Burden of Guilt

by lindahoyland

Summary

A violent and tragic misunderstanding with Eomer threatens Aragorn and Faramir's friendship and the Steward's very life. Meanwhile Arwen prepares to give birth and Aragorn is faced with the loss of all whom he loves. Rated for violence, childbirth and dark themes.

Notes

Burden of Guilt
The King and the Steward

Burden of Guilt

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema with the exception of Caranthir who appears by kind permission of Evendim and some minor characters of my own invention. This story was written for pleasure and not for financial gain.

A/N I generally follow book universe but see the faces of the film actors as I write, although I picture Faramir and Boromir as having dark hair and grey eyes like Tolkien described.

This story is sequel to my other stories but especially "Shadow and Thought" also on this site. It is not essential to have read the previous stories, but they should be more enjoyable if read as a series.

The events in this story take place a few months after the events in "Shadow and Thought". Aragorn and Faramir have become close friends, Faramir and Eowyn are now happily married and Aragorn and Arwen are expecting a child.

The story concentrates mainly on Aragorn and Faramir but also features Arwen, Eowyn and Eomer and to a lesser degree Legolas, Gimli, Ioreth, Imrahil, Damrod and Caranthir.

Warning –Like "Shadow and Thought", this story will be very dark with angst, torture, violence, childbirth and injuries, so please only read if you enjoy this genre and are not disturbed by it. The first 10 chapters though are light hearted and full of humour and the "T" rating applies only from Chapter 11 onwards. There will be a great deal of both physical and emotional pain involved for some of the characters.

Extra warnings will be given before certain chapters.

Part One - Before the Storm - Chapters 1-10

Part Two - Birth, Death and Resurrection - Chapters 11-29

Part Three - The Gulf Widens Chapter s - 30-39

Part Four - Healing and Reconciliation- Chapters 40 -

"My beloved wife, I am a burden to you, the King and to Gondor, so I shall take my leave of you.” Aragorn read, turning almost as pale as Eowyn. He sat down heavily beside her on the couch.

After taking a deep breath, he continued, noting the scrawled writing, unmistakably Faramir's but so unlike his usual neat script, "You will be far happier without me during what little time I have left as I know that without the King’s treatments I will die soon and would not have him trouble himself over one such as I.

I am a failure as a husband and Steward and would make a far worse father to our child than
I am a failure as a husband and Steward and would make a far worse father to our child than ever Denethor was to me.

Once I am gone, you and your brother will again be accord, as will Rohan and Gondor. I alone must bear the guilt for all that has happened and my actions can never be forgiven.

Forget me and find a good man worthy of your love and enjoy the happy life you deserve and can only enjoy if I am not part of it.

Please show this to my King and ask him to appoint a new Steward, a man worthy to serve Gondor and her people. I am so sorry that I let him down after all the kindness he showed me. Tell him I loved him dearly. He was not only my Lord, but also the father I never had, the brother I lost and the best and kindest of friends. Had I but been worthy, I would have gladly served him until my life's end.

Farewell, dearest and best of wives! Please tell our child I loved it

Your unworthy husband, Faramir."

Overcome by emotion, Aragorn buried his face in his hands.

"The poor, confused, honourable fool!" he gasped, quickly collecting himself "I must find him and quickly! How can he hope to survive in the wild in his fragile state of health? Did he take anything?"

"Nothing seems to be missing, though I assume he must have taken Iavas." Eowyn replied, "However did he even find the strength to mount his horse?"

Chapter 37

Twomonths earlier

August Year 1 of the Fourth Age

The Council Chamber in Minas Tirith.

The Council Chamber had recently become known for heated debates as King Aragorn Elessar, though firm in his decisions, always encouraged his Council to have their say before pronouncing his final judgement upon a matter.

It had taken the Lords of Gondor some time to become accustomed to the new regime as Lord Denethor; the Last Ruling Steward had strongly discouraged debate, especially in the latter years of his rule.

Today the debate had become surprisingly heated when Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth had raised the matter of the celebrations to follow the impending birth of a child and heir to the King and Queen

"How do we even know that a human and an elf are able to produce offspring?" argued the young Lord of Lossarnach.

Aragorn's eyes flashed dangerously although he remained outwardly calm." My own existence is proof as my ancestress was Luthien the Fair. "He replied.

"But that is so long ago, the story could be but a myth!" Lord Lossarnach refused to be silenced.

"I trust you are not making accusations against my Queen's virtue." Aragorn's voice was icy.
"None of us would, my Lord King but how can we know that the child is your true heir and has
not been smuggled into the Queen's bedchamber?" Lord Lamedon jumped to his feet and joined
in the argument.

"That is absurd! " Prince Imrahil rose to speak. "Not only are you questioning the honour of our
Sovereign but also forgetting that under the ancient laws of Gondor, during the Queen's
confinement, no one may enter her apartments on pain of death!"

"We know that." This time, the Lord of Lebennin was on his feet. "Yet a babe could still be
smuggled in prior to the confinement!"

The other Lords all started to argue loudly about this possibility.

Aragorn, usually good-natured, was by now white with barely suppressed fury, his hand reaching
for his sword hilt.

Faramir, Prince of Ithilien and Steward of Gondor, leapt to his feet." Silence, My Lords!" he
thundered.

They were silent. Faramir, once the most quiet and self effacing of the Council had grown
increasingly in confidence over the last few months and now was a force to be reckoned with,
second only to the King himself.

"Cease this bickering over what should be a joyous event! " Faramir said sternly." The birth of the
heir to the throne should be witnessed then no man might question the babe's legitimacy."

The Council murmured their assent.

"Well, spoken, Lord Faramir .I would ask no further questions were that so." Lord Lossarnach
said. "I am certain the other Lords would be of the same mind."

"How dare you make such a suggestion, Lord Faramir, I would not have my Queen subjected to
such humiliation! No man save myself shall ever enter her bedchamber at any time and the birth of
our child shall be attended solely by her ladies and midwives! The dignity of my wife is
sacrosanct." Aragorn advanced towards Faramir, his eyes blazing, his voice like thunder.

A lesser man than Faramir would have quailed but the Steward calmly held his ground.

" I agree my Liege. " he said, meeting Aragorn's eyes without flinching." I therefore propose that
my wife, the Lady Eowyn, Princess of Ithilien be present at the birth."

Aragorn's tense features relaxed into a smile.

"That would be acceptable to both the Queen and myself. "he said." Does the Council agree?"

"That is a good choice." said the Lord of Lossarnach. "We all know that should his Majesty die
without an heir that the rule of Gondor would revert to Lord Faramir and his heirs, so who better
to bear witness than the Steward's wife?"

No voice was raised in dissent and as no one raised any other matters to be dealt with, the Council
was dismissed.

Faramir and Aragorn left the Council Chamber and together walked back to the Citadel for
luncheon.

Faramir had never been as contented as during these last few months as for the first time in his life
he felt confident, loved and secure in both his public and private life. In public, he bore his responsibilities well and had the respect of his peers while in private he basked in the love and approval of his wife and his King. Now to make his happiness complete so it seemed, Eowyn was with child, and he hoped to become a father sometime in mid winter.

The King had over the past months healed all his old hurts, and although he still grieved for Boromir, Aragorn had become as a brother to him and also a father figure, who gave him the love and approval that Denethor had always denied him.

Aragorn was happy too, Gondor was finally at peace, he was happily married to the woman of his dreams and looking forward to the birth of his heir and he was enjoying seeing Faramir blossom from the almost broken man he had first met into a confident Steward of Gondor and much loved friend whose company he greatly enjoyed.

The ordeal they had both suffered a few months before had served to forge a very deep and loving bond of true friendship between them when before, although Faramir had always loved his King he had been too nervous to enjoy his company.

Faramir was laughing." I surprised you then, Aragorn, I think, the look on your face!"

Aragorn jostled him playfully. "Were you not afraid I would cut off your head, my wily Steward?"

"I had to be convincing. You should know that by now! " Faramir said in mock indignation. "We had no idea the Council would have such strange notions about the baby's parentage but as they had no idea that Arwen had requested Eowyn to be present, that seemed a good way to appear to satisfy them!"

"You were born to be a politician, Faramir!" Aragorn said, delighted at the confidence his Steward now displayed. "Whatever would I do without you?"

"I have no plans to go anywhere." Faramir replied, " I promised at the Hunting Lodge not to leave you and I meant it!"

"I am glad to hear that!" Aragorn replied, cuffing him playfully, "You and I we need each other if the Council is not to drive us mad!"

They made a good team and would often appear to oppose each other in order to get what they needed from the sometimes stubborn lords who sat on the Council. As few knew the depth of their friendship, the tactic usually worked to their mutual advantage.

They had now reached the Royal Apartments and Faramir was about to leave him to go to his own rooms" Would you like to go swimming this afternoon with Legolas, Gimli and myself while the weather is so fine?" Aragorn enquired.

Faramir hesitated; he enjoyed swimming but had only ever done so alone with Boromir.

Although he felt more confident, now his scars had faded, he was embarrassed at the idea of disrobing completely in front of others.

Aragorn, guessing the reason for his hesitation, added. "I know of a pleasant secluded spot and there is no need to disrobe completely. Given the positions we hold we have to be careful how we are seen."

Faramir smiled that the other could read him so well." I think I will then, thank you. It will be pleasant to relax for a while away from the paperwork. My new secretary insists on tidying
everything away which means it takes twice as long to find whatever I am working on!"

Aragorn smiled ruefully. "Why are good secretaries or rather secretaries that suit us so hard to find? I am glad you will come with us later, the water should be most refreshing at this time of year." The King clapped Faramir on the shoulder then added "Then afterwards maybe you would dine with Arwen and myself if Eowyn agrees?"

"I am sure she would be delighted, especially if you told her about this morning’s events!" Faramir replied, as he took leave of the King. He hummed contentedly to himself as he went in search of his wife.

TBC
Legolas and Gimli were paying a brief visit to Minas Tirith on their way to visit the Elf's home to Eryn Lasgalen. As they were due to depart on the morrow; Aragorn had invited them to join the swimming party, so they could spend the last day of their visit together.

Legolas was eager to go but the dwarf declined the invitation saying, "Swimming was all very well for fishes but not for dwarfs."

They rode down the levels of the city and across the Pelennor to the River Anduin at a leisurely pace, enjoying the summer sunshine. The people going about their business in the streets cheered their King, his Steward and the handsome Elven prince as they passed by.

Aragorn smiled and waved as the people cried "Hail to the King and his Steward!" Faramir smiled shyly in response to their adoration. Even after almost two and a half years, it still felt strange to him to hold his father's title.

He often wondered what Denethor would think if he could see him now. He knew Boromir would be proud of his success but his father had always been impossible to please and he was certain he would just be waiting for him to make some dreadful mistake.

Faramir inwardly vowed that was not going to happen, as he was conscientious in performing his duties and he was determined never to disappoint his King who had given him so much.

They reached a pleasant secluded spot by the river and desiring privacy for their swim, Aragorn dismissed the guards, telling them to enjoy a free afternoon. He loved Minas Tirith but after so many years in the wild, sometimes it felt like a cage to him and he needed to get out into the open countryside.

Often he would go riding, usually alone with Faramir at his side now Arwen was pregnant though the Steward having spent most of his life in the City would tease his King about his ambivalent attitude towards it, which Aragorn took in good part.

They tethered the horses and as soon as the guards had gone, sought the cover of some bushes and started to undress, shedding their tunics, shirts and breeches and placing them in a heap by the side of the river with their towels on top.

Legolas, with the supreme confidence of the Eldar, swiftly removed all his garments and stretched his lithe body under a tree as he waited for the others. The dappled sunlight only served to emphasise the lean contours of his body and perfect skin.
He laughed as Aragorn and Faramir, both naturally modest and rather shy, made their way to the water's edge, still clad in their drawers. They cautiously dipped their toes in the water, testing the temperature.

He ran past them and dived in, graceful as a seabird, and seemingly oblivious to the chill of the water.

"The water is pleasant today. Hurry up undressing and come on in!"

"We are undressed!" Aragorn replied as he slid into the water, closely followed by Faramir, who was relieved not to be the sole brunt of Legolas' teasing.

"You mortals are so shy!" The Elf teased. "Maybe it is because you lack our perfection?"

Aragorn's only reply was to duck him under the surface. Having grown up with elves, he was accustomed to their flawless skin and perfectly proportioned bodies and felt no envy, though his own shyness had developed from being compared with such perfection and found wanting.

He should still remember being teased over a spot on his nose when he was about fourteen, as no elf ever suffered from such an unsightly affliction. Much as he loved elves, it had not been easy being so different from those around him as he grew to maturity. The day he had started to grow a beard, had been the most traumatic of his young life, as it had marked him out as irrevocably different from his foster family.

Faramir kicked out from the shallows. He was a fine swimmer and had used to enjoy swimming here near the same spot with his brother. He still missed Boromir and always would, yet he had found happiness again now in the brotherly companionship of his King and his marriage to Eowyn. He wondered if Boromir were watching from the afterlife and smiling at how well his little brother had done.

Legolas emerged spluttering and met Aragorn's laughing eyes.

"We mortals can hardly bear to see your brilliance!" he teased. "I meanwhile must maintain my dignity as King for what if a subject were to bow to me unclad? They would not know where to look!"

Legolas tossed his now sodden golden locks and dived under again, pulling the King down with him. Faramir swam towards them and joined in the fun.

Wearying faster than the immortal elf, Aragorn and Faramir clambered on the bank for a short rest, while Legolas circled round, as at home in the water as a fish.

Faramir was unable to resist watching him as all his life he had been curious about the Eldar and had never in his wildest dreams have ever expected to be in such close proximity to them.

He realised that their perfection was no myth, though to a human eye the smooth hairlessness of their skin appeared somewhat strange. Not for the first time, Faramir wondered how Aragorn must have felt growing up amongst such as these and decided to ask him when he had the chance.

Tiring of watching Legolas' acrobatics, Faramir leaned back against a tree stretching out his arms and playfully chasing the dragonflies with his fingers as they whirled overhead. It was a perfect summer's afternoon. It was hard to believe they were only a short distance from the city as the only sign of civilisation was a herd of goats grazing nearby. Of the goatherd, there was no sign. The King wondered if he were playing truant by swimming too, further downstream from them.
Aragorn sighed with contentment. It gladdened his heart to see Faramir healed, confident, and contented.

Faramir got up and stood at the water's edge, his back to the King, the skin almost as flawless as Legolas' thanks to the Elven treatment, that Aragorn had persuaded him to use a few months ago.

It seemed that once Aragorn had healed the physical scars of Faramir's old life, the mental scars had faded too and the Steward had finally come into his own, much to his King's joy. At long last, Faramir was relaxed, healthy and enjoying the happiness he had long deserved.

Faramir dived in again, calling "Come on in again unless you are too worn out!"

"Youth have no respect for their elders nowadays!" Aragorn teased as he dived in beside him. Although he was now ninety years old, a passer by would have taken the two men to be much of an age.

"I will race you to the far bank!" Legolas challenged, setting off at a fast pace. The others followed, though they had no chance of catching the swift elf.

They clambered out on the other bank and saw the sun was starting to sink.

"I think it is time we returned to the city," said Aragorn. The others agreed, but loathe to leave the refreshing water, all three swam back slowly.

The goats had come down almost to the water's edge.

"They must be thirsty. " Legolas commented.

"Or hungry. " Faramir added. "They seem to be grazing."

Aragorn was the first to leave the water. He reached for his towel. It had vanished, as had his clothes.

_A/N A big thank you to everyone who has reviewed, your comments are much appreciated._

_Until recently the Home Secretary was required to witness a royal birth in Britain after rumours that the son (James Edward Stuart father of Bonnie Prince Charlie) of James II and Mary of Moderna was smuggled into the Queen's bedroom in a warming pan, so I based the attitude of Aragorn's Council on this actual chapter of history._

_I fear I am not good at writing Legolas unlike many writers on this site but hope Legolas fans will enjoy the next few chapters._

_This part of the story is the "Calm" before a major storm !_


Aragorn looked more closely at the goats and suddenly realised what they were eating.

"You are not having these too!" He yelled as a bearded Billy goat made a grab for the leg of his drawers. The animal retreated, carrying a piece of the fabric in his mouth.

"What has happened?" Faramir asked anxiously, as he scrambled out of the water.

"The goats appear to have eaten our clothes and towels." the King replied grimly. "It even took my white tree!" He gestured to the torn leg of his drawers where before there had been an embroidered White Tree of Gondor, one of his few vanities.

"No!" Legolas cried, scampering after a goat, which had a piece of his tunic hanging from its mouth but by the time he had reached the animal it had devoured the cloth completely.

"They have bitten through the ropes and the horses have strayed! " Faramir announced, unable to conceal the rising panic in his voice.

"They cannot have gone far." Aragorn tried to sound soothing. "Roheryn is Elvish and they are very loyal to their masters."

Legolas returned from his futile chase, looking totally dejected. "Whatever am I going to do? " He wailed. "I suppose one of you wouldn't lend me… "

Faramir blanched. He had a great admiration and respect for the Eldar, but the prospect of walking back to Minas Tirith stark naked was the stuff of his worse nightmares.

"The King and the Steward of Gondor have their dignity to maintain. Maybe the goatherd will return and be able to help us." Aragorn said firmly, placing a protective hand on Faramir's shoulder.

Despite the warmth of the late afternoon, the Steward's skin felt icy to the touch. He felt irked with Legolas, for upsetting Faramir as he could have kept some of his own clothing on instead of boasting about the perfection of elves.

"Very well." Legolas sighed. He wandered back to the bank to look for something to cover himself with and alighted upon some gigantic leaves which he started to gather.

"Do not touch those!" Aragorn called. "They are poisonous and cause a painful rash!"
"To mortals maybe but surely not for elves?" Legolas dismissed his concerns airily.

"I have not seen an Elf affected, but then these plants do not grow in the Elven realms." Aragorn conceded.

Legolas walked back up the back, clutching a bouquet of the giant leaves round his middle. He brushed his long golden hair back from his face with his free hand.

"You worry too much, Aragorn." he said, "These leaves will serve as covering until we find something better. I think they are just the right size to cover me."

"Bad goats come back!" a shout heralded the belated appearance of the goatherd, a young boy of about eleven summers. He was roughly but more than adequately clad in rough breeches, a tunic and a cloak.

Legolas ducked behind Aragorn at the boy's appearance, while Faramir shivered and crossed his arms defensively across his chest.

The boy stopped when he saw them and stared with eyes wide as saucers.

"Please could you help us? " Aragorn asked politely." We need some of your clothes from you, we will pay of course!"

The boy looked him up and down for a mere second them with a piercing scream fled.

Aragorn sighed with dismay." I fear he misunderstood our predicament. Either that or he took some of the clothing himself as it was a lot for goats to devour!" he said. "Come we had better try and find our horses and someone who will help us."

They started to run across the Pelennor. The meadows were green again after the carnage of the battle fought there, maybe made even more lush now they were fertilised with the blood of so many. The only reminder of what had occurred was a bare patch where the remains of the fell beast had been burned and nothing would grow on that spot now.

Aragorn and Faramir soon found themselves tiring, for although both had spent many years wandering in the wild, they had little such exercise since Aragorn had become King. Their pace slackened and they walked in dejected silence with Legolas bringing up the rear, for although the elf was tireless, he preferred to stay close to his human companions in his current predicament.

Much to their relief eventually they reached a farmhouse where a plump young woman was hanging some washing out on a clothesline. Their eyes brightened at the sight of several shirts, a pair of breeches, and some bed sheets.

"Stay behind us! " Aragorn instructed Legolas as the three made their way to the woman. He was blushing scarlet at the prospect of letting a woman see him so inadequately clad, while Faramir's expression suggested that had he not been loyal to Aragorn he would have turned and fled. As it was he stood huddled miserably, trying to cover himself with his arms.

"Your pardon, Lady, but we wondered if you would help us, as we are in dire need of your clothing. " Aragorn said politely, gesturing towards the washing line.

The woman reacted by giving him a resounding slap across the face.

"How dare you, you impudent knave!" She shrieked. "Be gone or I'll set the dogs on you! I hoped now the King has returned that things would get better here, but they have gone worst! "
"But Madam, I am the King." Aragorn said with as much dignity as he could muster, as he rubbed his reddening cheek before crossing his arms defensively across his bare chest.

"King indeed, a lunatic more like!" She snapped. "Obviously the three of you have escaped from the asylum. You need locking up forever!"

Much to their dismay, she snatched her washing from the line and ran inside, slamming the door behind her.

