to the grass.

"You and your precious Steward won't escape that easily, Elessar," he said. "I intend to teach you both a lesson to avenge my poor father and sister. Maybe, if I feel generous, I will let one of you live, if you can entertain me well enough!"

Aragorn repressed a shudder as he glanced at Faramir's white face. They were obviously dealing with madmen intent on killing them in the most unpleasant ways that they could devise. He
frantically struggled to free himself. A well-aimed kick from Calardan bent him double with agony. Aragorn bit his lip to suppress a cry.

Meanwhile Fennas had roughly pulled Faramir up on his knees, and held him still while Calardan seized a knife and slit the Steward's tunic and shirt down the back. "It seems only fitting that we should use my wife's kitchen knives to avenge her," Calardan said with a fond grin, stroking the hilt. "She was so proud of them, they were part of my bridal gift and I spared no expense. " That's good steel!"

"We should have stripped them before they woke up." Fennas grumbled. "These are fine clothes, worth several months' wages to the likes of us!"

"It's too late to grumble about that, now, we'll just have to cut their clothes off." Calardan retorted. "We should have secured their horses too before they wandered off."

Aragorn and Faramir struggled to remain impassive. Their predicament grew worse by the minute. They were bound and helpless with no prospect of rescue. Aragorn silently cursed his own foolishness for allowing them to fall into this trap. If only they had refused the wine! Yet, it had seemed but a small courtesy to accept a drink from an apparently loyal subject.

Fennas picked up the horsewhip; it was a cruel version with lead-weighted thongs. Aragorn had banned the use of that type, hating to see horses mistreated. Smiling at his victims, Fennas lifted the whip above his head and then cracked it down upon Faramir's unprotected back. The Steward tried to crawl away from the source of the blows, but was bound too tightly to evade their strike.

Aragorn blinked, wishing he could close his eyes. He remembered how he had vowed never to let Faramir be ill treated again. The whip fell again and again. Silent tears of pain ran down Faramir's cheeks, but the Steward made no sound.

"Leave him be!" Aragorn cried in his most commanding tone. "He has never harmed you nor even wished you ill!"

Fennas lowered the whip, and then dragged Faramir to his feet with Calardan's help. They shoved the Steward against the nearest tree and secured another rope round his feet. He then pulled Faramir upright and yanked his arms over his head and secured them to the birch tree.

Aragorn was dragged to his knees and he felt the cold steel against his flesh as his clothing was slit and his back was bared.

"Always delighted to oblige you, Lord Elessar." Fennas mocked. "We can always beat you instead of your weakling Steward!" He flexed his muscular arms and raised the whip.

The lash tore brutally into Aragorn's flesh, over and over again. He bit back his cries of pain, determined not to give them that satisfaction. He felt his warm lifeblood oozing from the wounds.

Faramir could only watch in horror, as his King was brutally beaten. His own back throbbed painfully, but seeing Aragorn suffer was a far crueler torment. He wondered why ever had the King taken his place as the victim. "Release him! I am the cause of your anger!" Faramir cried. "Beat me instead!"

Faramir's self sacrifice touched Aragorn deeply. The younger man's nobility made him all the more determined to endure his pain stoically.

"Why are you letting us beat you, Elessar? You have only to say the word and we beat him instead!" Calardan offered, from where he stood gleefully watching.
Aragorn gritted his teeth and said nothing. Faramir had already known too much pain in his life. If he could protect him, he intended to, whatever the cost. He had little hope that either of them would emerge from the ordeal alive to see their wives again, but maybe if they vented their wrath on him, they would at least grant his Stewart a quick and painless death.

"Enough!" Calardan cried after what seemed an eternity. "We don't want them to die too quickly!"

The two men roughly dragged Aragorn to his feet and rammed him against a nearby ash tree, securing his ankles and then tying his hands above his head, painfully jarring his bleeding shoulders. The rough bark scraped the open wounds on his back. Aragorn was no longer able to prevent himself crying out in agony.

Fennas and Calardan roared with laughter. "So King Elessar knows how to scream then!" they guffawed. "We thought he was struck dumb!"

Fennas picked up a fallen branch and thwacked the Steward with it several times. Growing bored with the lack of response, he then picked up a knife and cut into Faramir's arm.

"Leave him be!" Aragorn gasped, as Faramir finally cried out. "This man has suffered enough!"

Fennas grinned, "As you command, Lord King!" he said. He approached Aragorn and slit what remained of his tunic down the front and then cut his the cloth of his breeches from the waistband, exposing the vulnerable flesh of his belly.

Calardan approached with a strange looking knife, which Faramir recognised as an Orc blade. "No!" the Steward shouted, trying vainly to break his bonds.

"Make sure they suffer as much as those we loved did!" Fennas cried.

The knife cut into Aragorn's chest with a searing pain. He cried out in agony. Calardan cut in methodical strokes down his ribs, and across his belly with an occasional slash at his legs. Aragorn said nothing, biting his tongue to keep himself from crying out. To think that his life should be snuffed out like this just as he had achieved the birthright and the wife he had yearned for over so many long years!

"No! You cursed traitors, no more!" Faramir vainly ordered.

Calardan stepped back as if to survey his handiwork.

Hardly able to endure the horror of seeing his King, the kindly lord who had healed and comforted him and renewed his beloved land being savagely tortured, Faramir could have wept. Not even an Orc deserved to suffer such torment! He closed his eyes to avoid seeing the King's bruised and bleeding body.

"You are going to watch, or we can do something more entertaining!" Fennas' harsh voice bellowed in Faramir's ear. The man was hovering like a hawk, enjoying his anguish. "We might blind you, or relieve you both of your manhood!"

Faramir forced his eyes open again. Their main quarrel was with him, why must they hurt Aragorn so?

Powerless to intervene, Faramir could only watch in horror. He now realised how wrong he had been to fear Aragorn and fear the King would treat him as his father had done. If only he had understood Aragorn! They could have been friends. Now it was too late.
"It's time I used my bow again," Calardan said in a casual tone. "I rarely have such good targets to shoot at, sitting ducks you might call them! Which one shall we shoot first?"

"I would enjoy seeing the expression on my Lord Steward's face when we shoot the usurper!" Fennas chortled.

Aragorn bowed his head and sent a silent prayer to the Valar to protect his loved ones and watch over Arwen and their child. He had hoped and dreamed of so much and now his life would end for nothing at the hands of deranged ruffians.

"Let the King go!" Faramir demanded.

"Release...my...Steward!" Aragorn said slowly, summoning all the authority he could command. "You have had your revenge and wounded me almost to the death already, but you could still show mercy and spare him."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't." Fennas replied. "You will not live to find out, Elessar! Your line has ended; very fitting, since you killed all my kin."

Aragorn managed a smile as Calardan nocked an arrow in his bow. His killer was wrong. The line of Elendil would not end here, for Arwen carried their child! He hoped she would tell them how much he had loved them both.

The arrow flew free and pierced him. Aragorn knew no more.

Faramir allowed himself to close his eyes. There was no more to see, since hope was gone. The arrow might have missed Aragorn's heart, but no one could continue to endure such butchery and still live. A feeling of total emptiness and desolation cut through Faramir's very soul. Ever since he could remember, he had yearned for the King to return, and when Aragorn had come, he was everything he had dreamed of and more. Now his King, his lord, was dying and with him the hopes of Middle-earth. Faramir no longer cared about his own peril.

"Cowards!" He screamed. "'Tis a paltry vengeance to kill a bound and helpless man! Your lost ones would despise you if they could see you now! You are not avengers; you are accursed traitors!"

Calardan raised his bow.

"We would have spared you, as our Steward's only living son; but you will eat those words and beg for mercy!" Fennas jeered. "Stay the arrow, brother, that is too quick a death for him!" The two men held a whispered conversation. They laughed and gestured towards their knives.

Faramir could only await his fate. His heart seethed with grief and rage. Now he would never have the chance to fully experience the joys of wedlock, never know what it felt like to hold his own child and never know the King as a friend rather than simply a liege lord. He had had so much to live for, but was doomed to die despairing.

TBC
Painful Experiences

Chapter Notes

The characters are the property of the Tolkien estate. No profit has been, nor will be made from this story.

Painful Experiences

Éowyn sat brooding for some time after the men left. She was furious at being made to stay in this deserted place, with only a King she despised and a husband who shunned her for , she glanced out of the window. The bright sunlight gave the surrounding forest an inviting rather than forbidding appearance. Her spirits lightened at the realisation she had a perfect opportunity to engage in her favourite pastime.

Éowyn hastened outside and saddled her stallion. Windfola neighed joyfully in greeting, and tossed his proud head, eager for a gallop with his mistress. As was her custom, when riding alone, rather than because Faramir's had told her to, Éowyn secured her sword at her side.

Allowing Windfola his head, Éowyn followed the only track leading into the forest. Lost in thought, she passed the place where Aragorn and Faramir had stopped to admire the view and the charcoal burners' huts without even noticing.

The sight the two familiar horses still saddled and bridled jolted her out of her daydreams. Éowyn regarded them with a mixture of surprise and alarm. Faramir and the King, for all their faults, were devoted to their mounts. They would never willingly abandon them.

Roheryn neighed and indicated that he wanted her to follow. Éowyn admired the great war stallion's intelligence and trusted his instincts. Drawing her sword, she followed where the horse led. Suddenly, she heard shouts and screams. She galloped towards the source of the sound, drawing her sword as she went.

Rounding a bend in the track, a horrific sight met her eyes. Éowyn beheld Faramir tied to a tree. A man brandishing a whip was threatening him. A second man, wielding a bow, stood beside the first. She could hear them boasting about how much pain they intended to cause Faramir.

Éowyn had not felt such fury since she had slain the Witch King. She was angry with Faramir for marrying her without love, and shunning her bed, but how dare those ruffians attack such a gentle and kind- natured man?

Using surprise as an advantage, she urged Windfola into a gallop and lashed out at Fennas, just as he raised the whip to strike Faramir. The sword caught his throat, piercing a main artery. Fennas swayed, making a gurgling sound, before falling lifeless to the ground.

Calardan tried to draw his bow, but Roheryn reared up at him, trampling him to the ground with his powerful hooves. The man screamed and tried to escape from the thrashing hooves crushing him, but in vain.
Éowyn leapt from her mount and rushed to Faramir's side, quickly cutting through the ropes that secured him. She supported him, preventing him from falling when the bonds were loosened. "How dare they hurt you, husband!" she cried.

Any doubts Faramir harboured, that his wife still loved the King rather than him, vanished at that moment when he saw the love and concern in her eyes. The surge of elation he felt was swiftly quelled by his concern for Aragorn. "My hurts are but slight," he said, trying to flex his arms, which felt as if they had been torn from their sockets. "I fear they have killed the King, though! Please see how he fares!"

Éowyn hastened to where Aragorn was secured. Faramir stumbled along behind her. Faramir feared they were too late as he helped his wife cut the ropes. A wave of guilt swept over him. As Steward, he ought to have been able to protect his lord! Aragorn's head lolled lifelessly to one side. The arrow protruded from his chest, and his many open wounds oozed blood. His bonds severed, Aragorn sank limply to the ground. Hindered by his injuries, Faramir was unable to support him. Much to his Steward's relief, when Aragorn hit the ground, he moaned and curled into a ball, as if trying to ward off further blows.

Faramir sunk to his knees, trying to cradle the King in his arms. "He is alive! Help him, Éowyn please! You are trained in healing arts," he begged. He feared though, all they could do was to make the King's last moments more comfortable.

Éowyn stood looking down at Aragorn with an unreadable expression, unpleasantly reminiscent of that of a cat, which had just captured a particularly stubborn rodent.

"Leave me, Faramir, save yourself!" Aragorn murmured before losing consciousness again.

Éowyn's expression suddenly softened. "Can you help me get him on the horse?" she asked. "I have nothing here with which to bind his wounds."

Faramir nodded. "I can do what I must. How badly is the King injured?"

"I cannot tell until I've examined him." Éowyn replied. "His wounds are not bleeding profusely, which is good sign, but if the arrow has pierced his lung, I fear he has little chance of surviving. I am more concerned about your hurts, though, my lord."

"I have a few lashes, cuts and bruises, nothing worse. Do not worry about me. The King needs your help far more," Faramir insisted. "Let us get him back to the Hunting Lodge if it is safe to move him."

"We have no choice," said Éowyn. She led Windfola to where Aragorn lay and murmured in his ear. The well-schooled horse sank to his knees beside the King. Éowyn and Faramir lifted Aragorn across his back.

"You mount behind the King and see he doesn't fall," said Éowyn, easing the limp body into the saddle. "I'll ride Iavas and Roheryn can follow."

"What about the bodies?" Faramir asked.

"Let the wolves devour them!" Éowyn snapped. "They do not deserve a grave."

Faramir held on to Aragorn as best he could, trying his best to prevent him from sliding off the horse. Aragorn moaned softly but seemed unaware of his surroundings. The ride, though but a short distance, felt endless.
When they finally reached the Hunting Lodge, Éowyn helped Faramir lift Aragorn from the saddle. She shouted to the Housekeeper to fetch towels and hot water.

They half dragged, half carried the semi conscious Aragorn to his bedroom, and laid him of the huge bed. A fire was already burning in the grate and the lamps were lit against the gathering dusk of the late afternoon.

Éowyn only now noticed Faramir's torn clothing. The lashes from the whip appeared like scarlet ribbons, visible where his clothing had been shredded. "I shall tend you first, my husband," she said firmly, her eyes brimming with concern.

Faramir shook his head though touched by her obvious distress. "They treated the King far more cruelly. My hurts are slight compared with what they did to him."

Éowyn nodded reluctantly. At that moment, one of the maids arrived with the water and towels. Éowyn took them from the girl at the door, rather than letting her enter the room and gape at the stricken King. Frowning, she placed the bowls by the bed and washed her hands, sizing up the King's condition as she did so. Her frown deepened. "You must let me see your hurts if I'm to help you." she said firmly, trying to rouse Aragorn.

Aragorn instinctively curled up, his hands clutching his wounded body as if expecting further mistreatment.

Faramir moved nearer and gently gripped the King's hands. "Please my lord." he begged. "Let us aid you, I beg of you!"

Aragorn opened his eyes, their expression one of pain and confusion. He groaned again, but made no further attempt to resist their ministrations when they touched him.

Faramir gently prised his clutching hands away, as he moved to assist Éowyn.

"That arrow must be removed first." Éowyn announced "We need to turn him on his back."

Aragorn groaned in agony at the pressure of the mattress against his wounds.

"I'd better get a knife," Éowyn said, calling to the servant, whom she had instructed to wait outside the door. "It will have to be cut out."

Faramir knew the arrow must be removed, but wondered how much more Aragorn could endure. He feared he must be very close to death already. The Steward noticed for the first time, that the King was wearing what remained of a silk shirt. "You should try pulling it out first," he said. I will him."

"I will tear the flesh further if I do that!" Éowyn protested. "One should never pull out an arrow."

"Just try, I have a feeling it might work," Faramir urged. He gripped Aragorn's arms and held them He could not bring himself to look at the stricken King's face as Aragorn cried out in agony. Éowyn took hold of the arrow and almost fell backwards it came away so easily. She stared in amazement at the discarded arrow, now lying on the floor. Hastily, she grabbed a towel and pressed it over the wound to staunch the bleeding.

"Arrows can come out easily if the victim is wearing a silk shirt, " Faramir explained, The Easterlings are hard to best in battle, for they take little hurt from our arrow unless a vital organ is pierced. Silk so strong that it protects the flesh from being torn."
"He is not bleeding from the mouth and this blood o isn't pink or frothy, so I don't think his lung was pieced," Éowyn pronounced as the bleeding started to slow. "It appears to be just a flesh wound to the shoulder, which should heal cleanly enough." She secured a makeshift bandage, and then sighed at the prospect of tending the many wounds covering Aragorn's bloodied and battered form. "I hardly know where to start," she murmured, picking up a knife. "Help me get these rags off him so I can see the rest of his hurts properly." She started to cut off the remainder of his clothing and pulled the rags away from the injured flesh.

Faramir grabbed one of the towels and placed it over the King's hips in an attempt to preserve some dignity for his lord.

"I have seen plenty of unclothed males in my time." she said with wry amusement, much to Faramir's shocked surprise. "Your Gondorian women are very sheltered compared with those of the Mark!"

Aragorn felt he was having a nightmare; his whole body throbbed with pain, varying in intensity according to where he was being prodded. He had often been wounded in battle, but this pain seemed far worst. Mocking voices echoed round his confused brain, followed by an unpleasant sensation that he was lying naked on a bed under the harsh scrutiny of Lady Éowyn's gaze. He forced himself to open his eyes to dispel the vision, only to see her blonde hair and grey eyes hovering above him. He closed his eyes again, for even Arwen had never seen him thus. They always changed into their night attire in their dressing rooms and blew out the bedside candles as soon as they had got into bed. And where was Arwen? Where was he for that matter? He tried to speak, but the pain was too great to allow him to utter any other sound than a high-pitched moan.

Faramir reached out and clasped Aragorn's hand. "You are safe at the Hunting Lodge now, my King," he said soothingly.

"Come on, help me move him on his side," Éowyn ordered impatiently. "The sooner we get this over with, the better." She pulled away the last shreds of Aragorn's ruined clothing and expertly examined him, pressing her fingers down none too gently to check for broken bones. Once she would have delighted in touching Aragorn's flesh. Now, she felt only revulsion. "I can't find any fractures," she said at last. "There are countless wounds, but none of them seem very deep."

"Will he live?" Faramir asked her. "Can you save him?"

"His heart still beats strongly, so he may yet recover. That is; so long he can endure the pain and does not develop any serious infection," she replied. "Each wound is not dangerous of itself, but there are so very many. I can but clean and bandage them and hope for the best."

Éowyn called for the servants and ordered them to bring more hot water, cloths, and salt. Settling herself on the edge of the bed, she held up a lamp to better examine the cruel lash marks crisscrossing Aragorn's back. "I will start by cleaning these," she said "They will be the hardest to treat, as there are fragments of bark and even small insects in them. I fear infection is inevitable."

Faramir shuddered, remembering the men flinging the King against the ash tree and his agonised cry when the rough bark jarred the torn flesh.

Adding some salt to the hot water, Éowyn placed the cloth on Aragorn's back to start the cleansing, rubbing the lacerated flesh much as if she were scouring a cooking pot.

Aragorn struggled and cried out as the pain intensified.

"Hold him still!" Éowyn instructed Faramir. "This must be done and quickly."
"Please be gentle." Faramir pleaded.

"I can always get one of the maids to tend his wounds if you prefer!" she retorted tartly.

Faramir moved round to the other side of the bed preparing to secure Aragorn. The King’s eyes flickered open again. The Steward had always found it hard to meet his gaze, so piercing, and yet so compassionate. Now those same eyes were dulled with pain, fear and bewilderment. Impulsively, he held out his hands to the King. "Éowyn needs to clean your wounds, you must be still, my lord," he said, offering his hands in a gesture of comfort. Somewhat to his surprise, Aragorn reached out and gripped them. Faramir nodded to Éowyn to proceed.

Aragorn moaned softly but ceased struggling while Éowyn bathed and cleaned and extracted the fragments of bark from the raw wounds. His grip on Faramir's hands tightened to the extent that Faramir almost cried out at the bone-crushing grip.

Aragorn made no further sound but silent tears rolled down his cheeks.

"That's done!" Éowyn said at last. Aragorn loosened his grip and Faramir gave an audible sign of relief.

"So sorry… hurt you." Aragorn whispered faintly.

"It is nothing, my lord," Faramir replied, blinking back tears of his own. He forced himself to concentrate on wiping Aragorn's face.

Éowyn called for more water and moved round the other side of the bed. Faramir rose to his feet giving her room to work. She thoroughly cleaned the shallow but jagged gashes disfiguring Aragorn’s chest and belly. "I need honey now," she said.

Faramir, startled, moved back towards the bed. "Don't you want some bread as well?" he asked, puzzled how she could eat at a time like this. He anxiously studied Aragorn, who lay panting slightly as Éowyn tended the gashes on his legs. The wounds covering his body were still bleeding sluggishly but looked clean.

"She knows what she is doing." Aragorn's tone was more lucid now.

"I'm glad you approve, my lord!" she answered tartly. "I will finish bathing you now." She made as if to lift the towel covering him, then changed her mind when she saw the distress in his eyes.

"On second thoughts, my husband can bathe you, while I fetch the things I need. Unless you would rather I fetch one of the serving girls? Éowyn added. "I cannot do everything!"

"I will do it," Faramir said. He looked somewhat uncomfortable.

Alone with the King, Faramir felt even more ill at ease and wondered where he had found the audacity to clasp his lord's hands and wipe his tears away earlier. He would never have dared to do such a thing for his father, let alone help tend his wounds or bathe him. And Aragorn was not Denethor, Ruling Steward of Gondor, but the High King himself: a figure out of legend, the heir of Elendil wielding the Sword that was Broken and bringing healing in his hands. He picked up the cloth then hesitated, looking down at the injured man on the bed.

"I am sorry you should have to bathe me, but do it if you would, before your lady returns," Aragorn whispered. "I neither bite nor eat my Stewards for nuncheon," he added, amazingly with a touch of his old dry humour.

Faramir suddenly recalled when he first met Aragorn, and how the then Ranger, had fought
against his own weariness to save his life. Feeling ashamed of his own reluctance, he picked up the bowl and began cleansing the blood and sweat from Aragorn's face.

"It is my honour to serve you, my lord," he said, hoping his customary formality would help make this far from dignified situation easier to endure.

"Please call me by my name. As you can see now, I am a man like any other!" Aragorn said softly as Faramir dried his face and started on his arms, noting as he did so, that the shoulders looked bruised and distended where the King's arms had been stretched, while the wrists were red and raw from where the ropes had bitten. He imagined his own body would look little better once there was time to investigate.

"As you wish, sire." Faramir replied inadvertently disobeying the request immediately.

Aragorn said nothing; exhausted from the brief conversation. The pain from the wounds seemed to increase with every moment.

"Would you like us to try and fetch the Queen? She would be of comfort to you." Faramir asked.

"No! I forbid it!" Aragorn shook his head and spoke with all the strength he could muster. Now consciousness had returned to him, he was all too aware how gravely hurt he was. Nothing would have comforted him more than to have Arwen beside him, but the risk was too great. "It would distress her too much to see me thus, and I would not risk our child by having her travel. I see how my hurts distress you, who were a soldier and she is not even accustomed to mortal pain and weakness. You are beside me, so I am not alone. Promise me you will not send for her!"

"I promise," Faramir could see the wisdom behind the King's words. He realised what the shock of seeing her husband so cruelly hurt could do to the gentle Elf, although he wished someone better qualified than himself could comfort Aragorn. "I will not leave you," Faramir added.

He continued cleaning the blood and grime away methodically, but hesitated when he reached the towel covering his hips.

"Please do it, Faramir, rather you than your wife or a serving maid," Aragorn said ruefully. "Alas I am too weak to help myself."

Despite the Aragorn's words, Faramir felt he was committing almost a sacrilege to see the high King unclothed. Aragorn might appear the same as any other man, but he was not just any Man, but the greatest that now lived. To the Steward's relief, he did not uncover any further injuries apart from a few bruises. Once Aragorn was washed and dried from head to toe, Faramir took up a clean towel and wound it round Aragorn's hips fastening it like a loincloth.

"Thirsty." Aragorn murmured. He sounded too exhausted to speak.

Faramir filled a cup with some of the clean boiled water and supported the King's head as he drank. Aragorn managed to swallow several mouthfuls.

Éowyn returned just as Faramir was replacing the cup on the table.

"You look as if you just climbed Orodruin!" she exclaimed, seeing her husband's expression.

"That was the High King, you just told me to care for!" Faramir replied. "I have often helped look after my men when they were injured, but they were not figures out of legend!"

"After a few days of bathing, changing bandages and dealing with him when he needs the privy, I doubt you will be so awestruck!" she commented wryly. "My brother might well be King of the
Riddermark now, but he still gets wet if he falls in horse trough!" She placed the pot of honey on a table by the bed before beginning to tear the sheets into strips. Faramir helped her, wishing his arms and shoulders did not ache so much, not to mention the dull throbbing in his back.

TBC

A/N

*It is a fact about silk shirts providing some protection from arrow wounds. They were worn by Ghenhis Khan's warriors.*
Éowyn opened the jar of honey and placed it on the bedside table. "You need to hold him again," she instructed Faramir after washing her hands again. Plunging her fingers into the jar, she began to smear the honey thickly across Aragorn's lacerated back. "Honey is an old remedy of the Mark. It prevents infection from developing."

Aragorn bit back a cry and clutched at Faramir's restraining hands. Éowyn moved round the bed and smeared an equally thick layer of honey on Aragorn's other wounds. His Healer's knowledge helped him endure it patiently, a sharp intake of breath was the sole indicator of the agony he was enduring.

Finally, Éowyn unbound the arrow wound and smothered it with the sticky liquid. This time, Aragorn could no longer contain his cries of distress. He almost crushed Faramir's hands in his agony.

Éowyn washed her hands again, then folded strips torn from the old sheets, to make soft cloth pads. She pressed them against Aragorn's many wounds. "Can you lift him?" she asked Faramir, "I need to bandage him now."

The Steward braced himself against the bed and lifted Aragorn as gently as possible, while Éowyn secured the pads in place. Then while Faramir still supported the King in his arms, she peeled off the bloodied bed linens and replaced them with clean ones.