"We should have waited and helped ourselves to the washing when she had gone." Faramir said woefully. "We could have paid for it later. Has she hurt you?"

Aragorn rubbed his face ruefully.

"It could have been worse, she could have punched me in the eye! Whatever did I say to upset her so?"

"You asked for her clothes." Faramir answered with a mirthless laugh, I think she thought you meant what she wore, not the washing!"

Aragorn flushed slightly at the implication.

"How dare she strike you that is treason? Whatever can we do now?" Legolas complained.

"I can hardly blame the poor woman, she could hardly recognise me in my drawers and we must have frightened her." Aragorn replied.

He looked around him and spied a mill a short distance away.

"Let us try that mill." He suggested.

They set up at a fair pace, Legolas having to slow down to keep up with the two humans. He had now wedged himself between Aragorn and Faramir as the leaves were starting to wilt and he had lost several of them on the way. Both men were wary though and did their best not to get close enough for the leaves to touch their skin.

The mill door was open and much to Aragorn and Faramir's delight, a pile of flour sacks were neatly folded behind the door. They picked them up and started tearing holes in them to make makeshift clothing.

"Just what we need!" Faramir sighed with relief, as he was cold as well as miserable and embarrassed by their plight.

"What use are flour sacks?" asked Legolas. "We need clothing!"

"We can wear them." Aragorn was already pulling one over his head. Like Faramir he was starting to feel cold and his flesh was covered with goose bumps.

"These?" the Elf was horrified. "But the material is so coarse!"

Aragorn had already torn a strip off a second sack. He then made a hole in the bottom of it, stepped into it, and secured it round his waist. The outfit was far from being either elegant or comfortable, but it was at least decent.

Faramir had likewise made a similar outfit for himself.

"Can't one of you at least let me borrow your drawers now?" Legolas pleaded.
"We itch as much as you, maybe more so as we are mere mortals! " Aragorn retorted. "You had better put on a sack or remain naked and treat the citizens of Minas Tirith to a glimpse of your elven perfection! "

"Mortals would be unable to appreciate elven beauty! " Legolas retorted as he reluctantly followed the others’ example. "It itches. "he moaned as the sackcloth irritated his fair flesh.

" And just what do you think you are doing! " A plump middle-aged man, with greying hair and beard entered the mill, his face flushed with anger. "Stealing my flour sacks, I'll report you to the King's justices!"

TBC

A/N A very big thank you to everyone who has reviewed. Your comments are greatly appreciated.

Many of you guessed right about the goats, congratulations! I was inspired by a story my late Aunt told about a goat eating her Macintosh. I am sure they do prefer greener but I thought it amusing for the purpose of the story as they have been known to eat clothing!

My characters are the same as in "Shadow and Thought" but as circumstances have changed so have their attitudes. I thought it would be nice to show them for a few chapters as they could be if writers like myself did not torment them!

The tragic events, which form the heart of this story, are yet to come and emerge from an unexpected quarter although "Shadow and Thought" contains the genesis of the catastrophe to occur later in the story.
"We will recompense you fully, Master Miller. " Aragorn said. "I am the King."

The Miller threw back his head and laughed.

"King indeed! " He snorted. "How can you be the King? If you were, you would be wearing fine silks and velvets not sackcloth stolen from me! " He gestured towards Faramir." I suppose you'll be claiming next that this ragamuffin is the Lord Steward?"

" I am actually." Faramir looked as if he wished the ground would open and swallow him." We were swimming and some goats …"

"Be off with you!" The Miller snapped, quickly suppressing his laughers." If I catch you still here when my wife returns from market, you will be very sorry! I'm not listening to any more lies or slandering the good name of our King!"

The three sackcloth clad companions fled sheepishly from the mill leaving the Miller staring after them. They were obviously lunatics and yet there was something about the eldest man that intrigued him, it was as if he had an almost regal air about him, despite his appearance, something, which had stopped him from giving the impudent fellow a sound thrashing. Shaking his head at such thoughts, the Miller tidied up the scattered pile of sacks.

Aragorn and Faramir felt slightly more relaxed now they had acquired some clothing, however makeshift, while Legolas complained incessantly about how the rough sacking chafed his fair skin. It seemed a very long way back to the city.

"Look! " cried Legolas suddenly. "There are our horses! "

They craned their necks in the direction the Elf pointed and could just make out three specks on the horizon.

"They've strayed into a hayfield! " Legolas explained, his keen elven eyesight noting the details.

"Iavas loves fresh hay! It will be difficult to retrieve them. "Faramir groaned.

Aragorn gave his companions an enigmatic smile and then raised two fingers to his lips and gave a piercing whistle, paused for a moment and then whistled again.

Legolas regarded Aragorn doubtfully. Surely losing his clothes had not caused him to lose his wits
as well? By contrast, Faramir, having unlimited faith in the King's abilities, waited hopefully, certain that Aragorn knew what he was doing, however odd it might appear.

"They are coming!" Faramir said joyfully, as the horses started galloping towards them.

"However did you do that? " Legolas asked.

" I still remember a few tricks I learned as a Ranger. " Aragorn grinned as he swung himself up upon Roheryn's broad back.

"We never learned that in Ilithien" Faramir told him, as he mounted Iavas, patting the chestnut's neck as he settled himself in the saddle.

Meanwhile, Legolas had realised there was no way he could ride astride, without incurring the mirth of the populace, not to mention breaking several laws regarding public decency and breaching the peace so he had to mount side-saddle and ride like a lady, a feat he found took some mastering as he had never sat on a horse in such a manner before. It took all his Elven agility just to keep his balance.

Faramir and Aragorn struggled to contain their mirth.

"Your golden locks are even fairer than my wife's!" Faramir chortled.

" Don't let your Lady hear you saying that or you will be wearing sackcloth for a long time to come!" Aragorn teased, ignoring the Elf's furious expression.

They urged the horses towards the city gates and were there within minutes only to be halted by the stern faced Guard.

"What have we here?" he asked. "Vagabonds on stolen horses!"

"We own these horses." Aragorn said coldly. He was weary, cold and itching from wearing the sackcloth. All he wanted now was a hot bath and some comfortable clothing.

The Guard shook his head.
"Those are fine beasts, fit for the King and his Nobles, not for the likes of you!" He drew his sword and levelled it at Aragorn's chest. "I'm arresting you in the name of the King!"

"I am the King." Aragorn's tone was at its most commanding as he glared at the Guard." Release us this instant!"

The Guard flinched at the authority in Aragorn's voice but continued undeterred. "I've no time for your impudence, you rascal! You cannot be the King, not dressed like that! I saw him at his coronation and he wore finery that a ragamuffin like you couldn't imagine in your dreams!"

Aragorn groaned inwardly, he was cold weary and uncomfortable and was in no mood for a lengthy argument. The prospect of being locked in a cell and hoping someone would be allowed to identify him was growing alarming. They could overpower the Guard, but the King was reluctant to harm someone who was only doing their job.

He was about to urge Roheryn into a gallop and hope the others had the wits to follow, when he remembered he was wearing the Ring of Barahir, the heirloom of the Heirs of Isildur.

"Do you recognise this ring?" he asked the man.

The Guard shook his head. "It looks as if you stole that too!" he said grimly.
"Send for the Captain of the Tower Guard!" Aragorn ordered. "He will know this ring and its owner!" He could only hope that whoever was on duty would recognise him or Faramir in such unorthodox attire.

He was becoming increasingly worried, especially about Faramir. The Steward had endured so much in the past that Aragorn feared being locked in the dungeons could badly damage his newly acquired self-confidence. Then there was Legolas, a woodland Elf, one of a species attuned to Nature, who might react very badly if confined in a stone walled cell.

The man hesitated, he had a good mind to march these ruffians through the street to the dungeons, but it was a long walk and he was due to be relieved soon. Then what was to be done with the horses?

Aragorn, Faramir and Legolas could only wait and endure the stares and titters of the passers by. A queue was building up behind them impatiently waiting to enter the city.

"Whatever do you three, think you are doing?"

Aragorn heard a familiar and querulous voice, shouting almost in his ear.

"Dame Ioreth!" He was so relieved to see her that he could have kissed her!

"If that is your idea of the latest fashion, Lord Elfstone, I am not impressed!" Ioreth said tartly. "You look like beggars and ought to be ashamed of yourself encouraging Lord Faramir to dress like that to go out riding!" She turned to Faramir, "As for you, young man, your father would be ashamed of you to see you looking like this! He had his faults, did Lord Denethor, but he did at least see his sons were properly dressed!"

Faramir opened his mouth to protest but before he could do so, Ioreth continued,

"I just don't know what this city is coming to! Highborn Lords riding around wearing sackcloth! I don't care if it's some new fashion or even a new fangled religion, but it is not at all seemly. Maybe it's the fault of the Elf, I never could abide them, you cannot tell what gender they are! I thought this one was male, but as it rides like a maid, it must be a she!"

Legolas turned the colour of a beetroot.

"Dame Ioreth, I assure you that." Aragorn began but was promptly interrupted.

"And why is there such a queue at the city gates, I would like to know? It was never like this in Lord Denethor's time! I've spent a long tiring day visiting my cousin from Lossarnach, who is staying at a farm near here. And I want to get home and put my feet up not stand here talking. Why my cousin was telling me…"

Aragorn gently but firmly placed his hand over her mouth to stem the ceaseless flow. She glared at him with a look, which would have proved fatal if looks could kill.

"My pardon, Dame Ioreth but I want to put to put my feet up too but cannot get a word in edgeways!"

Seeing the Guard advancing menacing, he removed his hand, only just in time to avoid being bitten, he guessed.

"Please, Dame Ioreth, tell the Guard, who were are, then we can all be on our way!" he pleaded.

"Is that ruffian annoying you, madam?" asked the Guard.
Aragorn held his breath.

"Yes, he is." she replied.

Aragorn sighed. It looked as if the prospect of shedding the sackcloth followed by a warm bath and a meal were receding into a distant prospect.

A/N. My heartfelt thanks to everyone who has left a review. Your comments were much appreciated and I am pleased the last chapter made you laugh! There is a lot of doom and gloom to come so I thought it would be fun to have some humour first though to some degree it foreshadows the angst.

I intend to explore Aragorn's upbringing a little more in a future chapter. Aragorn's vision in "Shadow and Thought" does indeed hold a clue as does some of the conversations in Chapters 38 and 42 of that story, but all will be revealed in due course as I see all my LOTR stories as parts of one long story!
"But he is no ruffian and should know better!" Ioreth continued. "That is the King himself, Lord Elfstone, and the Steward, Lord Faramir and one of those elves that the Lord Elfstone seems to favour!"

A look of horror spread over the Guard's face as he dropped to his knees.

"My Lord King, forgive me, I did not know!" he gasped.

"Rise! You were only doing your duty." Aragorn said without rancour. "Now will you be so kind as to lend me your cloak? I will see that it is returned to you."

The man rose to his feet, and with trembling fingers, unfastened his cloak and handed it to the King.

Aragorn immediately passed it to Faramir. "You had better take this, as you have been known far longer than I in this city!" he said, knowing that Faramir was probably the most upset by the day's events.

"There is no need, he can have my cloak!" Ioreth volunteered surprisingly, handing the garment to the Steward.

"Why, thank you!" Faramir was touched by the usually fierce old woman's kindness.

"It is a warm day, I will get home all the faster without!" She said briskly. "Now don't you dare ride around the streets like this again, whatever that Lord Elfstone says! You will catch cold, and then who will have to tend you?"

"I promise I will dress properly in future." Faramir said meekly, as he wrapped the grey woollen cloak closely round him.

"Has no one a cloak for the Elf?" Ioreth demanded loudly. "Decent folks like us, don't want to see it riding through the streets like that!"

A man, who looked like a rich merchant came forward and offered Legolas his fur trimmed garment much to the Elf's grateful relief.

"All the cloaks will be returned." Aragorn promised in a voice all could hear as the Guard opened
the city gates and let them through.

They urged the horses to a trot and rode without stopping through the city streets. To their great relief, the citizens failed to recognise them.

Aragorn and his companions managed to enter the royal apartments unnoticed, using a secret way that Faramir knew from his childhood. They were anxious to avoid their wives until they looked presentable, knowing the ladies would tease them mercilessly if they were spotted sporting sackcloth. They parted and went their several ways, promising to meet for dinner once bathed and changed.

After a hot bath and now dressed in fine woollen breeches and a velvet tunic, Aragorn was about to enquire whether Arwen and his guests were ready for dinner when Gimli hurried up to him, an expression of great anxiety on his face.

"Please come quickly as Legolas feels most unwell and is unable to even dress for dinner! I have never seen him like this before! What if the poor wee Elf is dying?"

Aragorn raced to Legolas' room, closely followed by the panting dwarf. He knocked on the door and on getting no reply, entered and approached the bed where he discovered the Elf lying on top of the covers, dressed only in a loose nightshirt.

A painful and unsightly looking red blotch across his cheek disfigured his fair features. Legolas struggled to sit up as his friend approached but fell back against the pillows with a groan.

"What ails you, Mellon Nin?" Aragorn asked, although he already thought he knew the answer." I was told you were unable to dress to come to dinner."

"Those leaves, I fear you were right!" Legolas replied." I feel as if my skin is on fire, it is too painful to endure anything rubbing against it!"

"Why didn't you tell me about the leaves, Master Elf?" Gimli exclaimed, "I thought you were dying from some dreadful poison!"

Aragorn placed his hand on the Elf's forehead." You do not have a fever." He pronounced." The rash produces a painful burning sensation, though it affects humans slightly differently. Their symptoms take a few hours longer to develop. Luckily, I have a salve, which should help. Where is the rash?"

Legolas flushed slightly and held out his hands without much conviction." Here, where I touched it. " He replied. " And on my face."

Aragorn carefully applied the salve to the Elf's reddened palms and fingers, trying to suppress a wry smile. He then waited patiently for Legolas to elaborate further. A long uncomfortable silence followed, during which, Legolas shifted uneasily on the bed and winced.

"And where else?" the King asked finally to end the Elf's torment.

"It is rather embarrassing." Legolas sputtered.

"Unless you will show me, I cannot tend you, so if you would prefer I take my leave?" Aragorn gathered up the jar of salve and pretended to make for the door.

"If you don't tell him, I will!" Gimli exclaimed, placing himself in front of the door. "I have noticed where you have been scratching, Master Elf!"
"Maybe if you were to take a little walk?" Aragorn suggested to Gimli, "The gardens are pleasant at this time of year."

"And of what interest are flowers to dwarfs?" Gimli huffed indignantly, "We don't go around smelling them like yon prissy Elf and a fine mess it's left him in!"

"I meant that I need to …." Aragorn bent to whisper in Gimli's ear. The dwarf laughed out loud.

"I hardly think so, the laddie is fond of taking off all his clothes and jumping in the river to bathe in front of me when we are journeying together. He even suggests I should join him, just think of the damage it would do to my beard, not to mention anything else! A dwarf and his garments are not easily parted and that makes more sense than going diving in freezing cold rivers and getting a nasty rash as result!"

"The river was not the cause of it. It was some poisonous leaves." Aragorn explained patiently.

"Well it would never have happened it he had kept his clothes on. A dwarf would never …"

The chatter was making Legolas aching head feel worse "Stay, please!" he interjected halting Gimli's endless chatter.

With surprising tact, Gimli smiled at his friend and went across the room to look out of the window, where he remained standing as Aragorn approached the bed.

Blushing scarlet, Legolas reluctantly pulled his nightshirt up to above his waist, revealing large areas of red and blistered skin between waist and thigh marring the otherwise perfect elven skin.

With the calm detachment of an experienced healer, Aragorn applied the salve in liberal amounts, plastering it thickly over the affected areas.

Legolas sighed as the cooling ointment took effect.

"Turn over!" Aragorn instructed him.

This is so mortifying! " Legolas wailed as his friend continued to tend him.

Glad that Legolas couldn't see the expression of barely suppressed mirth on his face Aragorn asked with mock gravity. "I thought Elves were so perfect they had no need to be shy and delighted in revealing their perfection? You implied only this afternoon modesty was a trait only mortals shared!"

Unable to think of a good answer, Legolas changed the subject." Why do mortals grow such plants?" He asked

" They do not as it grows wild in the lands of the Harad." Aragorn told him." Most likely, their soldiers brought the seeds here during the war.

He finished applying the salve, smoothed down the Elf's nightshirt, and went over to where a basin and ewer stood on a table near the bed and poured some water into the basin to wash his hands.

"Is the poison deadly? My skin feels as if it is about to fall off! Am I going to die?" Legolas groaned.

TBC
A/N: A big thank you to everyone who has reviewed. I greatly appreciated your comments.

The coronation was about two and a half years ago, but most people would only have caught a glimpse of Aragorn from a distance clad in his too, would have either been dressed in finery or armour when in public. I also know from experience that it can be difficult to recognise people if you see them where you don't expect to!

Aragorn was annoying Ioreth by placing his hand over her mouth so that he could have a chance to speak.

I am hoping that these lighter chapters will make the impending tragic events all the more poignant and will be interested if my readers agree!

No one has yet guessed what might be about to befall our heroes!
Aragorn calmly dried his hands and started to mix some herbs in a goblet of wine.

"I have been stung with it many times and I live still!" he told the Elf. "It should be much better by morning and you should be able to return to Mirkwood as you planned for you have the fast healing abilities of the Eldar."

"I will never be able to sit on a horse!" Legolas moaned. "Then how can I let anyone see me, my looks are ruined!"

"You can of course stay longer, if you wish." Aragorn replied handing him the goblet. "Drink this; it will help you get some rest! I think though, you will find you are fully recovered by morning. I will have to go now, as the others are waiting for me to begin dinner. I will have some food sent to you later when you are rested."

"Don't leave me, I feel very ill!" Legolas pleaded.

"That is something we imperfect mortals often feel!" Aragorn said dryly. "You have no cause to fear, as you will live! Be comforted."

"I will stay with him." Gimli offered, finally losing interest in the view from the window and moving to Legolas' side. "Please give your Lady my apologies that I cannot come to dinner as yon wee Elf needs a nursemaid!"

Legolas opened his mouth to retort but only a yawn emerged as the sleeping draught started to take effect.

Gimli settled himself by the bedside and patted his friend's hand, the gesture belying his somewhat scathing comments.

Aragorn drew the coverlet over the unhappy Elf and left to join his wife and friends for dinner. He was going to enjoy relating the latest turn of events to his Steward!

When Aragorn entered the dining room of his private apartments, he found his wife together with Faramir and Eowyn already there and waiting for him.

Arwen was now so large, she had difficulty sitting at the table, though she was in good spirits and chattering to Eowyn in an animated fashion, while Faramir looked on uneasily.
"Eowyn and I have heard such tales from the city today!" she said. "Three naked madmen are on
the loose! It is said they attacked a boy and then a woman and stole all her clothes, then helped
themselves to some of the horses from the Royal stables before beating up and robbing a miller!"

"Well I heard they merely stole some sacks from the miller." Eowyn added," Then the latest
rumour was they escaped wearing stolen cloaks!"

"How are you going to punish these villains when you catch them?" Arwen asked with a gleam in
her eye.

"Surely the King won't let them run amok in the city?" Eowyn commented earnestly.

Aragorn opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again while Faramir blushed scarlet.

"The most interesting thing I heard was the description of the lunatics." Arwen's tone was like
honey." I was told two were dark haired with grey eyes, one older and slightly taller than the
other, while the third was fair to look upon with long golden locks that any maid would envy!
That sounds somewhat familiar!"

" How strange that my husband should go swimming this afternoon with two that fitted that
description !" Eowyn could now barely contain her mirth.

Arwen burst out laughing, not the usual musical laugher of Elves but very human guffaws, which
she had obviously learned from Eowyn as the two women shook with helpless mirth.

"If only we could have seen the three of you!" Eowyn roared. "What a sight that would have
been!"

"We were not naked, we were wearing our drawers, that is Aragorn and myself were." Faramir
said with as much dignity as he could muster, somewhat ill at ease to be even mentioning
underwear in the presence the Queen.

He was fond of Arwen and admired her greatly, but always felt slightly awestruck in the presence
of one of the Eldar, even at the best of times.

"How did you find out?" Aragorn asked. He had hoped for some sympathy from his wife, but
realised that to an observer, their plight must have seemed hilarious .It was good to see Arwen so
cheerful as her advanced pregnancy was starting to dampen her spirits as the delivery time drew
nearer.

"Ioreth came to see me and told me most of the story." Arwen explained once she could control
her mirth." The rest I heard from my maid, whose brother's wife is the miller's sister. He had come
to report the theft of the flour sacks to the guard and also had spoken to his neighbours. The tale
seems to have been embroidered in the telling, though."

"We never attacked anyone, only asked for some clothing and were forced into stealing some
flour sacks when no one would give us any." Aragorn explained. "They failed to understand our
motives I think!"

"You have certainly entertained us!" Eowyn chortled.

"Though the bruise on your cheek looks painful." Arwen added." Though maybe you deserved it
from what I have heard!"

"He did not!" Faramir said indignantly." None of us did anything wrong!"
"Where are Legolas and Gimli?" Arwen asked. "I thought they were joining us."

"Legolas is weary after all that happened this afternoon and decided to eat in his room and Gimli wanted to stay to keep him company." Aragorn said diplomatically, to spare the Elf the ladies' teasing, though he fully intended to tell Faramir the full story, once they were alone.

"It has been quite an unusual day starting with the Council Meeting this morning." Aragorn told her, anxious to change the subject as he proceeded to tell them about Faramir's intervention in the debate over a witness to the impending royal birth.

"There are dozens of regulations on the subject." Faramir informed them as they began their meal.

"Surely not any more than those we discussed this morning?" Aragorn groaned.

"I think there are about fifty pages of regulations. "Faramir informed him." It is a month or two since I last looked at them."

"Fifty pages?" Arwen was incredulous.

"It seems that each Queen in the past or her family demanded that new ones be added." Faramir explained. "For example, the ruling that the Queen may not be disturbed during her confinement was made after one King burst into the bedroom and kept shouting at the Queen, that he would divorce her, if the baby were not a boy, that also led to the rule that the King may only spend an hour a day with the Queen for the first days after the birth. The same monarch harangued his wife after the birth of their daughter, so the poor lady had no rest. She was the Queen who added the rule that the midwives must remain in constant attendance of the Queen for a week after the delivery. I think it was her father who insisted on adding the separate bedchambers clause too." Faramir flushed slightly.

"Whatever is that?" Aragorn demanded.

"The King may not share the Queen's bedchamber for two weeks after the delivery, nor have um, intimate relations for six weeks." Faramir mumbled uncomfortably, staring down at the tablecloth.

"What sort of monster am I supposed to be?" Aragorn said testily.

"The angry father of over a thousand years ago was only concerned about the health of his daughter." Faramir said hastily." I do think some of these ancient laws need revising though."

"They will be before we have any more children!" Aragorn said grimly.

"I think I should have some say in the matter!" Arwen interrupted.

"Of course, my love, you shall rewrite them yourself if you wish!" Aragorn soothed.

"And I shall help you!" Eowyn added. "I assume there are rules about the birth of the Steward's heirs too?"

"Forty pages of them." Faramir informed her.

Eowyn blanched.

"Well if you need a witness, I will be happy to assist." Arwen offered." I did learn some healing arts from my father, so I might be useful."

"I would be honoured to accept." Eowyn smiled, while Faramir gave a sigh of relief as he had
dreaded approaching the subject given that Eowyn insisted that ladies of Rohan took giving birth for granted and were back on their horses the next day!

The conversation took a lighter tone as the servants brought dessert. Arwen was starting to yawn and as soon as she had finished excused herself and prepared to call for her maid to help her prepare for bed.

"Shall I help you?" Eowyn asked, feeling anxious for her friend.

Arwen thanked her and the two women left the room, leaving the men to their wine.

A/N A big thank you for all your kind reviews which are very much appreciated.

Ioreth knew who Aragorn and Faramir were, and never stated the contrary but she wanted to scold them before helping them!

Arwen makes her first appearance in this chapter and plays quite a large part in the story.

Legolas' rash was caused by giant hogweed, a plant which is a problem on British riverbanks and originally came from the Himalayas. It causes a nasty rash if touched.

Aragorn is a very experienced healer, so he knows how to control what he is feeling!

There are still a few lighter chapters before the coming catastrophe but the mood will gradually grow darker after this chapter.
Eowyn unfastened the Queen's heavy gown and let it slide to the floor. A maid had already brought hot water and towels with which she helped Arwen bathe, noticing as she did so how much larger her belly had grown.

"I think the baby will come fairly soon."

"I wish I knew how long I have to wait. "Arwen groaned, "It could be as soon as next month or not until the Mid Winter festival when your own child is due!"

"I hope not as I cannot be in two places at once!" Eowyn joked, though secretly she felt anxious, as she did not think the Queen could safely grow much larger.

"I just do not know what happens when the mother is an elf and the father human. "Arwen mused, shifting uncomfortably as the babe inside her kicked. Impulsively, she grasped Eowyn's hand and guided it to where the child was kicking.

"This babe is strong!" Eowyn smiled.

"You are sure everything is going as it should?" Arwen fretted.

Eowyn used the opportunity to carry out a brief examination, as Arwen had become increasingly shy as her body swelled, though in her friend's opinion she was a vision of fecund beauty, the curves of her swelling body framed by her mane of shining raven hair and the silvery stretch marks on the ivory skin appearing more of an adornment than a disfigurement. .

"The babe's head is in the correct position and it moves strongly." Eowyn assured her. "Also you should have plenty of milk for it, though I assume, you will have a wet nurse?"

"Indeed, I will not!" Arwen replied. "Who but myself would have the right milk for my child?"

Eowyn agreed she had a valid point and applauded her decision as she intended to feed her own babe too, as such was the custom of Rohan.

"I think this babe is getting eager to be born!" Eowyn smiled as she helped the Queen get on to the bed, no easy task given her considerable bulk.

"I am eager too!" Arwen replied, rubbing her aching back. "Aragorn is impatient as well to see his child, he tells me he does not mind whether it be a boy or girl, as in the past the women of
Numenor have worn the crown. He wants the eldest to succeed him regardless of gender."

"Faramir says he doesn't mind either what our child is." Eowyn replied. "We are fortunate in our husbands."

"Oh, my back!" Arwen groaned as she tried to make herself comfortable.

"Shall I massage it for you?" Eowyn asked tentatively, for although both the King and Queen had taught her the Elven massage techniques, she was far from skilful in them. "Or would you rather I fetch Aragorn?"

"I would be pleased if you would do it. It works best when a friend does it as it is meant to be relaxing rather than exciting!" Arwen replied, turning awkwardly on to her side. "Let Aragorn and Faramir enjoy themselves together for it makes me happy that they are now such good friends. Aragorn was like a bear with a sore head before, he was so lacking in companionship as men need each others' company and friendship as much as we women do."

"Faramir is much happier too now." Eowyn commented, as she tried to use her fingertips as she had been taught, hoping she was easing the Queen's discomfort rather than adding to it. "It pleases me how at ease he is now with Aragorn instead of jumping at the sound of his voice and flinching away from his touch."

"It used to hurt Aragorn that Faramir was so afraid of him as he always wanted to befriend him. Now they are inseparable and I could not imagine it ever being otherwise for which I am glad" Arwen commented, stretching herself as the pain in her back eased, "That is much more comfortable." Arwen said at last. "Thank you. I will gladly do the same for you, once my child is born."

Eowyn sighed with relief. "I feared I lack the correct technique. And thank you, I would like that."

"If it is done lovingly, it always works!" Arwen said with a smile. "That is what true Elven magic is!"

"I often wondered!" Eowyn replied as she helped Arwen don her nightgown, plumped up the Queen's pillows and arranged the covers in place.

"You return to the men folk now." Arwen said once she was settled. "I am comfortable now and will sleep soon.

Eowyn bent to kiss her friend on the cheek and turned to leave. Arwen surprised her by suddenly starting to laugh.

"I was just thinking of what our husbands must have looked like skulking through the city this afternoon!" she tittered. "How I wish I'd been there!"

"So do I!" Eowyn replied, hastily leaving before she too was overcome with mirth as she had some serious questions to ask.

Faramir and Aragorn were seated side by side on the couch when she returned, sipping goblets of wine in companionable silence, while Aragorn with his free hand eased the knots from his Steward's neck caused by the stressful events of the day.

"I could do that for you!" Eowyn said in mock indignation though it actually pleased her that Faramir was now so at ease with the King.
"I know but this is the expert!" Faramir replied, "In any case you would only tease me about my ordeal this afternoon!"

"I had an ordeal too, my cook burned the stew intended or lunch!" Eowyn retorted.

"I will massage your neck next then." Aragorn grinned at her.

"Thank you but a strong woman like myself is already quite recovered!" Eowyn replied, secretly wishing her pride did not demand she turn down the offer as Aragorn had a truly magical touch.

Aragorn finished his ministrations to Faramir and then picked up a letter from the table.

"I thought you would be interested to know that I have decided to have Duilin of Morthond's Hunting Lodge converted to a refuge for war orphans." the King told them. "I thought that would be the best use for it, and we can always visit if we wish, for although our time there was not very pleasant, it did serve to bring us together!

"That is an excellent plan!" Faramir enthused," There must be many more children like Elbeth."

Aragorn's features darkened. "That is something else, I must tell you, the Housekeeper writes that Elbeth has vanished from her sister's home and that she heard Hanna had escaped from the asylum. I wish we had brought the child back with us!"

"So do I." Faramir said sadly, "It just seemed better at the time to leave her in a familiar environment"

"I doubt Hanna would harm her daughter." Aragorn said reassuringly. "I would just rather that she were safe with us as she was such a beautiful child.

Eowyn cleared her throat; "Talking of children, there is something important I need to ask you."

"What is it? Is Arwen well?" Aragorn asked apprehensively.

Eowyn came straight to the point." Aragorn, how much do you know about Elven pregnancy and childbirth?" She asked bluntly, causing Faramir to blush at her outspokenness and nervously twist the Elven wedding band he wore round his finger.

"Very little, I fear about any sort of pregnancy." He answered her as one healer to another." Arwen was the last Elf born in Rivendell, long before I was born and as a ranger and a soldier, I was rarely amongst women. In any case, childbirth is a matter for midwives .The healing arts I was trained in are for wounds and other maladies, not the natural lot of women. Why do you ask?"

"I am concerned for Arwen." Eowyn said bluntly. Seeing the look of alarm cross Aragorn's handsome features, she added quickly. "She is well, but growing so large, I do not think it can be more than six weeks at most before the babe is born, yet she tells me it might not be due for another four months yet. Then neither Ioreth nor myself have any idea what an Elven delivery is like. I have asked Arwen, but she has no experience of childbirth amongst her own kind either."

"I have heard a child of a mixed union such as ours could be born after nine months if it favours the father, or twelve if it favours the mother, or somewhere in between. I have no idea if an Elven delivery is different than a human one." Aragorn replied.

"That is very helpful!" Eowyn said sarcastically." Could we send a message to Rivendell?" she added.
"It is a long journey." They might not get there in time before Elrond and most of his household sail for Valinor." the King replied." If only I had thought to ask Lord Elrond before we parted, or even Lady Galadriel!"

"A difficult topic to discuss with your father in law." Faramir remarked sympathetically.

Aragorn frowned and rubbed his hand worrily across his brow as he sat lost in thought.

A/N Many thanks for all your kind reviews, which are much, appreciated.

Childbirth does come into this story, but only as a part of it.

Although this is a story about Aragorn and Faramir, I intend Arwen and Eowyn to play quite a large part too as I know I have some of their fans amongst my readers.

I know I am not good at writing Legolas and make no claims to the contrary!

Giant Hogweed has vast leaves about the size each of a child's umbrella!

The regulations surrounding childbirth are based partially on scripture, partially medical advice and are also taken from actual history.

The following abridged extract is taken from David Starkey's book, "Elizabeth, The struggle for the Throne "

Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, was born on Sunday, 7 September 1533.

Royal births, like other royal events, great and small, from marriages and deaths to dressing and dining, were the object of an elaborate ceremonial.

. By the third week of August all was ready, and on the 26th there took place the ceremony of the Queen's 'taking her chamber'. First, she went in procession to the Chapel Royal. The company then returned to the Queen's great chamber Her lord chamberlain now called on everyone present to pray that 'God would give her the good hour', that is, a safe delivery. Another procession formed and accompanied the Queen to the door of her bedchamber. At the threshold, the males of the court took their leave of her and only her women entered.

Her confinement had now begun. the etiquette of the English court confined a pregnant queen indeed in a sort of purdah. Thenceforward, until the birth and her 'churching' thirty days after, she dwelt in an exclusively female world, attended solely by women.

These ceremonies were ambivalent. They emphasized that childbirth was a purely female mystery. And they paid the tribute of the dominant male world to that mystery. But they did so on strict conditions: the queen, literally, had to deliver. '
Eowyn sighed in frustration.

"I know, Elrond's books!" Aragorn said suddenly. "Arwen's brothers brought his healing library to Minas Tirith when they visited at the New Year."

"You have Lord Elrond's books?" Faramir was awestruck.

"I am sorry, I should have mentioned it before, and there has just been so much to do these past months." Aragorn sighed. "Let us go now to my library and see what we can learn to help Arwen."

Faramir was naturally familiar with the main library of Minas Tirith, which had always been one of his favourite places, where as a boy, he would escape the grief of being motherless and the scorn in his father's eyes whenever he looked at his younger son, by immersing himself in Gondorian history and tales of the Eldar.

His vast knowledge had often proved invaluable to Aragorn, who, although well educated, paled beside his Steward when it came to the obscure details of history, law and customs of the southern part of his reunited Kingdom.

The Steward had never been in Aragorn's private library, though, as Aragorn brought any books that were needed to his study. He gasped in amazement at the sight of all the Elvish volumes lining the shelves.

"Knowing your love of learning, I should have brought you here before." Aragorn said apologetically, as he lit the lamps. "You are welcome to enjoy my library any time you wish."

Faramir thanked him, as the King searched the shelves for the volumes Lord Elrond had given him.

"Here it is!" he said at last, selecting a large dusty volume and placing it before Eowyn. "This tells of how best to avoid complications during childbirth."

"I fear I don't read the language." Eowyn said, a touch of regret in her voice.

Aragorn opened the book at a page illustrated with a diagram of an Elvish woman giving birth. "I can translate," he said, "That is, if you are not too tired as it is late, being with child yourself?"
Eowyn shook her head.

"The women of Rohan are strong. We are usually on horseback almost until the birth and I have been sitting for most of the day."

Aragorn placed the tome on a table and drew up three chairs.

"This chapter is about the first stage of labour. "He began." Is that what you want to know? Apparently labour is more emotionally draining for an Elf than for a human, though as a male, I would not know!" he added hastily, seeing Eowyn's expression.

Eowyn nodded and the King began to read, translating the ancient words into the common tongue.

"When the waters break it usually indicates the first stage of labour has begun. At this point contractions will be about thirty minutes apart and the midwife should ascertain by careful visual examination that there is no bleeding and that dilation is at least …" He broke off and turned to Faramir. "You can understand the language too, I know, why not translate for your wife and see one of Lord Elrond's books for yourself?"

Faramir had first blushed when Aragorn had started to read but had now turned a sickly greenish hue. "No, thank you!" he gasped. "In fact, I think I will go to bed now and leave you to discuss, um delicate matters!"

"You look tired, my friend, go and get some rest." Aragorn said sympathetically patting Faramir's arm. "Maybe this is a subject best left to women and healers. It is a tradition of the Eldar that the father be present but I am heartily thankful, Arwen has not asked me to observe it!"

I will bid you goodnight then." Faramir turned even paler at the thought of the father being present and was eager to leave before any more of the book could be read.

"Wait!" Aragorn got up and reached another volume down from the shelves." I think this, also from Elrond's library, might be more to your liking. It is a history of the First Age. Why not borrow it for a while then maybe we could discuss it together?"

Faramir's eyes lit up as Aragorn handed him the precious volume." You would let me handle this?"

"It ought to be read by someone who would appreciate it!"

Faramir impulsively embraced the King in gratitude, something he would never have dared do with his father and only recently had felt relaxed enough to openly show the affection he felt towards Aragorn.

The King warmly returned the gesture and placed his hand on the dark head in blessing. He truly did feel blessed to have a friend like Faramir, as never had he dared hope that the Valar would grant him both the wife and the brother he had always longed for. Suddenly his hands felt wet and when he hooked down he saw they were covered in blood, Faramir's blood!

He paled and swayed slightly at the horror and clarity of the vision.

"Are you unwell?" Faramir and Eowyn's concerned voices roused him from the vision, and Aragorn forced himself to smile reassuringly at his friends. The vision had to be false, as he would no more harm his friend and Steward than cut off his right arm!

"I am just a little tired after everything that happened today." Aragorn was certain that this must be
the correct explanation, though he found himself glancing anxiously at his hands, which now appeared perfectly clean.

"You should be going to bed too then, I shall bid you goodnight!" Faramir chided gently.

Aragorn smiled and then exchanged a kiss on the brow with his Steward. This time the contact passed without triggering a further vision, much to Aragorn's relief. Being of high Numenorean lineage carried the advantage of long life and vitality, but also the dubious privileges of foresight of psychic sparks being kindled when two of similar bloodlines were in close proximity. "You would make a good mother hen!" Aragorn teased as Faramir departed to his bedchamber, clutching the precious volume under his arm.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he should invite Faramir to form a thought-sharing bond with him to further cement their friendship. It was always a hard choice to make as so doing made any future loss of the other person like having part of one's soul torn away, as Aragorn knew to his cost and Faramir although much younger was unlikely to have as long a lifespan. Yet he knew that one day they would participate in the thought bond, as he loved Faramir dearly as a brother.

Eowyn's lesson in Elven healing continued late into the night. Her old feelings for Aragorn long since put aside, she now regarded him as another beloved elder brother, although tonight, they were simply two healers, studying an ancient text.

When she eventually left Aragorn, she found her husband asleep in bed, the history tome still open on the coverlet. Obviously he had been reading until he could keep his eyes open no longer. Taking care not to wake him, she placed the book on the table, before turning down the lamp, changing into her nightgown and settling down beside him.

Affectionately, she smoothed back his hair, which had fallen over his brow and noted how peacefully he slept, a smile hovering on his lips. He finally seemed to have escaped his old demons, which had plagued his sleep with nightmares, and Eowyn rejoiced before sinking into a dreamless slumber.

Arwen was still awake when her husband tiptoed into the chamber. It was very late for after Eowyn had left, he had gone to see how Legolas was faring. To his relief, the Elf was sound asleep, with Gimli beside him, who had obviously nodded off while watching over his friend.

Aragorn felt Legolas' forehead and pulse without waking him and noted the rash visible on his face already visibly fading. The Elf appeared to be quickly regaining his usual robust health. He had crept out again as silently as he had entered.

TBC

A/N No, Elbeth will not be the cause of the catastrophes about to befall our heroes in this story but she will remain a part of my LOTR universe if I should decide to write any more stories, which depends on the level of interest in this one.

Everything about Elves is beautiful and elegant, even their stretch marks!

I am just making up the details of Elven childbirth if the father is human, though I have researched Elven childbirth as best I can.

Eowyn is not annoyed that Faramir prefers Aragorn's ministrations as she having experienced them herself knows he has a natural healing touch which she lacks.

Legolas and Gimli's part in the story is almost over.
Appearances can be deceptive, as this story will soon become very dark and tragic. This is the calm before the storm.
Aragorn made his way silently to Arwen's chamber and crept into his dressing room. He swiftly changed into his nightshirt, having no need of a light after his long years in the wild had left him able to find his way in the dark, almost as easily as a cat.

He padded barefoot across the floor and climbed into bed beside his wife.

Arwen stirred as he settled beside her.

"Did I wake you, Beloved?" Aragorn asked contritely, "Maybe I should have slept in my own rooms?"

"No please stay, I like you to be here with me, especially at the moment!" Arwen replied. "I was just lying here wondering which of us our child would look like when it arrives. Did you have a pleasant evening, Estel?"

"Much more pleasant than this afternoon!" Aragorn chuckled. After a good supper, he was able to see the funny side of it. "You were right about Eowyn; all those months ago, she does have a good heart. And Faramir has grown so very dear to me."

He nestled his head against Arwen's huge belly, marvelling yet again at the miracle of new life moving within her. Her child, his child, the precious fruit of their love, was growing larger by the day, grown almost enough to be born if Eowyn's instincts were correct.

"I know our child will be the most beautiful, adorable babe ever to be born!" Aragorn said fervently placing a kiss over where he assumed the baby's heart was, before moving up the bed to kiss Arwen on the lips. "It cannot be as fair as its mother though!"

"Wait until you have met it!" Arwen giggled, returning the kiss and running her fingers through her husband's hair. "I hope it has your hair!" The waviness never ceased to fascinate her and the fact the dark locks were now flecked with grey, something which she had never seen amongst her own kind.