Faramir's throbbing arms lowered the King back on the bed. Éowyn covered Aragorn with a sheet of fine linen, and several blankets. She placed a pillow under his head and tucked the covers under his chin, Moving away from the bed, she was forced to turn aside, not wanting to see the tears of pain that ran down the King's face.

Faramir squeezed his lord's hand in sympathy. Aragorn's face was contorted with pain and an occasional low moan escaped his lips. Mercifully, his features relaxed when either unconsciousness or sleep eventually overcame him.

"We have done all we can for the King." Éowyn said firmly. "It is your turn now, Faramir, to have your wounds tended. I only wish I had some sort of pain relief to give you."

Faramir was painfully self-conscious about his many scars and frame that his father had denounced as 'puny', which until now, he had managed to conceal from Éowyn. He had little choice but to let her see his wounds. He knew he could not afford to neglect his own injuries when the King might have need of him. He tried to lift his arms to remove his torn and bloodied tunic, he found they refused to obey him, the damaged muscles protesting at being hoisted above his head again.
Seeing his plight, Éowyn took up the knife she had used to remove the King's clothing. Quickly she cut away Faramir's torn tunic and shirt, and pulled the shreds of cloth away from his body. "No!" she gasped when she saw the cut on his arm and the cruel welts disfiguring his back. "You must be in so much pain, why didn't you let me tend you first?"

"The King's need was far greater." Faramir said, looking across at the still form on the bed. Then the realisation hit him, had it not been for Aragorn, his injuries would be those the King was enduring now. He shuddered, and no longer able to maintain his iron self control, burst into tears.

Éowyn impulsively held her husband close for a few moments and tried to comfort him. When he had regained some of his composure, she picked up a cloth to bathe his wounds. "What happened exactly?" she asked in a matter of fact tone.

"We accepted a drink from an old woman which turned out be drugged. Too late, we realised our folly and collapsed unconscious. We regained our senses at the place where you found us," he told her, wiping his face with his hand. "There were two men, brothers in law named Fennas and Calardan. They blamed the King and myself for the deaths of their kinsfolk and wanted to make us suffer to avenge them." Faramir swallowed hard. "They had a whip and used it on me and then the King…" His voice faltered.

Éowyn paused in her ministrations. "You will feel better if you tell me," she coaxed gently.

"The King told them to leave me be. So they started beating him instead. They told him, he had but to say the word, and they would leave him alone and return to beating me. He remained silent. I ordered them to let him go but they would not listen. One of them cut my arm, after tying me to a tree, but compared with what the King endured, it was nothing!" Faramir gave her only the bare facts, and did not pause for breath as he spoke lest he was unable to continue. Looking towards the still form on the bed, he said, "That 'hypocrite' as you recently called him, was willing to give his life just to spare me pain! I can hardly bear to look at him knowing I should be suffering rather than he! Why could I not spare him? Why was I not strong enough to help him?"

Faramir started to sob again. Éowyn soothed him by stroking his hair and murmuring words of comfort. Her eyes kept straying towards where Aragorn lay. She wondered if she had somehow misjudged him. There was no question, though, that he had tricked her into a loveless marriage, of which Faramir was as much a victim as she. Such thoughts were too painful to dwell upon. She focused her attention instead on Faramir's wounds, cleansing his back so vigorously that he cried out. "It is almost done," she said, wiping away the blood. Then she saw the old scars and gasped. "You've been flogged before!" she exclaimed in horror.

Faramir recalled the madness in his father's eyes when he had told Denethor that he had let Frodo and Sam continue their journey. The palantír had changed him from a cold, but fair and honourable man into a stranger that at times his sons could hardly recognise.

Éowyn was looking directly at him, her eyes demanding an answer.

"My father was a hard man, and I could never please him, especially after he took to using the palantír," he said simply. "I failed to bring him the Ring, so I was punished with a horsewhip." He tried to shrug but the movement sent waves of pain through his bruised shoulders. He saw the pity he both feared and expected in his wife's eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "I scarcely knew my father at all. Théoden King was kind to my brother and me, at least until Grima's evil influence clouded his mind.

She picked up the honey jar and smeared her hands with the thick, sticky liquid.
Faramir felt the honey sting and bit back a cry as she applied a generous amount to his back.

Éowyn then washed her hands and applied a bandage before turning her attentions to the cut his arm and his bruised and bloodied shoulders.

She started to apply a salve. Had the circumstances been different, Faramir would have thrilled at the rare pleasure of her closeness and touch. Such was his pain, though; he wished fervently that a Healer like Aragorn were tending him, his touch being far gentler than his wife's rough, though well meaning ministrations. He would gladly welcome her touch in the bedchamber, but she lacked the hands of a naturally gifted healer. He thought back to his first meetings with Aragorn in the Houses of Healing, the King's kindness and his own shame that his King should have seen him thus. Why had he continued to fear the man and even refused the offer of Elven remedies to fade the old wounds? It all seemed so foolish now.

"I'll tend the hurts on your legs now," Éowyn said briskly. "You'll need to take off your breeches."

Faramir flushed scarlet, wishing he could be more comfortable with his wife, who was still a stranger to him. "I have but bruises on my legs. There is no need to bother you with them!" he protested, a note of rising panic in his voice.

"I am your wife!" Éowyn said, a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Looking wretched, Faramir reluctantly started to unfasten his breeches.

"If you just need some salve, you can apply that yourself. I will fetch some fresh clothes after I've helped you with your boots." Éowyn said, taking unexpected pity on him. "I will return soon, if you need more help."

Faramir heaved a sigh of relief when she left. He turned away from the bed and peeled off the remainder of his clothing. He found his legs were sore, but not too badly injured. Hastily he bathed the hurts and rubbed on the salve. He just managed to drape a towel round his hips when Éowyn returned with a bundle of clean clothing.

"Do you need any help?" she asked.

Faramir shook his head. "These hurts are but slight," he answered.

"Be sure to tell me if they get worse," Éowyn admonished. "Let me help you with your shirt. I will leave you to finish dressing, while I request the servants to prepare some food for us."

The soft linen shirt felt pleasant to his skin and he was pleased she had chosen a lightweight woollen tunic for him to wear. He sat meekly on the chair while she eased them over his head. To his surprise and delight she kissed him on the lips before leaving the room. A surge of pleasure spread through his body at this unexpected show of affection. Her reactions to his injuries suggested that maybe she cared for him after all. In any other circumstances, Faramir would have been overjoyed. However, the throbbing pain in his back and shoulders and the King's serious condition, drove all other considerations from his mind. He found it easy enough to pull on the linen drawers and thick cloth breeches. His boots and stockings were a different matter; he was forced to sit barefoot until Éowyn returned with food and drink for him.

He drank greedily. However, the bread and meat felt like sawdust in his mouth and he could only manage to eat a little fruit.

Éowyn anxiously studied her husband's drawn and tear stained features, thinking how much she could have loved him, had only she not been so deceived. Political unions were usual amongst her
class. Had her marriage been presented as such from the start, she would have accepted it, given that Faramir was attractive, and a union to cement the alliance between Rohan and Gondor made perfect sense. Yet, to have been tricked into thinking he loved her, only to learn that Aragorn had decreed the marriage to rid himself of a potential embarrassment prior to Arwen's arrival, still enraged her. She hated the King; yet, he had unselfishly endured pain beyond imagining in trying to spare Faramir. The man was an enigma. Unable to wrestle with her troubled thoughts any longer, she went outside to see how Windfola was faring.

Faramir maintained his vigil with the King, trying his best to attend to him when he briefly awoke and needed his assistance to answer nature's call, notwithstanding their mutual discomfort. Despite Éowyn's predictions, his reverence for his King was not lessened by such mundane and unpleasant tasks.

By the time the sun set, Éowyn had returned to Aragorn's bedside, where she sat with her husband, maintaining a vigil over the wounded King. They said very little, Faramir feeling too distressed after his ordeal, while Éowyn was too irate at being forced to care for the King and somewhat troubled by her earlier speculations. Had he been any other man on Middle-earth, she would have helped him gladly. Not this wretched man, though, who had caused her nothing but turmoil since she first laid eyes on him.

Several hours elapsed, and Éowyn decided that she had better check Aragorn's bandages before retiring to bed. Faramir was asleep on the chair after struggling vainly to keep his eyes open. Much to her annoyance, the dressings covering Aragorn's back were heavily stained. She concluded it was better to change them now, in case they soaked through on to the bed linen overnight. "Wake up! I need you to help me change the King's bandages." she told Faramir, rousing him from an uneasy doze.

"Could it not wait until morning? He seems to be resting peacefully, and sleep is a great healer." Faramir replied once he was sufficiently awake.

"So you are the Healer now! Maybe you should do it?" she retorted, in truth she would rather have doing anything, save tending this particular wounded man.

Faramir deemed it best to say nothing. He was in too much pain to argue. Sleeping in the uncomfortable chair had only served to intensify the throbbing in his back and shoulders. Éowyn summoned a servant and asked her to fetch water and clean linen. As soon as they were brought, she impatiently pulled down the covers to begin her task. "Hold him down!" she instructed Faramir.

"I will awaken him first so he will know what is happening." he insisted. He gently squeezed Aragorn's hand and called him. "My lord, wake up! It is time to change your bandages!"

Aragorn's only response was to groan and murmur; "Water!"

Faramir filled a cup and lifted it to Aragorn's lips. He gently supported his lord's head while Aragorn sipped the drink. Éowyn stood by the bed, arms akimbo, waiting impatiently to proceed. Satisfied that Aragorn had drunk his fill, Faramir put down the cup and clasped the King's hands, feeling them tighten round his own in expectation of the inevitable pain that was coming.

Éowyn determinedly pulled the blankets further down and started to unwrap the bandages, beginning with those covering the lacerations on Aragorn's back. The first one came away easily enough, but the second refused to yield to a gentle tug. It was stuck. She tugged harder. Still it
refused to yield. Exasperated, she snatched at it with all her strength. This time the bandage came free, and with it fragments of Aragorn's lacerated skin and flesh beneath. The King arched in agony and gave a piercing scream of pain and shock, almost crushing Faramir's hands in his distress.

"Éowyn! What have you done? Are you trying to kill him?" Faramir cried.

His wife grabbed a cloth to staunch the now copious flow of blood from the King's wounds. The Steward swallowed hard to control a sudden wave of nausea at the sight of the deep and gory laceration on Aragorn's back.

"I forgot to soak it." There was panic in Éowyn's voice.

Faramir could hardly bear to look at Aragorn's face, so great was the pain in his eyes. The King was gasping and trying unsuccessfully to hold back the tears of pain. Sweat poured from his brow. "It will soon be over then you can rest." Faramir said with a calmness he did not feel. "Peace, sire! Just grasp my hands. I will not leave you."

Aragorn managed somehow to give him a faint smile.

Éowyn finally succeeded in staunching the bleeding. She soaked the other bandages with lukewarm water. After waiting a few moments, they came away easily. Then, a little more gently than before, she bathed the wounds, applied more honey and bound them again.

Faramir held Aragorn's hands until he fell asleep. Only then did he rebuke Éowyn. "Could you not you have been more careful?" he chided, careful to keep his voice low. "His pain will be worst than ever now!"

"It was an accident," she replied rather sulkily. "I did not think they would stick like that so soon. Maybe, we should stay with him a while longer." she added, in an attempt to pacify her husband.

Faramir nodded curtly, saying no more for fear of disturbing Aragorn. He regarded Éowyn with an expression of great sorrow mixed with fury burning in his grey eyes.

Aragorn did not awaken again though he twitched and moaned frequently in his sleep. After an hour or so had passed, Éowyn suggested they retire to bed.

Faramir shook his head. "The King should not be left," he said. "What if he should wake and need something?"

"One of the maids could sit with him." she replied.

"I will not leave my King." Faramir said firmly. "I can sleep on the chair here."

"Do as you wish," she shrugged, although her eyes showed concern. "Though, do not forget you are injured too. If you must stay here, why not sleep here on the bed? It is large enough."

Faramir shook his head vehemently.

You must have shared with wounded comrades before, surely?" Éowyn asked somewhat incredulously.

"Of course I have done on many occasions, but never with a living legend who is my liege lord. I might somehow aggravate his wounds!" the Steward protested.

"How could you in a bed this size?" Éowyn retorted. "If you wish to be uncomfortable, though, I
will leave you to it. Don't let the fire burn too low and if you are in pain, call me. Goodnight!"

Fearing she might soften if she lingered, she swept out of the room without a second glance. Faramir stared after her for a few moments and then resumed his vigil over the King.

000

Aragorn seemed to grow more restless over the next few hours but did not awaken. Faramir watched him anxiously but as time passed, sleep overcame his desire to be vigilant. He woke suddenly with a start, roused by a loud moan from the bed. He was on his feet within seconds. "Sire?" he whispered.

Aragorn's eyes were open, but he seemed unaware either of Faramir or his surroundings. His eyes were wide with some terror. Much to Faramir's alarm, he was shaking convulsively, breathing with ragged and shallow gasps.

The Steward placed a tentative hand on his lord's brow and found the skin was cold, clammy, and drenched with sweat. He struggled to hold back the panic that threatened to engulf him. "I will be back soon," he told the unresponsive Aragorn. He left the room and hurried to Éowyn's chamber. "Éowyn!" he cried, banging on the door before entering.

"What is it?" she asked sleepily, reaching for her robe.

"I think the King is dying!" Faramir cried

TBC

*If you are interested in why Éowyn uses honey to treat Aragorn and Faramir's wounds, this link provides interesting information.*
Chapter Seven – Three's Company

Faramir hastened back to Aragorn's bedside closely followed by his wife Êowyn felt the King's forehead, before pulling back the covers to check his heartbeat. It was dangerously weak and rapid. This was the last thing she needed: the King of Arnor and Gondor to die in her care, much as she detested the man. Aragorn's skin felt like ice to her touch. She quickly pulled the covers back over him.

"What ails him?" Faramir asked.

"He is suffering from shock," Êowyn replied. "The pain and shock are proving too much for his body to endure."

"Is it dangerous?" Faramir could not hide the fear in his voice.

"Very, in his weakened condition he could easily die," Êowyn replied gravely.

"No!" Faramir cried, his voice filled with anguish "Surely you can do something to save the King?"

"He needs to be warmed and calmed, but I know not how. The fire is blazing and he has plenty of blankets." Êowyn replied grimly.

Faramir stood looking down on Aragorn, his eyes moist with tears. This was the long awaited King, for whom Gondor had waited almost a thousand years. And to his Steward, Aragorn was even more than that. Aragorn was the man who had saved his life. A maelstrom of emotions; fear, compassion, and a burning anger overcame Faramir. He felt somehow responsible for the men who had brought his King to such a plight and his helplessness in the face of their evil.

Why ever had he feared his new liege lord as much as the old? He understood now why he had loved the King from the moment he first beheld him. In Aragorn, Faramir had perceived not only a liege lord, but also the father he had always wanted and the brother he had lost. It had been his grievous mistake to fear that Aragorn would treat him as his father had done. He should have embraced Aragorn's frequent offers of friendship and healing, instead of rejecting the King's kindness for fear of incurring his scorn and wrath. Was it now too late?

Faramir forced himself to concentrate. Inwardly, he asked himself what would he do, were it Boromir and not the King lying close to death on this bed. Suddenly he realised there was
something he could try. He bent to try and pull off his boots, only to be foiled by the pain that
coursed through his arms and shoulders.

"Whatever are you doing?" exclaimed Éowyn.

"What you suggested earlier!" he replied. "Help me remove my boots and tunic and shirt, please!"
He was too agitated now to feel uncomfortable.

Once divested of his upper clothing, Faramir started to remove his bandages. Luckily they did not
adhere to his flesh.

"You need those bandages to protect your wounds! You are risking your own health now!"
Éowyn protested.

"I must do what is needed to save the King, whatever the cost," Faramir said simply. He carefully
eased himself up beside Aragorn and turned on his side to face the badly injured man. He gripped
the King's arms with his warm hands. Aragorn's flesh felt even colder now than before. Faramir
tried to remain hopeful, despite the unlikelihood of his plan succeeding. He spoke soothingly. "My
lord, you are safe, no other shall harm you, be easy now!"

"You would be better using his given name; you sound as if you are at a Council Meeting!"
Éowyn retorted.

Faramir realised the sense behind her words. "Aragorn!" It sounded so strange to address the King
so informally. He had to push aside years of carefully taught court etiquette to so. "Aragorn, you
are safe now. I am here beside you."

The King gave no sign that he was even aware of his Steward's presence.

"He grows ever colder cold!" Faramir exclaimed after a few moments. "Éowyn, please help him!
He is dying, I think!"

"How?" she asked, trying to conceal her rising panic. "This is beyond any healing arts I know."

"Help keep him warm!" her husband pleaded. "Come the other side, you must hold him too!"

"What?" Éowyn gasped in an outraged tone. Was it not bad enough that her husband shunned her
bed; let alone demand she share it with another, no matter how chastely? "You ask too much!
Whatever would the Queen think?"

"She would understand that nothing improper was taking place and ask us to do all we could to
save her husband! Faramir replied. "I have seen you comforting others when they had need of
you. Go and find a servant to help if you will not? Why do you hate the King so much?"

Éowyn did not reply. Once she would have shared Aragorn's bed gladly, even as his mistress, so
great had been her desire for him. Nothing remained now save hatred and bitterness.

Aragorn's shaking suddenly became worse. Faramir struggled in vain to gently restrain him. He
slid from the Steward's grasp and landed on his flayed back, moaning in agony.

Éowyn felt a sudden stab of compassion mixed with guilt. She knew Aragorn's condition was
caused either by severe loss of blood or extreme pain. She doubted he had lost sufficient blood to
cause him to go into shock, so pain was the most likely explanation, some of which he had
suffered at her hands. Hastily, she slipped off her robe and climbed in the bed beside her husband.
Together they managed to move Aragorn back onto his side. She then moved to lie behind
Aragorn, helping her husband to hold him.
Much to her surprise, Éowyn found herself feeling pity for the shivering man she held. He was far too ill even to realise she was there. Strangely though, she found she was far more disturbed by the close proximity of Faramir, whose fingers brushed against hers as they clasped Aragorn's arms. It seemed apt that Aragorn should now lie between them literally. He had always come between them. He was her first love, to whom she had offered her all, only to meet with rejection. When she had met Faramir, she had believed that here was a man who could love her as Aragorn had not. When Éowyn had learned his love had been no more than a shadow and a thought, either; a mere guise to ensure she complied with the King's will; her heart had then turned to stone.

Faramir guessed nothing of Éowyn's thoughts. Night after night he had longed for his wife to lie close beside him. Now, he was simply grateful that she had agreed to help him try and save the King. He still felt angry with her for her earlier cruelty, wondering if she had handled the King more gently, that there would no need for this desperate attempt to save him.

Aragorn continued to shake convulsively. His laboured, ragged breathing was the only sound in the otherwise quiet room. Faramir impulsively guided the King's restless head against his own shoulder and gently smoothed the sweat soaked hair off his lord's forehead. He could now feel the dangerously weak and rapid heartbeat vibrating against his own stronger one, as Aragorn's chest rose and fell against his own body. 'You cannot die!' he thought, 'I could not bear it and what of Arwen and your unborn child? What of Gondor and her people?'

Aragorn's eyes were open, staring, yet unseeing; his mind locked in some dark horror.

Searching his mind for any remedy, however far fetched, Faramir started to sing an Elvish melody, which he recalled the King mentioning he had known since childhood. He hoped that the familiar tune might soothe him and reach him on some level that speech could not. How Faramir wished that he had Aragorn's power to give his strength to another! Gladly would he give his last ounce of strength to save his King. He knew he was not gifted with such abilities, yet did not the blood of Númenor flow in his veins too? Maybe if he willed it hard enough, he could share his life energy to another? Faramir continued the lullaby, all the while focussing his strength into the man beside him, remembering when they had first met. How much care and kindness the King had shown to him, even though he was a stranger and possible rival to him at the time! Aragorn had given him everything; friendship, kindness, lands, titles, his very life. The Steward was determined now to try and repay him.

Aragorn felt cold; so very cold that he trembled. He could hardly breathe now. The pain seemed to intensify with every passing moment, driving him into some dark realm, from where there was no escape, lest it be in merciful release of death. He could still see his attackers' faces, their features contorted with hate as they tormented him. He was trapped; helpless to escape the pain and humiliation. He was sorely tempted to use his people's ability to return the Gift. Where was Arwen? Why could he not sense her spirit? Carrying a human child had taken that from her. He was alone, imprisoned by darkness. His mother was no longer there, neither was Halbarad.

Suddenly something reached out to him in the darkness, like a star piercing the blackness of the night sky. Dimly, Aragorn became aware of someone holding him, cradling him in comforting arms and singing a familiar melody he remembered from his childhood. Was he dying? Surely the pain would fade if he were passing beyond the circles of the world? The agony in his tormented body was almost unbearable; yet, somehow the warm arms and familiar words brought comfort. He fought against the encroaching darkness with renewed resolve, remembering his Queen and their unborn child.

Faramir continued to sing, fighting grief and exhaustion. He started to shiver, while Aragorn gradually grew warmer. Éowyn had not heard her husband sing before. The beauty and richness of his voice took her by surprise. Together, they cocooned the King in their arms through the long
hours of the night.

Crammed, uncomfortable and now more that a little amazed at his own boldness, Faramir continued to fight for the life of his King, however hopeless it seemed. His injured arms and back throbbed painfully. However, he determined not to move until he was sure his King had no further need of his aid. Faramir planted a gentle kiss on Aragorn's brow, willing him to live. Often the King had greeted him thus, but never until tonight, had he felt emboldened enough to bestow a similar blessing. He noticed that Aragorn had now closed his eyes, though whether that was good or ill, he knew not.

As the long hours passed, Aragorn stopped shaking and lay quietly. His breathing became less ragged. Slowly warmth returned to his body.

"How is he faring?" Faramir whispered to Éowyn.

She reached to feel Aragorn's heartbeat. It felt stronger and steadier to her touch. Slowly, she sat up, taking care not to jar the King's injuries. "I think he is a little better," she said. "I'll try rousing him and giving him a hot drink. That should further ease him." She slid from the bed and pulled on her robe, then lit another candle and made her way to the kitchens.

Faramir waited anxiously. He wished Aragorn would come round, while at the same time, wondering however such a dignified man would react to finding himself being held like a child by his Steward.

Éowyn reappeared a few minutes' later, clutching three steaming cups; one of which she placed on the small table by the bed, the other two by the fire. "Can you sit up with him?" she asked.

The Steward was so stiff he could scarcely move. He slowly eased himself into a sitting position, still holding Aragorn. Éowyn took some of the weight from him.

Aragorn slowly opened his eyes and groaned. He looked at Faramir, an expression of bewilderment on his face. "What is happening?" he whispered. "I had such dreams of pain and darkness!"

"You were attacked in the forest, but you are safe now," Faramir said reassuringly.

Éowyn held out the mug. "Try to drink this, it should help you," she coaxed. "It is the tea the Hobbits drink. Merry sent some from the Shire, which I brought it here with me."

Faramir moved his position slightly, allowing his wife to hold the cup to the King's parched lips. Aragorn took a sip and swallowed. "Warm, tastes good" he murmured. To their great relief he kept drinking until the cup was empty.

Faramir and Éowyn gently eased the King back onto the bed, this time on his other side. Overcome with pain and exhaustion, he fell asleep at once. Éowyn felt his brow. "I think the crisis has passed," she said quietly.

"The Valar be praised!" Faramir gave an audible sigh of relief. "Thank you for helping him."

"For some inexplicable reason my brother dotes on him as much as you do, so disagreeable man though he is, I would prefer him to live, if only to spare the tears of you both!" Éowyn said dryly.

"Why do you hate him so much?" Faramir demanded.

"The reason is too obvious to speak of, especially he wronged you too!" she retorted; going over
to the fire and collecting the two cups she had left there.

"I have no idea what you mean, The King has never wronged me. I could not wish for a kinder lord!" Faramir replied.

"You men are all the same, the way you refuse to see each other's faults!" Êowyn said sharply. "Do not think that I have forgiven him, despite what happened tonight. We will not speak of it again."

Faramir felt too exhausted to press the matter further. He had started to shiver. The pain in his back and shoulders had grown well nigh unbearable.

Êowyn pressed a cup of lukewarm tea into his hands. "Drink this, you look as if you need it!" she ordered. Picking up a spare blanket, she draped it round his bare shoulders.

Faramir pulled it close across his chest and gratefully sipped the tea. It was strong and liberally sweetened with honey.

Êowyn took up her own cup and stood sipping the drink by the fire. Her golden hair gleamed like burnished copper in the warm glow.

Faramir gazed at her, unable to hide the yearning in his eyes. He quickly looked away, before she could guess his feelings.

"Drink your tea," she coaxed. "You have had a shock too, and need it. Then you must have your bandages replaced."

Faramir's eyes grew heavy as he drained the cup. He was only dimly aware of his wife taking it from him. He struggled to keep upright as she smeared his back with honey and re-bandaged the painful welts, before helping him back to bed beside Aragorn.

After a moment's hesitation, Êowyn climbed into the bed beside her husband. She lay wakeful, gazing at his face, the handsome features now marred with fresh lines of grief and pain. 'If only he could be honest with me, she thought, 'Maybe our marriage would have a chance.' She glared at the sleeping King, the other side of Faramir, annoyed with herself for softening towards him earlier. She was, however, relieved he still lived. Whatever had possessed her to hold him in her arms? The man deserved to suffer, though, just as he had made her suffer!
Chapter Eight – When A Raging Fever Burns

Just after dawn, Faramir was awakened by what sounded like the door closing. For a moment, he felt disorientated and struggled to recall why he was lying in this huge bed with the King on one side of him, and Éowyn on the other. Then the throbbing in his back and shoulders painfully recalled events of the day before. The King had been close to death and he had forbidden the servants to disturb him. Who then had been in the room? Slowly and painfully, Faramir sat up.