Aragorn did not reply, as he was already soundly sleeping. Arwen smiled indulgently, thinking she would be weary too, if she had had such an adventurous day. Before many minutes had passed, she too was asleep, her head cradled against Aragorn's broad shoulder.

The next morning, Legolas appeared completely recovered as Aragorn had predicted and no sign of the rash could be seen on his face or hands, and as he sat comfortably upon his horse, it had
presumably disappeared from everywhere else as well.

His health and spirits restored, he cheerfully bade Aragorn and Faramir farewell as he set off for Eryn Lasgalen with Gimli where they planned to remain for several months.

After they had gone, Aragorn told Faramir of the Elf's misadventures of the previous night.

Faramir was surprisingly sympathetic. "Poor Legolas!" he exclaimed, "I can think of nothing worse than having any injury in such an embarrassing region! The shame of it!"

"He is recovered now though I gave him a jar of salve just in case." Aragorn replied, "It takes a great deal to make an Elf blush unlike we humans, though it was the fact his skin was blemished, rather than where the rash was that so distressed him!"

"It cannot have been easy growing up amongst them." Faramir said, finally bringing up a subject, which intrigued him.

"I enjoyed it as a child and was as uninhibited as Legolas then." Aragorn confided, but when I reached adolescence, first I had spots and worse was to come when I grew hairs on my chest and a beard! I have been self conscious ever since! Some of the Elves would tease me about how different and imperfect I was. I doubt they meant to be cruel but for a self-conscious youth it was very painful. Some even tried to tweak my beard and pull off my clothing to gratify their curiosity! My mother did her best to reassure me and even scolded the Elves that teased me but those experiences were distressing for me. I often wish I could have grown up with at least some other humans. It was because of my own experiences that I was so anxious to treat your scars when I realised how much they distressed you."

"I always felt self conscious being compared with my brother." Faramir said with a hint of melancholy in his voice. "He developed early and was very tall, muscular and strong whereas I was just tall and skinny and already heavily scarred as I could never please my father. Boromir never made fun of me but the other boys and my father did. No one could compare with my brother!"

"You are a fine man in your own right and you are loved and valued now!" Aragorn placed a comforting hand on his Steward's shoulder. "You have my word no one will ever beat you again and what does it matter we both are rather shy and modest?"

Faramir smiled." A sensible trait for both a King and his Steward, I would think. It is bliss to know I will never be beaten again and be free of my scars. I shall always endeavour to be worthy of all the kindness you have shown me, my friend. I will never let you down."

"I know you would not and you richly deserve what little have given you. I count myself blessed to have you at my side." Aragorn reassured him, patting his shoulder. "I hope you did not find yesterday's events too distressing."

"I enjoyed our swim until the goats came!" Faramir assured him, "And even afterwards I was sure you would think of something to spare our blushes!"

"We will leave a Guard with our clothes next time!" Aragorn grinned, touched by Faramir's faith in him "I will see you later at the Council Meeting as I promised Arwen I would breakfast with her. I had better hurry if I want any as she is eating for two at present!"

"Eowyn said she would stay with the Queen later while we are in Council. I shall look forward to our next swim together, without the goats that is!" Faramir replied grinning broadly.

"We are fortunate indeed to have you both." Aragorn said as they briefly went their separate
Early September

Steel clashed against steel on the practise yard as the King and his Steward honed their skills.

Aragorn was by far the better swordsman while Faramir had the advantage of youth and the bout seemed destined to last all morning until a the sound of a maidservant's crying child distracted the Steward.

Aragorn took advantage of the lowered guard and had his sword tip at Faramir's throat. A bead of blood appeared where the sword pricked the skin.

"You are hurt!" Aragorn's voice was full of concern, "Come let me see!"

"It is nothing, I did not even feel it. "You win!" Faramir said calmly, not batting an eyelid.

"You dropped your guard!" Aragorn chided as he examined Faramir's throat, wiping away the spot of blood. The Steward was right it was a mere pinprick.

Faramir shrugged. "I would not in a real battlefield but I trust you! Rematch?"

Aragorn nodded.

This time Faramir fought with renewed vigour and threw himself wholly into the bout.

The swords rang as two experts each tried to surpass the other. This time Faramir won by virtue both of making the older man tire to match his swift strokes and Aragorn being somewhat distracted. He held the point of his sword to Aragorn's heart,

"I yield!" Aragorn threw up his hands in surrender and laughed. "I made the mistake of underestimating you! With anyone else I would be more wary!"

"It's a draw so shall we return to the ladies and call it a day?" Faramir suggested.

"They are waiting for us." Aragorn's keen eyes had spotted his wife and Eowyn watching from an upstairs window.

He waved and Faramir did likewise as they sheathed their swords. Aragorn heaved a inward sigh of relief for after his vision, part of him had feared to spar with his Steward but as they had both emerged without injury it seemed the 'vision' had just been the jumbled workings of an overtired mind.

A/N A very big thank you for all your much appreciated reviews.

Faramir should not be too harshly judged for his reactions to graphic descriptions of labour as he is typical of the men of his culture with regard to childbirth as it was only in recent times that fathers have been expected or even allowed to be present at the birth of their children.

During the Victorian era, if a woman in a hospital died after a male doctor delivered her child(Which carried a huge risk of infection as he might have come straight from the dissecting room !), it was widely believed to be a punishment for a male being involved in such matters.

Aragorn and Faramir do indeed need each other as this story will I hope show in some depth.

I do have more ideas for stories floating round in my head if my readers continue to enjoy reading.
If anyone reading this enjoyed or is interested in reading "First Meeting", I have added a couple of paragraphs to chapter two as I felt on rereading that Faramir came round too quickly.
A tiny spot of Faramir's blood on his fingertip could hardly be termed a catastrophe! Aragorn could have laughed out loud at his foolishness at taking his 'vision' so seriously.

"We had better change before joining the ladies," Faramir, ever mindful of court etiquette suggested, glancing ruefully at his sweat soaked shirt. The sparring had been especially energetic that morning. "I will go to my apartments and meet you later."

"My rooms are much nearer," Aragorn replied, "You can borrow a clean shirt of mine. It will be quicker if we change together."

"Thank you," Faramir replied following the King into his room and pulling the sweat soaked shirt over his head and casting it aside.

"There is water and a towel on the washstand." Aragorn told him as he did likewise, thinking as he did so what a change had come over Faramir these last few months, as before the Elven scar treatment, he would have gone to almost any lengths to avoid changing his shirt in front of anyone else, most especially his King.

He found himself surreptitiously looking at Faramir's throat again; still anxious that he was injured, but nothing at all was visible now. The incident had shaken him, but he resolved to put it from his mind, as sword practise was vital for them both to keep their skills finely honed.

It was wonderful that now his Steward was so relaxed and comfortable in his company and to see him in such good health and spirits. Faramir now moved with grace and ease when once he had struggled even to raise his arms above his head without pain while now he glowed with health and vigour, the effect heightened by the slight tan he had acquired the day they went swimming.

"Can I borrow a blue shirt?" Faramir asked as he towelled himself vigorously, "That is Eowyn's favourite colour."

"Of course, here you are! We are so grateful to Eowyn." Aragorn said, tossing the garment to him and choosing a red shirt for himself as that was his wife's favourite shade. "Arwen is feeling nervous as the birth approaches and it helps her to have Eowyn constantly at her side."

"We will all be glad when the baby is safely born." Faramir replied, his voice muffled as he drew the borrowed shirt over his head. "You will make a wonderful father!" Smoothing down the garment, he proceeded to borrow a comb to tidy his mane of black hair.
"As will you, my friend." Aragorn replied. "You will give your child all the love you were denied. I will be relieved when our baby is here; poor Arwen is so large she can hardly move. It cannot be much longer! Come on, we had better hurry as Arwen is somewhat impatient at present!"

"You had better tidy your hair too or she will go into premature labour with fright at the sight of you!" Faramir teased, handing his friend the comb.

Aragorn's unruly locks looked wilder than ever having survived sword practice, washing and drying and the change of clothing and now resembled the shaggy coat of a dog, of the that has to be combed in order for it to see where it is going. "No one cared how I looked when I was a Ranger!" he groaned.

Sighing, Aragorn struggled to tame the unruly locks; ignoring his Steward's smirking. Brought up within the rigours of Denethor's court, Faramir would consider it unthinkable to appear other than perfectly groomed in the presence of ladies or his superiors.

Eowyn helped the Queen waddle back to the couch. "That was a fine display of swordsmanship!" she complimented the men as they entered. "You only see that when the combatants trust each other completely."

Aragorn grinned as he gave his wife an affectionate kiss.

"I am lucky Faramir is here, so we can practise with real blades sometimes, as there is none other save Eomer that I could trust with my life like that." he said.

"What about my brothers?" Arwen asked with a frown.

"I trust them too, but being Elves, they are too quick for me," the King replied, dodging the cushion his wife threw at him in mock indignation.

"So we mere mortals are slow then?" Faramir followed the Queen's example, only with better aim, hitting the King on the chest.

"Show some respect for your King! I will have your head!" Aragorn chortled as he hurled the cushion back aiming for his Steward's head, only to be hit by two more thrown by the women.

Laughing the two men collapsed on the heap of scattered cushions as they continued their mock fight. Eowyn and the Queen laughed till tears rolled down their cheeks at their husbands' antics.

Mid September

He was weeping over the prone form on the bed, but he could not see their face, as they were shrouded in blankets. All he knew was, it was someone he loved dearly. He bent forward to pull the blankets aside.

"Estel, wake up!"

Aragorn slowly opened his eyes and tried to force himself to full consciousness and away from the blackness of his nightmare. While he was living in the wilds as a ranger, it had been easy for him to wake instantly alert, but during these last three years, he had grown accustomed to a life of ease and learned to sleep deeply. For a moment, he felt he was back in the wilds, lying on damp grass.

"Wake up!" Arwen's voice was more insistent.

"What?" he mumbled, blinking at her. "It is not dawn yet!"
"I am having contractions and my waters have just broken! The baby is coming!"

Aragorn was now fully alert and leapt out of bed. Grabbing his breeches, he pulled them on over his nightshirt.

"I will fetch Eowyn." He knew he should think of something profound to say at this moment, but the words would not come as he hurried out of the room to fetch help. For the last week or two, either Ioreth or Eowyn had slept in a bedroom adjoined the Queen's chambers in case they were needed.

Eowyn, a robe pulled over her nightgown, answered the King's knock quickly. Always a light sleeper, she was quickly alert and seeing the look on Aragorn's face, knew at once what was happening.

"Go back to Arwen!" she instructed him. "I will send a servant to summon Ioreth and will be with you in a moment.

Aragorn rushed back to his wife who moaned as a contraction came. Aragorn concentrated and held his hand over her belly, using his healing powers to ease her pain.

"I am afraid!" Arwen gasped. "It is too soon!"

Aragorn gently stroked her hair.

"Hush, my Love, the babe could take after me, remember! Eowyn said she thought you would give birth around now, so the time must be right!"

Just then Eowyn entered the room, and quickly grasped the situation.

"She is having contractions, I think." Aragorn said helplessly.

"I need to examine her to make sure, if you would leave us?" Eowyn instructed.

Anxious about his wife, the King hesitated.

"Shoo!" Eowyn said impatiently, propelling him towards the door. "Go and ask Faramir to stay with you for the next few days, while your wife and I deliver your heir! You can look after each other as I must stay constantly by Arwen's side for at least three days!"

"A good idea, if he can endure my company! I will see that you get a short break each day as that is allowed" Aragorn replied, as he obediently retired to his dressing room, closing the door behind him.

A brief examination confirmed what they suspected.

"You are in labour and everything is happening just as it should be." Eowyn soothed as she slid a dry shift over the Queen's swollen body and called Aragorn back into the room.

"The babe is on its way. Now stay calm!" Eowyn instructed. "Ioreth is coming and we will take you to the rooms prepared for your confinement I will help you to dress first. If you feel another contraction, don't panic just take deep breaths! Now which of your ladies will be attending you?"

"Lady Meril and Lady Morwen. Several maids are coming too, to assist with fetching and carrying. They can be handed buckets of water at the chamber's entrance or pass messages to the guards when need be."
Arwen let Eowyn lead her to her dressing room and clothe her in a loose gown while Aragorn moving restlessly to the door, lingered anxiously on the threshold, looking for Ioreth.

Arwen was already dressed and ready by the time the elderly midwife appeared.

"You are late!" Aragorn reproached her.

"And you, Lord Elfstone, know nothing of first babies!" She retorted. "They take their time in coming, it could take two days or more!"

A/N

A very big thank you to everyone who has taken the time to review. I greatly enjoy reading your comments and it makes all the hard work worthwhile to know you are enjoying the story.

"Burden of Guilt" will be taking a short break as I have a special story for next week to celebrate Aragorn's coronation. As several readers asked for more stories, I thought I would write one!

When it returns the angst will begin in earnest, as this was the last fairly lighthearted chapter.

In response to your queries,

My historical information comes from a variety of sources gained over the years, not just the Web, though the BBC history Site is a mine of information.

AU means 'alternate universe', which is a story that uses established characters but changes what happened in the original, for example Boromir might not die or the ring be destroyed. On this Site Evendim is a good example of a skilled writer of this genre.

Tolkien did not say whether Eldarion or one of the daughters was Aragorn's first child.

I think both Aragorn and Faramir still have much to learn about women, having spent so much of their lives in a male dominated environment.

This story should be able to stand on its own but I think readers who have read the prequels especially "Shadow and Thought" will probably get the most enjoyment. I tend to see my stories, almost as one long novel divided into sections!
Arwen grasped her husband’s hand. “If anything should go wrong, “She faltered. “I want our child to be saved.”

"Much as I want our child, my Love, it is you I adore! I regret now that I ever got you in this condition to take such risks with your life!” Aragorn protested, his nightmare returning with a frightening clarity. "Your life comes first, but do not think of such things and distress yourself!”

" It was my choice as I want a child as much as you do, you need an heir, Gondor needs an heir." Arwen said firmly. "I love you so much, Estel!" They exchanged a lingering kiss and only broke apart when another contraction hit Arwen.

"Come, Lady Elfstone!” Ioreth ordered. "We need to prepare you for the birth!"

Aragorn took Eowyn aside.” Take care of her please!” he begged.” I am so worried!”

Eowyn gently patted his arm, it was rare she saw the usually self-assured King in this mood "Please try not to worry, we have taken every precaution just in case." she said quietly. "But I think you have no need to fear, as she is strong, broad hipped and I know the babe's head is in the right position. You will soon be holding your first child in your arms and telling Arwen, how proud you are of her!"

"Thank you, Eowyn, I know she is in good hands.” Aragorn tried to force a smile, but there were tears in his eyes as Arwen was led away. He feared he would never see his beloved wife again in this life.

"You need to keep busy, all expectant fathers are the same!” Ioreth chuckled.

"Farewell, my Love!” Arwen called as she disappeared down the stone corridor.

Aragorn returned to bed and tried to go back to sleep for a few more hours but found it impossible. He could have sent for Faramir to keep him company but was loath to disturb his Steward just yet when he would still be sound asleep in his own apartments.

He had every intention of inviting him to stay with him, though throughout the coming days, as since their ordeal at the Hunting Lodge they had become truly comfortable with each other and
apart from Arwen, the only other person that Aragorn felt he could share his innermost hopes and fears with.

At daybreak, he abandoned any further attempt at sleeping, as he was just too concerned about Arwen. It was now daylight and he supposed he should eat breakfast, though he had little appetite and then attend that day's Council Meeting. Duty must always come first, however he was feeling, as Lord Elrond had taught him all his life. Faramir would understand this, as he too had been well schooled in duty, albeit more harshly by his late father.

As he dressed, his hands shook as he fastened his elaborate tunic. Maybe he should have sent for his valet, but he disliked having others clothe him and usually dispensed with their services unless it was some state function, for which a second pair of hands was essential to secure all the finery in place.

He paced the room restlessly, knowing he could not spend most of the day like this. It was so hard to concentrate as his every thought was with Arwen, wishing he could ease her pain. A servant brought him breakfast on a tray and he picked at his food before making his way to the Council Chamber.

It was a beautiful sunny morning and Midas Tirith was alive with citizens bustling through the streets. Across the courtyard, he could see Faramir already mounting the steps to the Hall of Kings. The Steward paused as one of the Nobles came to speak to him. Everything in the entire city seemed at ease with exception of her King.

Suddenly loud shouting and the clatter of hoof beats on stone shattered the peaceful atmosphere.

"Horses are not permitted in the Citadel! You are not allowed here!" A hapless guard protested, only to be pushed aside as Eomer King of Rohan and his personal Eored stormed into the courtyard, scattering alarmed guards and citizens in their wake.

Women and children screamed while the horses neighed wildly in the unaccustomed environment.

Aragorn raced outside to try and calm the commotion.

Eomer, a grim expression on his face, dismounted, and handing his horse's reins to one of his Eored, looked around him as if searching for someone.

He suddenly espied Faramir amongst the Counsellors and strode menacingly towards him.

"Come here worthless scoundrel, how dare you insult and dishonour my sister!" Eomer raged in the common tongue, as he waved a sheet of parchment under Faramir's nose.

"I know not of what you speak, brother!" Faramir, looking totally bewildered, backed up the steps towards the Council Chamber's entrance. "There must be some misunderstanding. Come inside and let us discuss this calmly."

"How dare you call me brother, when you treat my sister without honour! How many times have you beaten her? What cruel humiliations have you forced upon her, a Princess of Rohan, How many of your friends have you forced her to lie with?"

"Only one and she was not forced and there was no impropriety as he was near death." Faramir replied blushing as he recalled the events of six months before. I have never abused nor ill-treated my wife! I have no idea what you mean."

"Send for her then and let her speak!" Eomer snapped.
"I can not as she is attending the Queen during her confinement." Faramir said quietly.

"Will not or can not? Or is this some new insult to her, forcing her to act as the Queen of Gondor's maid?" Eomer snapped, drawing his broadsword and advancing on Faramir. "I demand satisfaction, arm yourself! Worthless cur though you are, I would not kill you in cold blood!" He threw the crumpled parchment down at Faramir's feet.

Faramir hesitated, unsure of whether or not to pick it up. He decided not to as Eomer advanced menacingly. Slowly and reluctantly he drew his sword.

"Stop this at once!" Aragorn, having arrived on the scene, shouted in a commanding tone, although somewhat out of breath in his haste to get there.

"This is none of your affair, save that you should have not let your Steward abuse my sister, Aragorn Arathornsson!" Eomer retorted. "I will avenge Eowyn's honour whether you like it or not!"

Aragorn tried to rush forward but found himself restrained by his own guards.

"Let me pass!" he ordered.

"Your life could be in danger, Sire and we are sworn to protect you." the Captain of the Guard replied. "You can punish us as you will, but we are not lending you face over a hundred heavily armed men, unarmed and protected by only four guards!"

"I order you, as your King, let me pass!" Aragorn roared.

Eomer rushed forward up the steps towards Faramir and lashed out with his sword, catching the Steward a glancing blow across the arm and side. Trying to defend himself, Faramir lunged at his opponent, aiming to disable his sword arm.

Eomer spun away from the blow, while Faramir was thrown slightly off balance and as result landed Eomer a blow to the chest.

Eomer, standing precariously on the top step, overbalanced as Faramir's sword pierced him. He fell down the stone steps backwards; landing with a sickening thud then lay there motionless, blood pouring from his head and chest.

His followers leapt from their horses, drew their swords and milled round him, loudly demanding justice.

Aragorn finally broke free from his guards and rushed to Eomer's side. The King of Rohan appeared lifeless and Aragorn bit back a cry of anguish as he bent over his stricken friend.

He held his hand over Eomer's nose and mouth and thought he detected a faint breath. Speed was the essence if he were to have any chance of survival.

"Take him to my apartments!" Aragorn ordered. "Carry him carefully!"

The Rohirrim pressed round Faramir, lances raised, demanding vengeance, while the Gondorian guards, who had come rushing from their various posts round the city, tried to hold them at bay.

A large crowd of citizens had also pressed into the courtyard on hearing the commotion. The horses, unused to the city, stirred restlessly, threatening to unseat their riders and stampede.

"Death!" chanted Eomer's men.
"For the white tree in the name of the King!" cried the Gondorians.

Aragorn realised he must act quickly if war was to be averted.

"Take Faramir, steward of Gondor into my custody!" he ordered. He bent and stuffed the crumpled parchment into his tunic.

White with shock, the unresisting Steward was led away.