Aragorn shifted restlessly in his sleep when the Steward moved. Faramir laid a gentle hand on his King's forehead. To his alarm, it felt hot to the touch. "Éowyn, wake up!" he cried. "I think the King has a fever!"

Yawning, Éowyn struggled to rouse herself. "It is only to be expected." she replied calmly, feeling Aragorn's burning forehead. She reached for a bowl of water that had been left on the table by the bed the night before and dipped a cloth in it, then wiped Aragorn's face. "With wounds like these, there is usually some infection. We will find out where it is when I change the bandages later. Try and get some more rest," Éowyn lay down again and pulled the covers over her head.

"Surely you are not going back to sleep?" Faramir protested.

"What else is there that I can do?" she replied, "I have nothing to give him to lower the fever. He is in no immediate danger and is sleeping, which should help him regain his strength. Rest while you can, and try not to fret so. Remember you are injured too!"

Faramir ignored her advice. He slowly and painfully climbed over her to get out of bed. He then struggled to don his shirt and tunic, only succeeding after several clumsy attempts at lifting his arms over his head. Painful though dressing might be, he could not allow the servants to see him without a shirt. As he struggled to tie up the laces, he found himself thinking of his brother. Faramir had never shared Boromir's self-confidence. His father had often told him he was a puny weakling compared with his brother. Boromir, in defiance of Gondorian custom would walk around with his shirt unlaced and not even blush should a maid come in with towels when he was bathing. If Denethor knew of these lapses, he said nothing. If Faramir gently chided him, Boromir would laugh and then make his brother blush by reminding him of the infamous occasion his little brother had walked into the servants' quarters dripping wet and stark naked. Faramir had only been about four years old and had gone in search of his nurse. The woman had gone to fetch a towel after his bath and stayed gossiping to the laundress. The servants had roared with laughter, while Denethor had been furious. It had not been long after Finduilas died.
Grimacing, Faramir secured the laces on his tunic. It was futile to dwell on the past. He was without either father or brother now. With a sudden pang, he realised that the King might have filled the aching void in his heart for his lost kindred, had he only allowed himself to respond to the many kindnesses Aragorn had shown him. How could he bear to lose him too? Faramir determined to do everything within his power to save his lord.

Although it was still early, the sun was rising and it promised to be a fine day. Faramir made his way to the kitchens in search of hot water. The maids were already up and about, and engrossed in their work when he entered. A young girl, who looked about twelve years old, was scrubbing the stone floor, while a sulky looking woman, who might once have been attractive, was watching a kettle boiling on the fire. They both got up and curtsied when they saw the Steward.

"I would like hot water, clean cloths and some firewood sent up to the King's room please," he said. "Please knock and leave the things outside the door."

"Yes, my lord." the older woman said. "Is the King still living?" The woman sounded almost as if the prospect disappointed her.

"You should implore the Valar that our lord recover swiftly!" Faramir replied sternly. The woman pointedly turned her back and returned her attention to the boiling kettle.

The Steward knew that not everyone had been happy when Aragorn ascended the throne of his ancestors. A woman such as this could hardly be expected to know their new lord's worth. Yet, apart from her impertinence, something about the servant troubled Faramir. Her features appeared vaguely familiar, but he could not place where he might have seen her before. She was broad hipped and large bosomed, the kind of woman Boromir had always favoured. Maybe that was why he felt so uneasy, having seen Boromir pursue many a tavern wench? Inwardly Faramir rebuked himself for letting his thoughts stray yet again to his dead brother. No doubt he was imagining ill of an innocent and overworked maidservant. "Please tell the cook we would like some chicken broth later," he said curtly before leaving the room.

When Faramir returned to the bedroom, he settled himself beside the King. He gently sponged Aragorn's face, neck, and arms as soon as the water was brought. Aragorn relaxed slightly in his sleep, seemingly eased by his Steward's ministrations. Faramir felt his forehead again. It felt hotter than ever. He had little healing knowledge but it seemed to him that the King's fever was growing worse. Faramir wished his wife would awaken.

When Aragorn became increasingly restless and started to thrash around and cry out, Æowyn finally woke up. She sat up and felt the King's brow. "It is worse than I thought," she sighed. "When I have dressed, we must try to find the source of the infection." With those far from comforting words, she left for her own room, leaving Faramir feeling more anxious than ever.

Æowyn soon returned, now fully dressed. Approaching the bed, she pulled down the covers. Aragorn recoiled, shivering and moaning. Faramir tried vainly to soothe him. When Æowyn leaned over Aragorn to start soaking off the bandages, Aragorn tried to fight her off, some corner of his fevered brain obviously remembering the night before. "Hold him still!" she ordered her husband.

"Try to treat him more gently," advised Faramir.

Æowyn tried again, only for Aragorn to struggle all the harder. He lashed out wildly and narrowly missed striking Æowyn. She raised her hand as if to strike him in self defence than thought the better of it.

"Æowyn!" Faramir chided.
"I suggest you do it yourself then!" she replied impatiently.

"I will and gladly," Faramir replied. He began by carefully rearranging the covers to prevent Aragorn becoming chilled. Very gently, he soaked off the wrappings covering the King's upper body. This time, Aragorn lay still and quiet beneath his touch and did not struggle when Éowyn helped her husband lift the King into a sitting position to remove the bandages. She washed her hands and carefully examined the many hurts. They soon found the source of the infection. Several of the stripes on his back felt hot and inflamed and were swollen with infection, as was one of the cuts just below his ribs.

Éowyn frowned as she examined them. To her dismay, they were far worse than she had anticipated. "I did clean them as best I could." she said defensively.

"I know you did, but I think it was impossible to cleanse his back thoroughly after they rammed him against that tree," Faramir replied, trying not to shudder at the memory. "They cut him with a rusting blade, which would make things worse too."

"All I can do is clean and dress them again. Bathing him repeatedly might bring his temperature down," Éowyn said. Her tone suggested that she was not hopeful.

Together, they gently laid him back on his side. Éowyn began her painful task.

Aragorn started to struggle again as agony coursed through his body. Too feverish to be aware of what was happening; he cried out. "No more! Leave me alone, Let my Steward be!"

Faramir had increasing difficulty in restraining him. Even Éowyn's strong stomach felt somewhat queasy when she cleaned the evil yellowish pus oozing from one of the wounds, and scraped away the fragments of tree bark from his lacerated flesh. She applied a mixture of honey and vinegar in an attempt to combat the infection.

Faramir was then left alone to bathe the King as he had done the previous day. This time, Aragorn did not speak nor show any sign of being aware of what was happening.

Although Faramir had felt uncomfortable the day before at the need to perform such personal tasks for one he had placed on a pedestal, it felt even harder to care for Aragorn now he was too ill to be aware of what was happening. He respectfully kept Aragorn covered by the blankets while he washed him.

Éowyn came back into the room bringing clean bed linen. Faramir helped her to change the sheets. Aragorn continued to toss and turn. Éowyn placed pillows either side of him to try and stop him turning on his back and aggravating his wounds.

"I don't know what else I can do," she sighed. "I might not like the man, but I don't want him to die! The pain and infection are fast draining his strength."

Faramir gently persuaded the King to drink some water, and then sat beside him on the bed bathing his face and singing in Elvish to soothe him. He wracked his brain for an inspiration of how to bring the fever down, but could think of nothing. His own wounds throbbed and ached, but he ignored then, concentrating solely on the King's worsening plight. Aragorn cried out repeatedly, calling for his mother, Arwen, and several other people that Faramir did not know. Faramir grasped the King's hand, which seemed to calm him a little. However, the fever continued to rage unabated.

The Steward realised Aragorn was wise not to want Arwen here. The sight of her husband in such pain would greatly distress the gentle Queen. That, together with the journey would endanger the
unborn heir to the throne of Gondor and Arnor. Yet it was hard for him to sit there watching him call out for her. Sadly, he also wondered if Éowyn would ever love him like the Queen loved Aragorn. It was obvious to all who saw the Royal Couple that they adored each other.

From his earliest childhood, Faramir had been taught that Gondor must always come first. She had ever proved a demanding mistress. He felt he had failed both Aragorn and Gondor. It should have been him lying there and not the King. If only he had Aragorn's strength and courage! He found himself weeping and for once did not fight to repress his emotions, as there was none present save the unconscious King. Much to his shame, Éowyn returned and saw his tears before he could stifle them. To his surprise, she did not chide him for his weakness. Instead, she quietly sat on the bed beside him, placing a comforting arm around him.

She waited until his tears stopped, then said quietly. "I'll fetch us something to eat. It will make you feel better. You are still in shock from yesterday."

A few minutes later, she returned with some broth for them both. It tasted surprisingly good and Faramir found himself draining the bowl, despite his lack of appetite.

"Should we try and get the King to swallow some?" Faramir suggested.

Éowyn shook her head. "No, not while his fever rages. He just needs water and plenty of it. If only I had something I could give him for the pain and fever. I fear he is growing weaker. I think I will look outside in the garden to see if any healing herbs grow there. I wish I had brought some with me."

Faramir had a sudden thought. "I wonder if the King brought healing supplies," he mused aloud.

"I doubt it. He would hardly expect to need them here," Éowyn replied. "This was supposed to be a holiday!"

"Before we were attacked, he tended my shoulder and spoke as if he intended to continue treating it while we were here. I wonder if he did bring healing supplies? When he was a Ranger, he would travel prepared for emergencies." Faramir pointed out.

Éowyn rose to her feet. "I will fetch his pack from the other room, and we shall see. Why ever didn't I think of that before?"

Aragorn was now sweating and writhing with such agitation that Faramir breathed a silent prayer to the Valar for his life while he waited for Éowyn to come back.

She soon returned, triumphantly clutching a worn leather satchel Aragorn had brought with him. The Steward hardly dared to hope as he unfastened the frayed straps. What if it only contained clothing, or even a secret stash of pipe weed, though Aragorn had sworn he had given up the Halflings' pleasure for the love of his bride.

"His spare clothing is in his other pack," Éowyn announced, as if reading Faramir's thoughts. She carefully tipped out the satchel's contents on to the small bedside table. "Here's willow bark, feverfew, marigold, dandelion, garlic, arnica, cashew nut oil and even poppy juice!" she exclaimed. "If only I had thought of this before! I should have brought my own healing supplies too."

"You could not have known," Faramir reassured her. "Can you make a potion to help him?"

She nodded. "Yes, I have all that is needed here. But first, he needs poppy juice for the pain." She carefully measured a small drop of the thick liquid into some water and handed the cup to Faramir. He lifted it to Aragorn's lips, but the King moaned and turned away.
"Aragorn, drink this, it will help you!" the Steward whispered, gently patting the stricken man's hand to soothe him.

Aragorn briefly opened his eyes and a flicker of recognition was in their grey depths, before he swallowed the medicine. As the moments passed, Aragorn relaxed a little.

Éowyn brewed an herbal tea, blowing on it to cool the steaming liquid. She sipped it and pulled a face. "This tastes vile!" she exclaimed. "I don't even know if it will be effective for one as ill as he is." She handed Faramir the cup, together with the spoon, she had used to mix it with. "You had better use this to get it down him," she suggested. "I doubt he will drink it easily."

Faramir started spooning the brew into Aragorn's mouth. To their surprise, he swallowed obediently as if his healer's training had conditioned him to take it. Once the cup was empty, Faramir lowered the King back on his pillows, where within moments, Aragorn relaxed and slept, his noble features no longer contorted with agony.

Faramir found he was shaking. Éowyn pushed her husband down on the bed and pulled the covers over him. "Drink this and rest!" she said, handing him a cup. "Your wounds need tending, but that can wait. I will stay here."

Faramir swallowed obediently, unaware of the poppy juice she had added.

Éowyn watched until her husband fell asleep, the lines of pain and worry easing from his face. She felt angrier than ever with Aragorn. It was through him her husband was injured by bringing him here. It was also Aragorn's fault that Faramir was unhappily married to her, rather than to some Gondorian beauty of his choice. The more time she spent with Faramir, the more she grew to love him, an affection which he could never return after Aragorn had ordered him to deceive her into a loveless marriage! She settled herself on the chair but it was hard and uncomfortable. The bed looked soft and inviting, despite the fact it was partially occupied by the man she hated so much. Eventually, Éowyn gave up trying to resist. She climbed up beside Faramir, as far away as possible from Aragorn, and lay on top of the covers. Despite her attempts to stay awake, she was soon slumbering peacefully beside Faramir and the King.

When Éowyn awoke again, the position of the sun in the sky suggested it was well past midday already. She was surprised to discover that beside her, Faramir had nuzzled against her body, while his hand was stretched out protectively towards the King.

Trying not to awaken Faramir, she leaned across to feel Aragorn's forehead. It was still burning hot to the touch. She sighed, realising she would have to continue fighting for the life of one she so despised.
Chapter Nine – A Growing Bond.

A few hours later, Faramir awakened. He yawned and slowly and painfully sat up. "Did you add something to my drink?" he asked Éowyn. "I did not mean to fall asleep."

"You badly needed rest, so I shall not apologise for giving you a sleeping draught," Éowyn told him. "I will send for food and drink."

Faramir turned to look at Aragorn. "How is the King?" he enquired.

"There is no improvement. He is still feverish," Éowyn replied. "The poppy juice is at least allowing him some rest."

After they had eaten a light meal, Éowyn insisted on tending her husband's wounds. Faramir felt more uncomfortable than ever, wondering just how disappointed his wife must be at the sight of his unclothed body. He did not look at his wife while she gently bathed his wounds, fearing to see revulsion in her eyes. At least the injuries, though still raw and painful, were clean and bore no signs of infection. After she had helped Faramir don fresh garments, Éowyn left the room, saying she needed some fresh air.

Aragorn suddenly shifted on the bed and groaned. Faramir was at his side in an instant, grasping the restless hands.

"Aragorn, are you in pain?" he asked anxiously.

The King's eyes opened. This time they held a flicker of recognition. "Faramir? - So much pain – burning - water, please!" he murmured disjointedly.

Faramir lifted Aragorn's head with one hand and raised the cup of water to his lips with the other. Aragorn drank thirstily and drained the cup. Faramir filled it again, noting with alarm how parched and dry the King's lips looked. The King's forehead was dripping with sweat, so Faramir moistened a cloth and gently wiped Aragorn's face.

"Thank you, my friend," Aragorn whispered. "I am glad you are here." He lay still for a few minutes before falling asleep again.

Éowyn returned to the sickroom after what felt like an age to Faramir. She looked somewhat more cheerful than before and her cheeks were slightly flushed.
"You should go outside and get some fresh air," she told him.

"But what if the King needs anything?" Faramir protested.

"Whatever he needs, can wait for a few minutes. I will sit with him while you are gone. I have just been to see the horses, and then I walked round the garden. I feel much better for it. You need some fresh air, or you will make yourself ill!" She pushed him towards the door.

Faramir reluctantly made his way to the garden. It was a small, rather neglected patch of land, cleared from the surrounding forest. It comprised a vegetable patch, bare at present, being so early in the year, an overgrown flowerbed, and a herb garden, populated by a few sparse plants.

A short path led to a meadow, where the horses were grazing. Faramir slowly and painfully made his way there. The cowslips and primroses were in bloom, creating a cheerful carpet of yellow. They reminded Faramir of his early childhood, when his mother was still alive. She had loved primroses. Boromir would often take his little brother out into the gardens to gather the blooms for her. During the last few months of her life, Finduilas had been too frail to go outside and could only enjoy the flowers if they were brought to her room. He remembered one day a few weeks before she died, when she had felt a little stronger. She had donned her favourite blue mantle, embroidered with stars, which had been a gift from her brother, and gone out into the gardens of the citadel with her children and her maids.

His mother had sat on a bench smiling and watching her sons play. Faramir had picked her a bunch of primroses. She took them from him and kissed him and called him her precious jewel. That was to be his last happy memory of her. She had grown paler and thinner by the day. Before that year was over, she was dead. Faramir's childhood happiness had ended then too, for Denethor, always a stern man, had grown even grimmer with the death of his wife. The only time Faramir had ever seen him weep was on the night that she died. Afterwards, the Steward had become cold and withdrawn. The two brothers were forced to rely increasingly on each other for mutual support.

Finduilas had already taught Faramir his letters before she died, and her younger son's love of books and learning had come from her. This had infuriated his father who would always say: 'Gondor needs soldiers, not scholars!' every time he caught his younger son reading. Faramir could never please Denethor, who was fond of saying: 'Your mother was strong before you were born!' which made him fear from an early age that he must somehow have killed her. His Uncle Imrahil had told him when he was older that Faramir was much wanted, especially as Finduilas had lost babies both before and after him. The hurt however, remained.

As if sensing Faramir's melancholy, Iavas came up to nuzzle his face. The Steward stroked the silky chestnut mane for comfort. He had known so many losses; his mother, Boromir, his loyal comrades, and his father. He had been more than ready to join them beyond the circles of the world. The Valar must have had other plans for him, though. Aragorn had come and saved him; not only healing his body, but also showing him the love and compassion he had lacked from his father. What a fool he had been not to accept the friendship Aragorn had repeatedly offered to him! Faramir vowed to somehow repay some of the great debt he owed to the King.

The Steward impulsively picked a handful of primroses before making his way back to the house. He noticed the surly maidservant was standing watching him. He could only assume she was curious about her new masters. He called at the kitchen to collect a small jar of water and asked the housekeeper the woman's name.

"That will be Hanna, you mean, my lord," she replied. "Not quite right in the head, poor thing. I believe she suffered some family tragedy, and there was a scandal over a child she bore outside wedlock. She does her work well enough, though."
Reassured by the woman's explanation, Faramir returned to the sickroom and placed the flowers on a table. When Faramir came in Éowyn remarked, "The fresh air looks to have done you good."

"You were right about the fresh air, I feel much better," he told her. "I picked some flowers while I was out. You and the King should both be able to enjoy them here."

Éowyn's resentment flared anew. Caring for her husband's wounds had reawakened her feelings towards him. She prized courage; the stoicism with which Faramir endured his hurts had kindled her admiration. If only she could concentrate her attentions on him, then maybe he would eventually grow to love her? Yet to her fury, she had to devote most of her energies to Aragorn, whom she now hated as intensely as she had once adored him.

Faramir walked over to the bed and stood looking down anxiously at Aragorn. He felt as if he had broken his sworn oath of fealty, as his first duty was to protect the King. "How is he?" he asked Éowyn.

"A little better," she replied, "I checked his wounds a few minutes ago and they are starting to drain."

"The Valar be praised!" exclaimed Faramir. "I can sit with him now. Why not take Windfola for a short ride? He will need exercise."

Thankfully, Éowyn escaped the sickroom.

Faramir continued to bathe Aragorn's face and hands. To his great relief, he seemed more comfortable. When night fell, it seemed sensible for them to again rest beside him on the vast bed. The Steward's weakened body could not fight the urge to rest and fell into a deep sleep. When he awakened again, Aragorn lay still and quiet; Faramir was overcome by dread, afraid of what might have happened while he had slept. "Aragorn!" he cried.

Aragorn slowly opened his eyes. "Water!" he croaked.

Filled with relief, Faramir reached for a cup and held it so the King could drink. Aragorn drained it thirstily.

"How are you?" Faramir asked him, feeling Aragorn's forehead. The King's skin felt much cooler, to his delight.

"Better, though I ache almost everywhere," Aragorn replied. "How long have I been here?"

"It is the third day since we were attacked," Faramir told him, refilling the cup and offering it to his lord. "It gladdens my heart you are feeling better."

"Thank you, I cannot remember very much. I was aware, though, that you stayed with me and I am grateful. It cannot have been pleasant for you." Aragorn's hand gripped Faramir's wrist as he made to put the empty cup down.

"It was an honour, sire." Faramir replied, feeling he should revert to formality now his King was lucid. He only hoped that Aragorn would not remember how they had held him the night before.

"Will you grant me one favour?" Aragorn asked, still gripping Faramir's hand. He still appeared vulnerable.

"Anything, sire," Faramir replied earnestly. "What is your wish?"
"That you treat me as a man rather than a King high upon a throne. To begin with, I should like you to use my given name in private. I know that you can, since I heard you just now." Aragorn managed a wan smile. He tried unsuccessfully to shift to a more comfortable position and groaned.

"I will try, sire, um, Aragorn," Faramir said uncertainly. Years of training in court etiquette were not easily undone.

"Thank you, I have need of a friend, not a servant or a courtier. You have seen for yourself, that I am but a man such as you are, neither more nor less." Aragorn groaned again as he fell back exhausted upon the pillow, his meagre reserves of strength exhausted.

"I will fetch something to ease your pain." Faramir said, gently releasing the King's clutching hand. "Try to rest now."

"I will mix his poppy juice," Éowyn announced, wakened by the conversation. She slid off the other side of the bed and came over to examine Aragorn. "I think he will heal now. You make a good healer, my husband!" she pronounced, in a voice devoid of emotion.

"I only treated him with kindness," Faramir replied quietly.

Éowyn seethed silently at his implied rebuke. She said nothing, but stirred the medicine furiously. None too gently, she began removing Aragorn's bandages, then prodding his wounds hard enough to make the unfortunate King cry out in pain. "The infected wounds are draining well and the others will soon close," she pronounced.

"I will look after him on my own from now on," Faramir said in a determined tone. Despite his very rudimentary knowledge of healing, he felt he could care for Aragorn better than Éowyn. Her Healer's training counted for little while her dislike for the King was so obvious.

"As you wish," Éowyn conceded with supreme indifference. "I shall still need to mix the medicines, though, and help you change the bedding."

Aragorn heaved a deep sigh of relief at Faramir's words.

Éowyn noticed and resented it.

Later that morning, Aragorn was well enough to partake of some broth, which Faramir patiently helped him spoon into his mouth. He slept for much of the day while Faramir sat beside him, patiently caring for his needs.

That night, Faramir again settled himself to rest next to the King. Éowyn climbed in the other side of the vast bed. She lay there for sleepless hours, listening to her husband's breathing. She brooded over the strange and frustrating circumstances, which had led to him finally sharing a bed with her. Even if Faramir were to desire her; his injuries and the presence of the King, made any amorous overtures impossible.

The next morning, Faramir brought one of Aragorn's nightshirts for his lord to wear. The King sighed with relief as he was eased into it. Not only did it restore some of his dignity; but also it felt more comfortable next to skin than the scratchy sheet did.

Over the next few days, aided by the herbs and Faramir's gentle care, Aragorn's wounds began to heal. He was, though, much plagued by nightmares whenever he tried to rest. Faramir too, suffered from much the same problem, both men being haunted by their ordeal.

The wounds on the Steward's back were healing well, under his wife's care. His arms and shoulders, though, remained very painful. He feared to take sufficient poppy juice to ease the pain,
lest it made him too sleepy to care for Aragorn properly.

On the fifth day after the attack, Aragorn was finally well enough to sit up in bed. His wounds still pained him, and he felt weak, but he was well on the way to recovery. He could now hold a cup unaided, and partially wash himself, though Faramir still had to bathe his injured back. When Faramir approached that afternoon with hot water and bandages, Aragorn sighed. "Not again!" he complained. "You only changed the bandages a few hours ago."

"Éowyn told me you needed fresh ones every few hours," Faramir said firmly, unlacing the neck of Aragorn's nightshirt and easing it down to uncover his upper body. He gently undid the bandages to reveal the wounds. "I believe you are healing," Faramir said uncertainly. He gently felt the area surrounding the wounds that had become infected, checking for any sign of heat and inflammation.

"I agree with you," Aragorn replied, wriggling away from Faramir's cold fingers.

"Keep still!" Faramir ordered. "How can I do this, if you refuse to be still?"

To his surprise, Aragorn burst out laughing for the first time since they were attacked. "We have come full circle since we met, have we not?" he chortled. "I remember the first proper conversation I had with you, when I was telling you to be still."

"How long ago that seems!" Faramir mused, as he gently bathed the injuries covering Aragorn's back. "I remember how you tended my wounds and told me to look after Éowyn. I feared you would never return from Mordor."

"Were it not for Frodo and Sam, Sauron would have killed us all." Aragorn said gravely, while Faramir handed him the washcloth and placed the bowl of water within easy reach. "We were indeed blessed by the Valar."

Faramir tactfully lingered in fetching the salves from the other side of the room to give the King a little privacy. He was trying to care for the King by treating him in the same manner as he would like to be treated himself, were he in a similar situation. "Have you heard any news from Frodo and Sam? Éowyn writes to Merry, but he says little of Frodo," he asked.

Just then Éowyn paused outside Aragorn's room on her way to the stables. She had seen Faramir take in the water and dressings, and was wondering whether she should examine the King's wounds again. Then she heard laughter and her name mentioned.

"I think Frodo will go over the sea with my foster father within the year," Aragorn said quietly, his eyes full of sorrow. "I have heard he has never truly recovered from his wounds. If only he had stayed in Gondor, maybe I could have helped ease his pain. I am glad I told you to care for Éowyn, as I feared for both your futures. Who could have foreseen the outcome? I find a friend and you find a wife!"

"You thought of everything, especially as you won the crown and with it, your own bride!" Faramir replied somewhat flippantly.

"I feared all our plans would go awry," Aragorn said thoughtfully. "But everything turned out as it should."

Listening inadvertently to their conversation, Éowyn fumed. They were discussing how she had been given to Faramir like some unwanted parcel! There had been times when she had questioned if Aragorn's remark at her wedding had really meant what she thought it did, but here was the proof! Overcome with rage and humiliation, she stormed out to seek comfort on Windfola's broad
Faramir picked up the heavy bowl of water. He flinched as the pain coursed through his shoulder.

"As soon as I am sufficiently recovered, I will ease your hurts," Aragorn told his Steward, regarding him with a look of profound compassion.

Faramir took a deep breath. He had been trying so hard to avoid the King seeing his wounds again. Yet now, it did not seem like such an ordeal. "Thank you, I would be grateful for your help," he agreed.

Aragorn felt a certain sense of satisfaction; the last few days had been a nightmare beyond his wildest imaginings, but one good thing at least had come out of it. Faramir no longer feared him and was even willing to accept his help. Maybe, at long last they could become friends.
Why I could take his sword here

Chapter Ten– Why I could take his sword here.

Why I could take his sword here, and with one quick dart right through his heart! Stab him as he mocks me; what sweet revenge for all his laughter! - The Desert Song
1926
Broadway
operetta
with
music
by
Sigmund Romberg
and
book
and
lyrics
by
Oscar Hammerstein II
and
Otto Harbach

Von seinem Lager

blickt' er her, -

nicht auf das Schwert,

nicht auf die Hand, -

er sah mir in die Augen.

Seines Elendes
jammerte mich; -

das Schwert - ich liess es fallen!

From his couch,

he looked up -

not at the sword,

not at my hand -

he gazed into my eyes.

His misery

tormented me!

**The sword - I let it fall! - Tristan und Isolde – Wagner. 1;3**

In the middle of the night, Éowyn awoke suddenly from an uneasy sleep in the chair beside the King’s bed.

Earlier, Faramir and Aragorn had kept waking each other up by crying out and thrashing around in their nightmares. Éowyn persuaded her husband to take a few hours rest in the next room. She hoped he would be less troubled by evil dreams away from the King.

Bright moonlight illuminated the room through the open shutters. In a corner, stood Andúril, the King’s renowned sword, propped up against the wall. He had placed it there on the day they arrived at the Lodge. Éowyn felt curious about the legendary blade, never having seen it unsheathed. Her dislike of Aragorn had prevented her from asking him to show her the blade. Unable to resist temptation, she tiptoed across the room, picked up the sword, and drew it from its sheath. It was surprisingly light, and weighed far less than the swords of the Mark. She noticed the blade was finely decorated with a design of a crescent moon and stars. There was also an inscription engraved in a script she could not understand. Éowyn stood holding the sword for a few moments; it was both beautiful and deadly.

Just then, Aragorn moaned in his sleep. Éowyn had almost forgotten that he was in the room. She walked over to the bed, almost as if in a dream, the sword still in her hand. She studied the King’s sleeping face, features she had once loved, but now despised and hated. She perceived now a mouth filled with lying words; eyes full of false compassion. Her life lay in ruins because of this man. Were it not for him, she would be either the honoured hostess at her brother's court, or
married to some man who truly loved her, and would give her his children. Now there was nothing left to live for. Éowyn's life would forever be barren, bleak and loveless. A few days ago, she had dared to hope again that Faramir needed her, and even might cherish warm feelings towards his bride. Yesterday, though, he had made it abundantly clear that he had no need of her company. He was sufficiently recovered not even to need her to tend his wounds.

Éowyn knew were she to leave her husband and return to Éomer's court, she would be nothing but an object of scorn and pity. Her brother would make her welcome, but he now had a bride of his own and had no need of a sister to preside at his table. If only she had seen through the web of deceit when Faramir had proposed to her and found a worthy husband instead!

She had not loved the Steward when she had agreed to wed him, for every other man had paled in comparison to Aragorn. She had accepted his hand in marriage as a way of restoring her damaged pride. She had been flattered that at least one highborn man of valour found her desirable. Éowyn had simply intended to be a good and loyal wife and provide Faramir with an heir. Yet, as the months had passed, she had come to love the gentle Steward of Gondor even more than she had once loved Aragorn. She had believed Faramir loved her too. His protestations of devotion had been nothing but lies, told to please his King, who had ordered Faramir to make her his bride!

Éowyn studied the blade in her hand, wondering how many lives had ended on its sharp point. How easy it would be to take her own with a single thrust of this sword. Better still, though, to first take the life of the man who had brought her to such misery!

Clutching the hilt with both hands, Éowyn raised the blade and held it poised over the King's heart ready to strike.

She hesitated. It seemed harder than she had thought to do this deed. Why could she not strike? Maybe she should simply take her own life? That would mean, though, she would die unavenged. She was the daughter of the House of Eorl, not some wronged serving wench! Again, Éowyn steeled herself to deal the fatal blow.

Aragorn's eyes slowly opened. He neither moved nor spoke, but simply looked at her. Not at her shaking hand, not at the sword, but deep into her eyes. His gaze held none of the anger or contempt she expected, but rather a mixture of sorrow, compassion and bewilderment. His sorrow wounded her. For the first time, Éowyn glimpsed the very soul of this man who had been the first to capture her heart. She took an involuntary step backwards, dropping the sword in her confusion. The expression in his grey eyes pierced her very soul. The blade fell to the stone floor, the clatter deafening after the tense silence of but a moment before.

Aragorn's hand suddenly reached out, gripping her wrist with surprising strength for an injured man. His gaze was now full of cold fury. Éowyn was filled with terror. This was no ordinary man, but the heir of Elendil who had beaten Sauron in a battle of wills, and commanded the Army of the Dead. Too late, Éowyn regretted what she had planned to do. She knew her life was now forfeit. Éowyn hardly dared to breathe, all too aware that she had been caught in the act of trying to murder the High King of Gondor and Arnor. What would her brother think of her now? Worse still, would her husband be punished for her wicked and foolish actions?

"The inscription reads, "I am Andúril who was Narsil the sword of Elendil. Let the Thralls of Mordor flee me," Aragorn informed her in a voice devoid of emotion. "Tell me, my lady, why you were thinking of stabbing me with my own sword?" The King's calm words were like ice, which was far more terrifying than if he had ranted and raved.

"I accept my life is now forfeit under the law of Gondor," Éowyn said bleakly.

"I do not desire your life, my lady, but rather, an explanation," Aragorn replied in a tone she had
never heard him use before. "I demand to know why you considered killing me, you whom I
believed had too much honour to attack a wounded and weaponless man in cold blood. Why,
lady, do you so hate me? Your King demands an answer!"

Éowyn shivered. Aragorn seemed able to see into her very thoughts. The grip on her wrist
tightened making flight impossible.

"Do you really need to ask?" she replied.

"I am asking and you will tell me!" If words had the power to do so, Éowyn would have been
turned to stone or crumbled to ashes by the cold anger in Aragorn's voice.

"Why should I not hate you?" she replied bitterly. "You called me back from death against my
will, after you had ruined my life by rejecting my love. Then you tricked me into a loveless union,
by ordering Faramir to marry me in order to remove any possible embarrassment from Lady
Arwen! You boasted of your cruel deed on my very wedding day! Today, I overheard you jesting
about it again with Faramir. I cannot endure to live trapped in a loveless marriage! I thought to die,
taking you with me, but only truly desired the blade for mine own heart!"

Aragorn gaped at her open mouthed, loosening the grip on her wrist in his astonishment. "What?"
he exclaimed, sounding both hurt and surprised. "I swear to you, my lady, that never did I
command Faramir to marry you. He wed you because of his great love for you. I do not know
why you should think so ill of me! Arwen has always known that you once had romantic feelings
for me. She believed they were but a shadow and a thought, which fled once you met Faramir.
The scheming knave you believe me to be would well deserve your fury, but I am no such man!"

"How could you Éowyn? The King speaks the truth!" Faramir, on hearing the commotion, had
entered the room unnoticed. "I married you because I loved you, no man influenced me, I swear it
on the memory of my brother!" Faramir's reproachful tone was almost harder to bear than the
King's cold fury. The Steward hastened to Aragorn's bedside and grasped Éowyn's arm, as if
fearful she would attack the King again. "Has she harmed you, sire?" he asked in dismay "I am so
sorry, I had no idea she would even think of such a deed. I accept my punishment at your hands."

"She has not touched me. Peace, Faramir!" Aragorn said.

Éowyn glanced nervously at her husband, and then turned back accusingly to Aragorn. "But you
told me yourself on my wedding day, my lord, that you asked Faramir to look after me!"

Aragorn nodded. "I did indeed, my lady. I also told him to look after the Hobbit Meriadoc, and all
the people of Gondor! I also bade Merry take care of you. I hope you are not now going to accuse
me of planning a bigamous marriage for you, to both a man and a Hobbit, or maybe the entire
male population of Gondor?"

Éowyn cringed at the biting sarcasm. She suddenly felt very foolish.

"Remember those were dark days," Aragorn continued. "I never thought that either your brother
or I should return alive from Mordor. I simply did not wish you to be alone and friendless in a
foreign land. All I desired of Faramir, was to see that you were escorted safely back to Rohan. My
words at your wedding feast meant simply that I was glad I had encouraged Faramir to seek out
your company. He could give you his heart when I could not!"

As the full impact of their words sunk in, Éowyn covered her face with her hands. "But you
shunned my bed!" she told Faramir accusingly, ignoring Aragorn's presence. "Why would you do
that unless you regretted the marriage? I even suspected you had a mistress!"
"I have always loved you. I desired you greatly almost from the moment I met you. I was waiting for you to show some sign you desired me likewise! I would never take you unwilling, trembling with fear and revulsion! I feared that you would reject me should I beg of you to truly become my wife! I suspected you still loved the King. As for a lover, my only mistress is Gondor!" Faramir replied reproachfully, also seeming to forget Aragorn was there.

The King cleared his throat loudly. Brought back to the present situation. Faramir flushed scarlet. He turned again to his wife. "Why did you not tell me how you felt, Éowyn, instead of attacking the King? Do you not know the penalty for such a crime is death? We could have been so happy together!"

Éowyn burst into tears at his words. Faramir impulsively put his arms around her. "I am sorry, so very sorry, Faramir. I love you so much!" she sobbed, clutching him tightly. "Now it is too late after my wicked and foolish act of treason!" Collecting herself, she broke free of her husband's embrace and knelt before the King. "My lord, I wronged you. I can only say that I am sorry, though, I do not expect or deserve your forgiveness for my folly. I ask for no mercy, except to beg of you not to punish Faramir. He would never betray you like I have done this night!"

"I do owe you my life, my lady, for tending my wounds, so far be it from me to desire to take yours!" Aragorn replied sternly. "Therefore, I pardon you. However, I warn you never again to raise a blade against me in anger, or it will go very ill indeed for you!"

Amazed, Éowyn kissed his hand in fealty and gratitude. "What penance would you have me make, my King?"

Aragorn softened and smiled at her. "I charge you never to let such a misunderstanding arise again between you and your husband or between you and me! If you are angry, speak of what troubles you ere sunset of that day."

"I give you my word, my lord," Éowyn said tearfully. "If only we could start again!"

"Dry your tears and rise, my lady," Aragorn said gently. "Maybe when I am less weary, I can think of some way to express all our hopes for a happier future."

Faramir moved forward to kneel before the King beside his wife. "I can never thank you enough for your mercy, my lord!" he said fervently. "Surely, I would die of sorrow, were Éowyn not beside me!"

"My friend," Aragorn said with a wan smile, "I could not repay your kindness towards me with anything but the same."

Faramir grasped the King's hand in gratitude. To his alarm, it felt moist and trembled slightly. Aragorn's features looked grey and drawn. The shock of the night's events was obviously taking its toll.

"Do you have any of Merry's tea left?" Faramir asked Éowyn, "If you do, maybe you could make us some. I think we are all in need of something with restorative properties. But first, bring some water, so I might bathe the King's hands and face."

"Merry sent me a whole chest of tea. I brought an adequate supply with me," Éowyn replied, feeling glad of an excuse to escape. "I will fetch the water at once."

"Could you pick up my sword please, Faramir, and sheath it?" Aragorn asked as soon as she had left the room.

"I would, sire, but I thought only the King were allowed to touch it on pain of death?"
"I permit you to sheathe it tonight. I am, alas too weak to get out of bed, so I must make an exception, whatever the custom dictates," Aragorn said wearily. "We cannot leave a naked blade lying on the floor, or there will be more mischief this night!"

Faramir knelt and reverently picked up Andúril. "I can hardly believe I am holding the sword of Elendil!" he whispered, studying the inscription. The writing was framed by stylised symbols of the Sun and the Moon interspersed by seven stars representing Elendil. He knew the Sun and Moon symbols represented the King’s ancestor Elendil’s sons Anárion and Isildur respectively. With great reverence, he sheathed the sword and went to replace it in the corner.

"Put it where I can reach it, please!" begged Aragorn. "I would feel reassured to have it nearby."

Faramir had just propped Andúril beside the bed when Éowyn returned with the water and placed it on the bedside table. Too ashamed of her actions to speak, she hastened back to the kitchen.

TBC

A/N I quoted "The Desert Song" from memory, if I have it wrong and anyone knows the correct words, do please let me know.

You can see a video clip of the scene from "Tristan und Isolde" which inspired this chapter on my link is on my profile page.
Chapter Eleven – Healing and reconciliation

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate, no profit has been nor will be made from this story.

Faramir began the by now familiar ritual of seeing to the King's needs. He handed Aragorn the cloth to wash himself. Aragorn's hands were shaking so much after his latest ordeal that the Steward had to bathe him. The King moaned in frustration. "I had thought I was improving, but now I cannot even wash myself. I have almost forgotten what it feels like to feed myself, walk, or even answer nature's call in private!"

"Please do not fret, sire, you will be well soon. You have had a dreadful shock tonight," Faramir soothed. He gulped at the sudden realisation that he could so easily have entered the room and found both his King and his wife dead. Almost as overwhelming was Aragorn's magnanimity towards her. Without doubt, his father would have had Éowyn executed for any attempt on his life, however half hearted. He turned his head away as he concentrated on bathing Aragorn.

"As have you, Faramir," Aragorn said gently. "I should not have spoken thus. You treat me with great kindness and respect, which makes the indignities far easier to endure. I did not mean to sound ungrateful. My heart is heavy tonight."

Not able to think of a suitable reply, Faramir silently squeezed Aragorn's hand in a gesture of wordless compassion. "I am so very sorry about my wife's behaviour!" the Steward murmured. "I could never have imagined she harboured such fury. How could she even think of committing such a deed?"

Aragorn smiled wanly. "How could you have known, Faramir? You know how to read men's hearts, but Éowyn is no man! Neither is she of our people, that you might share her thoughts! You are not to blame for her troubled mind. I fear the shadow of the past still hangs over her and clouds her spirits."

Faramir nodded. "I should have seen it. We both fell into the same darkness from which you called us back. Why ever did I not press her to tell me what was wrong? I came to believe I was but a poor substitute for the husband of her dreams. The distance between us grew ever more difficult to overcome as the months passed without us talking to each other."

"Life can be hard for a woman such as Lady Éowyn," Aragorn replied. "You have had many duties of state to occupy your mind. Éowyn has had more time to brood. Then she loved me once; love and hate are close kindred of each other."
"Indeed so, sire," Faramir replied deferentially.

"Please, no formality!" Aragorn begged, wiping his brow with the back of his other hand and sighing deeply. "It would be sad indeed, if tonight's misadventures should mar the friendship we have forged."

"I am honoured you regard me as a friend," said Faramir, his eyes lighting up.

"I had always hoped that we might be," Aragorn replied. Grimacing, he shifted against the pillows.

"Are you in pain, Aragorn?" Faramir asked anxiously, picking up a cloth to wipe the King's face. Aragorn shook his head. "Only a little. I awoke from dark dreams to find Éowyn standing over me, aiming my own sword at my heart! My heart, though, is heavy, helpless as I am. Even in my days in the wild, I never felt quite so vulnerable. Will you stay here with me tonight, please?"

"Of course, I will!" Faramir was alarmed by the almost childlike plea from one he had seen as almost superhuman, even after their ordeal at the hands of Fennas and Calardan. He shuddered at the thought of another near tragedy so narrowly averted.

"I am accustomed to relying on the strength of my sword arm rather than being at the mercy of others," Aragorn replied. "It is not easy."

Just then, Éowyn entered carrying three steaming cups. "You have discovered the fear women always live with," she said dryly.

"How so, my lady?" Faramir asked. He took the cups from his wife and balanced them on the bed, leaving her to light the candles.

Éowyn moved to sit on the bed beside her husband. She stared at the cup for a few moments before replying, "When we first met, my lord, you remarked on my skill with a blade," she said at last. "I told you my brother had taught me to use a sword, but not why. When I was a young lass of little more than fourteen summers; a strange man came upon me alone in the stables. He tried to force me to lie with him. Had it not been for my mare, he would have succeeded, but she lashed out with her hooves and almost broke his leg. I went that night to Éomer and pleaded with him to teach me how to use a sword, though I told him I feared lest Orcs came to Edoras. I learned quickly and men became wary of me. Years later, when Wormtongue held my uncle in thrall he came to me and threatened to kill my uncle if I would not yield to his desires."

"Éowyn!" Faramir exclaimed in horror. His knuckles tightened round the cup he held.

"Have no fear, my husband, I am still a maid!" Éowyn said bitingly. "Before Grima could carry out his threats, Gandalf restored my uncle's health and Wormtongue was banished." She looked Aragorn straight in the eye. "Your arrival could hardly have been more opportune!"

The King smiled at her compassionately. He could understand now why she had become so infatuated with him.

"It would make no difference to me what had happened in the past," Faramir protested, "I would still love you."

Éowyn said nothing, but planted a kiss on his cheek. Shyly he returned her gesture.

"A man who takes a woman by force deserves death," said Aragorn trying to stifle a yawn, as his
eyes grew suddenly heavy.

"Quite so, my lord," Éowyn replied, taking the cup from his hand and rearranging the pillows so he could lie down. Aragorn instinctively wanted to recoil from her, but was too weary to protest at her being so close. He tried to speak again, but was asleep before he could get the words out.

"I put poppy juice in his tea." Éowyn explained, feeling Aragorn's pulse and frowning. "His heart still beats too rapidly. I fear that I caused him great distress. Tonight, it is best we should both stay with him." Her tone was full of guilt and remorse.

Faramir regarded his wife, his grey eyes full of sorrow. "I shall never know how you could even think of harming the King. We neither of us would be alive were it not for him, have you forgotten that?" he asked her.

Éowyn hung her head in shame.

"Your brother told me Aragorn was sore weary, but he would neither rest nor eat until he had brought us back from the brink of death. Then he honoured me with lands and titles, and above all his trust and friendship. I love you very much, but you frighten me at times!" Faramir told her. "As Aragorn has forgiven you, so shall I. Tomorrow we will think about making a new start."

Éowyn said nothing, but wept quietly. She settled beside Faramir in the vast bed. She mutely held out her hand to him and he clasped it tightly. Thus, they too fell asleep, too exhausted for further thought or conversation.

000

The next morning Aragorn was still drained from his ordeal of the previous night, but mercifully, his fever had not returned. Faramir changed his bandages and applied salves to his wounds under Éowyn's supervision. As the day progressed, Aragorn gradually regained some of his strength. By late afternoon, he was again able to bathe himself and hold a spoon to feed himself some broth.

The more she thought about it, the more amazed Éowyn was by his mercy and kindness. She realised she could never have made him a suitable Queen; he was immeasurably above her in nobility and lineage. Her folly had been failing to believe anyone could truly be as good as Aragorn. He had proved himself nobler by far than she ever could have imagined. She spent the day sitting with Faramir by the King's bedside. They talked quietly about the many matters they had avoided over the past months. They realised that many of their problems stemmed from cultural differences, the culture of Gondor being far more reserved and setting a far higher value on abstract learning than that of Rohan did. Faramir and Éowyn promised each other to try to learn more of each other's cultures the better to understand and respect them.

Éowyn shyly told her husband how she had always dreamed of a large family of children while Faramir confided that had always been his wish too. He longed to become a father so that he could try to give his children the happy and carefree childhood that he had been denied.

That evening, they retired early, weary still from the previous night's events. Deciding it was best they should stay together, they all three settled down in the huge bed with Faramir next to the King and Éowyn beside her husband. The King was again troubled by nightmares, so Éowyn arose and mixed him poppy juice, thinking restful sleep was now what he needed above all else to help him recover.

The next morning, Aragorn seemed to have recovered from his ordeal, and even allowed Éowyn to tend his wounds. She was much more gentle and made a great effort neither to aggravate his hurts nor injure his dignity. She was amazed at how quickly the injuries were healing, not having
encountered the recuperative powers of one of the Northern Númenorean bloodlines before. "I think you could get up and sit in a chair by the fire if you wish, sire," she pronounced securing the final bandage round Aragorn's shoulder.

"That is good news indeed! I am weary of this bed!" Aragorn replied, hoping that he would feel a little less defenceless once he was on his feet again.

After Faramir had helped the King bathe and don a clean nightshirt and a warm robe, the Steward and his lady prepared to escort Aragorn to the comfortable armchair by the fire.

Aragorn tentatively eased his feet on the floor and tried to stand. He would have fallen, had not Faramir and Éowyn supported him. He was like a babe newly learning to walk when they steered him the few yards across the room and settled him in the chair, then cocooned him in pillows and blankets. He stayed sitting there until after the midday meal, then on Éowyn's insistence returned to bed for a nap, but later insisted on resuming his seat in the chair. This time, his legs felt stronger and though he still needed assistance, Faramir and Éowyn no longer had to almost carry him. Aragorn was well on the way to recovery.

TBC
Chapter Notes

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate. No profit has been or will be made from this story.

Chapter 12 – The Hands of the King.

The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. And so the rightful king could ever be known. - Tolkien – The Lord of the Rings.

With grateful thanks to Raksha and Deandra.

Later that day, Faramir stood by the window watching the sun sink behind the trees outside. It promised to be a glorious sunset.

"My lord, you have travelled far and know of the ways of many peoples?" Éowyn, who had been sitting staring into the fire, asked rather hesitantly, turning her gaze towards the King.

"I have visited many lands during my travels," Aragorn replied, smiling at her encouragingly from the chair, where he sat by the fire. "What would you like to know?"

"Do you know of any rites by which I could pledge myself to my husband again?" she asked, screwing up her courage to come to the point. "I made such a dreadful mistake in believing he considered our marriage nothing but a loveless political union. I know I cannot undo the past, but I should like to make a fresh start, if only I could!" Éowyn struggled to keep back her tears.

Faramir hastened to her side. He placed a comforting arm around her. He was both surprised and touched at her words, "I should like that too," he said. "I bear much of the blame as well. I should have learned what troubled my wife long ago. I fear I do not find it easy to express my feelings."

"The Elves have an unique ritual to bind them together," Aragorn informed them gravely. "Arwen and I pledged ourselves after the marriage ceremony." He held up his right hand, so they could see the slender band of gold on his index finger. "My lady and I exchanged these rings when we made our private vows. The official ceremony seemed to be far more for public show than an expression of the love we bear each other. The Elven vow is even more solemn than the marriage vows of Men; it binds a couple not only till death; but also until the ending of the world. Are you certain you wish to do that?" The King sounded somewhat doubtful, having witnessed their earlier coldness towards each other over the past months.

"I do," Éowyn replied without hesitation. "I finally understand my husband's true worth. I love him far more now than I did on my wedding day!"

"I, too, would bind myself completely to Éowyn. I love her more than ever, despite everything that has happened. We both made mistakes. I realise now how cold and unloving I must have
seemed to her," Faramir added, equally unhesitatingly. "What must we do?"

"You truly wish to pledge yourselves anew, then?" Aragorn asked.

"The sooner we put the past behind us the better!" Faramir replied.

"We need to start again after these unhappy months of mutual misunderstandings!" Éowyn insisted.

"Would you like to do it now then?" the King enquired.

"Yes, if you will show us how, my lord," Éowyn said resolutely. Beside her, Faramir nodded.

"You must kneel, then, facing each other." Aragorn told them, realising that they were determined. "The ritual is simple; the meaning behind it takes a lifetime to fully comprehend!"

The young couple knelt before the fire, their faces illuminated both by the firelight, and the crimson glow of setting sun, which streamed through the window.

"You must both say the words together. Repeat them after me," Aragorn said solemnly. "They are a pledge of eternal love and fidelity."

Faramir and Éowyn nodded.

"I swear by my forefathers and foremothers, by my own word, and with the Valar to witness," Aragorn began in Elvish.

Éowyn understood not a word; the words were Quenya rather than the Sindarin that the children of the House of Thengel had been taught. She trustingly repeated the beautiful phrases, so strong was her desire to redeem herself in Faramir's eyes. And since they both repeated the same pledge, the vows would bind them equally.

"That I take thee in wedlock," Aragorn continued.

Faramir smiled reassuringly when Éowyn stumbled over the Quenya, touched that she was trying hard to speak precisely in an unknown language.

"And that I will bear love and faith only to thee for all time. So do I plight thee my troth," Faramir and Éowyn concluded.

Aragorn beckoned them to rise, the young couple clasped hands, and then Faramir drew Éowyn close and they kissed.

"Be thou blessed and fruitful!" Aragorn concluded in Rohirric.

Faramir and Éowyn knelt again for the King's blessing just as the sun's dying rays bathed the room in a beautiful crimson light.

"I am wearing my oldest gown," Éowyn lamented once the rites were concluded.