"He must die, he killed our King!" shouted the Roherrim.

Aragorn raced to the top of the steps, oblivious to his own safety.

"Put down your weapons!" he roared. "Guards, arrest anyone who desists! Good citizens of Gondor, return to your homes, you are under curfew for the rest of the day!"

He then called in Roherric "Men of Rohan, I myself, Aragorn Arathornsson will care for Eomer King and see justice done. Put down your weapons, your horses could easily be harmed in this confined space!"

Aragorn held his breath, hoping that war could yet be averted.

TBC

A/N

Welcome back to this story, I was touched that some of you missed it.

The events to which Faramir refers occur in chapter 18 of "Shadow and Thought" if anyone is unsure what he means.

My ideas for stories just jump into my head, usually when I am trying to sleep!

Tolkien said that the law of the eldest always succeeding had not been observed in the lands of exile. (Middle Earth) because they were ever troubled by war.

I am sure Aragorn and Faramir are familiar with the births of foals, puppies and kittens as well as the gore of the battlefield but when it comes to their wives and their own offspring, they find that very different!

As it is a modern convention of the last forty years or so that fathers are present at the birth, I have decided to stick to older traditions, though anything could happen!

I hope you enjoyed "A New Beginning" It was written on impulse but I hope it provides some relevant background about Aragorn and Faramir.
Several spacious rooms and a bathing chamber had been prepared for the Queen's confinement. The largest of them was furnished with comfortable low chairs and a couch and overlooked a secluded garden.

There was also a chamber furnished with a large bed and several smaller rooms for the attendants.

As the two ladies in waiting took the Queen to bathe, Ioreth and Eowyn unpacked everything they might need, a supply of clean shifts, towels and clean cloths, herbs, ice kept packed in straw to staunch bleeding if it occurred, a needle and thread and tongs, which they might need but hoped they would not, and the last resort, always there but kept hidden, a sharp knife used to cut the cord and also there as a hideous final option to try and cut a living child from the dying body of its mother.

Eowyn shuddered as Ioreth laid the blade out of sight. She was certain Arwen and the babe were healthy at the moment, but could an Elf safely give birth to a half human child? She had delivered several babies in the past, but always to sturdy Rohirric women who easily took childbirth in their stride and had usually had several children already. This confinement was unlike anything she had known before and even Ioreth, veteran of more births, than she could count, was looking apprehensive.

Arwen returned from her bath looking refreshed and started to pace round the largest of the rooms, restless as a caged animal.

"Would you like some music?" Eowyn asked, as she knew of the Eldar's devotion to sweet melodies.

Arwen nodded, hoping it would distract her from the pain, while Ioreth looked rather shocked at such a novelty in a birthing chamber.

Lady Meril produced a harp; which she had brought for the occasion and started to play while Lady Morwen sang in an attempt to soothe the Queen.
Arwen continued to pace but gradually became calmer.

Slowly the mob started to disperse moved both by Aragorn's words and his commanding presence.

Swiftly he moved back to Eomer's side, where two of his Guards hovered with a stretcher. Kneeling beside him, he weighed up the risks of moving him. From what he could determine from a swift examination, his neck and spine appeared undamaged and as he could hardly treat him where he lay, he carefully eased him on the stretcher, aided by the Guards.

The King brushed the sweat from his face with the back of his hand and took a deep breath. This was a situation he could never have imagined in his worse nightmares, one of his closest friends injured, a distinct possibility of war and being bereft of the support and guidance of his Steward and his wife when he needed them the most.

He required every ounce of composure he possessed, as he directed the bearers to carry the King of Rohan to the nearest bedchamber and lay him carefully on the bed.

Eomer was a much-loved friend, as was Faramir. However could this have happened? He pushed his feelings aside as he knew he must concentrate on trying to save the King of Rohan and avert a bloody conflict. A group of Rohirrim and Palace Guards followed close behind muttering angrily.

As he entered the room, Aragorn grabbed a mirror, and held it in front of Eomer's lips. A fine mist appeared on the glass and Aragorn could have wept with relief.

"Eomer, King of Rohan yet lives!" he announced in a loud voice. "Now everyone leave this chamber, save the Captain of the Guard and his Lieutenant, as Eomer King's wounds must be tended with all haste if he is to have any hope of surviving! I want Guards posted outside this room at all times."

The Gondorians left the obediently but the Rohirrim lingered.

"Go!" Aragorn ordered in Roherric. "You endanger your King's life by remaining! I give you my word to do everything I can for my brother of Rohan."

They filed out muttering amongst themselves save one whom Aragorn recognised as Eothain, a faithful but surly companion of Eomer's since his days as Third Marshal in Theoden's court.

"I am not leaving my Lord with him whose Steward struck him down!" Eothain said angrily.

"Very well!" Aragorn bit back the rebuke he wanted to utter. "But sit over there and do not interfere or I will throw you out myself!" He gestured to a chair in the corner of the room and then turned to his two remaining Guards. "I want the swiftest of you to go and fetch the two most experienced healers from the Houses of Healing and tell them to bring everything needed to treat wounds, "he ordered. "Ask the Warden whom he recommends, but be swift!"

He did have the skills to treat Eomer himself, but wanted two assistants both to help him and to serve as witnesses that everything possible had been done, should Eomer die, as he could be seen as less than impartial as he was not one of the Rohirrim and also his Steward was involved in the attack.

The young Lieutenant sped away. Aragorn then turned to the Captain. "I need you to go to the Council Chamber and inform Prince Imrahil what has happened and ask him to lead today's session."
If the Captain replied, Aragorn did not hear, as he was already at Eomer's bedside engrossed in trying to save his friend.

At a glance Aragorn could see that Eomer was bleeding profusely from wounds in his head and chest, while his right shoulder, which he had landed heavily on, was at an odd angle.

The King staunched the bleeding as best he could, with a sheet snatched up from the bed and then took Eomer's pulse, which felt alarmingly weak and rapid.

He shouted to a passing servant to fetch some athelas from the gardens, as he feared he was going to need it.

Lifting Eomer in his arms, he started unfastening the armour he wore.

"I should be doing that!" Eothain protested as he hurried to the bedside.

"I though I told you to stay over there!" Aragorn snapped.

"How can I when my Lord requires my aid?" the Rohirrim replied. "I fastened it on him but this morning!"

"Very well." Aragorn conceded, inwardly realising the man would be more adept with the fastenings than he was, as it was long before Eothain was even born since he had last wrestled with the intricate clasps the Rohirrim used, the chain mail Theoden had lent him, being of a different design.

The armour Eomer wore was more ceremonial than functional, and had been all too easy for Faramir's blade to pierce.

Together they lifted off the elaborate leather breastplate revealing the torn and blood soaked tunic beneath. Aragorn's heart sank even more, especially as Eomer showed no sign of life when they moved him.

He carefully cut the ruined tunic away with one of Eomer's own knives and sighed when the gash that Faramir had cut across his broad chest was finally revealed.

The wound was deep, bleeding heavily and had only missed his heart by mere inches. The jagged edges of the injury suggested the blade and gone awry and not hit its intended target cleanly.

Eothain was purple with rage.

"Your Steward did this to my Lord!" he snarled. "He will pay, I swear it!"

"Justice will be done!" Aragorn said in a voice that brokered no argument, as he pressed a cloth against the wound, attempting to staunch the bleeding.

He bent and pressed an ear against Eomer's chest. He suspected the damage included a collapsed lung, though the colour of the blood issuing forth led him to hope it had not been pierced.

He gently prodded the bruised ribs, adorned with a tattoo of the white horse of Rohan, and found that several were broken, as he had feared.

He then examined Eomer's shoulder, which proved to be dislocated rather than broken and pressed it back in place, while Eomer was insensible, though even so it would cause discomfort. To his alarm, the painful procedure produced no reaction whatsoever as Eomer lay motionless beneath his hands. Aragorn feared more than ever for the life of his friend.
Before Eothain could think of anything else to say, the healers, clad in the black robes of their calling, arrived together with a servant, who was carrying the supplies they needed. Aragorn recognised them as Caranthir, the Warden himself, who had been Denethor's personal physician and Aedred, a younger healer, who originally hailed from Rohan.

Aragorn made a mental note to thank whoever had been responsible for this piece of diplomacy, as Eothain visibly softened on seeing another of his race enter. Aragorn was hopeful these two Healers were amongst the most skilled available, especially Caranthir, who had been a Healer for as long as Aragorn himself.

Aragorn quickly greeted them and explained the situation; even as he spoke they had moved over to the bed. Caranthir took over applying pressure to the chest wound, while Aedred, speaking softly in Roherric to Eothain, helped him to remove his King's leg armour and boots.

Aragorn turned his attention to the head injury. The King frowned as Eomer's head was starting to swell at an alarming speed. He had seen wounds like this before and very few survived them, though he had once assisted Elrond with a dangerous but effective procedure, from which the patient had made a full recovery. He hoped he could remember the exact details, as he feared he might have to try it on Eomer if the King of Rohan was to have any chance of survival.

Aedred was preparing to finish undressing Eomer and unfastened the leather breeches.

"What are you doing that for?" Eothain asked suspiciously. "Show some respect for our King!"

"We need to see if he has any more injuries." Aedred explained.

"You are one of those Gondorians now as you follow their foreign ways!" Eothain grumbled. "In Rohan, you never part a man from his breeches in case he needs to get on a horse in a hurry!"

Aragorn glared, knowing the man just wanted to cause trouble, as the Rohirrim were generally totally unconcerned about nakedness. He wondered whether he should throw the man out, but instead gestured towards a folded blanket lying on the table. "I do not think your King will go riding for some time yet," he said. "Fetch that blanket to cover him with as he needs keeping warm!"

Aedred uncovered a badly bruised hip and twisted knee once the clothing was removed. He set to work bathing the hurts and applying salves of arnica and marigold before taking the blanket from Eothain and covering Eomer's lower body with it. Aragorn caught his eye and transmitted a silent message, as Caranthir and Aragorn began cleaning the chest wound, which had finally stopped bleeding.

Aedred took Eothain to one side. "I have an important errand for you," he said. "I wish you to go and tell the rest of your King’s men what is happening as they will be as concerned as you are."

"I don't want to leave him." Eothain said stubbornly, "Not with those Gondorians!"

"I am of Rohan and will care for him, I give you my word!" Aedred said firmly, guiding him towards the doorway. "It is best that news of Eomer King should come from one of his own men!"

Aragorn and Caranthir now examined the chest wound carefully and debated how best to treat it. They decided on washing it out with an infusion of meadowsweet, stitching it and then smearing it with honey and garlic to prevent infection from setting in.

"It looks as if the edge of the sword caught him." Caranthir remarked. "I have seen many wounds
like this but usually on a battlefield!"

Aragorn sighed as he threaded a needle. "He overbalanced and fell on to the blade, most unfortunate, though I am hopeful that it is not a mortal injury. While I do this, could you shave the hair surrounding his head wound?"

Caranthir took up a razor and began to carefully shave off part the matted and bloodied blonde mane surrounding the wound.

"You are skilled with a needle, my Lord," Aedred commented admiringly, as he bandaged the damaged knee.

"Lord Elrond of Rivendell taught me." Aragorn replied without looking up. "My skills are nothing compared with those of the Elven healers, I fear. I see you are a diplomat as well as a healer, Master Aedred as you dealt well with Eothain. I did not want him to witness it when I cut open the King of Rohan's skull!"

TBC

A/N

Replies to queries

First, grateful thanks to my reviewer who pointed out the discrepancy between chapters 10 and 11. I have rewritten chapter 10 now. The oversight occurred as result of forgetting due to a week's break!

All will revealed soon what the parchment contains, though many of you have already guessed! Hanna's family are innocent.

Aragorn's troubles are only just beginning, I fear.

A friend of mine was in labour for two days and she had the benefit of modern maternity care.

Aragorn had little choice but to arrest Faramir, as he had to think quickly before there was a bloodbath. The Roherrim are honourable but they are incensed about the fate of their King and supposed ill treatment of Eowyn.

I am not suggesting that Arwen is fat, in this instance broad hipped wide pelvic bones.

Ioreth, in her unconventional way, refers in the book to Aragorn as "Lord Elfstone" which would make Arwen "Lady Elfstone" according to British tradition, as I am trying to keep Ioreth in character by making her address Arwen in an unconventional fashion.

I was delighted that one of my readers was wondering who carried the "Burden of Guilt" and hope this will provoke some debate, especially as even I am not sure of the answer as the plot unfolds!

To my critic who finds the plot unbelievable, I assure you I did give it careful thought and as Eomer is Aragorn's closest Ally, I am sure he would be allowed in the city without question. I doubt he demands Faramir's death until he finds him, and even if he did the City would not be heavily guarded in peacetime. As for Faramir not trying to reason with Eomer, if you read the story, he does!

Faramir blurts out about his friend in Eowyn's bed as he is confused, bewildered and latches on
the only accusation he understands sufficiently to explain!

I used "Arathornsson" as Tolkien based the Rohirrim on the Saxons and Vikings and that was a common Viking form of address. Tolkien often refers to a character as 'son of.'
A Dangerous Procedure

Chapter Notes

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema with the exception of Caranthir who appears by kind permission of Evendim. This story was written for pleasure and not for financial gain

Warning - This chapter contains material which may upset readers of a squeamish disposition, so please read with care.

Aedred blanched and even Caranthir looked alarmed as he tugged nervously at his short white beard.

"My Lord, that is very dangerous!" the elderly healer protested. "I have heard of the procedure but not of any surviving it! Would it not be better to wait and see if the swelling subsides?"

Aragorn looked troubled, but said nothing as he finished the stitching and turned his attention to the injured ribs, feeling them gently before applying a salve of comfrey and arnica. He motioned to Aedred to lift Eomer while he bandaged the chest wound and strapped the damaged ribs.

He then moved up the bed and stood for a moment looking down at Eomer.

"See how his head is swollen! It has grown worse even since you came in this room! I know the procedure is dangerous but not to try it would be more so. I do not like doing it, but fear I have no choice!" Aragorn said. He gently probed the head wound with his long sensitive fingertips, as he spoke. "I will need you to hold him while I make the incisions."

The healers still looked doubtful but did not wish to contradict the King.

"Have you any better suggestions?" Aragorn asked, determined to leave no stone unturned in his efforts to save his friend.

"I fear I cannot think of any other treatment except maybe cold compresses, which I doubt would work." Caranthir sighed. "We will assist you as best we may, Sire."

Aragorn wrapped blankets round Eomer to keep him warm and try to prevent him going into shock then draped a towel round the young King's shoulders.

Carefully, he washed his hands and steeled himself for one of the most difficult tasks of his life. He knew it was unwise to carry out such a procedure on a loved one and it turned his stomach to think of what he must do. He was all too aware that Eomer's life lay in his hands, as he alone had the skill and knowledge to save Eomer and could not allow himself to give way to his natural revulsion towards hurting a dear friend.
He studied Eomer's pale face, trying to see him merely as a man in need of his help and not as his close friend and brother in arms; his first and most faithful ally in the struggle to defeat Sauron and a loyal friend who had shown him many kindnesses and always held his welfare close to his heart. Eomer lay as still, as one already dead and Aragorn knew that unless he acted quickly, his friend would soon be beyond all mortal aid.

"Hold him upright!" Aragorn instructed the healers as he took a very sharp knife they had brought from the Houses of Healing and held it in the flames of the fire to sterilize it.

Taking a deep breath to steady his hand, he made three incisions round the wound on Eomer's head, each about three inches in length.

Caranthir, while supporting Eomer's upper body with one hand, used the other to mop away the blood oozing from the fresh cuts, to allow Aragorn a clear view of Eomer's skull as the scalp was peeled back to expose the shattered skull beneath.

Aragorn carefully picked out the fragments of bone, all the while taking care not to pierce the membrane surrounding the brain, as that would cause a most likely fatal infection.

It was deliberate and painstaking work as one slip would be fatal, as would leaving any fragments of bone inside. When he was satisfied the wound was clean, he folded back the skin flap and carefully stitched it before applying a salve of garlic and honey to fight off infection.

Aragorn finally dared to relax a little and found that he was shaking as the healers eased Eomer back on the bed.

"Rest a while, my Liege!" Caranthir counselled, "I will bandage King Eomer's head."

Aragorn nodded and permitted Aedred to assist him to a chair. The Rohirric healer brought him a restorative drink and a cloth to wipe his hands, hands stained red with his close friend's blood.

"That cannot have been easy for you, my Lord, as I know you hold Eomer King in high esteem."

Aedred sympathised, as Aragorn, his hand now steadier, gave him back the drained goblet.

Aragorn briefly closed his eyes and for once, allowed himself for once to be aided. He felt drained with the strain of fighting for his friend's life combined with guilt about not being able to prevent this catastrophe and worry about Arwen and the child she was labouring to bring into the world.

Caranthir paused in his almost completed bandaging, as he felt uneasy about Eomer's condition. He felt under the blankets to check his heartbeat.

"He grows weaker!" he exclaimed in alarm, "His heart is slowing!" He pulled down the blankets and made to massage the fading heart.

His momentary weakness forgotten, Aragorn leapt to his feet.

"Leave him to me. Bring hot water, quickly!" he demanded.

The healers looked baffled but did as they were bidden and brought a bowl of steaming water to the King, into which he cast two leaves of the athelas, he had sent for earlier.

"Hold the bowl under Eomer's face!" he commanded Caranthir.

"But my Liege, we should be trying to revive him!" The elderly healer protested.

"I am trying to, do as I say!" Aragorn's tone brokered no argument. "Hold the bowl!"
The King went on his knees by his friend's bedside and laid one hand on the pale brow, the other
he clasped round Eomer's cold fingers.

"Eomer, Eomer!" he called, as if in a trance.

The healers looked on in bewilderment.

"Whatever is he doing?" whispered Aedred.

"I know not, but Dame Ioreth told me he used some strange Elvish art to cure the Lord Faramir of
the Black Breath, maybe this is akin to it?" Caranthir replied in a low voice, looking with some
alarm at Aragorn, who had turned almost as pale as the King of Rohan.

Eomer suddenly started to breathe more deeply and some colour returned to his pale features to the
amazement of the watching healers.

Aragorn swayed and would have fallen, had Aedred not steadied him. He helped the King to his
feet and led him to a chair.

"His heart beats strongly now!" Caranthir, who hastened to examine Eomer, announced.

"My Lord, you are unwell, let me aid you!" Aedred fretted, as Aragorn gradually regained his
composure.

"I am well, just give me a moment." Aragorn replied, gently but firmly batting the Healer's
probing fingers away.

"This type of healing is very draining, I believe, though I have never seen it done before. That is,
if it is not just some sort of illusion. It could be the athelas acts as a restorative." Caranthir
commented, secretly impressed but not wishing to acknowledge something, which broke every
rule he knew of, in front of his colleague, "Dame Ioreth told me the King's friends feared for his
well being when he healed the Lord Faramir but he quickly recovered."

"Faramir!" Aragorn, all weariness forgotten, leapt to his feet, remembering that he had ordered his
Steward to be taken into custody.

(The procedure Aragorn carries out on Eomer is taken from a description I read about an
operation carried out in Anglo Saxon times, which the patient survived)

TBC

A/N

A big thank you for all your greatly appreciated comments which have given me plenty of food for
thought and encouraged me to quickly update!

I have revised "The Hidden Days of Healing "as being my first LOTR story it was full of errors.
In it, I develop the bond between Aragorn and Eomer referred to in this chapter.

The complete story does exist in rough form, but I rewrite each chapter before I post it, so I can
hopefully improve it and incorporate points, which may not have occurred to me!

I do try to stick carefully to Tolkien's universe but am reluctant to say just yet if this is AU or not in
case it spoils the suspense! Being set after LOTR, Tolkien tells us very little in any case and
nothing in the main text of the novel.
There will be more to the story than endless surgical procedures, I promise!

I am quite interested in herbs and their uses and also information is freely available on the Internet. Honey and garlic have been used since Roman times to fight infection and honey is still used today to treat wounds. You can also buy arnica and calendula creams, though not mixed!

I agree Faramir can be his own worst enemy at times. He is sometimes too honest for his own good! His whereabouts and fate will be revealed in due course.

I too, feel sorry for Aragorn and his troubles are only just beginning!

As several of you have said, the 'burden of guilt' could rest on a variety of characters, which intrigues me as I work on this story as sometimes the characters take over!

Ioreth says in ROTK page 295 "That will be the one that walks with our Elfstone-Now he is a marvel, the Lord Elfstone: not too soft in his speech, mind you", so the passage made me think in character if called Arwen "Lady Elfstone" but that is purely my invention and belief.