"You do not need finery with your beauty!" Faramir assured her. "When we return to Minas Tirith, we will exchange the Elven rings, and you shall have a new gown then if you wish. Let us send for some wine now to toast our union!" He summoned a servant, bidding the girl to fetch the best wine from the cellar.

When she returned with a flagon of the finest vintage from Lebennin, Faramir poured the ruby red liquid into three goblets.
"May you be granted long life and abundant blessings!" Aragorn lifted his glass in a toast to his friends, truly thankful to see them in accord at last.

"We are blessed indeed to live in these times!" Faramir replied, lifting his glass and wincing as the pain coursed through his shoulder. The near constant throbbing seemed to grow worse with every movement this evening. Maybe helping the King to the chair earlier had aggravated his injuries. Despite Faramir's attempts to disguise his discomfort, Aragorn's keen eyes noticed.

"You are in pain, Faramir!" the King exclaimed in concern.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Éowyn chided gently. "I will fetch some salve and mix some poppy juice for you."

"Let me try to ease you," Aragorn said. "I know many Elven arts that would help you."

"Would it not overtax your strength?" Faramir asked, looking anxiously at his King. "After all, today is only the first time you have been able to get up."

Aragorn shook his head. "It takes very little energy to use the Elven healing touch. It is usually mutually soothing for both healer and patient. I fear that as yet, though, I lack the strength to heal you completely."

"Is it fitting the King should tend me?" Faramir asked, uncertain whether or not he should finally accept help from Aragorn.

"Please, no more of that! Have you learned nothing these last days?" Aragorn chided. "Can I not offer help as your friend?"

Suddenly ashamed of his reticence, Faramir nodded a reluctant agreement. "I will be honoured to accept your help if it does not overburden your strength."

"Come then, sit by me and I will see what I can do for you," Aragorn said, smiling encouragingly at his Steward.

Bringing a low stool from the other side of the fireplace, Faramir sat on it, directly in front of the chair the King was sitting on. He hesitantly fingered the laces of his clothing. Now the moment had come; he was as uncomfortable as ever at the prospect of the King beholding his shameful scars and puny frame. He could hear his father's mocking tones still, comparing him unfavourably to the much more sturdily built Boromir. "Maybe I should bathe first?" he suggested desperately.

Aragorn shook his head. "Come, you look perfectly clean to me! It would be best if you took off your tunic, but you can just unlace your shirt if you wish to keep it on."

With some difficulty, given the pain in his shoulders and arms, the Steward removed his heavy outer garment. He already felt half naked. Court etiquette decreed everyone must be correctly dressed at all times in the presence of the King or Ruling Steward.

Faramir simply unlaced his shirt, vastly relieved that he could keep it on.

Éowyn, who was sitting nearby, had other ideas. "For Bema's sake, take off your shirt!" she exclaimed. "You are not even amongst strangers here! Remember you were a soldier!"

Faramir was about to retort that a Captain was granted some privacy when it struck him that the King had received no such privilege over the past days. Maybe for all his kindness, Aragorn would feel insulted if he refused to disrobe. After all, the King had been trying to persuade him to
allow him to examine his wounds for the past two years. If only Aragorn did not look so much like his father!

"Be at ease, I would neither distress nor hurt you!" Aragorn said gently. "Remember, I now most likely bear as many scars as you do. You have never recoiled from me, having beheld them. Neither will your lady and I recoil from you."

"Do you need help to get your shirt off?" Éowyn enquired.

Realising he had little choice, Faramir took a deep breath and pulled the linen garment over his head, baring his scrawny and heavily scarred body to Aragorn's gaze. He sat bolt upright on the stool, eyes downcast, crossing his arms defensively across his chest. Despite the warmth of the fire, he shivered, conscious of two pairs of eyes scrutinising him in the red glow of the firelight.

It had felt different when Éowyn had tended his wounds. He had not been able to see her face, and she had always carried out the task with merciful speed.

Aragorn waited a few moments, allowing Faramir to compose himself. His healer's keen eye beheld a man in considerable pain. He noted immediately that Faramir resembled his father, being of true Númenorean build as well as features, having a slender build, but with a broad chest and shoulders. His muscles were sadly wasted, but he would surely heal completely with the proper Elven treatments.

"May I?" he asked gently, reaching out his hand towards Faramir's injured shoulder.

Faramir nodded reluctantly and submitted to the discomfort of the injury being probed. He had to admit the King was very gentle, much more so than the healers in the city. Aragorn's hands were surprisingly warm, so that his very touch seemed to immediately ease the pain.

"The whip caught your old injury, and the muscles and ligaments were torn further when your arms were forced over your head. Then the muscles in both arms and shoulders have been damaged and weakened," Aragorn pronounced. "You must be in great pain, not only these last days, but ever since your shoulder was first injured during the war. However did you cope with all your duties as Steward? You have always fulfilled them in an exemplary manner. I should have seen you were in pain and helped you long ago, I am sorry!"

"Do not blame yourself, sire. You had a country to rule, rebellions from the South and East to quell and a new bride to occupy your time. And you did offer me your help many times, but I foolishly refused," Faramir replied, again lapsing into formality. Closing his eyes to hide his discomfort, he could feel Aragorn's hands warm on his goose-pimpled flesh, lingering a moment over his racing heartbeat before starting to gently massage his shoulder with his fingertips.

"You need to relax. Take deep breaths with the rhythm of my hands and allow your hurts to be eased," Aragorn advised him. "This treatment is painless and should feel quite pleasant." Long years in the wilderness had taught Aragorn patience. Unlike others who had treated Faramir in the past; he did not order Faramir to uncross his arms.

"Could I learn to do that?" Éowyn asked, while Aragorn's nimble fingertips expertly kneaded Faramir's aching shoulder, though somewhat hampered by the Steward's defensive pose.

Faramir glanced towards his wife. Éowyn was watching the King's hands with intense fascination rather than casting a critical eye over his imperfect body.

"Yes, I could teach you if you like, though Arwen is far more skilled at it than I am, having had centuries in which to practise," Aragorn replied.
"I thought salves or oils were required for this kind of treatment?" Éowyn remarked.

"The Elves prefer to use just their fingertips." Aragorn explained. "The secret is applying just the right amount of pressure. It is quite easy to learn."

Much to his surprise, Faramir found he was beginning to enjoy the experience. His tense frame slowly relaxed. Almost without realising it, he uncrossed his arms; letting his hands fall limply on his lap, thus allowing Aragorn to properly massage his arms and shoulders, followed by his chest and the upper part of his belly.

The Steward gave a contented sigh. He realised he was experiencing something very different than the cold touch generally associated with healing. This treatment had a much more caring feel, and awakened long buried memories of his mother's loving touch. Faramir had always craved affection, but been starved of it for most of his life since the premature death of Finduilas. Subsequently, he found it very hard to either give or receive affection. He had briefly shed his reserve in the days when Middle-earth had seemed doomed to fall to Sauron and he had shown kindness to the Hobbits and wooed Éowyn. But with victory, his natural reserve had soon returned. During the last few days, his formality had relaxed when he had tried to comfort the King, but after so many years of his father's disapproval, he had not found it at all easy. Denethor had considered any display of tenderness to be a weakness, and his nurse, fearful of their lord's wrath, had followed his edict. Although, Boromir had loved his brother dearly, he had been well schooled to follow his father's example. Therefore, he could offer no more than the occasional awkward hug to his younger brother when he was certain Denethor was not looking.

It seemed to Faramir that he was at last getting the loving fatherly tenderness that had always been denied him. That in itself was as healing as any easing of his muscles. Much to his shame, tears started to roll down his cheeks.

"You have been denied much of the love which was rightfully yours." Aragorn said, showing an uncanny ability to read his thoughts. The King gently wiped away the teardrops with his thumb. Aragorn's voice was as soothing as his touch.

Faramir gave a great sigh as he felt the past slipping away. If he were a cat, he would have purred.

Still the King continued, totally engrossed in his task; his fingertips unknotting the tension in Faramir's muscles with slow circular movements. The firelight softly illuminated Aragorn's features. When Faramir raised his eyes at last, he felt almost overwhelmed by the depth of love and compassion in his lord's eyes. Aragorn might resemble Denethor, but his eyes were so very different. A flame seemed to dance upon the King's brow, highlighting the nobility, which had never diminished even during the darkest of the past few days. The Steward realised he was truly blessed to know this man and feel the power of his touch; and the look of reverence on Éowyn's face suggested she shared his awe.

TBC

A/N. Many thanks for your much appreciated comments.

I have just posted a new story "The Storm" and angst lovers might enjoy my new work in progress "Dies Irae".
Chapter 13 - See Spring, smiles in the room! – Wagner – Die Walküre (siehe, der Lenz lacht in den Saal!)

Immersed in his task, Aragorn continued to treat his now willing patient, his sensitive fingers kneading Faramir's sore muscles in slow circular movements.

Gradually the light faded, until only the dancing firelight illuminated the room. Éowyn's golden hair shimmered in the reflection of the flames, making it appear like burnished gold. Faramir shivered as he looked at her. This time: it was neither from cold nor feeling ill at ease. A new dread seized him, a fearful, yet pleasurable sensation that intensified as he gazed upon his wife.

Éowyn gradually became aware that her husband was watching her. She turned her attention away from the King's hands to look Faramir straight in the eye. Her gaze was filled with a hunger akin to his.

Suddenly afraid of the strength of the feelings she kindled within him, Faramir looked away and resumed staring shyly at his hands.

"Does it take a lot of study, this Elven healing touch?" Éowyn asked Aragorn, her voice unsteady, as she struggled to contain her emotions.

"Not for the simplest way of doing it," the King explained. "There are different variations used, depending on whether a servant, an acquaintance, a friend, or a kinsman dear to your heart is being treated. The technique varies depending whether you are using it for healing, bonding or comforting. It does not work very well for lovers though; there is nothing erotic about it."

"And which sort are you using now?" Éowyn enquired in a steadier tone.

"This is how I would ease my foster brothers when they were in pain or distress." Aragorn smiled as he answered her question.

Faramir felt a warm glow permeate his entire being. He had been certain he would only merit the treatment reserved for a servant, though the tenderness of Aragorn's touch was how he had always imagined a loving father should treat a child.

Seeing Faramir was obviously enjoying the Elven treatment, Aragorn started to gently massage his forehead. The King suddenly paused in his ministrations and stared unseeing straight ahead.

"Aragorn, do you feel unwell?" Faramir asked in alarm. "This must be too tiring for you!"

The vision surprised Aragorn in its suddenness and clarity. First, he saw a battlefield with two
armies engaged in bitter conflict. To his horror: they were those of Gondor and Rohan, each trying to destroy the other. Then the scene changed, and he could see two children of about the same age; a dark haired boy whom he somehow knew to be his son, and a fair haired girl, with grey eyes, who was clearly Faramir and Éowyn's daughter. He saw them laughing and playing together as children, and then hand in hand as adults. He knew then that he saw two possible futures, the happier one of which contained their future children united in wedlock, and the friendship between the two realms maintained, if only Éowyn and Faramir could overcome their inhibitions sufficiently to produce offspring. Or maybe the vision portended a rift between Rohan and Gondor if the marriage of Gondor's Steward and Rohan's Princess remained troubled? Foresight was rarely clear.

"I am well." Aragorn smiled at Faramir reassuringly and continued rubbing circles across his Steward's forehead. "Sometimes, I see things if my hand comes into contact with your head."

Faramir started in astonishment; the same thing had happened to him a few days before.

"It is our shared Númenorean lineage," Aragorn explained, cupping Faramir's face in his hands and looking him straight in the eye. "Accept it as a rare gift in these latter days. I am descended in direct line from Elendil, while the blood of Númenor runs true in your veins as well. There is so need to shy away from me because of it." He released Faramir.

Éowyn shuddered. Such feyness made her uneasy, and yet it explained why her husband and the King were so uncannily alike. She wondered if that meant any child Faramir might give her would have the same unnerving abilities.

"Turn around and I will ease your back now," Aragorn told Faramir in an abrupt change of subject.

"It breaks all protocols to turn my back on the King!" the Steward protested.

Knowing what was really troubling the younger man, Aragorn placed both hands on Faramir's shoulders. His eyes were full of tenderness and compassion. "We are far from the Court here," he said gently. "We are both now as scarred as any miscreant; there is no shame in such for innocent men."

"My father lost his wits towards the end as much as our assailants," Faramir spoke so softly that the King could only just make out his words. "My house is dishonoured!" He bowed his head as he spoke.

"Sauron destroyed your father's mind. There is no taint upon you," Aragorn said gently, "Now turn around!" He began tenderly kneading the most damaged areas with his skilled fingertips. Faramir had tensed again. Aragorn could detect so many knots in Faramir's muscles; he feared even the gentlest touch might cause his Steward pain. "Easy now, just take deep breaths," he said, using an Elven calming technique to rub the back of the Steward's neck. "Your stripes are healing nicely. I hope you will permit me to give you a further Elven treatment to heal them completely, together with your old scars too; once we return to the City. I know they pain you, and you have suffered with them too long, mellon nîn."

Relaxed again, Faramir nodded an almost unthinking assent.

"Does that feel better now?" Aragorn asked, when finally convinced he had done all he could to ease his Steward.

Faramir turned his head for a moment to face Aragorn again and cautiously moved his arms. To his amazement, he found he could move freely without pain. He fought back the urge to
impulsively embrace the King. Taking a deep breath, he exercised his usual formal restraint, somewhat to Aragorn's disappointment.

"The pain is gone! Thank you!" the Steward exclaimed with a rare smile. "And the treatment was very pleasant, and pained me not at all. I should not have feared it."

"You are most welcome. It troubled me to see you hurting so much from your wounds," Aragorn replied, tracing a finger tenderly across Faramir's scarred shoulder. "I only wish I could have spared you such cruel injuries. I swear you will never be harmed at my hands."

"Thank you!" Faramir suddenly knelt in front of his King, clasping both his hands and looking straight into the compassionate grey eyes, before impulsively kissing the hands that had eased his pain. He was surprised at his boldness and flushed slightly.

Aragorn was delighted to see Faramir finally shed some of his habitual reserve. The Elven treatment was obviously starting to work. He hoped that one day Faramir might become as easily affectionate towards him as a son towards a loving father. "I will treat your hurts again soon," he promised.

Faramir suddenly felt very sleepy and had to fight not to yawn.

"You need to rest now," said the King. "If you feel you must weep, or even laugh, do not try to hold it back. It is all part of the treatment."

Faramir reached for his shirt and tunic to put them on again.

"You should finish undressing and lie down in your own bed," said Aragorn. "It will help your wounds to heal if you just wear your nightshirt. The treatment I have been using tonight should make you sleep for an hour or so, then wake feeling refreshed."

"I will fetch my husband's nightshirt," Éowyn offered, hastening to the next room and quickly returning with the garment. She helped Faramir ease it over his head, wishing as she did so that she could feast her eyes on the lean, muscular frame for a little longer. She forced herself to concentrate in settling the King back into bed with her husband's assistance, and then excused herself to see to the horses.

"Goodnight and thank you again." Faramir hesitated, and then kissed his lord lightly on the brow. "You will call me if you have need of anything?"

"I shall indeed, but I believe I can get out of bed now if need be," said Aragorn. "Your lady can sit with me while you rest."

000

Éowyn now found herself alone with Aragorn for the first time since she had contemplated using his own sword against him. She sat on the edge of the large chair by the fire, nervously twisting her hands together. "Thank you for helping Faramir. I hate to see him in pain," she said at last, breaking the tense silence.

"So do I, my lady," Aragorn replied. Much as he hated to admit it, even to himself, he still felt rather uneasy with her, though his forgiveness was genuine.

Éowyn took a deep breath, knowing she must speak openly, if matters were ever to be truly made right between them. "I am truly sorry for all the pain and distress I have caused you, these last days. I know I was not gentle and it shames me now to think of it!" She flushed scarlet as she blurted out the words.
"You saved my life and Faramir's too, which is all that matters," said Aragorn, tactfully avoided a direct reply. He could still remember the pain when she had torn his skin away with the bandage. That was just one of many unpleasant moments.

"I was so blind, I could not believe that you and Faramir could be as noble as you seemed! Even though, that was why I first fell in love with you, and then with him."

It was Aragorn's turn to colour slightly. "Love and hate can be mirror images of each other," he said gently. "I hope now we can enjoy the love that a brother and sister might share. If I had spent years living under the shadow of Wormtongue, I would also hesitate to trust easily."

"I should like you as another brother!" Éowyn replied. She shuddered to recall those dark days when it seemed that Wormtongue's desires would prevail over everything, including her body. She thought instead of her brief happiness with Faramir, which had all too soon been clouded by bitterness and suspicion. Her temples throbbed: past fears and present guilt threatened to overwhelm her. She buried her head in her hands.

"What ails you, my lady?" Aragorn enquired.

"My head throbs. It feels as if it will explode!" Éowyn admitted.

"Will you permit me to ease you now, my lady?" Aragorn asked quietly.

Éowyn lifted her head to meet the King's gaze. Aragorn's kindly, yet searching eyes seemed to see deep into her very soul. She hesitated to accept comfort from the hands of one whom she had wronged so much. She knew, though, if she refused now, she might never enjoy the King's friendship. Her mind made up, she moved across the room to sit on the edge of the bed. "Thank you, sire. I will be honoured to accept your help." She tensed herself, wondering what was coming next. Unlike Faramir, she had no recollection of feeling the King's healing touch before.

Aragorn's gentle fingers brushed lightly across her forehead and massaged her tense brow in small circular movements. Now Éowyn had reconciled herself to accepting his help, she found it oddly, even blissfully soothing. Almost forgotten memories of her mother's tender caresses returned to her, the only other experience she had known of a touch so pure, warm, and loving. She could understand now why Faramir had looked like a contented cat earlier.

"I have a favour to ask of you, concerning Arwen." Aragorn suddenly broke the companionable silence that had developed between them.

"If it is within my power, I would gladly grant it." Éowyn suddenly felt anxious, wondering if after her attempt on Aragorn's life, she would still be allowed to spend time with her friend and Queen. She had grown very attached to Arwen during the past year. Although the two had very different personalities, they had found much in common. Both ladies were strangers to Gondor, married to its greatest lords, and both vastly preferred trees, grass, and flowers to stone walls. Éowyn had, until yesterday, believed that she and the Queen were both victims of Aragorn's deviousness. She now realised that the beautiful and sweet-natured Peredhel had a husband truly worthy of her.

"I ask this for both Arwen and myself," Aragorn continued. "We hope to be blessed with a child soon. Arwen has requested that you attend her, both as a friend, and as a midwife to assist Ioreth when the baby is born. I know how much you dislike being in the City, but it would mean a good deal to us if you would consent to be there for the birth."

Éowyn glowed with pleasure at this unexpected turn of events. "You would trust me to do this after all that has happened?" she exclaimed in amazement.
"You have the Queen's trust and mine too," Aragorn assured her, hoping fervently she would treat Arwen more gently than she had treated him. He was certain, though, the formidable Dame Ioreth would prevent any harm from occurring.

"I will gladly stay in Minas Tirith as long as the Queen needs me," Éowyn assured him. "I am so happy that you are to have a child and heir! When is it due to be born?"

Aragorn smiled somewhat shyly at her. "Even Ioreth does not know if Arwen will carry our child for twelve months like an Elf, or nine months like a mortal, so I fear you could have a long wait in the city."

Éowyn smiled back. "It will be interesting to find out!"

"I only hope the child looks like his or her mother!" Aragorn mused wryly.

"You are not that ugly!" Éowyn retorted teasingly. "If I had not seen you beside Faramir, I would even say you were handsome!"

Aragorn grinned at her before changing the subject. "Does your arm ever pain you?" he asked unexpectedly.

"The one the Nazgûl injured?" Éowyn was surprised at the question. "No, why do you ask? It is two years ago now, since it happened. Sometimes it feels a little cold, but it is not painful."

"I fear I may have neglected your injury, as I was too much of a coward to treat you once you were awake," Aragorn confessed. "I made certain that Merry and Faramir were recovering, but I was afraid of having to face you. I knew you were in love with me at the time," the King confessed, looking rather uncomfortable as he spoke.

Éowyn laughed. "I have called you many things, sire, but coward is not one of them!" She started to roll up her sleeve, rather to Aragorn's surprise. "See there is nothing, my arm is quite healed!"

She now felt so at ease with Aragorn that she wondered how she could ever have considered his touch so repulsive. He gently felt her bared arm.

The King's hands were unusually warm. Éowyn felt a sudden sensation of the last vestiges of darkness being melted from her heart. With it, came the lifting of a burden, which she had hardly known she carried; yet now it was gone, her heart felt immeasurably lightened. Aragorn finally removed his hands, trying to conceal his weariness. Éowyn laughed filled with pure joy.

"Whatever did you do then?" she enquired. "I felt as if the sun had suddenly shone into a dark room, bringing spring after a long winter!"

"You were still touched by the darkness. It should now be but a fading memory," Aragorn explained. "The heirs of Elendil have the gift of healing such ills."

"I would know more of your people!" Éowyn begged, her interest aroused. "Tell me of the Kings of Old!"

Aragorn willingly complied. Soon they were engrossed in conversation as never before. Aragorn spoke first of Númenor; then of Gondor and Rohan, of loved ones long gone, of travels and of horses. Éowyn began to realise how much she had missed in refusing to see Aragorn as a friend. She wanted to tell Faramir that she understood now, why he found the King so special. I know now why Faramir loves and respects you so much," she said at last, thinking she must remember to tell Faramir of her realisation.

"The feeling is mutual," Aragorn assured her with a smile. "I hope he no longer fears me."
"Faramir was afraid you might treat him as his father had done. I am told you look somewhat alike," Éowyn confided. "I hope he is not dreaming again of Lord Denethor, he still has nightmares about him.

"Why not go and see how he fares? I am ready to sleep now," Aragorn suggested. "There is no need for you to sit up with me."

"I don’t like to leave you, sire," Éowyn said, torn between the two men she now loved, albeit in very different ways. "What if you need something?"

"I will sleep comfortably alone. I am well used to it from my Ranger days," Aragorn assured her. "And, my lady, you have no need to be so formal. You may use my given name!"

"So too may you, Aragorn. I bid you a peaceful night. I shall look in on you again soon, or Faramir will. Sleep well!" Éowyn bent to kiss his hand in farewell.

Clutching her candle, she hurried away before she could change her mind over what she planned now to do.
Interlude A long overdue wedding night

Chapter Notes

Chapter Fourteen - A long delayed wedding night

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

Warning - this chapter contains content of a sexual nature between husband and wife.

With grateful thanks to Raksha for her help with this chapter

Éowyn hurried to her own chamber. There she undressed, shedding her everyday garments in favour of a silken nightgown from the lands of the Easterlings. Donning a robe over the gossamer-light material, she took the candle and swiftly walked along the corridor to Faramir's room. To her relief, the door was not locked. Turning the knob quietly, she crept inside. Then she put the candle on the table near the window, and slowly approached the bed.

The man she had, and still loved, her wedded lord, lay asleep. Éowyn stood still, wanting to hold this moment in her heart. She had never studied him before while he slept. He seemed most fair to her eyes. She gazed down at her husband's face, which seemed to possess an especial beauty in repose. Most men looked foolish when they slept; like her brother or her uncle. But Faramir's features, his long eyelashes and the high cheekbones framed by raven hair, were strangely compelling, with a touch of Elven mystery.

She wanted to be completely possessed by this man she had once misunderstood and scorned. Her desire had been rekindled the night they had lain holding the King. And now it blazed. The feeling she had cherished for Aragorn seemed a pale, weak shadow indeed compared to this flame that rose within her, driving her to the one man she had ever truly desired.

She shed her robe and climbed into bed beside him.

"Éowyn, is that you?" Faramir asked sleepily. "Is it time for me to sit with Aragorn? I feel rested now."

"He said he wished to be alone," Éowyn told him. "One of us can see how he is later." She took a deep breath and planted a passionate kiss on Faramir's lips.

Her heart pounded wildly while she awaited his response. Would he think her too bold? When his lips hungrily met hers, there was no doubt in her mind that he wanted her too.

Faramir drew her close, caressing her first with his eyes, then with strong yet slender hands that made her quiver with delight. "You are so beautiful!" he exclaimed, as he traced her features with eager fingertips. "May I?" he asked shyly. "Or should we wait until we have the Elven pledge
rings?” This was the moment for which he had long prayed. Yet, he wondered if he could give her all the pleasure she deserved, as his beloved, his lady. He had never experienced bodily union before. Like most of his race, he had always shunned casual couplings, preferring to contain his desires until married, trusting that natural instincts would guide him when the moment came. Was it the right time to do this? He never would have thought to take such a step in this unexpected and sudden fashion. But his body seemed to be outracing his mind, tensing, tightening, and yearning to join with the woman beside him. In fact, it was taking some effort on his part not to seize her shoulders and press her down beneath him, make her his wife in deed as well as word.

Éowyn's lips met his again, giving their own reply before she nibbled his ear and whispered. "We have waited long enough! I want you body and soul! I would be your wife in more than name!"

Faramir was pleased that she felt this need as well. But did Éowyn know that there would be pain? He had heard that much from the talk of other men who boasted of awakening desire in their innocent young brides. "And so I would have it, beloved. But I fear I might hurt you."

"You would only hurt me by denying me, dear one," she answered with certainty. "I am a strong woman of the North who has spent her life astride a horse, not a statue made of glass."

Having uttered such bold words, Éowyn felt a sliver of fear as Faramir took her into his arms and she felt his mounting desire. "Am I to lose myself too, Man of Gondor?" she whispered, tensing in his embrace. "Will I no longer be the proud Shieldmaiden of Rohan?"