The white horse tattoo idea was borrowed with permission from a story I read.

I do appreciate when readers point out genuine discrepancies that I can correct. I'm not the type of writer who deletes or ignores comments when I know I made a mistake!
My Lord?" Caranthir asked in bewilderment.

"I must go to my Steward as soon as I can safely leave Lord Eomer." Aragorn explained, inwardly cursing himself for not sending someone to check on Faramir's welfare sooner, but the seriousness of Eomer's condition had pushed all other considerations from his mind.

"I hope Lord Faramir was not badly injured as I believe he and King Eomer fought, or so I am told." Caranthir remarked. "He is very dear to me as I have known him since he was a child."

"He is very dear to me too." Aragorn replied, wondering however could he have forgotten all about his closest friend.

Returning to Eomer's bedside, he carefully examined him. The athelas treatment appeared to have worked as his dreadful pallor had been replaced by a more healthy colour, the previously weak and fluttering heartbeat, was now stronger and steadying, while his skin no longer felt cold and clammy to the touch. However he was still deeply unconscious and failed to respond when Aragorn softly called his name.

"He is still seriously ill, but I believe he has a good chance of survival as long as he regains consciousness within a day or two and is able to take food and water." Aragorn pronounced, allowing himself to heave a small sigh of relief. "We should make him as comfortable as possible now."

The healers agreed and together with Aragorn they bathed Eomer in the water in which athelas had been steeped and clothed the King of Rohan in a soft linen nightshirt, one of Aragorn's own, and then placed pillows under his head and shoulders to ease his breathing, hampered as he was by a collapsed lung and damaged ribs.

Aragorn gently wiped Eomer's face and moistened his dry lips with a cloth soaked in cool water.

"Get well, dear friend!" he murmured, so softly that Eomer alone might hear. He bent and gently kissed his brow.

Eomer lay unmoving and it tore Aragorn's heart to see his friend, the vibrant King of Rohan, looking so vulnerable and much younger than his thirty years.

"Stay with him constantly, keep him comfortable and inform me of any change at once!" he instructed the healers as he made for the door and thanked them for their help.
"I believe you have saved his life." Aedred informed him. "Now you should rest yourself, my Lord. We will care for King Eomer."

Aragorn wished he could take the advice but first he had to find out what had caused Eomer to attack Faramir and see how his Steward was faring.

Imrahil was waiting for him outside the door, pacing the corridor anxiously.

"How fares my son in law?" the Prince of Dol Amroth asked anxiously." I need to send word to my poor daughter!"

"He lives and I hope he may yet recover, but he has not yet awakened." Aragorn told him." Have you heard any tidings of my Queen while you were in Council?"

Imrahil shook his head. "No more than in the message, you sent, my Lord. And what of my nephew? Matters have gone very ill this day! The Council are calling for war to avenge the attack on Gondor's Steward. I told them they must await your decision. The Rohirrim are confined in the barracks for the time being, both for our safety and for theirs."

"You did well, I sincerely hope war may yet be averted ,as long as Eomer survives and we can learn the reason for his actions." Aragorn clapped the Prince on the shoulder as a gesture of gratitude. "I am going to speak to Faramir now to try and find out why Eomer attacked him. War must be averted at all costs with our friends and allies in Rohan, but first I need to know what was behind Eomer's strange accusations."

Imrahil coughed. "Should you not bathe and change first, my Lord? You look, um, somewhat alarming!"

Aragorn glanced down and noticed for the first time that his tunic was stained with copious amounts of Eomer's blood, as were his hands and arms. His sweat soaked clothing clung damply to his skin as the strain of trying to save his friend had exerted him heavily.

"You have a point!" he said ruefully. "I could alarm the servants like this! Luckily we are near my apartments."

Imrahil followed Aragorn into his spacious rooms and sat down to wait while the King changed.

Aragorn pulled off the blood stained outer tunic in the main room and flung it aside. He was not squeamish but found being soaked with the blood of his friend a highly unpleasant experience. A piece of parchment fell to the ground as he tugged the garment over his head.

Imrahil stooped and picked it up as Aragorn disappeared into his dressing room.

"Whatever is this?" he exclaimed.

"Eomer was waving it around just before he attacked Faramir," Aragorn replied, emerging from the room with a handful of clean garments, "I had forgotten about it until now as I have been so preoccupied."

He took the now blood splattered parchment from Imrahil, unfolded it and read aloud; "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 Eowyn!"
"Eowyn!" Aragorn groaned as he let the parchment slide on the table "I should have guessed Eomer was angry on behalf of his sister! But why? Faramir would never ill treat his wife. He is the most honourable of men!"

"I thought my nephew and Lady Eowyn were happy, they seemed overjoyed to be expecting a child!" Imrahil looked bewildered.

Aragorn disappeared into his bathing chamber and carried on the conversation through the door, which he had left slightly ajar.

"They are happy now but it was very different when they were first married! I suspect Eowyn switched her affections to Faramir rather too quickly." Aragorn replied, pouring water from a pitcher into a bowl untroubled that it was cold, "Do you remember when I took them to Duiolin of Morthond's hunting lodge last spring?"

"Of course, as you left me in charge of the City. Faramir seemed much more happy and confident when you returned but he never told me why."

"A great deal happened during that time, which would take me all day to tell you." Aragorn explained, as he bathed his upper body vigorously. "Suffice to say that a misunderstanding about the reasons for their marriage was making them both unhappy, especially Eowyn, who was furious about being invited to the lodge. I invited her, rather than commanded, but Faramir taking it to be an order, insisted that she come. I would guess the letter dates from that time but why Eomer has suddenly acted on it, I have no idea!"

"You had better ask the lady!" Imrahil replied, as the King emerged, clad in a clean linen shirt and woollen breeches. He was pulling a tunic, which was lavishly embroidered with the White Tree, over his head.

"You forget, she is attending Arwen during her confinement and may not be disturbed on pain of death!" Aragorn replied grimly. "All we can do is ask Faramir if he knows anything about it and keep the Rohirrim apart from him until Eowyn can speak!"

"Where is Faramir?" Imrahil asked as they prepared to leave.

"I had him taken into my custody for his own safety so he will be in 'The Hospitality room'," Aragorn explained. "I fear I may have seemed harsh, but Eomer's men would have torn him limb from limb had I not appeared to punish him. The situation was very ugly."

"You did your best and I am sure he will understand. "Imrahil said calmly. "You had no other choice."

Aragorn still looked worried. "He was wounded too, though only slightly it seemed, but I would like to tend him myself, though I am sure the men will have done their best for him. I fear though, he may be upset or believe that he really has incurred my wrath and some dire punishment might await him. I should have gone to him before, but Eomer was dying and it took all my skills to revive him."

"I fear my late brother in law has a lot to answer for. "Imrahil said bitterly. "He destroyed Faramir's confidence but he has thrived since you came to the throne."

"It has gladdened my heart to see him blossom." Aragorn said sincerely, as they made their way to the euphemistically labelled 'The Hospitality Room' room used to detain everyone who caused trouble to the Royal Household, be it foreign diplomats suspected of spying, Lords drunk at banquets or Counsellors who caused disruption at meetings.
To Aragorn’s surprise, there was no guard outside the door of the detention chamber, as was customary when it was occupied. As the key was in the lock, Aragorn turned it and went inside closely followed by Imrahil.

It was a small room, furnished simply but comfortably with a bed, table and chair, illuminated by light from a single high window. At the far side of the room, a door led into a bathing room and privy. Of Faramir though, there was no sign.

Aragorn looked puzzled as he called "Faramir, where are you? I apologise for taking so long to fetch you!"

Imrahil looked carefully round the room as if to assure himself that Faramir was not concealed somewhere as Aragorn rattled the door of the bathing chamber.

"I do not wish to disturb you if you are bathing or in the privy, but please tell us you are inside!" Aragorn called.

There was still no answer and Aragorn pushed open the door, expecting to reveal a blushing and maybe unwell Steward within, but the room was empty.

Aragorn looked anxious. "I was sure he would be here," he said, shaking his head slightly in bewilderment.

"Maybe he is in the Guardroom?" Imrahil suggested. "He will know many of the men there from his days as a ranger. Maybe they disliked the idea of locking him up and took him to have a drink with them and remember old times? They would know you would not be angry if they did that."

The King looked relieved. "Let us go and find out if you are right!" he said with a smile. "Not that they will thank us for interrupting their reminiscences!"

They walked together down to the bustle of the Guardroom, where the soldiers were milling to and fro, some talking, some drinking, others sitting and polishing their weapons. Half of the Citadel Guard seemed to be there but Faramir was not amongst them.

Aragorn espied the men who had held him back that morning and made a mental note to see they were demoted. If he had only been able to reach the combatants and throw himself in front of them, he was sure that bloodshed could have been averted.

The level of noise gradually lessened as the men realised the King was amongst them and they stood to attention.

"Has anyone seen the Lord Steward?" Aragorn enquired in a loud voice.

"You told us to arrest him, Sire." A young Guard, whom Aragorn now recognised from earlier that day, replied nervously.

"I did, so why is he not in the Hospitality Room?" Aragorn replied. There was a hard edge in his voice.

The men stiffened. The King did not often use that tone.

"We took him to the prison, my Lord" the young Guard said, gulping hard.

"You did what?" Aragorn's tone was like ice.

"We took him into custody like you told us to." the young man stammered, flushing scarlet.
"I told you to take him into *my* custody, which meant the Hospitality Room, not the city prison!" Aragorn roared, his eyes flashing. He raised his hand as if to strike the offender and then thought better of it. Instead he said coldly. "You and your companion from this morning are suspended from duty while I decide what to do with you! Do not expect to escape lightly!"

The Guard looked as if he wished the floor would open and swallow him. Aragorn turned away from him dismissively much to the man's relief, as he did not think he could endure the King’s fierce gaze for much longer.

"I need two men to accompany me to the prison!" Aragorn snapped, as he selected two burly guards. "You will do, Captain, and you too, Sergeant!"

Followed closely by Imrahil and the Guards, Aragorn all but raced through the deserted city streets, his features set in a grim line.

He did not know who to be more angry with, the Guards who took Faramir to prison, or himself for not making the order clearer, as now he had had a moment to think he realised that 'my custody' could have easily been misheard for 'custody' during the commotion.

He was assailed by a sense of dread, for the prison housed dangerous criminals and a man of Faramir's gentle and highly-strung nature could be in grave danger there.

TBC

A very grateful thank you to everyone who has reviewed. I enjoyed reading your comments very much and will bear many of your points in mind while continuing the story.

I was very sad to hear that one reader had a friend who suffered a similar injury to Eomer and did not survive it. I hope the chapter did not cause too much distress as it was not intentional and am glad you are still able to enjoy the story.

The circumstances surrounding Eowyn writing the later are in 'Shadow and Thought' chapter 6
The Dark Night of the Soul

Chapter Notes

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema with the exception of Caranthir who appears by kind permission of Evendim. This story was written purely for pleasure and not for profit.

Warning – This chapter contains violence and disturbing material and is maybe one of the darkest in the story. It was not easy to write so please only read if you are not easily disturbed.

"My life will be justly forfeit, if I now choose a course that proves ill for my city." Faramir - The Two Towers

Faramir sat hunched on the hard prison bed, which apart from a bucket for nature's calls and some filthy straw, was all the dungeon contained.

The damp, grime encrusted walls were very different from what the Steward was accustomed to since his elevation to high office, but he was far too anguished to pay much heed to his surroundings.

All he could think of was the memory of Eomer lying dead at the bottom of the steps by his hand followed by Aragorn's stern voice telling the Guards to arrest him.

He could not see the King's face as he gave the order and wondered if he had done if he could have endured seeing the disappointment and anger in his eyes.

The Guards had told the jailor, that the King himself had ordered him brought here for killing the King of Rohan and then brought him unresisting to this cell. One of the Guards, pitying him had then roughly bandaged his wounds before they both left, securing the door behind them.

Faramir buried his face in his hands. He had sometimes feared that the happiness of the last few months could never last and that one day he would wake and find it had melted away like a dream, but this hideous turn of events, he could never have imagined in his worse nightmares.

He could hear his father's voice in his head, mocking him for ever believing he could enjoy the esteem of the King and the People and basking in the warmth of the love that Eowyn and Aragorn showed towards him. It seemed he was doomed to be a failure, Hanna, crazy though she was, was right, it would have been better had he perished with his father as her curse was coming true.

He had lost everything within the space of a few brief moments, when he drawn his sword to defend himself and killed the King of Rohan, Gondor's chief ally, close friend of Aragorn and his own brother in law.

He was bewildered why Eomer was so angry but nothing could extenuate the fact he had killed
him, a King and his wife's only brother. He had only meant to deal him a light blow on the arm to force him to drop the heavy sword, hoping he could then use words rather than weapons to settle whatever the dispute might be.

He shuddered to recall the angry soldiers of both sides milling round the courtyard. War would come soon and it would all be his, Faramir's fault. He had committed regicide and treason as well as several other heinous crimes such as causing a war and endangering King and Country.

He accepted he must pay the ultimate price and expected no mercy, nor desired it for all the grief he had brought to his King, his wife and his beloved Gondor.

He could not help though, but fear the punishment that he was certain would await him, the death of a traitor, which involved the pain and humiliation of being dragged through the streets dressed only in his shirt, hung but taken down while still alive. Then stripped naked before being castrated and disembowelled while still breathing before his heart was torn from his body. Even after death, the punishment did not end as his body would be cut into four quarters and displayed throughout the kingdom as a warning to others.

He had seen several such executions during his father's time as Steward and was sickened and haunted by them. He had hoped the people's love for Aragorn would have consigned such grisly spectacles to the past, he had never dreamt that he would die in such a manner, as he was loyal to the King, body and soul.

He only hoped that the Rohirrim had not harmed Aragorn in the initial battle as the King would be needed during the coming war and though he knew he had lost Aragorn's friendship he would always love his King until he drew his last breath.

He wondered how his family would welcome him into the afterlife. He supposed his mother and Boromir would accept him come what may, though it would shame them that the family had produced a traitor. While Denethor would delight in telling him how often he had predicted he was good for nothing. He shuddered at the thought, as he had dared to hope he was finally free of his father's cruel taunts.

He trusted Aragorn would be merciful to Eowyn and not punish her, as the law demanded. She would be needed in Rohan now, as she was their Queen, unless his cousin Lothiriel, Eomer's bride of only a few weeks, was already with child.

He longed to see his beloved Eowyn for one last time, but how could he face her, having killed Eomer, the brother she adored? He knew he would see the King again, presiding over his trial for treason and dreaded the prospect of seeing the contempt he knew would be in his eyes.

He loved the King with a deep and enduring love, far exceeding that which was merely owed to his Liege Lord, for Aragorn had given him his life and health back and with it honours, lands and titles, and above all love, everything that his father had denied him. He would have sooner have died than willingly betray Aragorn, whom he loved so dearly and had become father, brother, mentor, healer and friend to him.

The knowledge that he had let Aragorn down and betrayed all the trust the King had placed in him, hurt him the most deeply, as he had sworn that would never happen. Denethor had always the expected worse of him and he had never lived up to his father's expectations, but with Aragorn it had been so very different as the King demanded so little and given so much in return.

He knew the King to be a merciful man, but how could he show mercy again as he had already pardoned Eowyn for trying to kill him once? It would make him appear weak and seem like a signal that the Steward's family could do whatever they liked. Eowyn's misguided actions of six
months ago had been kept secret until now but were bound to be revealed at his trial.

Faramir's musings were interrupted by the sound of footsteps and raucous shouting.

The door was unlocked and the jailor who had admitted him, who Faramir was certain looked familiar, came in with an obviously drunken prisoner, obviously in a foul mood at being separated from whatever it was he was drinking. The Jailor pushed the drunk inside the cell with Faramir.

"Well, I never did if isn't our oh so virtuous Captain or should I say my Lord Steward now, "the Jailor exclaimed, leering at Faramir in a manner which made his blood freeze.

If it were possible to do so, Faramir's spirits sank even lower. He remembered the man now as Mahrod, who had once been in his company of rangers. The memories were not pleasant, as he had ordered him to be flogged and dismissed from the army after he had been caught committing rape. Had it not been wartime, his punishment would have been far harsher, but as the enemy was advancing, Faramir had needed to act quickly to dispense justice.

"I remember the day you had me beaten like yesterday. Not so high and mighty now, are we?" Mahrod jeered, as he spat in Faramir's face.

"You deserved your punishment." Faramir said quietly, wiping his face with his sleeve and thinking how ironic it was that this criminal had survived the war, when so many good men in his company had died. He felt nauseous as he remembered the events of that time, both the crime and having to order the punishment, as it was the first and only time he had ever needed to order the lash to be used.

"As you'll deserve yours! We'll have something special in store for a fine gentleman such as you, your fine airs and graces won't help you here, quite the contrary!" Mahrod retorted, eying Faramir gleefully. "I did nothing compared with you, you might well call me a rogue, but I was never a traitor!"

The words stung like a blow and Faramir hung his head.

"I'll be back soon as I have something very special planned for you!" Mahrod laughed unpleasantly as he left the cell, barring the door behind him.

The drunk went straight to the bucket to relieve himself, and then moved towards Faramir.

"Got a drink, 'ave you?" he asked.

"No." replied Faramir, alarmed at the look in the man's eyes. "I have nothing."

"But thought 'e said you was the Steward?" the drunk persisted.

Faramir said nothing as he rose uneasily to his feet and backed into a corner.

"You not trying to make fun or me, I 'ope or did I 'ear 'im wrong? Did 'e say you a traitor? I don't 'old with no traitors, a loyal soldier of 'is majesty, that's me!"

Without warning, the drunk punched him in the ribs. Winded and caught off balance, Faramir fell to the ground, twisting his ankle as he fell.

"Get up you!" snarled the drunk.

Hindered by his injured ankle, Faramir was unable to comply. The drunk prodded him with his booted foot and kicked him viciously in the belly.
As he raised his foot to strike again, Faramir tried to grab it but the man was nimbler than he looked. Enraged now, the drunkard kicked Faramir, this time in the ribs, then in the groin and again in the belly.

Again and again the booted foot descended as he vainly tried to curl in a ball to protect himself. He screamed in agony as the boot made contact with his wound and he felt the warm blood trickle down his side. A sickening crack told him his ribs were being broken. Then the cell started to spin and he knew no more.

TBC

The execution method that Faramir dreads is unfortunately no mere figment of my imagination. It was introduced in 1241 and not abolished until 1821. Famous victims were William Wallace and Guy Fawkes. Often members of the nobility were beheaded instead and women were burned at the stake. Such grisly executions attracted vast crowds of spectators! Killing a King was considered the most heinous of crimes.

A/N A big thank you for all your greatly appreciated reviews. I am thrilled by your response to this story and as result decided to update as quickly as I could!

Where did I refer to Faramir as "little" as I am well aware he is tall? Aragorn lived to be 210 according to canon.

Faramir refers to events in Chapters 25 and 38 of "Shadow and Thought".

I am relieved that Chapter 13 did not cause any distress to my bereaved reader.

I am glad that one of my readers mentioned what dangers could await Faramir in prison and come to the same conclusion as I did.

All will be revealed about Arwen eventually, labour with a first child often takes at least a day.

Thank you to readers who pointed out the mistakes in Chapter 14, my fault for amending it online. I have corrected it now.

The soldiers were just doing what they believed Aragorn wanted but hopefully their actions add to the debate about where the Burden of Guilt lies.
The Evil that Men Do

Chapter Notes

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story was written purely for pleasure and not for profit.

Warning – This chapter contains violence and disturbing material and is maybe one of the darkest in the story. It was not easy to write so please only read if you are not easily disturbed.

The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
Shakespeare- Julius Ceasar 3.2

"My life will be justly forfeit, if I now choose a course that proves ill for my city." Faramir- The Two Towers

"On your feet, you lazy scoundrel!"

Faramir blinked as he slowly regained consciousness. For a fleeting moment he thought he was in his bedroom until the fact that his whole body throbbed with pain and the stench assailing his nostrils, all too vividly reminded him that he was in a prison cell.

Panic seized him as he wondered what had happened to him while he was unconscious.

He looked around anxiously for his drunken assailant but there was no sign of him. Instead, Mahrod stood looking down at him, grinning at his obvious discomfort.

He groaned and tried to sit up but the pain in his chest and belly was too great. Even breathing was agony and the sweat poured from his face at the effort of trying to move.

"I told you to get up, you scum!" Mahrod snapped, tipping a bucket of cold and filthy water over the helpless Steward.