"You will always be my fair warrior maid!" Faramir reassured her. "It is I who will lose myself wholly in you, if you will but unite with me!"

He rolled away from her, holding himself back while he whispered words of love in her ear and slowly stroked her beautiful throat, shoulders and perfect breasts. If he could increase her desire to match his own, perhaps the consummation of their union would prove easier for her.

Suddenly Éowyn felt a certainty that almost chilled her with its power, that this night would yield more than the fulfilment of their marriage vows. She had never been given to foresight, but she knew that they had to come together now, that their love would have consequence other than pleasure. For one fleeting moment, she had a sense of destiny, and what it required of them, for her, for him. And her own vision matched the demand of fate. She wanted this!

"Give me your child, Faramir!" Éowyn pleaded. "Sow the seeds of new life within me!"

Warmed as she was by Faramir's attempt to hold back his desire for her sake, she would have done with caution! Éowyn smiled up at him, only a little nervously, and lay down on her back. She nodded her assent, suddenly tired of words. Faramir's eyes brightened as he leaned over her. She willingly spread herself beneath him.

When they finally joined, she felt only a brief stab of pain. Then Faramir looked at her, his eyes so full of love and joy that something seemed to melt within her. The pain was gone, replaced by warmth and heat. She was amazed at how their bodies fitted together, as if out of all the world, she were made for him and he for her. They belonged to each other now. They were explorers in a new world of their own, their tenderness and ardour more than compensated for their lack of experience in such matters.

Finally they disengaged, but remained clasped in a close embrace.

"Why was I foolish and fearful enough to deny myself this happiness?" Éowyn sighed.

"I should have told you before, my beautiful wife, how much I loved and wanted you," Faramir
lamented. "Why was I so afraid?"

Éowyn kissed him again, with renewed desire. "I made things very difficult for you before. Don't you now fear this wild and passionate woman even more?"

"I have a confession to make," Faramir said shyly. "The night we were married, I was so very nervous, I doubt that I would have been capable of fully making you my wife. I was almost relieved at first that you did not appear to desire me. It was only later, when we returned to Gondor without all the jests and ribaldry that I wanted you so much that it hurt. Yet I feared to approach you in case you rejected me or I could not please you as I should."

"We have found each other now and I will never let you go!" she pledged, sealing her vow with a tender kiss.

She could say no more as Faramir was smothering her willing lips with kisses of his own. And then, oh then...

Something new happened this time, as he took her. There were strange flutters inside her, tingling like the froth in a cup of mead. The flutters grew stronger; until she moaned with a pleasure so great it was almost painful. She heard Faramir cry out her name in a joy that surely equalled her own.

'Lustful' and 'wild' were only words to her now, not sufficient to describe the delightful shudders that racked her body. She clawed Faramir's back in ecstasy, begging him to take her again.

No longer a Shieldmaiden with a heart of ice, Éowyn rejoiced in yielding to womanly passion at last.

Their desire sated, they still held each other, wanting the moment of bliss to last forever. Éowyn was almost surprised at how suddenly drowsy she felt, but it mattered not, for she would fall asleep the happiest woman in all Middle-earth.

Exhausted now from exercising his husbandly duties, Faramir desired nothing more than to sleep in his wife's arms. She slept now herself, with a soft, sweet look on her flushed face. Faramir hoped then that they would one day have a daughter. For, as much as he needed a son and heir, he would adore a little girl with that same fair face and proud spirit as Éowyn.

However, the call of nature and his inborn sense of duty told him to rise. He only hoped that Aragorn was sleeping peacefully. Pulling on his robe over his crumpled nightshirt, Faramir made his way to the privy. When he emerged, a sudden feeling of dread assailed him. He raced towards Aragorn's room.
A Knife in the Dark

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 13 - See Spring, smiles in the room

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

Warning – this chapter contains violence and may distress sensitive readers.

Chapter Fifteen- A Knife in the Dark

*With Thanks to Deandra.*

Aragorn tossed uneasily in the vast bed. Despite his assurances to Éowyn, he still felt uneasy when left alone. Every time he closed his eyes, he was reliving the attack upon him and his Steward. Muffled sounds from the next room suggested that Faramir and Éowyn were finally enjoying the intimacies of marriage. He felt delighted that the troubled young couple appeared to have finally overcome the traumas that had kept them apart. He hoped that their union this night might be a fruitful one. He felt that, somehow, the very future of both Gondor and Rohan might depend on whether or not their marriage was now blessed with children. Foresight was not an easy gift to possess; often the images were vague, clouded, and full of foreboding.

Not wishing to eavesdrop, Aragorn pulled the covers over his head and tried to concentrate on other matters. He thought of Arwen and their own child, trying to imagine the bliss of finally holding a child of his own in his arms. He wondered whether the child would be a girl or a boy, and what he or she would look like.

His thoughts then returned to Faramir. He hoped fervently that his newfound friendship with his Steward would endure. Being King was a lonely position, especially now his old friends were mostly far away. If only he could have wed Arwen soon after their troth plightring. He could have hoped by now to have a grown son who might have been a close companion to his father. Maybe Faramir could be that companion? He had felt drawn to the young man the first time he beheld him, seeing in him the image of the son he might been blessed with, had Elrond permitted him to wed Arwen years ago. Faramir looked as like to him as close kin, and the blood of Númenor ran almost as true in his veins as in Aragorn's. It was small wonder he felt an affinity with his Steward.

Aragorn began to wish that he had asked Éowyn for some poppy juice. His body ached everywhere after sitting up and using his skills with the Elven healing touch. It had taken more energy than he had allowed Faramir and Éowyn to realise. He knew they both were in grave need of what help he could offer; these two troubled souls both deeply scarred by the past. He was certain his Elven remedies could eventually cure Faramir completely, if only the Steward would permit him to use them. They could be somewhat of an ordeal for a man like Faramir, who was
even more reticent than his lord. Truth to tell, Aragorn himself would find the treatment something of an ordeal, but he knew it was well worth the discomfort.

All was silent now. Aragorn was torn between hoping the Steward and his wife would spend their wedding night contentedly asleep in each other's arms, and a wish that they might come and see how he fared. When it seemed that they had decided on the former, he shifted against his pillows trying to get comfortable. He was finally on the verge of sleep when he heard the door open. He tensed at the unfamiliar footfalls. By now, he had become accustomed to Faramir's quiet Ranger-like tread and Óewyn's light footsteps.

A serving maid entered the room, trying to move soundlessly, but sounding like a young Mûmak as she moved clumsily across the creaking floorboards. What was she doing here when Faramir and Óewyn had forbidden the servants to enter without permission? The woman advanced towards the bed. Aragorn could see now that she carried something in her hand, which glinted in the dim light. To his horror, he realised it was a carving knife. Before Aragorn could cry out, a rough hand was clamped over his mouth.

"Prepare to die, upstart!" the woman hissed. "You killed my brother! I found his body in the forest. He should have killed you. He promised me he would! It's not fair!" She gave a keening wail, and then surprisingly started to giggle. "They wouldn't let me come and help them, being as I'm a woman, but I shall kill you, when they couldn't! I know how to kill pigs, so I've had plenty of practise!" She lunged at Aragorn with the knife, aiming for his heart.

Summoning every bit of strength he had left, the King managed somehow to grab her by the wrist. She immediately tried to break free, struggling like a wild animal. Aragorn grimly hung on as she cruelly twisted his hand. In desperation, he dug his teeth into her palm. She cried out indignantly, jerking her hand away.

Aragorn screamed loudly for help. He must win, or at least survive until that help came - Arwen, the child, his kingdom, his friends, they all needed him! These thoughts renewed his strength. He managed to roll away from his attacker, and move across the bed. There was nowhere to go other than the floor. An undignified strategy, but it was his only chance! Trying to brace himself for the impact, he slid from the bed. He landed on the thick pelt serving as a rug, which cushioned his fall a little. Despite that small mercy, he yelped in pain when the stone floor jarred his wounds.

The woman flew at him again.

Aragorn found the strength to kick out. He caught her ankle, which threw her off balance, so causing her to drop the knife. He rolled towards her and seized her arms, trying frantically to prevent her from regaining the knife and attacking him again.

She struggled fiercely, kicking him in a particularly raw region of his still tender back.

Aragorn was fast wearying, breathing in ragged gasps and sweating so heavily that his vision was slightly impaired. The woman's struggles increased and she kicked his ribs viciously. With one last surge of strength, Aragorn lunged towards Andúril, kicking desperately at the woman to hold her at bay. His bare feet made little impact on her crazed struggles, until his toe hit her in the eye, which gave him enough time to draw the sword from its sheath and hold it to her throat.

The blade felt heavy as lead. Aragorn wondered how long he could manage to hold it in his shaking hand. "Stop struggling or I will kill you!" he ordered, hoping his voice was firmer than his grasp.

"Aragorn!" With a loud cry, Faramir raced through the doorway and was beside him in an instant, grabbing his assailant by the shoulders and dragging her away from him. The woman stopped
struggling. She began to sing incoherently in a high keening voice.

Éowyn then rushed into the room, seemingly oblivious to the fact she was clad only in a diaphanous silk nightgown. The housekeeper followed close behind her. Grabbing a roll of bandage from the table, Éowyn bound the attacker's wrists before she could start struggling again.

Aragorn sighed with relief. His strength exhausted, he sank back on the floor with a groan. He feebly tried to pull down his nightshirt, which had ridden up past his knees.

The woman's mood changed again when she cackled, "Nearly killed you, what a pity, you slew my family from the City!"

"Who are you?" Éowyn demanded of her.

The woman fell silent, scowling at her captors.

"That's Hanna." The housekeeper interrupted the tense silence. "If you ask me, not quite right in the head, that one, since her father died during the war. A few days ago, she found her brother and brother-in-law murdered in the forest. They were all a bit strange, that family, always on about revenge. We all lost loved ones during the war. My husband never came back, and I don't go around trying to stab honest folk in their beds! Not that he was any great loss, mind you, when all's said and done!"

"Could you lock her up, please?" Faramir asked. "We will take her away when we leave." The Steward leaned heavily against the wall, panting with exertion. He looked anxiously at Aragorn. The King appeared to be bleeding; red stains were spreading across the white nightshirt he wore.

"I'll lock her in her room, my lord," the housekeeper replied. "The groom can help me. "Come on, you!" She was a large, stout woman, who towered over Hanna.

"Can you return, please, to make up the fire, and bring us hot water and towels?" Éowyn requested, busying herself lighting the candles to augment the waning moonlight.

Now there was sufficient illumination, Faramir recognised the attacker as the woman who had stood watching him in the gardens and had asked him if Aragorn still lived. He realised now why she looked familiar, for she closely resembled Fennas, who was obviously the dead brother she spoke of.

As the housekeeper led her away, Hanna spat in his direction. "You should not be in your brother's shoes, you're not half the man that he was!" she jeered. "You should have been left to burn with your father!"

Faramir flinched at her words, but quickly turned his attention to his King, who now lay crumpled and bloodied in a heap on the floor. Éowyn was already at his side, anxiously feeling for a pulse.

"I think he has swooned," she said worriedly. "Let us get him back to bed. Can you help me to lift him?"

At the sound of their voices, Aragorn groaned and his eyes flickered open. He tried vainly to sit up.

"Stay still, Aragorn," Faramir said, kneeling at the King's side. Hanna's words swirled round his head, reawakening old demons. He should never have left Aragorn alone, he thought. Boromir would never have been so thoughtless.

"Did she stab you?" Éowyn noticed to her horror, that the red stains on the King's nightshirt seemed to be getting larger.
"No, I think not. I believe my wounds have reopened," Aragorn told her, his head gradually clearing. "I rolled off the bed to escape my attacker."

Faramir winced in sympathy as he helped the King to sit upright. They wanted to lift him, but Aragorn insisted on slowly walking the few steps back to bed, albeit heavily supported and grimacing in pain.

He had just collapsed back on the bed when the housekeeper arrived with the towels, hot water and firewood.

Faramir tucked a blanket round Aragorn as she entered, both to keep him warm and maintain his dignity in front of the servants.

"You are fortunate the kitchen fire hadn't yet burned low!" the woman said, explaining her speed while she knelt to make up the fire.

Loth to begin tending Aragorn while she was there, Faramir asked if she knew anything else about Hanna.

"She lives with her old mother, who is every bit as crazy as her daughter, in a charcoal burner's hut near here," the woman told them. "She has a child, a girl of about five or six summers. I've no idea who the father was, Hanna said he was dead."

Everything that was previously unexplained about why they had been attacked in the forest, now fell into place. Hanna had obviously told her mother and brother when she had learned that the King and his Steward were coming to the house. As the charcoal burner's huts were on the only track to the Hunting Lodge, it was all too easy to trap the unsuspecting travellers.

"I will see the little girl is provided for," Faramir said. Deprived of his own mother at a similar age made him pity the unfortunate little one. "Can you think of anyone to care for her?"

"My sister lost her child to the Black Breath," said the housekeeper. "She would take her, but won't the girl be as mad as the rest of her family?"

"Unlikely, if as you say her family only lost their wits after their losses in the war," Faramir answered. "I know only too well what grief can do to its victims. With love and care, the child should be able to have a happier future."

"I will send a message to my sister then," the housekeeper replied. "Do you need anything else, my lord?"

"That is all, thank you. You may retire to bed," Faramir said, dismissing the woman.

As soon as the housekeeper had left, Éowyn hurried to Aragorn's side and pulled back the blanket, fearful that he might go into shock again. To her surprise, apart from a racing pulse, he seemed quite calm.

"Can you sit up?" she asked. "I need to see how badly you are hurt."

Aragorn nodded, wondering apprehensively if she were going to cause him more pain. He was no coward, but even when trying to be gentle, Éowyn was somewhat heavy handed.

"Would you like me to fetch you some poppy juice first?" Éowyn asked.

Aragorn was sorely tempted to say yes, but knew it would be better if he were alert while his
wounds were tended. "I will wait until I wish to sleep," he replied stoically.

Faramir helped the King to sit up, surprised that his arms and shoulders no longer ached very much. The Elven treatment was obviously highly effective, he thought, as he unfastened Aragorn's nightshirt and gently slid it down his body.
Chapter Sixteen – Transparency

Éowyn started to unwrap the bloodstained bandages from around Aragorn's upper body. The task now seemed surprisingly difficult. No longer did she hate him, nor could she regard him almost as an inanimate object. Now he was a friend, a man with feelings, who could feel pain were she not careful. She looked in dismay as three bleeding wounds were revealed; the place where the arrow had struck, the gash below Aragorn's ribs, and worst of all, where her rough handling had torn the skin from his back.

"I am so sorry!" she whispered, fighting to hold back the tears. She gently bathed the hurts.

"You did not flog me," Aragorn said, trying to be tactful. He gritted his teeth. Éowyn was trying to be gentle but her distress was making her clumsy.

"Should I stitch the hurts closed?" Éowyn pondered aloud.

Aragorn repressed a shudder; the thought of a needle in the lady's ungentle hands piercing his very tender skin was well nigh unbearable. He studied the wounds he could see, trying to eye them dispassionately.

"They are partially healed," he pronounced, "I think bandages and salves should suffice. There is a greater risk of infection from stitching."

Éowyn looked relieved at these tidings.

"Which salves should we use?" Faramir asked, deliberately not directly addressing either his wife or the King.

"The one in the green jar," Aragorn said from between clenched teeth. "It fights infection and promotes healing."

Éowyn briskly applied the ointment. "I had better check you for broken bones," she said after the wounds were bandaged. "It is quite a drop from the bed to the floor."

Aragorn reluctantly nodded his consent, knowing it was necessary but not looking forward to the experience. He bit his lip as she started to prod him firmly. Faramir gripped his lord's hand comfortably. Aragorn groaned when she touched one especially painful spot.

"Your ribs are badly bruised," Éowyn pronounced.

"It feels like it," Aragorn said wryly.
"It feels like it," Aragorn said wryly.

Faramir discreetly arranged the discarded nightshirt around Aragorn for modesty as Éowyn continued her examination, discovering a bruised hip and knee. She applied a salve of comfrey and arnica as instructed by her reluctant patient.

"You have had a lucky escape!" Éowyn announced at last. "You could have easily broken your leg or worse, rolling off the bed like that. I hope you won't do it again!"

"I have no intention of doing so, I assure you," Aragorn replied. He could laugh with relief at his escape now.

Faramir helped the King don a fresh nightshirt. Only as he was smoothing it down, did he notice that his wife was wearing an almost transparent nightgown, made worse by damp splashes of water and blood, which made it cling revealingly to her figure. "Éowyn!" he exclaimed.

"Whatever is the matter?" Éowyn looked startled.

"Your nightgown! It is rather…" The Steward flushed scarlet.

Éowyn glanced down at the offending garment. "Oh, this: it is rather stained and wet, I should change," she replied unperturbedly. "Your nightshirt doesn't look much better! I will go and get dressed while you should change into dry clothing here. We are not leaving the King again until he is recovered."

"Bring me all my clothes, please," Faramir replied, not trusting himself now near his wife without the barrier of plenty of clothing.

Aragorn felt obliged to mildly protest. "Would you two not rather be alone?"

Éowyn smiled broadly, looking like a cat with a saucer of cream. "We had sufficient time together for me to become a true wife," she announced. "There will be plenty of time in the future for further pleasures!"

It was hard to tell which of the two men blushed deeper at her outspokenness. Before either could speak, she had left the room.

Alone with the King, Faramir looked anxiously at Aragorn, worried how he would withstand the shock of this latest attack. He felt overwhelmed with guilt that he had not been there to prevent it happening.

To his surprise a faint smile hovered on the King's lips. "Do not look so troubled, Faramir," he said. "We defended ourselves, did we not? I know it was only against a madwoman, but after being so helpless, I am starting to feel much better!"

Faramir still looked unconvinced. "I should have stayed with you, it is my fault you have been injured again!"

"You needed the chance to make Éowyn your 'true' wife," Aragorn replied, smiling at his Steward.

"Um, yes," Faramir was now the colour of a beetroot.

"The first time is somewhat daunting," Aragorn's tone was grave, but his eyes sparkled. Tempting though it was tease his Steward, he resisted. The poor man had endured enough.

Faramir gazed at him shocked.
"Yes, even for Kings - and Stewards," Aragorn confided. "I may be old enough to be your father, but I am a recent enough bridegroom to remember my apprehensions. Believe me, marriage is like wine that grows richer as time passes. I fear your wedding night was somewhat rudely interrupted."

"That crazed woman…" Faramir gave a shudder. "Her words and deeds will forever haunt me!"

"Do not let the ramblings of a madwoman disturb you, they are not worth a second thought!" Aragorn advised. "It was I, who bade Éowyn to leave me alone, not you. It all turned out well in the end. We have had a chance once more to prove ourselves as warriors, have we not, mellon nín?"

Faramir hesitated for a moment before smiling and grasping the King's forearm in a warrior's clasp, "So we did, Aragorn," he replied. "I feel better for it too!"

Éowyn, now fully dressed, returned at that moment, bringing a pain-killing draught for Aragorn and some clothes for her husband.

After giving the drink to the King, Faramir pulled on his drawers and breeches under his nightshirt, before pulling the blood-spattered garment over his head. He did his best to ignore his wife's presence and the effect it had upon him.

"Whatever must the Housekeeper have thought?" he said, looking uncomfortable as he inspected his discarded nightshirt.

"It was perfectly decent before we tended to Aragorn," Éowyn assured him.

"And voluminous to fit both of us!" Aragorn added with a grin. "Rest assured you were properly covered from head to toe in front of the good lady!"

Although Faramir's shoulders were still slightly sore, he had been able to dress without feeling pain, much to his delight. He started to tell Aragorn how amazing his Elven treatment was, only to realise the exhausted King was already fast asleep, as the poppy juice had quickly taken effect. Aragorn slept peacefully after the night's events, his dark hair spilling over the pillow.

Faramir arranged the pillows more comfortably for the King, and then absentely brushed back a lock of unruly hair from Aragorn's brow. He gave a sharp intake of breath as he sensed their minds briefly touching. He knew it needed an exceptionally strong bond between two individuals of Númenorean lineage for such a link to form. He sensed Aragorn's love and gratitude towards him before seeing a fleeting image of two children. The vision vanished before he could understand its meaning.

The Steward was fey tonight, and knew not whether the heightened emotions renewing his vows and consummating his marriage had caused it. Or was it perhaps, the Elven treatments and the King's touch? Maybe, the danger of the madwoman's attack had given him heightened perception, or was it a mixture of all these factors.

Wondering what it all might mean, Faramir climbed into the bed between Aragorn and Éowyn. It was a curious conclusion to a wedding night, but the Steward felt more content than he had been for a long time. He quickly fell into a dreamless slumber.
Kick up the Fire

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Seventeen

Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose

To drive the shadows back;

Prolong the talk on this or that excuse... - Philip Larkin 1922-86

With thanks to Raksha and Deandra

Aragorn grew steadily stronger in the days that followed, as did his newfound friendship with Faramir and Éowyn.

At the King's suggestion, Faramir and Éowyn took a daily walk in the gardens. He could see them from his chair by the window, strolling hand in hand, smiling and looking lovingly at each other.

The young couple had discussed their future with Aragorn. They both decided that once their new home in Ithilien was complete, Éowyn would dwell there most of the time. Faramir intended to divide his time between Ithilien and Minas Tirith. He had spacious apartments in the Citadel, adjoining the King and Queen's, from where he could carry out his many duties as Steward.

Growing up in the Riddermark, Éowyn has assumed she would wed a Rider, who would often be away, giving her considerable freedom as mistress of the home. Faramir was happy to be able to please his wife as well as continue serving Aragorn. He secretly hoped that Éowyn would become less averse to Minas Tirith as time progressed, but her contentment was his primary concern.

Aragorn, too, was pleased with this arrangement. He hoped that in future he could enjoy Faramir's companionship when they worked together to help Gondor regain her former glory. It gladdened him to see Éowyn finally free of the cage she had once told him she dreaded. He knew that his Steward and the White Lady of Rohan were complete opposites in character. However, as they were now prepared to understand and meet each other's needs, he was certain their love would deepen and flourish.

"When our new home is complete, I hope that you and Arwen will often visit us with your child,"
said Éowyn one evening.

"We should like that very much," said Aragorn. "Both my wife and I often long for woods and fields as well as convivial company. We hope, too, that you will dine with us often when you are in Minas Tirith. There will always be a place at my table for you both."

As soon as Aragorn was well enough, Faramir helped him dress and escorted him for short walks in the gardens. It was unusually pleasant weather for March and the King would sit on a bench thinking fondly of Arwen and their eagerly awaited child when too weary to walk further. The evenings were spent sitting round the fire as the three deepened their bonds of friendship.

After a week of such gentle activities had passed, Aragorn decided he felt strong enough to accompany his friends out to fetch Hanna's child.

King and Steward could not help but feel apprehensive when they approached the dilapidated cluster of cottages. Aragorn wished fervently that he were still not so weakened from his injuries. One crazed old woman would not pose a threat, but he had no idea whether her neighbours might be as deranged as she. This time both men carried their swords, as did Éowyn, who had insisted on joining them. Secretly they were glad of her presence, as neither had much experience with children. They both told themselves it was foolish to fear an old woman, but what sort of old woman, however crazed would drug them so they could be slowly tortured to death?

"Maybe we should have waited until the guards returned," Faramir remarked.

"Every day we delay puts the child's life in greater danger," Aragorn replied. "I think too, that the less that is known about what happened here by any but ourselves, the better! They would try to keep me a prisoner in the City, if the Council should discover that we had been attacked. One day, after our child is born, I shall tell Arwen the whole story, but no one else."

The huts appeared deserted when they arrived, and the three feared they had come too late. Nevertheless, Aragorn called in a loud voice. "Come forth, woman, in the name of the King!"

The old woman who had given Aragorn and Faramir the drugged wine, appeared in the doorway, carrying what on first sight appeared to be a large bundle of rags. When the 'rags' started to wriggle and scream, they realised they had found Hanna's daughter.

Aragorn drew Andúril somewhat more slowly than usual, hoping she would not notice that his hand shook slightly. "I arrest you on charge of conspiring against the life of the King and his Steward," he said sternly. "I demand that you surrender yourself and the child."

The crone's only reply was to spit in his direction. "And what makes you think I would obey the likes of you?" she snarled. "You, who have slaughtered my kin! Where is my daughter, the only child of my body yet left to me?"

"She is in my custody after attempting to murder me," Aragorn replied coldly. "Your daughter has not been harmed. Now surrender yourself and the child. You have my word your granddaughter will be well cared for."

"Never!" snarled the crone.

Faramir and Éowyn also drew their swords. Together, they advanced upon the old woman, planning to seize her and the child.

With surprising speed for one so frail looking, she retreated back inside the hut. Before they could seize her, she had overturned an oil lamp from its stand on the mantelshelf and snatched a blazing faggot from the fire. "I will die as the old Steward's spawn should have died!" she screamed. "The
"The child must be saved!" Aragorn cried, making to go inside the burning building.

"No, sire!" Faramir held him back. "It is my place to protect the King, I will save her!"

Hastening inside, Faramir tried to make out through the thick smoke where the child's screams were coming from. The old woman laughed dementedly as the flames leapt higher. The air was thick with smoke and the acrid smell of burning. Faramir momentarily hesitated, remembering what he had been told of his father's dreadful death, a fate he had almost shared. In that brief instant, one of the beams supporting the roof collapsed.

Thinking quickly, Éowyn tore the sleeve from her gown. Covering her face with it, she went after her husband.

Aragorn followed close behind. Espying Faramir pinned beneath the remains of the beam, Éowyn grabbed hold of his legs and struggled to free him before the smouldering thatch caught fire. Another pair of hands reached out and caught hold of Faramir's ankles. She heard coughing as Aragorn helped her pull her husband away from the rubble.

"I have Faramir!" Aragorn cried. "Save the child!"

Éowyn could hardly breathe or see. The smoke filled her eyes and lungs. Through the gloom, she could dimly perceive a small figure huddled against the far wall. Seizing the child by her clothing, with a supreme effort of will she fought her way back towards the doorway,

As soon as she reached the blessedly sweet air outside, she tore off her makeshift mask and gulped fresh air into her burning lungs.

The old woman cried out in her death throes while the rest of the building went up in flames.

Aragorn slumped on the ground gasping for breath. With a mighty effort he threw his cloak over Faramir, and smothered the smouldering patches on the Steward's clothing.

The sickly odour of burning flesh assailed their nostrils while acrid smoke billowed from the burning hut.

"Are either of you hurt?" Éowyn enquired anxiously, once she had sufficient breath to ask. She clasped the frightened little girl in her arms still.

Faramir was already struggling to sit up. He was shaking. "I am unhurt," he coughed. "What of Aragorn and the child?"

"I will be well, once I get my breath back," Aragorn replied, struggling into a sitting position.

The fire burned higher, tongues of flame shooting upwards as the stench intensified.

Faramir started to retch and his shaking grew worse.

Aragorn crawled closer to him and placed a comforting arm around his shoulders, while with the other hand he rubbed his Steward's back.

"My father!" Faramir whispered. "To die in such a fashion!"

"Easy now," Aragorn soothed. "You are safe, I have you, it is over now!"
Éowyn moved to Faramir's other side, realising he must be reliving the horror of Denethor's death, and his own narrow escape from sharing it. It was a subject, which, so far, Faramir had been loath to discuss. All she knew of the tragedy was what she had learned from Merry, who had told her of Pippin's heroic rescue of Faramir together with Gandalf the Grey. She realised in that moment, she still had much to learn about the man she had married and the demons that haunted him.

The little girl started to cry loudly and tried to struggle free. "Easy, child, no harm will come to you now," Éowyn soothed.

The little girl was small, hardly larger than a toddler. She was dressed in rags, which had been filthy enough, before they were blackened by soot and ash. Underneath the grime, she looked as if she might be a pretty child, with jet-black hair and beautiful grey eyes. Éowyn held her close and comforted her as best she could. The child continued to struggle briefly, but was too distressed by recent events to put up much of a fight.

Éowyn returned her attention to Faramir and Aragorn. Faramir had stopped choking and shaking, much to her relief. However, he sat silently weeping, the tears streaking his soot-blackened face. Aragorn still sat with his arms around him, clasping him in a comforting paternal embrace.

"Are you able to ride?" Éowyn asked the men briskly. "We should leave this place."

People had now emerged from the other huts. Fortunately, the old woman's dwelling was some distance apart, so the fire seemed unlikely to spread.

"An oil lamp was overturned, the old woman was unfortunately trapped. We were able to save the child, and are taking her to a place of safety," Aragorn told them, pressing Faramir's tear stained face against his still painful shoulder to hide the man's tears from public view.

A man, who looked like a charcoal burner, shook his head. "She was crazy, the old crone; we always feared something like this would happen! Are any of you hurt?"

"We are well, thank you," the King replied. "Take this to pay for any damage." He handed three gold coins to the dumbstruck man, who had never seen so much money in his life before. "See that the others are safe," he said, dismissing him. The small group quickly dispersed, fearful the sudden bounty would be withdrawn again if they lingered.

The fire was already dying down, having all but consumed the flimsy hut. Some of the charcoal burners had fetched water from a nearby stream. They were keeping a watchful eye on their own properties in case the wind fanned the dying flames towards their homes, but it seemed very unlikely.

Éowyn left the little girl with Aragorn and went to lead the horses to where the men were sitting. "Can you mount Iavas?" she asked Faramir.

He nodded mutely. Éowyn aided first him, and then Aragorn to their feet.

Éowyn lifted the little girl onto Windfola's back, mounting up behind her, while Faramir aided Aragorn onto Roheryn's saddle before he climbed into Iavas' saddle.

They slowly returned to the Hunting Lodge, relieved to leave the nightmarish scenes and scents behind them.

Éowyn led the way while Aragorn and Faramir rode a little behind.

Now the first shock was over, Faramir felt deeply despondent over his show of emotion. The Steward felt a gentle touch on his shoulder as Aragorn brought his horse alongside Iavas. "That
was a very brave thing you tried to do just then," the King said quietly.

"But I failed!" Faramir protested.

"After all that has happened to you in the past, a lesser man would have fled from a fire, rather than attempting to save a child," Aragorn replied firmly. "A wounded soul is slow to heal. What you tried to do took a great deal of courage. Remember, Faramir, those who love and respect you, surround you now."

"Thank you, sire," Faramir said with a catch in his voice as he heard the warmth in Aragorn's tone. "I owe you my life yet again. I would have died without you and Éowyn."

"I think we should both thank your lady," Aragorn said more loudly as they approached the house. "She was magnificent!"

"I happen to be used to wooden buildings, unlike you men from your city of stone!" Éowyn said haughtily, bringing Windfola to drop back alongside them, but she was smiling as she spoke.
The housekeeper had been told of their plans to bring Hanna's child to the Lodge before they set out. She was waiting for them at the door when they returned. The woman gasped in horror at their bedraggled and blackened appearance. Éowyn briefly explained what had happened, then handed the child to her.

The little girl stared at Faramir with keen grey eyes. She seemed oddly familiar, yet he was certain he had never set eyes on her before today. "What is your name, child?" he asked her gently. The child trembled slightly in the Housekeeper's arms, overawed by her new surroundings. "I am called Elbeth." she replied, shyly sucking her thumb.

"I very much doubt that!" the housekeeper commented. "Far too grand a name for such a little ragamuffin!"

"It suits her, so let that be the name she is called by," Faramir replied. He felt oddly drawn towards the little girl. "If she is not happy with your sister, send me word, and I will take her into my own household."

Éowyn looked taken aback. Although, she pitied the little girl, she was wary of taking a strange child of dubious mental stability into her home. She had hardly had time even to get to know her husband properly, and hoped to soon have her own children, not a ready-made family.

Faramir caught her gaze. "I am sorry, my love, I should first have spoken to you," he said.

"We must see the child is well cared for," Éowyn said firmly, hating herself for her lack of goodwill. "Of course, she can come to us if she is unhappy, but we need to be settled properly in our own home first."

"Thank you," said Faramir. "I expect Elbeth will happier, though, amongst humble people rather than subjected to the strictures of court life. It is hard enough when you are born to it."

"I am certain my sister will love her as her own flesh and blood," said the housekeeper. "She has always wanted a little girl."

Faramir nodded, a wistful look in his eyes.

"I shall give you many children," Éowyn promised her husband. "Our home will be filled with the fruits of our love!"
Faramir flushed crimson at such outspokenness.

Aragorn developed a sudden fit of coughing.

"Come!" the housekeeper said briskly. "This child needs a good bath. I will send hot water for you my lady, my lords." she added, "I knew the child would need a good scrubbing, coming from those hovels, so I had the maid boil water ready."

"Treat her gently, she has endured a good deal." Faramir instructed. "Elbeth is lucky to be alive! As the Valar saw fit to spare her, so we must cherish her."

***

Returning from stabling the horses a few minutes later, Éowyn found Faramir and Aragorn still standing in the hallway looking slightly dazed, Faramir especially so. They presented such a bedraggled spectacle, she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry, though she imagined could she but see herself; she would appear equally dishevelled. Faramir's tunic was torn and he had a cut across his face. His eyebrows were singed, as was a large chunk of his hair. As for the King, his beard was singed, his clothing torn, and his hands were bleeding. Both had blackened faces and clothes.

"I wonder when we will have a peaceful ride?" Aragorn mused, her entrance jerking him out of his near stupor. "After all, we did come here to find rest and quiet!"

"When return to Minas Tirith, it will seem a haven of tranquillity after all that has happened here," Faramir replied

"A pity we don't have the large baths here like we do in the city," Éowyn commented, "You two could bathe together. It would be much quicker and less trouble for the servants."

"What?" Faramir looked horrified at the very thought. Aragorn stared at the floor.

"I have never known men as shy as Gondorians!" Éowyn teased. "My brother would laugh at you both! And what of Elvish custom?" she enquired of Aragorn.

"We bathe alone."

Éowyn looked sceptical. "I thought you had communal heated springs? I am sure your wife mentioned them."

"They are purely for medicinal purposes," Aragorn replied in a somewhat evasive tone, obviously not wanting to discuss the matter further.

Éowyn suddenly sneezed. She rubbed a blackened palm across her face, which had been protected from the smoke by her makeshift mask, leaving a comical looking black smudge across her nose and cheeks.

"Soot does not suit you!" Aragorn quipped.

Éowyn laughed, but Faramir remained grim and silent. Apart from expressing concern over Elbeth's welfare, he had hardly spoken since their return. "Are you well, my love?" Éowyn enquired, putting her arms round him.

"I just need to bathe and rest," he answered. "I will see if the water is ready."

He was gone before they could press him further; Aragorn and Éowyn exchanged anxious glances.
"I fear he is suffering from shock," Aragorn said worriedly. "Although, he was unconscious when his father tried to kill him, encountering fire must be very difficult even for such a brave man as he."

"Can you use some of your Elvish treatments on him?" Éowyn asked. "Or should I mix some herbs to help him sleep?"

"I can easily induce sleep using Elvish healing techniques." Aragorn informed her.

Éowyn raised her eyebrows. "What can you not do? Raise the dead?"

"Only the oath breakers who betrayed my ancestor, I fear," Aragorn informed her with perfect seriousness.

Éowyn felt suddenly uncomfortable; it was easy to forget the magnitude of the King’s powers at times. She gave an involuntary shudder.

"That was a once only occurrence." Aragorn smiled, putting her at her ease again. "Your ancestors are safe in their graves, I assure you! So do not fear me, Éowyn, I seek only to help Faramir."

"Then it will be your turn, I need to see that your wounds have not been inflamed by riding then rushing into a burning building!" Éowyn informed him, her usual self-confidence returning.

Aragorn paled beneath the layers of soot. "There is no need, Eowyn, I will tend my own wounds when I bathe," he said firmly.

Éowyn snorted. "Despite your many and varied abilities, even you lack eyes in the back of your head! Faramir is in no fit state to care for you today," she told him, "I need to see if your back is healing, and there is no soot left clinging to your wounds."

Aragorn hastened to his room before she could offer to scrub him.

An hour later, Faramir sat by the fire with Éowyn and Aragorn looking far more presentable. He was now bathed and clad in his nightshirt. Éowyn had tended the cut on his face as soon as he emerged from the bathing chamber. Apart from thanking her, he remained silent and withdrawn. Two pairs of anxious eyes watched him as he shivered despite the warmth of the fire.

"I am well," Faramir replied to their enquires concerning his health.

Knowing his wisdom and experience was far superior to hers, Éowyn decided to let Aragorn take charge. She nodded to him, signalling that it was time he used his Elvish skills on her husband.

The King moved across to take Faramir's hand, noting with alarm his cold flesh and racing pulse. "Come and lie down, mellon nín, you have had a shock," Aragorn said gently but firmly. Together with Éowyn, he shepherded Faramir towards the bed and they tucked the blankets round him. "Lie back and close your eyes," Aragorn told him.

"I want to rest but I cannot!" Faramir whispered, "I keep thinking of how my father must have died. When I close my eyes I see flames and hear screaming. I have been told of his death but could not picture it until now. His death that should have been mine too!"

"Maybe a hot drink would help you sleep?" Éowyn suggested, clasping his cold hand.

Faramir shook his head miserably. "I fear what dreams may come if I sleep now."
"Do you trust me, Faramir?" Aragorn suddenly asked bluntly.

"Yes of course, sire," Faramir replied without hesitation.

"Close your eyes and take deep breaths." Aragorn sat down on the bed and bent over his Steward. He gently started to trace circles across Faramir's forehead with his fingertips. "Be at peace!" The King intoned, his voice deep and compelling. "Easy now, all is well."

Faramir visibly relaxed and closed his eyes, allowing Aragorn to lightly brush his fingertips across his eyelids. The Steward started to breathe deeply. His whole demeanour changed from distress to calm tranquillity. Within moments, Faramir was in a deep peaceful sleep. Aragorn smiled reassuringly at Íowyn, all the while continuing the motion of his fingertips across Faramir's forehead and eyelids.

Aragorn then felt his Steward's heartbeat. Once satisfied it had returned to normal, he straightened up. "When he awakens in a few hours time, his mind should be at peace," he told Íowyn.

"Thank you, Aragorn." Íowyn sighed with relief. "You look exhausted now. You are very good to us both. Faramir has sore need of your skills this day, I fear." She studied her sleeping husband, her eyes full of love and concern. The Steward looked vulnerable and far younger than his years as he slept, the scorched eyebrows highlighting his long eyelashes. "Poor Faramir! I believe he always felt unwanted," Íowyn said sadly. "He was just the 'spare' son, always living in his brother's shadow, although, Boromir loved him a great deal. I doubt, though, Denethor ever realised his worth, little wonder his father haunts him still. I fear my husband never knew true paternal love."

"I would be the loving father to him that Denethor was not," Aragorn said softly. "Or maybe, he is the little brother fate denied me. We have much in common, Faramir and I; my early manhood was troubled too. No sooner had I learned who I truly was than I fell in love with Master Elrond's daughter! I went out to be a Ranger in the wilderness, much like Faramir was. I know in my position it may sound foolish, but I hope I will only have one son, lest I should treat the younger less favourably than the elder. I wish to love all the children I may be granted equally."

"I am sure you will," Íowyn reassured him. "Faramir worships you as the saviour of his people. You should tell him all you have just told me."

"It is Frodo, he should revere, not me," Aragorn replied modestly.

"But you played a major part by embracing almost certain death to distract Sauron," Íowyn argued. "Without you, the Dark Lord would have surely triumphed!"

Aragorn smiled at her rare praise. "One worshipper in your family is enough!" he teased. "We all played our part in the victory, including the slayer of the Witch King!" He yawned; exhausted from the day's events, and the energy he had expended treating Faramir. "I think I will rest now."

"Not before I see your wounds. You are not escaping that easily!" Íowyn said firmly, going over to the table where she kept the healing supplies and picking up a jar of salve.

"There is no need!" Aragorn protested.

"Yes, there is," Íowyn insisted, "Just look at your hands for a start! I noticed them while you were tending Faramir. However did you handle your horse on the way home?"

"Roheryn is well schooled and needs little guiding. I shall be able to ride home. They are mere scratches from clawing at the rubble."
Éowyn applied the salve liberally to Aragorn's hands. Somehow, it struck her as deeply poignant; that hands such as his, so full of healing power, should be bruised, swollen, and covered in deep scratches.

Aragorn flinched slightly as the salve stung. Éowyn found herself blinking away a tear.

"What are a few scratches compared to the life of Faramir and the little girl? Nothing at all!" Aragorn said, sensing her distress.

Éowyn retreated behind her usual no nonsense façade. "Off with your shirt now!" she ordered. "I need to see your back." Sighing deeply, Aragorn complied. Much to her amusement, she noticed he immediately crossed his arms defensively across his chest, much as Faramir had done. She found Númenoreans curious compared with the uninhibited Rohirrim.

Much to her relief, Aragorn's wounds were clean and healing well. They could safely be left unbandaged until he rode home. She had not seen them since the day after Hanna's attack, having left Faramir to care for the King. Most distressing now for her to behold, was the ugly pattern of scar tissue forming across his back, especially where she had torn off the bandage. Éowyn placed the salve on the bedside table where they could both reach it. "You rub it on your chest, I'll do your back." she said, trying to choke back the tears, while she rubbed the salve into the deep wound she had inflicted upon him.

Aragorn turned round to face her, his defensive posture forgotten at her obvious distress.

"What is it, Éowyn?" he asked gently, taking her hand.

TBC

There is a poll on my LJ asking readers who have read both versions of this story which they like best. I'd be interested in your thoughts.

"Dies Irae" is now complete on this site. A big thank you for all your interest in the story.
Éowyn shook her head, impatient at her own weakness. "It is nothing - only after all that has happened today - the sight of these cruel scars!"

Aragorn gently squeezed her fingers before releasing her. "Do not trouble yourself, Éowyn, I must have caused you a great deal of distress over these last two weeks, little though I intended to. It cannot have been pleasant for you to have to sleep here. I cannot even remember what happened when I was very ill." He gestured towards the bed.

Éowyn shook her head, "It did not distress me, so do not concern yourself over it." She made a mental note to destroy the letter she had written to Éomer, as soon as she could retrieve it from Faramir's study in Minas Tirith. Her protective elder brother might not understand. She vowed inwardly never to tell Aragorn about the night they had held him; it would only embarrass him needlessly. "Faramir protected your dignity well, Aragorn," she reassured him. "He kept the servants away from your bedside, and even I never saw you completely uncovered. I do now so regret treating you so cruelly!"

The King smiled at her reassuringly. "The past is behind us now, Éowyn: Faramir and I can both be fully healed, I assure you. Just one thing I ask of you, to persuade Faramir to undergo my Elvish treatments if he tries to change his mind again?"

"I will do my best," Éowyn replied, briskly resuming rubbing salve on Aragorn's broad back.

Much to the King's relief, she was too preoccupied with her ministrations to question him about the exact nature of the treatment. He was so weary; he struggled not to fall asleep before Éowyn finished her ministrations, despite her less than gentle touch.

"I have finished now," Éowyn said at last, replacing the jar on the table.

"I should see how the little girl is." Aragorn replaced his shirt, yawning as he did so. "I will take one of my shirts for her, it should be softer than anything the servants have for her. We must order some proper clothes to be made for the child. Give the housekeeper some money for suitable materials, and tell them to purchase some toys for her to play with too."

"I will go, you ought to rest," Éowyn replied, kneeling to help him pull off his boots. Then much to Aragorn's surprise, she kissed his hand.

Deeply moved, he responded by placing his hand on her head in blessing. He had told Faramir the truth, when he said he loved her as his sister. Now it seemed, she did indeed treat him as a down to earth sister would a brother. He knew he needed a friend to tell him the truth in the midst of all
the fawning he encountered. He lay back against the pillows and closed his eyes.

Éowyn made her way to the kitchens. She found Elbeth had been freshly scrubbed and roughly clad in a flour sack. Underneath the grime, she turned out to be an attractive child, with long black hair and large grey eyes, framed by long lashes. With proper nourishment to fill out her stick-like limbs, she could grow up to be very beautiful. Éowyn was relieved that the little girl seemed recovered from her ordeal. The child was sitting beside the housekeeper who was feeding her bread and milk. The stern woman seemed to have softened in the face of the child's charm.

"How is she?" Éowyn asked.

"She wasn't very happy about being bathed, but hasn't she scrubbed up well?" the housekeeper replied, "amazing what soap and water can do! My sister will love her, that's for certain! She's a good appetite and my sister will like a child to appreciate her cooking!"

"Come here, Elbeth!" Éowyn said, moving in front of the fire, "I have a gift from the King himself."

Elbeth cautiously approached as Éowyn held up the shirt.

"Let me look at you, child, let's get this off you!"

"Why?"

"I am a healer. I need to see if you are hurt. Then you can put this on, which is nice and soft."

"What's a healer?"

"Someone who makes sick people better." Éowyn lifted the sack over the inquisitive child's head.

"I'm not sick!" Elbeth protested.

To Éowyn's dismay, the small body was covered by a colourful variety of bruises. Elbeth also had minor burns from the fire she had so narrowly escaped.

"Who hurt you, child?" Éowyn asked gently.

"Mummy or the men she was friends with hit me when I was bad. They said I was a nuisance. Granny only hit me when I didn't do what she said."

Éowyn's heart went out to the unfortunate little girl. She applied the same salve she had been using earlier on Aragorn to the child's hurts, though with considerably more tenderness. Elbeth wriggled beneath her touch.

"Please keep still!" Éowyn pleaded.

"I don't like that cold stuff and your fingers tickle!" Elbeth complained.

"All over now, you can put this on," Éowyn said briskly. She slipped the King's shirt over Elbeth's head and rolled up the far too long sleeves.

Although much too big, the shirt fit better than the flour sack, and was infinitely more comfortable, being made of soft cream linen embroidered with the white tree of Gondor.

"This is pretty!" Elbeth smiled, stroking the soft material with her small fingers.

"It belongs to the King himself, so you must take care of it," said Éowyn.
"I thought a king wore gold and silver clothes." The child sounded disappointed.

Éowyn laughed. "Don't you think he would itch if he did?" she said. "It would be worse than that flour sack!" She smiled at the child, then gave the housekeeper the money together with the King's instructions. "Be certain your sister spends all of it on the child, or she will feel the King's wrath!" Éowyn said as she handed over the money. "He is a most stern lord!"

"I will do as you say," the woman promised, smiling. "Though, I hardly think my Lord King can be as harsh as you say, he appears to have a soft heart!"

Éowyn smiled enigmatically. After bidding Elbeth to be good, she returned to her husband and Aragorn. They were both sleeping soundly. Rather to her surprise, Faramir was smiling in his sleep and murmuring her name. Satisfied all was well, she settled down beside him to rest before the evening meal.

000

The next day, Faramir awoke feeling refreshed. He was seemingly fully recovered from his ordeal of the day before.

Éowyn had no idea exactly how Aragorn's healing arts had helped Faramir, but was extremely grateful for his skills. It mattered not whether she understood, only that Aragorn was a wise and compassionate man. She took Windfola for a ride, happy in the knowledge that her husband and the King would take good care of one another in her absence.

Aragorn had decided to treat Faramir's shoulder again to help him endure the rigours of the long ride ahead on the morrow.

Though less apprehensive than before, Faramir still felt ill at ease. He settled himself on the footstool by Aragorn's chair. Reluctantly, he prepared to remove his shirt. How could he ever be comfortable having his scarred and puny frame scrutinised by one who looked so like his father, and in bright daylight too? He tensed at the very thought.

To Faramir's consternation, Aragorn slid from the chair and settled himself on the pelts, which served as a hearthrug, stretching his long legs out by the fire.

"Sire, you should not be lower than I!" Faramir protested, moving to sit on the floor beside him.

"Nor should I be higher and please do not be so formal in private!" Aragorn replied. "The more comfortable you are for this, the better. I can see you are ill at ease and desire to ease your mind as best I may. This house does not have a couch and the bed is too high, so the floor will have to suffice. It is as good a place as any to treat your hurts. I need you to relax, reach out with your mind, and accept what healing I can give. Elven healing is unique. It is only successful if both healer and patient want it to be."

Faramir nodded and slowly unlaced his shirt. Aragorn was right; he was indeed more comfortable like this.

"Leave your shirt on if you wish." Aragorn protested, "Ideally, I should massage your shoulders, but alas, my fingers are too painful today, so I will do that another time for you."

Faramir tried to pull his shirt aside to simply bare his shoulder before realising he was acting foolishly. Aragorn had after all, seen his scarred body before without deriding him. Rather to his own surprise and greatly to the King's, he pulled the shirt over his head. He sat beside the King and tried to relax and open his mind, reaching out to receive as Aragorn's hands hovered over his
injury. Warmth and energy flowed from the King's hands into his damaged shoulder. Faramir felt
the pain and stiffness flow away. "You do not receive my pain when you take it away, do you?"
Faramir asked in sudden consternation.

Aragorn laughed, "I fear I am not that noble! Healing can weary me sometimes, but it causes no
pain and gives me great satisfaction"

Faramir realised that the King was almost fully recovered when he felt the full strength of his
healing power. "I have not felt so well in a long time, as when you treated me the other night," he
remarked.

"The Elven healing touch stimulates the major organs within the body and aids breathing and the
flow of blood," Aragorn explained. "That is why I did not only massage your shoulder the other
night."

Faramir nodded his understanding. It had puzzled him why Aragorn had treated all of his upper
body, but had been too soothed by the healing touch to desire to protest.

The King then moved behind him and placed his hands a few inches over the raw welts on
Faramir's back.

"That feels so much better!" Faramir sighed.

"No honest man should be beaten. I have ordered flogging be reserved for the very worse
criminals," said Aragorn.

"Only once, when I was a Captain, did I order a man to be flogged," Faramir said, shuddering at
the memory. "It still pains me to think of it.

"I am sure you had good cause," Aragorn replied.

"He committed rape," Faramir said.

"A heinous crime indeed!" Seeing the younger man was troubled by the memory, Aragorn
changed the subject. "It will be good to be home," he said, "I miss Arwen so much! There, that is
all I can do for today. I will treat you again when we return to Minas Tirith."

"You must greatly regret coming here," Faramir replied, donning his shirt and then offering his
hand to help Aragorn up from the floor.

"I very much regret the pain we both suffered," Aragorn replied, "Apart from that, have not these
weeks been special for all three of us? We will return with some memories to cherish."

Faramir looked at the man, who until recently, he had loved and feared in equal measure. Over the
last weeks had come to look upon him almost as the father he would have liked to have. His
thoughts turned to his wedding night with Éowyn and he flushed slightly.

"Yes," he agreed, "they were very special."

Aragorn impulsively embraced him. To Faramir's amazement he found himself returning the
gesture. So much had changed, and all for the better.