Faramir, with a supreme effort of will, managed to drag himself to a sitting position. He tried to stand but his many injuries made it impossible. Coughing and retching as the bile rose in his throat, he collapsed again in agony.

"Time you were taught a long overdue lesson, Lord uppity Steward!" Mahrod sneered as he roughly dragged Faramir, out through the door and along a narrow dark corridor until they came to a small windowless room, dimly lit with oil lamps. The room was bare apart the manacles, which hung from the blood spattered walls.

"Strip!" Mahrod ordered, leering at Faramir, "We are going to have some fun together, you and I!"
"No!" Faramir protested in terror, clutching at his clothing with what little strength he had left. It seemed that the unspeakable was about to happen.

When Mahrod began to pull at his clothing, resisting his weak struggles, he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Aragorn strode into the prison, demanded the keys from the startled head jailor and ignoring the man's feeble protests, marched through the corridors, unlocking each cell and glancing inside, hoping he could find Faramir before he was harmed.

His expression became even grimmer as he took in the harsh conditions and wondered however his sensitive and gentle natured Steward was enduring it. He made a mental note to improve prison conditions in future as he had no idea things were so bad.

The head jailer, a short tubby man, finally caught up the King and his Escort, as they peered inside the final cell, which was occupied by a man who screamed that the walls were trying to eat him and had obviously lost his wits.

"Where is the Lord Steward?" Aragorn demanded.

"I don't know, my Liege!" the man stammered. " I wasn't here when he was brought in. He should be in one of the cells, though!"

Aragorn towered over him, his expression grim. "Well he is not. I have looked in them all and I demand to be taken to him, wherever he is!"

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Mahrod stood up from where he had been kneeling beside the Steward when a younger man entered the room, carrying a cat o' nine tails. Faramir, gradually regaining consciousness, was writhing in agony and moaning softly as he came to his senses.

"A hundred lashes for the traitor, Lamrung!" the older Jailor ordered, looking somewhat furtive. He appeared disappointed that the other had arrived.

Lamrung hesitated." I haven't seen the order sentencing the Lord Steward yet. And the maximum allowed by the law is twenty five as less than forty can kill a man!"

"It will come soon enough. The man is a traitor of the worse kind! He killed the King of Rohan, our chief ally!"

Faramir groaned and stirred and was immediately hauled roughly to his feet.

"Traitors deserve punishment!" Mahrod said, a note of grim relish in his voice, as he secured Faramir's wrists in the manacles, so he was forced to stand with his arms painfully supporting his pain in his wounded arm was excruciating as it was yanket above his head.

The Steward was unable to prevent himself crying out at this rough treatment metered out to his already severely wounded body. He felt nauseous and giddy with the pain and struggled not to disgrace himself by losing his breakfast or fainting again, as it would appear to the bystanders to be from fear.

His heart ached even more as he remembered how Aragorn had promised him he would never feel the lash again, but his own conduct was bad enough to make even one as honourable as the
King break his was he who had betrayed Aragorn.

"I hope this hurts you as much as you deserve!" Mahrod sneered, greatly enjoying the prospect of seeing his former Captain treated far worse than he ever was. It was a perfect chance for revenge, for who would care what happened to a traitor in prison, Steward or not?

"I'm not flogging anyone with an official order." Lamrung protested. "The King is meticulous about proper procedure being observed and the Steward is a good man. In any case, I can see he is wounded and regulations forbid flogging an injured man."

Faramir felt a flash of unexpected joy. Aragorn had not ordered the flogging!

"And who heeds what some bleeding heart behind a desk comes up with? And since when were you a healer?" Mahrod retorted, "If we refused to flog them just because they appeared unwell, no one would get what's coming to them, they'd just keep injuring themselves to avoid punishment! Get on with it, one hundred lashes!"

"I cannot, not without an order." Lamrung said firmly, "And even if there were one, I would not touch a man in his condition. He needs a healer!"

Mahrod grabbed the whip from the other's hand and for a moment looked as if he might strike him. Then he laughed. "It's not every day you get to give your former Captain a taste of his own medicine!" he roared, "Off with you then, I'd rather flog this one myself as I shall enjoy every stroke! Now we can see what he is made of!"

"You will find yourself in trouble, Mahrod!" Lamrung warned, "You cannot get away with this!"

"And what do I care if they do hang me?" Mahrod retorted with a bitter laugh, "My life was ruined by our oh not so noble Steward! He had me thrown out of the army just for having a bit of fun! Not that anyone understood as my wife left me and my parents disowned me because of it. The only way I could even earn a crust was to work at this place dealing with the scum of Arda! Now be off with you or I might practise on you first!"

Lamrung shuddered as the vengeful gleam in the other's eyes and fled.

Mahrod grabbed Faramir's collar and tried to tear open his tunic and shirt but the material, being of good quality, refused to yield. He took a knife from his belt and advanced upon the Steward.

Faramir felt cold steel against his back as his tunic and shirt were sliced open and roughly ripped apart. A piece of wood was then jammed into his mouth to bite on and stifle his cries. He tried vainly to brace himself as he heard the crack of the whip before it could bite into his flesh.

"One!" Mahrod called, lashing out with the whip.

Faramir would have screamed had the wood in his mouth not prevented it, as the cruel knotted strands came into contact with his bared back.

Mahrod raised the whip again and struck Faramir with even greater force, this time drawing blood.

"Two, three, four, five!"

Faramir was now struggling to breathe as he felt as if he were choking. His whole body felt as if it were on fire now. The pain in his lungs was even worse than that in his back and he felt as if his insides would burst. This was far worse than any beating Denethor had given him with a riding crop as his father's intent had been chastisement to correct some real or imagined fault, not a desire to cause lasting damage. He could feel death approaching and welcomed it as an end to all the
"Long live the King!" he tried to whisper with what he was certain would be his final conscious breath.

TBC

A/N

A big thank you to everyone who has reviewed, your kind comments are much appreciated.

The healers will briefly appear again later. I'm pleased my readers like Aedred.

I agree that Faramir will find his belief that he has let Aragorn down, the hardest thing to bear.

The cat o' nine tails was used as a method of punishment in the British Navy prior to 1881 and I have used eye witness accounts of its effects.

More about the letter will be explained later.

This is the last (physical) torture chapter. I disliked writing these two chapters and wished they were not essential to the plot!

Edward I devised hanging, drawing and quartering as a punishment for Welsh and Scottish rebels.

Hanna appears in "Shadow and Thought" and curses Faramir and Aragorn in Chapter anyone decides to check the story out who has not yet read it, please let me know what you think.
"Where is my Steward?" Aragorn demanded again with rising fury, as he tried to conceal his fears for Faramir's welfare. He instinctively disliked the Jailor and noted with disgust how his breath stank of liquor.

"He must be in the cells!" the Head Jailor insisted. "He can't have escaped and the only other room is the Punishment Room and no punishments have been authorised as I have been indisposed all morning."

Lamrung appeared from the opposite direction, somewhat out of breath, as if he had been hurrying. He addressed the Head Jailor, seemingly oblivious to the presence of the King and his Escort. "Sir, there is an unauthorised flogging taking place, I thought you should know!"

"It happens, lad, don't you go worrying about it," the Head Jailor replied without much interest. "Can't you see I have important visitors?"

Lamrung suddenly noticed the King was there and fell to his knees. "My Lord, I am sorry!" he gasped. "I did not realise it was your Majesty!"

Ignoring the man's apology Aragorn snapped, "Take me the punishment room and quickly!"

Dumbfounded, Lamrung just stared at the King.

Aragorn impatiently dragged him to his feet. "I fear my Steward is there!" he explained. "Now show me where it is!

Lamrung gulped "Yes, Sire!" and led the way down the gloomy stone corridor and flung open the door at the end.

A dreadful sight greeted Aragorn. There, suspended from the wall in chains was his closest and dearest friend.

Faramir's shirt and tunic had been torn open to expose his back, which looked virtually flayed and resembled a chunk of raw meat in appearance.

A man with a whip stood over him "Thirty nine!" he cried and raised it to strike the helpless Steward, but before the cruel throngs could bite into his torn and bloodied flesh again, Aragorn
grabbed the whip from his hand and struck him with it.

Mahrod screamed in pain as Aragorn caught Faramir in his arms, supporting his weight. The Steward was unconscious, cold, wet and covered in blood.

"How dare you strike my Steward?" the King roared in a tone, which made all the listeners shudder to hear it. "You deserve a stronger taste of your own medicine but I have better things to do at present! I swear you will pay for this atrocity!"

Imrahil had thought he knew the King well, but he had never seen him so angry before and it was chilling to behold.

Mahrod’s reaction was to spit in Aragorn's direction without looking him in the eye. "He deserved more of it, the likes of him!" he mumbled, seeming to care more about being interrupted than getting caught.

Aragorn beckoned the head jailor and Lamrung towards him. "Free the Lord Steward and lock his assailant in the cells. I will deal with him later!"

Lamrung produced the keys from his belt and unlocked the chains securing Faramir's arms to the wall.

The manacles removed, Faramir would have fallen to the floor, had not Aragorn's strong arms caught him.

The Steward's complexion was bluish tinged and his features were contorted with agony. Gently Aragorn removed the piece of wood from his bloodied mouth, slightly easing his laboured breathing. Imrahil rushed to his side to assist.

Faramir's eyes flickered open and saw the King bending over him. His eyes briefly lit up, for despite the enormity of his crimes, he was glad to see his beloved King for one last time as he knew now he would die of his injuries before he could be brought to trial.

"So sorry, my Lord. Thank you, kept your promise, be thou blessed!" he murmured before much to his shame finally losing his breakfast. The retching and coughing sent such waves of agony through his tortured frame that almost immediately he lost consciousness again.

Aragorn's healer's eye quickly realised that Faramir was very badly hurt.

"Hold him!" he told Imrahil, as he unfastened his own cloak to wrap round the shivering Steward. "I need something to staunch the bleeding!" He started to pull off his tunic.

"I'll fetch some towels to staunch the bleeding and mop up." Lamrung offered.

"Quickly!" Aragorn ordered. "He is losing a lot of blood!" He placed his hands over Faramir's arm and side in an attempt to staunch the worst bleeding. A chill of recognition swept over him as he realised his vision was true, he now had Faramir's blood on his hands both literally and figuratively.

Lamrung returned quickly with the towels, which were at least fairly clean, and handed them to Aragorn, who swiftly fashioned them into makeshift bandages as best he could over Faramir's torn clothing.

"Can I do anything else to help?" Lamrung enquired, "I am sorry I wasn't able to stop Mahrod beating him, but he refused to listen to reason."
Aragorn managed to smile faintly at the young Jailor, who seemed a pleasant contrast to the others who worked in this grim place. "Could you find us something to carry him on, please?" he asked, expecting the request to be too difficult to fulfil.

"Of course, Sire, we still have the stretcher we used in Lord Denethor's day to carry those who had been tortured to execution!"

Aragorn shuddered, yet it seemed the perfect solution. He would gladly carry Faramir but it would be much quicker and less likely to cause him further injury, if the Guards carried him on a stretcher.

"Bring it please and then I require your assistance to help carry the Lord Steward to the Citadel!" Aragorn decided that he had no wish to leave Lamrung here, as he hoped that away from the prison, the young man might be able to tell him exactly what had happened to Faramir.

While Lamrung was gone, Aragorn took Faramir from Imrahil and tried to determine how badly his Steward was injured. The bleeding seemed to have slowed but his pulse was weak and rapid and his skin felt clammy to the touch.

Ominously, blood still trickled from the corner of his mouth, though whether from having the piece of wood roughly forced in or from some injury inside, it was hard to clothes were torn and filthy and he was soaked to the skin with some odious smelling liquid.

Most distressing to Aragorn, was the damage caused to Faramir's back by the flogging, as he had sworn such cruelty would never befall him again. Now his back was so covered with bleeding stripes, that no unmarked flesh was visible. The cat o' nine tails was a horrific method of punishment and only used to punish the very worse offences committed by hardened criminals.

Had he not been in a public place and needing to maintain the dignity of his office, Aragorn would have wept both for the obvious agony Faramir was in and his own folly in letting this happen to him.

Imrahil said nothing but watched grim faced as Lamrung brought the stretcher and together they gently laid Faramir on it.

Imrahil added his cloak to Aragorn's to attempt to keep his nephew warm and the melancholy procession set off through the streets of Minas Tirith, deserted because of the curfew Aragorn had imposed earlier that day.

The soldiers carried the stretcher while Aragorn and Imrahil steadied Faramir and held him on the stretcher, as the path grew steeper.

At the same time, Aragorn tried to learn from Lamrung what had happened to his Steward, but all the young man knew was that the Guards had taken Faramir to a cell earlier that day, but the first time he set eyes on him, was when Mahrod had told him to administer a hundred lashes.

Aragorn and Imrahil gasped in horror.

"The maximum penalty is twenty five lashes, have you ever been asked to administer so many before?" Aragorn enquired.

Lamrung shook his head. "No my Lord," he replied, "But Mahrod told me that the Steward dismissed him from being in the army and he held a grudge against him."

"He will pay dearly." Aragorn's voice was grim as they finally reached the Citadel.
He gently lifted Faramir from the stretcher and dismissed the soldiers, while telling Lamrung to wait in the kitchens. He had already decided to offer the young man alternative employment if he wished it.

While Imrahil went on ahead to tell the Servants to make up the fire and bring hot water, fresh bedding and bandages, he carefully carried Faramir into his own private apartments, rooms which he kept for when he needed to be alone, for much as he loved Arwen, after spending so much of his life alone in the wilds, there were times when he needed solitude. Here seemed the best place as he kept his healing supplies there as well as wanting Faramir to be treated in the most comfortable surroundings that Minas Tirith afforded.

He first ordered guards to be kept outside the door until further notice, in case any angry Rohirrim thought of seeking revenge on the helpless Steward.

He did not immediately place Faramir on the huge bed, but instead sat on the couch near the now blazing fire, with Faramir in his arms, carefully positioned as not to aggravate his injuries.

The Steward's wounds needed tending and his wet and filthy clothes removing, but he was in such a state of deep shock, Aragorn feared doing anything that could cause any more stress to his damaged body until he was in a more stable condition.

Feeling under the cloak for a heartbeat, only confirmed his fears as Faramir's heart fluttered feebly, like that of a trapped bird in its final death throes.

TBC

A/N A big thank you to my readers for your much appreciated reviews. As I have had so many requests to do so, I have updated quickly as a thank you for your interest and support.

I would like to point with regard to a comment some of you may have read but has since been removed that my stories are about friendship not slash, as close affectionate friendships were usual in olden days, from Biblical times to the Victorian era and still are in many places. My characters love their friends but are in love with their wives.

As for violence, I only use it if essential to the plot and give warnings so that no one need read if offended. I have several LOTR Stories on this site rated K+ with no violence at all in them.

Mahrod has had the opportunity to do 'other equally nasty things to the Steward', whether he succeeded or not, only time will tell.

I am aware that Tolkien never specified what the death penalty entailed, so am drawing my ideas from British history .I try to be as true to Tolkien as possible but also use my imagination.

I believe somewhere in my stories, I use "little brother" as a term of endearment for Faramir so am in no way troubled if any of my readers see him like that too!

Writing of Faramir's ordeal was especially hard, as he had been so happy before it happened.

I was delighted that one of my readers had spotted that Faramir has reverted to seeing Aragorn as a feared (albeit loved) authority figure again as this forms an important plot thread.

The windowless room is supposed to be used for authorised floggings for offences such as rape and violence against children. I do not think Aragorn would allow torture. Torture has never been legal in Britain but was unfortunately widespread in past eras.
Imrahil sat down beside him, noting his grave expression.

"I am sorry, I should never have allowed this to happen to your nephew." Aragorn said bleakly.

"You could not have known." Imrahil replied with equal bleakness. "How could anyone guess he would be treated so brutally? Do you want me to summon some assistance from the Houses of Healing as this must be very difficult for you?"

"I would rather tend him myself, if you approve? He is my friend and I would do this from love of him." Aragorn replied, as he anxiously wiped the blood from Faramir's mouth. At least it appeared a normal colour, which was a hopeful sign. It was obvious Faramir was seriously injured, but just how badly was impossible to tell until they could properly investigate.

"Of course, you are the most skilled healer I know of and I will be happy to assist you, for as you know, I have some small knowledge which may be useful." Imrahil replied.

"Thank you, I would appreciate that. As soon as he is a little more settled, we will tend him as best we may." Aragorn settled Faramir's limp head against his shoulder, ignoring the stench of the jail, which clung to his Steward, and started gently massaging his Steward's head and neck, singing softly in Elvish, as he did so while using his healing powers at the same time.

Faramir remained semi conscious and they had no idea if he knew them or was aware of his surroundings but he relaxed a little and when Aragorn next checked his heartbeat it was stronger and his skin felt a little warmer to the touch.

"We had better begin now." Aragorn sighed, as Imrahil held on his nephew, while he rose to his feet. Together they carried him over to the bed and gently laid him down, with a pillow under his injured back, until they could turn him on his side.

Aragorn put a blanket ready to cover Faramir as soon as he was disrobed, not wanting him to become either chilled or distressed at the lack of coverings.

He unwrapped the cloak and cast it to one side and then started to carefully remove the makeshift bandages, while Imrahil pulled off his nephew's boots.
"I need to see how badly you are hurt, so we will have to undress you, I fear," he told Faramir in case he understood, "I promise to be as gentle as I can."

The remains of the tunic and undershirt had stuck to the flesh and Aragorn gently soaked them off with the warm water the servants had brought. From what he could see, Eomer's broadsword had cut deeply into Faramir's upper arm, tearing the muscle and then left a series of diagonal smaller cuts starting on his side and tapering down his chest and belly.

At the same moment that Aragorn finally loosed the remnants of the tunic and undershirt, Imrahil removed Faramir's breeches and drawers.

King and Prince both gasped in horror when the extensive bruising concentrated round Faramir's ribs, belly and groin area were revealed.

"No!" Aragorn's exclamation was almost a groan. "Who can have done this to him?"

The King gasped in horror as the full of extent of Faramir's injuries were revealed. The flogging alone was enough to cause serious or even fatal damage to the heart and kidneys of a healthy man, but combined with these other injuries how could Faramir possibly survive? He vowed to do everything within his power to save him whatever the cost.

He was already gently but thoroughly prodding the bruised areas, trying to contain his rising sense of panic as to what lay beneath. He knew from long years of experience that such injuries often meant crushed or damaged organs or severe bleeding inside, both of which were usually fatal.

He first carefully felt Faramir's damaged chest and discovered several cracked and broken ribs, frantically he bent and pressed his ear against the bruised flesh and let out a sigh of relief that at least the lungs seemed to have escaped damage, though the fluttering rapid heartbeat was worrying.

He then gently prodded the abdominal area, which was so badly swollen, it was difficult to determine the extent of the damage, though to his relief, there did not seem to be any hardness, but with so much swelling it was impossible to tell.

At the gentlest touch, Faramir flinched under his probing fingertips. He beckoned Imrahil to help turn him as he felt it was sadly necessary to investigate if the ultimate degradation had befallen his Steward.

It was a relief that Faramir was unconscious at present, as Aragorn did not know how such a modest and private man could endure the humiliation of what would seem like a further violation. His eyes met Imrahil's in mutual understanding. Such things were known to happen in prisons, especially when sadists like Mahrod were involved, and they needed to know the truth however dreadful if they were to help Faramir and bring his attackers to justice.

"I am so sorry, my friend." he murmured soothingly to Faramir as he shivered and moaned in distress although still unconscious. "I like this no better than you do. It will all be over soon, I promise."

He gently covered his Steward with first a linen sheet and then blankets, while he pondered what to do next. Usually in a case like this, he would use ice and cold compresses, but wondered if salves would be better given Faramir's weakened condition, or was he letting his love for his friend cloud his judgement as the ice could cause a painful burning sensation as well as sending a patient deeper into shock?

"Will you fetch Caranthir, if Eomer can be safely left with one Healer?" he asked Imrahil. "
Left alone with Faramir, Aragorn covered his face with his hands, fighting back the tears. He knew that whoever had inflicted his Steward's injuries; he alone was to blame for not making his instructions clearer and thereby exposing him to danger.

Feeling he should continue tending Faramir as best he could, he brought clean water to the bedside and started to bathe his Steward, trying unsuccessfully to cleanse him of the prison stench. He worked a few inches at a time, carefully trying to keep Faramir warmly covered with the blankets and all the while softly reassuring him in case he were somehow aware of his presence.