Later that day Faramir sought out Elbeth. Much to his relief, he found she was quickly adapting to
her new surroundings. He found himself wondering who her father might be. Boromir had been a
frequent visitor to the Hunting Lodge. Although not inclined towards the ties of marriage, his
brother had always had a keen eye for the fairer sex. Maybe Hanna had been attractive before so
many misfortunes had befallen her and addled her wits? Faramir chided himself inwardly for such wishful thinking, all too well aware how much he yearned for some part of his brother to remain.

He was determined, however, to ensure Elbeth was well looked after. He wondered if he should take her back with them, but when he entered the kitchens, he found her contentedly cuddled on the lap of a plump motherly woman, whom the housekeeper introduced as her sister. The Steward reluctantly concluded she would be happier with her, rather than in a strange environment where she would have to conform to the rigours of Court life and endless speculation about her origins.

"I want the child to be treated kindly and provided with ample food and clothing, which I will pay for," he told the woman." My lady and I intend to visit her sometimes to see how she fares."

"She will be as my own daughter to me," the housekeeper's sister promised.

Faramir handed Elbeth a sweet honey cake, freshly baked that morning, together with some ribbons Éowyn had given him for her.

Elbeth smiled at him, the oddly familiar grey eyes now sparkling and happy. Faramir stole one last wistful look at her. He consoled himself that now he had reached a proper understanding with Éowyn that maybe soon they would have children of their own.

TBC

A/N "A Time to Reap" is now complete and "Healing the Healer" will be updated soon.
The characters are the property of the Tolkien profit has been, nor will be made from this story.

Homecoming

As expected, two days later the guards returned to escort the King and his friends back to Minas Tirith.

Aragorn had still not decided what to do with the Hunting Lodge. He had known much suffering there, but also found friendship that he had been yearning for. He assured the servants that whatever was decided, they would be provided for. Aragorn told the Housekeep to keep Elbeth indoors when they departed. He had no wish for the child to be distressed by the sight of her mother being bound, and fastened to a burly guard. Aragorn had ordered that she be taken to the asylum just outside the city, where she would be kept secured and cared for until she regained her sanity.

Still recovering from their injuries, Aragorn and Faramir travelled slowly and stopped frequently. If the Captain was surprised at the leisurely pace, he was too well disciplined to remark upon it. Hanna endured the journey with ill grace. She ranted and screamed wild accusations, which grew ever more preposterous.

They were relieved when they reached their destination and she could be given over to the care of the Chief Warden of the Asylum. Aragorn instructed him to keep her under careful watch. He added her desired that she be well fed and housed and treated with kindness.

As Aragorn bade the Warden farewell and turned to depart, Hanna screamed at them, "I curse you, false King of Gondor! I curse you and your worthless Steward! May you know only pain and sorrow!" Her mood then changed again and she laughed wildly as the doors shut behind her.

Faramir shuddered.

"Pay no heed to her ravings, the poor woman has lost her wits!" Aragorn told him reassuringly. "Let us hope that she will recover with proper care."

By late afternoon, they came in sight of Minas Tirith. Faramir's heart leapt to see it again. However many times he returned to the city of his birth, he always felt the same thrill on the first sight of the White Tower.

"As soon as we have rested, join me in your father's old apartments and we shall treat our scars." Aragorn told Faramir as they arrived in the Courtyard of the Fountain, where the White Tree was already covered with fresh green leaves.
Faramir hesitated slightly and then looked at the tree. The sturdy sapling, alive with new growth marked a new beginning. Faramir realised that he too, had the chance to heal the scars of his past. He smiled his acceptance to the King, "Yes, sire, I will await your summons." Faramir said, reverting back to formality now they were in a public place.

Éowyn took her husband's arm and they prepared to go their separate ways.

"My Lord Steward!" Aragorn caught Faramir's arm before he could go, "Thank you for everything!" He drew the younger man close and embraced him, before repeating the gesture with Éowyn, "I will see you again very soon, my friends."

"It almost feels strange without him!" Éowyn mused as they reached their own rooms voicing Faramir's unspoken thoughts as well.

"I never thought I would hear you say that!" Faramir replied, "I am so glad everything is now well between us all."

Éowyn's reply was to kiss him passionately. Faramir joyfully responded.

Arwen was eagerly awaiting her husband's return. She watched him arrive from her window before hurrying down to greet him. She welcomed Aragorn home with a warm smile. Both were far too well controlled to show the true depth of their emotions in public.

Aragorn was delighted to see how well and happy Arwen appeared. A slight fullness of her figure proclaimed her impending motherhood to a keen observer such as her husband. He felt it served only to enhance her beauty.

"Are you well, my love?" Aragorn asked her as soon as they were in their private apartments. He kissed her warmly, before enfolding her in a close embrace.

"I have never felt better," Arwen smiled at him happily. "I have such wonderful news to tell you too. My brothers and grandfather have decided against sailing yet. They are staying at Imladris! They are out riding at the moment, but should be back in time for dinner. Did you find what you sought while you were away?"

"Faramir and Éowyn are now my good friends," Aragorn told her. "Our plans went awry when some ruffians attacked us, but it all served to bring us together in friendship."

Arwen looked alarmed and studied him more closely. "Were you badly hurt, my beloved? You do look rather pale. And your poor hands! Whatever has happened to them?"

"I took a slight arrow wound, but I am fully recovered now. I also helped rescue a child from a fire, which is a long story." Aragorn assured her. "There is nothing to worry about. I just need to rest and bathe." He intended to tell her the whole story one day, but not until after their child was born. Usually she could sense his thoughts, but being with child had blunted her ability to read his mind. He missed their mental closeness, but was glad now that he need not distress her while she carried his child. The loss of the ability to read thoughts was maybe nature's way of protecting the unborn child by keeping the mother calm. "I must change from these travel stained clothes!" Aragorn said, "I must reek as foul as in my days as a Ranger!"

He retired to his dressing room, leaving Arwen to summon a servant to bring light refreshments. He shed his travelling clothes, together with the thick bandaging that Éowyn had insisted he wear to protect his freshly healed wounds. They were sore from being chafed when he rode, but none had reopened, much to his relief.

Once Aragorn and Arwen seated together enjoying a light meal, she proceeded to tell him
delightedly about her brothers' plans for their future at Rivendell. "We must go and visit them there," she said. "We could invite Faramir and Éowyn too. I thought the hunting lodge was just the place for you to befriend them! I hope you all huddled together on one of those huge beds and talked well into the night by the fire!"

Although Aragorn was loth to tell her everything until after the baby was born, he wanted to confess immediately about Éowyn's presence in the same bed to prevent any possible future misunderstanding. He flushed slightly. "Yes, we did spend our nights together," he confided. "When I was wounded, Éowyn needed to stay close by me lest her healing skills were needed. Faramir was next to me while she slept the other side of him. How did you guess? I swear nothing improper took place."

"You have no need to tell me that, beloved, I know you would never be unfaithful to me, "Arwen replied, tenderly kissing his lips. "My ladies have told me about the men's traditions when on hunting trips. I assumed Éowyn, as a daughter of the Mark, would be untroubled. I was very much hoping Faramir would have the chance to hear you snoring. I knew he would not be so in awe of you afterwards!"

"I do not snore! " Aragorn protested.

"You do! But I still missed you beside me!" Arwen replied.

"I missed you too!" His lips met hers in a passionate kiss. They drew together in a close embrace. He flinched very slightly as his wounds were still tender.

"Your wound!" she exclaimed, tears filling her gentle eyes, "Let me see!"

He smiled at her reassuringly. Already prepared for this eventuality, he pulled his shirt aside just enough for her to see the almost healed arrow wound, while keeping the other scars covered.

"See, it is almost mended!" he reassured her, "Éowyn treated it most skilfully. It was worth being wounded, since it caused her to soften towards me, while Faramir lost his fear, when he saw that I am just a Man like he! Some ruffians, who bore a grudge against us from the war, attacked us. They were soon despatched, though. I thought when I had rested and eaten, to treat Faramir's old battle scars together with my own with the Elven healing remedy."

Aragorn held his breath as his Queen traced gentle fingers across the scar, hoping she would not investigate further. To his great relief, she seemed satisfied and allowed him to pull his shirt back in place.

"My silk shirt saved me from serious injury," he explained, "We must see about equipping all our soldiers with silk shirts to protect them in battle."

"A wise idea!" Arwen conceded and then to Aragorn's bewilderment suddenly laughed.

"I was thinking about Faramir," she explained, "I should love to see his face when you have the treatment for your scars together. He is so reserved and shy, quite unlike Elves!"

They ate their light meal, and then simply sat together, the King's head resting on his lady's shoulder. There had been times during the last weeks when Aragorn had feared he would never see her again in this life. He savoured her presence more than ever now. The restlessness that had plagued him had disappeared and he felt whole. He had not only his beloved wife, but would soon be a father too. Also, he now had good friends to experience the many different facets of human love with. Arwen had been right when she had told him that love was like a rainbow, which needed all the colours to complete it.
Faramir began to feel slightly apprehensive while he rested. He knew it was time he joined Aragorn. He very much wished now that he had asked the King what he planned to do to treat his scars.

Éowyn grabbed his hands and pulled up him from the couch where they had been resting, in a mock show of strength. "Go!" she ordered. "Accept the King’s help. I know how much those scars pain you."

"I would gladly be rid of them." he replied. "But I have no idea what this treatment entails!"

"Some sort of salve, I would surmise." she replied, "What else could it be? It probably stings somewhat, or smells unpleasant. Now go to him, before he thinks you have changed your mind."

Aragorn was already waiting in the rooms, which had been occupied in the past by the Ruling Steward. He had ordered the huge sunken bath to be filled with hot water.

The King now used these rooms and he would sometimes sleep here when he craved solitude. It was customary for high-ranking couples, each to have their own apartments. Much as Aragorn loved his wife, there were times he needed to be alone, as did she.

The King’s wounds still pained him. Aragorn was not greatly looking forward to what was to come, especially Faramir's reaction. He supposed he should have told him what the treatment entailed. He knew, though if he had done so, his Steward would most likely have firmly refused to be healed unless ordered. He would never have abused his authority to force him to be treated.

Aragorn had felt drawn to Faramir from their first meeting, seeing him as the son a man of his age might have hoped to be blessed with. He had hoped at first simply to be on cordial terms with the man whose rule he had succeeded, but had gradually grown to love the younger man as a father would a son. Aragorn yearned to see Faramir well and as happy in his new life as his lord.

Going to the chest in the bedroom, where he kept his healing supplies, Aragorn took out a jar of a brownish green power, which he sprinkled liberally into the bath water. While waiting for it to dissolve, he selected a jar of salve and placed it on the bedside table. At his request, the servants had brought large quantities of towels, some of which he spread over the bed. He then returned to the bathing chamber carrying two bathing robes, which he placed, folded, on the top of the steps. The bath was now ready. Still moving a little stiffly, he undressed and climbed into the tub, gritting his teeth against the stinging sensation he knew he would feel.

After a few moments, he heard footsteps, followed by a tentative knock on the door. "I am here Faramir, come in!" Aragorn called.

Faramir obeyed, feeling somewhat puzzled. He had expected the King to be waiting with a salve or a potion of some sort, not that he knew much about Elven healing techniques. He slowly entered the bathing chamber, and stood at the top of the steps, gaping with astonishment at the sight that greeted him.

TBC
Mud! Mud! Glorious mud

Chapter Notes

Mud! Mud! Glorious mud

Chapter Twenty-One - Mud! Mud! Glorious mud

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate

Mud! Mud! Glorious mud!
Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood.
So, follow me, follow, down to the hollow,
And there let us wallow in glorious mud. - Michael Flanders - The Hippopotamus Song.

Aragorn was lying submerged in the tub, which seemed to be filled with a thick gooey substance that looked as unpleasant as mud scraped from the bottom of the Anduin! "After our recent experiences, I probably have as many scars as you do, so it seemed sensible that we should both be treated at the same time." Aragorn explained, looking somewhat uncomfortable at the strange spectacle he knew he must be presenting to his Steward.

Faramir eyed the tub doubtfully, suddenly wishing feeling sorely tempted to flee. He knew, though, that was no way to behave when offered help by his friend and King. He had never been tempted to run from a battlefield. This, however, was an entirely different matter!

"Hurry up and undress, Faramir, or the water will get cold." Aragorn said, trying to sound as if this were an everyday situation for them both. "The bath is large enough for three or four, never mind two."

"I know. Boromir and I would be allowed to bathe together here sometimes, when we were both very young. I remember how we liked to play with our toy boats in the water." Faramir said, starting to ramble to cover his discomfort. "It was such hard work for the servants to carry the buckets, we would save them the trouble of doing it twice."

"Come on then, or the mud will congeal. You will have to undress for the treatment to work. Your clothes would only stick to your skin!" Aragorn lifted a mud-encrusted arm from the depths, to emphasise the point.

"What is that stuff?" Faramir protested, looking dismayed at the prospect, both of disrobing in front of his sovereign and being covered in the ghastly looking mixture. "I am not certain if I wish to be immersed in it."

"It is a special mixture of salts distilled from the hot springs at Rivendell, quite harmless and clean, despite appearances. Whatever would Éowyn say if you changed your mind now?" Aragorn's tone was more teasing than commanding but the Steward knew better than to disobey.

Flushing uncomfortably, Faramir slowly started to pull off his outer layers of clothing, chiding himself for being foolish to feel so ill at ease. A painful memory resurfaced of his father coming
into the bathing chamber just before he went to become a soldier and eyeing him scornfully, before telling him that his comrades would laugh at his puny frame. The humiliation had haunted him ever since. Now another lord stood in his father's place in this same room. Faramir was loth to be shamed before him too. He undressed down to his drawers, and stood shivering at the top of the steps, his arms crossed over his chest. "Can I not keep my drawers on?" he pleaded, "The scars are all on my chest and back."

Aragorn shook his head, though his eyes showed his compassion. "I fear not; for if you did, when you eventually removed them, your skin would come away with the cloth. That would be far more unpleasant for you. Just think of all the salves, either Éowyn or myself would have to apply! You have no need to worry; I have been a healer since long before you were born and have seen all manner of men unclothed."

Faramir still hesitated, fingering the waistband of his drawers.

"Come on!" Aragorn coaxed, "I thought you would be more comfortable if we did this together. I would still need to be with you if we went in separately, since you have no knowledge of the Elven treatments. I assure you there is nothing to fear, it will sting a little at first, but after that feel quite pleasant. I feared if I told you what the treatment entailed, you would never agree. I will not order you, but it grieves me to see you in constant pain when this would heal you."

Faramir looked down at his heavily scarred chest and shoulder and sighed deeply. "Very well then," he conceded, "I know I am being foolish." Mentally, he berated himself. Aragorn had always treated his Steward's scrawny, scarred body with kindness and compassion.

Aragorn displayed a sudden and tactful interest in the stylised patterns of the White Tree surrounded by stars, which decorated the bathing chamber.

Faramir reluctantly let his final garment slip to the floor. Taking a deep breath, he slid into the bath and crouched down in the mud. To his surprise, Aragorn was correct, the mixture felt quite pleasant.

"Good, you have joined me!" Aragorn smiled encouragingly, only turning to face his Steward once he was partially submerged in the mud. "Sit down and lean back, you need to be completely submerged apart from your head. I fear it will sting somewhat. You may feel a drawing sensation, which will soon pass. Take deep breaths and try to relax."

Faramir obediently leaned back. The scarred areas of his flesh suddenly smarted as if salt were being rubbed into a raw wound. He gasped. Aragorn reached across and clasped his arm in a comforting grip until the pain subsided. After a few moments had elapsed, he suddenly thought how odd they must look, almost like two disembodied heads. Rather to his surprise, he burst out laughing.

"What is so funny?" Aragorn enquired. Faramir rarely laughed, and he had not expected him too in a situation, which even he found somewhat discomforting.

"We must look like two pig's heads in a cooking pot!" Faramir chortled.

Aragorn suddenly saw the image clearly in his mind's eye and burst out laughing too. The sound echoed merrily around the tiled chamber. When their mirth subsided they lapsed into companionable silence. Faramir discovered once the stinging sensation abated, he actually felt quite comfortable. The mineral rich mud was warm and soothing. They could hardly have been more covered, were they swathed in blankets!

Once the mixture started to cool, Aragorn said, "We must get out before it goes cold and sets with
us in it."

"I was enjoying it," Faramir sighed, much to the King's amusement.

I told you it was not as bad as it looked, did I not?" he grinned.

"As always, my King was correct!" Faramir teased.

"I will get out first." Aragorn said. "This was just the first part of the treatment. There is a robe for you to put on, so when you are ready, join me in the other room."

Still covered from neck to toes in mud, Aragorn climbed out of the tub.

Faramir reluctantly scrambled out of the relaxing bath, donned his robe and followed Aragorn into the adjoining bedchamber. "What do we do now?" he asked, when Aragorn settled himself on the vast bed. "Will this robe not stick to my skin?" He looked at it doubtfully.

"You have no need to worry, it is on top of the mud now," the King explained, gesturing Faramir to sit beside him. "Just try to rest, while the servants clean away the mud and fill the bath with fresh water. You may feel rather light headed, which is to be expected, but it will pass before the clean water is ready." Aragorn lay back and closed his eyes. This was probably the most uncomfortable part of the treatment. The mixture now felt tight as it dried against his skin. His head had already started to spin. Faramir was faring no better. This will soon pass," Aragorn reassured his Steward, "As soon as you feel able to sit up, drink some water. This treatment drains away impurities from the body."

Faramir slowly reached for a cup of water, which had been placed conveniently on a table near the bedside. "How long will it take?" he asked.

Another hour or so," Aragorn replied "Elvish treatments tend to be rather slow, as Elves have an eternity to carry them out in!"

The servants bustled to and fro carrying buckets laboriously emptying and cleaning the tub before refilling it with clean water.

"I think our bath is ready now," Aragorn said as he sat up, stretching his long limbs as lithely as a cat. He helped Faramir to his feet. After ascertaining they were both free of any light-headedness, they returned to the bathing chamber.

"Just plunge straight in now and rinse off the mud," the King told him. He pulled off his robe and climbed thankfully into the clean water.

Faramir followed, this time forgetting his shyness at the weird spectacle he and his equally mud covered sovereign presented. "I wonder what my father would have said if he could see us now?" Faramir laughed. We look like a pair of Uruk Hai in his bath!"

"Not for much longer!" Aragorn chortled, ducking his Steward under the water. Faramir emerged spluttering and promptly dunked the King in return. They guffawed like two schoolboys at the absurdity of it all.

As soon as the mud was washed off, they swiftly climbed out of the tub and swathed themselves in towels

Faramir glanced down at his chest only to be disappointed to see that the scars remained. "It has not worked!" he lamented sadly.
"You would not make a good Elf, you are in such a hurry!" Aragorn teased. "We need to apply a special salve made from rosehips. It will then take about three days for the scars to fade. They will not disappear completely, as Men lack the healing ability of the Eldar, but they should fade eventually to near nothingness, and will not pain you any longer." Aragorn slipped on a fresh bathing robe on over his towel and picked up the jar of salve. "Lie on the bed and let me see the scars. This may sting a little!"

Faramir did as he was told and lay down on his back,discarding one towel, while draping the second round his hips. Aragorn smeared his fingertips with an orange hued ointment, and rubbed it sparingly into the scars across Faramir's chest and shoulders. The old wounds suddenly felt very painful. Faramir had to grit his teeth at the stinging sensation. He then felt a soothing warmth from Aragorn's fingertips, which lessened the discomfort considerably.

"Now turn over so that I may treat your back," Aragorn said.

Faramir gritted his teeth again and took deep breaths as the treatment progressed.

At last Aragorn said." You can dress now. I have left some suitable garments on the chair for you. Be careful not to bathe the scars for the next few days. You might itch or feel slightly unwell, but that means the treatment is working."

Faramir found loose undergarments of softest linen and a loose fitting velvet robe laid out for him. While he was dressing, Aragorn started applying the salve to his own almost healed wounds across his chest, legs and belly. "These would only upset Arwen if she saw them," he said." I no wish to be reminded of Fennas and Calardan for the rest of my days."

Faramir could only marvel at how well the King endured the stinging ointment.

Aragorn rolled over to lie face downwards. "Will you apply the salve to my back, please?" he asked.

Faramir hesitated. "I am no healer," he said doubtfully. "I might hurt you."

"I chose you to do this rather than someone from the Houses of Healing as I trust you," Aragorn assured him.

"I would never betray your trust, mellon nîn," Faramir replied picking up the jar to do his friend and lord's bidding, thinking it had been yet another act of kindness to undergo the treatment alongside his Steward, rather than merely administering it.

As the salve stung, Aragorn instinctively wriggled away.

"Keep still!" Faramir ordered in mock indignation. "Or shall I fetch Êowyn?"

Aragorn laughed, pondering on just how much things had changed over the past weeks. His original plan may have gone almost fatally awry, but he had succeeded very well in helping Faramir lose his fear of him.

"Stop wriggling!" Faramir ordered sternly. "You are making this very difficult!"

Aragorn grinned; he was enjoying seeing a different side to his Steward and discovering the essence of the young man who was becoming like a son to him.

To be concluded
A Happy New Year

Happy New Year

The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate

Three days later

"The King is here to see you my lady," a servant announced to Éowyn.

Although it was still early, the Princess of Ithilien was already up and dressed. Smiling, she rose to her feet to greet Aragorn.

"How is Faramir feeling this morning? I hope the treatment worked for him?" Aragorn enquired of her after they had exchanged greetings.

"I don't know yet." she replied. "He went straight to his dressing room when he awoke and is still in there. How I wish I could have seen you both in the mud!" she laughed.

Aragorn thought how happy and contented she looked now, almost glowing with well being.

"We were not a pretty sight at all, I assure you!" Aragorn grinned back. "Now can you call Faramir? I should like to see him before I join Arwen for breakfast."

Faramir kept the door of dressing room firmly shut. As was his custom, he had donned his drawers and breeches under his nightshirt. Today he was loth to shed the garment. He took a deep breath, trying to summon up the courage to see whether or not his body was still heavily scarred. Could the promised miracle have taken place? The lack of the constant pain, which had plagued him for so long, suggested that it might well have done.

Suddenly, there was a tap on the door, which opened before he could say anything. His wife entered, closely followed by Aragorn.

"I have come to see how you are faring, my friend," Aragorn said.

"I feel well, thank you" Faramir replied.

Grinning, Éowyn turned to the King "Did the mud bath work for you?" she asked in her usual outspoken fashion. "Let us see you first!"

Faramir found himself holding his breath while Aragorn good-naturedly, albeit rather shyly, removed his tunic and shirt. The ugly red marks of three days ago were now so faint that had they not known, Faramir and Éowyn would not have noticed them.

Éowyn circled the King, gazing intently at his now unblemished back. To her great relief, even the scar caused when she had so roughly tugged away the bandages had faded to near nothingness. "That is amazing!" she exclaimed, "You can get dressed again now!"
Aragorn struggled to refrain from bursting out laughing; no one else, save maybe the garrulous Ioreth ever spoke to him like that, now he was King. He found it oddly refreshing and hoped she would never change. It was good to have friends who would treat him as one of them, rather than as Elessar Telcontar, High King of Gondor and Amor.

"Now it is your turn!" Aragorn said, smiling at Faramir encouragingly.

The Steward's fingers were suddenly all thumbs as he tried to unlace his nightshirt. Ëowyn went to assist her husband, and before he could protest, she had whisked the garment over his head.

"That has worked very well, just as I knew it would!" Aragorn exclaimed delightedly.

Faramir finally dared to look down at his chest and shoulders. He gasped with delight when he realised the painful scars, which had plagued him for so long, had faded to almost nothing.

Aragorn moved behind him. "The scars on your back have faded, you no longer bear any disfigurements, mellon nîn," he said gently." And I give you my word, I will never let anyone lay a finger on you again!"

"Thank you so much," Faramir impulsively embraced his King.

"You are even more handsome now than before, I shall have to watch you with all the court beauties!" Ëowyn teased, as she too embraced Aragorn.

The King smiled, and returned their embraces, he had found the rainbow he sought, and it was filled now with all the colours of love and friendship. "It is a pleasure to see you healed, my friend," Aragorn replied. "I had also come to invite you both to a New Year supper with Arwen, her brothers, and myself.

"We gladly accept." Ëowyn replied while Faramir smiled agreement.

That evening, Aragorn sat at the head of the dining table, with Arwen and Faramir seated either side of him. "Your happiness for the coming year, my friends!" he said, proposing a toast.

"Your happiness as well!" they replied, raising their glasses.

Faramir smiled happily, secure in the love of his wife and his King. For the first time in his life, he had cast off the shadow of his father's disapproval.

Ëowyn looked into the eyes of her handsome husband and rejoiced that he loved her. She was so thankful that she had never sent that letter to her brother, or by now she would be back in Edoras, living off Ëomer's charity, rather than enjoying her husband's love and the friendship of the King and Queen.

Aragorn looked round the table at his beloved and beautiful wife, her brothers; his dear friends from childhood, his Steward, whom he had grown to love as dearly as a son, and Ëowyn who had become as a sister to him. This New Year he had so much to celebrate. Gondor was at peace; he was surrounded by the love of family and friends, and Valar willing, he would be a father before the year ended.

Clasping hands they wished each other a Happy New Year.

The End.

A/N This is the final chapter of my revised version of "Shadow and Thought." .You can see read
the old version if you follow the link on my profile page. I hope I have managed to improve the story and am interested in what readers think.

"Coastal Tales", "Alphabet of Arda" and "Out of the Depths" will continue soon. Also look out for a special story to mark the anniversary of the death of Boromir.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!