Imrahil finally returned accompanied by a reluctant Caranthir.

"I thought you told me not to leave King Eomer, my Liege!" Caranthir protested.

"I did but my Steward requires your urgent attention too!" Aragorn replied," How is King Eomer faring?"

"Much the same, though he appears to rest more easily, Sire." Caranthir approached the bed and started to pull down the blankets covering Faramir.

"I would value your opinion on how to treat the bruising." Aragorn said. "I would like to use salves but wonder if that will enough or whether ice would be better."

Caranthir stood for a moment with a look of great sorrow in his eyes before starting to examine the bruises, causing Faramir to yelp with pain. Skilled Healer though he was, he lacked the gentle touch of the Elven trained Aragorn.

"Ice is the only option that might work," he said at last. "Impossible though to tell how great the damage might be, unless you cut him open and cauterised any bleeding you uncovered, save that would most likely cause him to die from shock!"

"I cannot!" Aragorn said brokenly, "He has suffered too much already!"

"How did he come by such hurts if I may be so bold as to ask?" Caranthir asked. "I cannot see how any man could survive such mistreatment!"

"In the City prison. He was beaten and flogged." Aragorn replied sadly.

"The City prison is no place for the son of our late Lord Steward! Lord Faramir is a true gentleman! Whatever was he doing there? Caranthir said angrily. "Whoever is responsible for such an outrage should be punished!"

"The blame is mine alone. The Guards misinterpreted my orders." Aragorn said wretchedly. "I have done Lord Faramir a most grievous wrong!"

"Yes, you have as you have most likely killed him!" Caranthir replied acidly.

"I am sorry. My actions were unforgivable." Aragorn's usually stoic reserve was starting to crumble under the enormity of his feelings of guilt.

At least you never tried to burn him alive!" Caranthir retorted dryly, as he finished his examination of the bruises and then to Aragorn's surprise, brushed a hand against his shoulder in comfort.

Although the elderly healer had been close to the old regime, he had witnessed how Aragorn had battled to save the life of Faramir, his only possible rival the first time they met, which had given him a great deal of respect for the new King.
"Stop blaming yourself, My Lord and concentrate of the Steward or send for a healer who can!" he said briskly. "What's done cannot be undone and I very much doubt you intended anything like this to befall him! I fear he will not last the night, poor young man, as the sword wounds and the flogging combined alone are likely to prove fatal, but you can only try and see what you can for him! Maybe the powers beyond my knowledge that you are said to possess will help him! Would you like me to assist you?"

Aragorn shook his head. "Thank you but King Eomer still has need of you and Prince Imrahil assisted me before with Lord Faramir, so he knows how I work."

"Very well then, with a last sad glance at Faramir and without waiting for dismissal, he turned and left.

"He is quite a character!" Imrahil said ruefully. "He even stood up to Faramir's father! I heard rumours that that could perhaps even be half brethren! Another uncle to my poor nephew!"

"I suppose we had better send for the ice," sighed Aragorn. "Though I have an uneasy feeling about it." He called for a passing servant to do his bidding while prepared a tincture of hawthorn berries and rosehips to try to strengthen Faramir's heart and help him fight infection.

TBC

A very big thank you to all my readers who have taken the trouble to review and an especial thank you to everyone who made kind and supportive comments against the unpleasant flame (now deleted) which I received. I found some of your comments very moving.

I welcome fair criticism but this was a complete misinterpretation.

I assure my readers there is no erotic subtext of any variety and any chapters which readers might find disturbing will always carry warnings.

Faramir's attackers will be punished but at the moment Aragorn has other things on his mind.

I was interested to hear from a reader about a true-life case of a sailor who died following a beating similar to Faramir's.

The drunkard's speech can be more easily understood by replacing the aitches, e.g. 'as has.

My experience of boarding Schools is limited to Enid Blyton's books, which I loved as a child.

Some of my readers like a lot of detail, others don't so it is not possible to please everyone, alas I fear. Aragorn might have been holding Faramir carefully not to drop him or get the prison grime over his clothes rather than concern over the wounds!
"I only hope Caranthir is right and ice will be the correct treatment!" Aragorn fretted, "It will take time to fetch it, so we had best bathe him thoroughly while we wait."

The Prince of Dol Amroth called for servants to fill the tub in the bathing chamber with lukewarm water.

Usually, sponging an injured man on the bed would suffice, but the grime from the jail still clung to Faramir and bits of filthy straw and worse had adhered to his hair and his wounds. Without a thorough cleansing, infection was bound to set in and Aragorn feared they might already be too late to prevent it.

Calling the servants in and instructing them to lay clean linens on the bed while they were gone, Aragorn and Imrahil rolled up their sleeves and carefully carried Faramir into the bathing chamber where they unwrapped him and gently lowered him into the water to which Aragorn added a little salt.

While Imrahil supported his nephew's head above the water Aragorn washed away the prison grime as gently and thoroughly as he could. The water soon turned dark with a mixture of blood and filth.

Imrahil shook his head slightly for much as he loved his nephew, it amazed him that the High King would himself bathe him himself instead of leaving such a menial task to his servants.

Noticing his expression, Aragorn commented, "Is what has already happened not humiliation enough for a man like Faramir, without servants gaping at him and gossiping? I have no idea if I can save his life, but I can at least grant him a little dignity."

Imrahil could have wept.

Apart from the occasional low moan as the water stung his raw wounds, Faramir still seemed unaware of what was happening.

Swathed in the softest towels available, Faramir was carried back to the King's bedchamber and laid on the bed again and turned on his uninjured side as not to put pressure on his raw back, which looked worse than ever, now the stripes were cleaned. In places the flesh was so badly torn that it could hardly have looked much worse if some wild beast had savaged it.
Aragorn swiftly changed his damp and grimy clothes and washed his hands before touching his injured Steward again.

The water had caused the wounds to bleed afresh and Aragorn staunched them as best he could, applying a bandage to the deep wound caused by Eomer's sword.

A servant knocked on the door and Aragorn went himself to see if the ice had arrived, while Imrahil was changed his clothes. He handed Aragorn a large chunk of ice, carefully wrapped in the straw, which was used to keep it from melting.

"The cook brought it straight from the ice house, My Lord." he said. "She'd already been in there once today to get some for the Queen!"

"The Queen?" Aragorn's heart was in his mouth. If Arwen was in need of ice, her life must be in danger. "Tell me, what news of her? When was the ice sent for?"

The man shrugged. "At dawn, I think. One of the midwives came to get it, told the cook it was a precaution when she asked why, not that she was very pleased as she wanted to be certain she had enough left for the State Banquet for the Rhun, not that she begrudges the Queen anything my Lord, she just doesn't want her scarce reserves of ice going to waste!"

Aragorn's sigh of relief was even audible to the garrulous servant.

"You can go now!" Aragorn said curtly, dismissing the man. He feared this was going to be the worse day he could remember in his long life.

As he carried the ice to Faramir's bedside, he silently prayed to the Valar that the lives of all his loved ones would be spared.

Slowly and with reluctance he unwrapped the ice. He then sharpened his knife and used it to cut the block into smaller pieces, all the while hoping Faramir would regain consciousness so he could explain to him what he was going to do.

The treatment in itself was not dangerous, but he feared it could lead to Faramir going into shock again at the sudden coldness. He also disliked having to turn him on to his raw back again in order to position it correctly against the bruised areas.

Imrahil helped him turn Faramir and he found himself grimacing in sympathy at the younger man's obvious pain.

"I fear you may find this unpleasant, Mellon Nin but it should help you," he murmured as he pulled aside the towels and slowly placed the pieces of ice across Faramir's injured belly, concentrating on the areas where he was most likely to be bleeding inside.

He pressed it with his bare hands against the bruises, gasping as it burned and froze his hands, all the while wondering how it must feel against the much more tender and damaged skin of Faramir's belly.

He still felt instinctively that he should have shunned this treatment, yet to only use salves and his healing abilities seemed to be indulging his emotions rather than following accepted wisdom.

Feverish visions kept flittering through Faramir's semi conscious brain. The last thing he could remember was seeing the King. Was that at his trial?

They had come at last to fetch him for his execution. He could feel himself being carried through the streets and jostled over the rough cobblestones. He wondered why the streets were so silent as
he had expected the jeering mob, but maybe his crime had shocked them to silence.

They had stopped and he could feel hands removing his clothing somewhat more gently than he had expected. Maybe the executioner remembered him from when he had been forced to watch such spectacles as a child, and felt pity, though he would not dare spare him by hanging him until he was dead.

He thought he could make out Aragorn's voice and a fleeting hope stirred within him that maybe his King and friend would commute the sentence to a quick death, before dismissing it as quickly as it arose, he could hope for no special treatment nor desire it after what he had done.

Stripped naked to the gaze of the mob, he shivered with a mixture of shame and fear as he heard a vaguely familiar voice discussing cutting him open and then the ominous sound of a knife being sharpened.

Then he felt it, the cold steel against his belly, pressing into his defenceless flesh. The pain grew worse. He panicked, remembering that a skilled executioner could ensure that it took a long time for the victim to die, as they disembowelled them inch by agonising inch.

There was only one thing left to him, if he were not to die like a coward, screaming in agony. He could use the gift his people processed of giving up his life freely. He surrendered and let the darkness take him.

Faramir had twitched and moaned while Aragorn applied the ice to his bruises but now he lay still and suddenly went completely limp.

He hardly seemed to be breathing. Alarmed, Aragorn felt for a heartbeat but his hands were too numb to feel anything.

Imrahil took over and exclaimed in alarm.

"His heartbeat is weakening, I can barely detect it! I think my nephew is dying!"

Aragorn swept the ice aside and desperately tried to get his own hands warm enough to tend his Steward, while trying to control a rising sense of panic.

His healer's knowledge and intuition strongly indicated that Faramir's injuries were not now the cause of his worsening condition but rather a desire to end his own life, though that might be because his spirit knew his body was too damaged to survive.

"We need to resuscitate him!" Imrahil said urgently.

Aragorn shook his head." With his ribs broken already, it would most certainly prove fatal. He is giving back the Gift so it is his mind not his body I need to reach. I will try to call him back."

He knelt beside Faramir, fighting to keep his emotions under control and wondering if he were only prolonging his friend's agony by trying to save him. He clasped Faramir's hand in his own, the other he placed on his brow as he called.

"Faramir, come back into the light. Do not leave me, my friend!"

The Steward did not stir and his eyes remained closed. He hardly seemed to be breathing and Aragorn could only detect the faintest of heartbeats by pressing his ear close against his chest.

Aragorn continued to call him, though now he was weeping so hard that he could only choke his name brokenly as he fought desperately for his friend's life.
Imrahil steadied Aragorn as the King almost swooned.

"I cannot reach him, there is nothing but darkness," he whispered. "He has determined to die and is beyond my reach! I have failed him!"

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you to you all for your kind reviews. I am touched and overwhelmed to have now passed the 300 mark. Your support and encouragement is a great inspiration to me.

I have slightly changed the previous chapter as when I re-read it, Caranthir came across as a little too harsh, more so than I intended. I do not think more assistants would help Aragorn though as he uses treatments the other healers know nothing of.

I most certainly do not think that Aragorn is Faramir's father! He is far too honourable to have an affair with a married woman. Caranthir is Ecthelion's son and therefore Faramir's uncle in Evendim's universe.

Unfortunately abuse in prisons still takes place, charities like Amnesty International and The Medical Foundation publicise and campaign against such atrocities.

Aragorn has promised Faramir many times that he would never be beaten again, most recently in Chapter 8 of this story.

Arwen is also being attended by the very experienced Ioreth, her labour is progressing normally and I will return to her once it is established where Faramir lives or dies.

The Rohirrim are not forgotten either! I am sure if Eomer could only see Faramir now he would be very upset.

The Tudor era was probably the cruellest time in British history with regard to torture.

As most of you seem to like a lot of detail, it is staying!
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Psalm 23.4

Choking back his own grief, Imrahil tried to comfort his distraught Liege Lord. "Were it not for you, my Lord, he would have died three years ago, never having known what fatherly love was like, never been given his rightful status, never having married, never having had the chance to father an heir. You have given him all these things and more!"

Unheeding, Aragorn stumbled to his feet, aided by the Prince of Dol Amroth. He stood for a moment looking down at the still figure on the bed.

Suddenly reaching a decision, he pulled off his heavy brocaded over tunic, so he was left clad in a thin undershirt and breeches.

Opening the chest where he kept his clean linens, Aragorn, pulled out one of his nightshirts, noticing as he did so the blue shirt that Faramir had borrowed but a month ago, folded beside it. They had been so happy that day!

The King started to ease the garment over Faramir's head. Imrahil assisted him though unsure why his Sovereign was doing this.

"He would wish to be clothed for his last journey." Aragorn murmured, more to himself than his companion, as he smoothed the linen garment down to his Steward's ankles and preceded to wrap a blanket round Faramir and lift him from the bed.

"I want to hold him in his last moments. It is the least I can do for him!" Aragorn said brokenly, gazing down at the still form in his arms.

He could hardly bear to contemplate life without this man at his side. Faramir was everything he had ever wished for in a friend, loving, loyal and intelligent.

Faramir held a very large part of his heart, as they were kindred souls, often even able to sense what each other was thinking

His self-effacing manner and shyness had only served to make him all the more endearing. His friendship and trust had taken Aragorn a long time to win, which made him prize it all the more, as like most of their race friendships were not made lightly, as a bond once formed was rarely broken.

There was so much he had hoped to share with his Steward. He had planned to one day to show
him the Northern Kingdom and take him on camping trips so they could relive the days when they were Rangers.

He had hoped that over the years they would continue their lively discussions on their shared Numenorean heritage and enjoy seeing their children grow up and play together. Now all those simple pleasures would be denied to them.

Now that Faramir was dying, the King was overwhelmed by the realisation how much he loved him and how much he had always owed to him. Without his support, he could never have become King, married his beloved Arwen or managed to rule Gondor.

Without Faramir's devoted care during their sojourn at the Hunting Lodge, it was doubtful he would even be alive now. Faramir had been a mixture of brother, son, friend and advisor to the King.

It was a bitter irony that the son of the man who had always been a thorn in Aragorn's side should have become so dear to him and yet it seemed that Aragorn had succeeded in causing his death when Denethor had failed.

Engrossed in his thoughts, he carried Faramir to the spacious seat by the window and sat there, clutching the unconscious man in his arms. Faramir was beyond even feeling pain now.

He tenderly cradled the dark head against his heart as one might soothe a babe.

Imrahil knelt beside them taking his nephew's cold hands; even they were bruised from where he had obviously tried to vainly protect himself. He tried vainly to chafe some life into the limp fingers.

His heart close to breaking, Aragorn absentely massaged Faramir's head and shoulders, using the Elven technique, which had so often soothed him before.

"I cannot even fetch Eowyn to him!" he lamented. "He should at least be with someone he loves."

Still chafing the icy hands, Imrahil bent to bestow the farewell kiss of blessing on his nephew's brow. "Faramir loves you too, my Lord," he pointed out gently, "Differently than Eowyn, naturally, but no less so and he was so proud that the Queen chose Eowyn to attend her in her confinement."

Aragorn was weeping bitterly now. "I shall kiss you farewell as I did Boromir." he choked, pressing a kiss on Faramir's pale brow." But unlike your valiant brother, you are not dying as a hero in battle but because in my folly!

He turned away from Faramir and looked directly at Imrahil.

"I have killed him as surely as if I ran my sword through him! I broke the vow I made to him to protect him from ever being beaten again! A death in battle or through disease, though hard, is the will of the Valar to be accepted, but how could I have killed him through my own thoughtlessness! How can I ever tell Eowyn or even my Queen? How I can look you, his kinsman in the eye again? I have robbed Gondor of her noblest son!"

Imrahil briefly loosed one of Faramir's hands to place a hand on the King's shoulder. "You sought only to protect him and never meant to break your vow." he soothed. "I beg you, do not reproach yourself as I, his close kinsman hold you guiltless of blame. You must not give way to despair!"

Aragorn in his grief clutched Faramir closer and hot tears fell on the Steward's brow.
"Faramir, my Faramir, I love you, do not leave me! You are so very dear to me! Come back into the light, my friend, my little brother!" he sobbed in anguish.

Stirring ever so slightly, Faramir nuzzled his head against the King's heart as if seeking some last comfort as he faded from the circles of the world.

The trusting gesture, however feeble, restored Aragorn's resolve.

Gently easing Faramir's limp body down to rest on the couch, he slid to the ground and knelt beside his Steward.

"Bring me some athelas and hot water, and the jewel casket from the table. I shall try again to reach him!" he instructed Imrahil. "I was wrong to lose hope while he yet breathes."

He unlocked the casket and took out the Elfstone and pinned it on his breast, where it glowed with a mysterious green light.

Imrahil went and called to the servant waiting outside and a few moments later returned with a bowl of steaming water, which he held under Faramir's face, as Aragorn breathed on the athelas leaves, crushed them and cast them into the water.

"Be careful, My Lord!" Imrahil warned, torn between love for his nephew and his duty to protect the King "It could kill you too trying to reach one as far gone as he is!"

Ignoring the warning, Aragorn clasped Faramir's hand with one hand, while laying the other on his cold brow. Urgently, he called his name.

He immediately felt as if he were falling into a strange, clouded realm filled with an overwhelming sense of pain and despair. This place was even darker than where he had sought Faramir when he was in the grip of the Black Breath.

He searched until he could see a chink of light, little more than a weak candle flame spluttering in the darkness, which engulfed Faramir. He followed the flickering flame until he came to a precipice where his Steward was standing, mere inches from the abyss.

"Come home, Faramir, I beg of you!" he said, "I will heal you! Remember the time you promised not to leave me? I hold you now to that vow!"

"There is too much pain and guilt." Faramir replied, "How can I? Leave me or you will fall with me, brother of my soul!"

"I cannot let you go, I love you too much!"

Aragorn grasped Faramir's arms, knowing that if the other leapt, he would be pulled into the darkness with him.

Faramir staggered back and Aragorn held him tightly as they both fell into the abyss.

They seemed to be travelling at vast speed through a tunnel at the end of which a bright light and a sense of overwhelming peace and joy awaited.

"You cannot go, it is not yet your time!" A voice commanded, Aragorn knew not whether he had spoken or some higher power. Suddenly he was floating rather than falling and Faramir was still in his arms.

"My Lord!" Imrahil exclaimed in alarm, as the colour drained from Aragorn's face, while Faramir
appeared to grow stronger. It seemed as if he pouring all his life energy into Faramir and growing weaker by the minute until he slid senseless to the floor.

Imrahil ran to the door and shouted desperately for a healer to come.

TBC

A/N

It has long been my wish to write an emotional scene, in which Aragorn attempts to heal Faramir, as in "First Meeting" they were strangers, rather than friends. Whether I have succeeded or not only my readers can decide.

A very big thank you to everyone who has reviewed. I am so touched and overwhelmed by all your much appreciated comments.

I assure everyone that no plot thread will be swept under the carpet and everything will eventually be resolved.

Faramir is indeed his own worse enemy at times due to his low self-esteem.

A wise midwife would want ice available for if Arwen wished to suck some and also to use in an emergency if she started bleeding.

Faramir was drifting in and out of consciousness, so would be only vaguely aware of isolated words and actions. Sharpening a knife is an especially grating sound.

Watching executions was considered a pleasant day out for all ages in olden days!

Imrahil is very mindful of protocol but I think he is touched by the King's concern for Faramir.
Pain and Confusion

Chapter Notes

These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema with the exception of Caranthir who appears by kind permission of Evendim. This story was written for pleasure and not for financial gain.

Warning – This chapter contains gory descriptions of injuries. Please only read if you are unlikely to be upset.

Aedred rushed into the room to find the King of Gondor and Arnor apparently lifeless on the floor beside his Steward.

Feeling for a pulse, he could detect none. Frantically he tore open Aragorn's shirt, trying vainly to detect a heartbeat.

Imrahil watched ashen faced as the Rohirric healer attempted to resuscitate the King. Remembering how the athelas had revitalised effect on Aragorn before, he thrust the still steaming bowl in front of his face.

Aedred took an involuntary step backwards as Aragorn suddenly began to convulse as if in agony, then almost as suddenly he appeared almost to glow with some transcendent inner beauty, and it seemed as if a star adorned his brow, which faded even as Imrahil and Aedred gazed in wonder.

Aedred cautiously approached the King again "His life signs are almost completely normal now and yet I could have sworn he was dead a moment ago!" he gasped, as he examined him "I have never seen anything like this before and he displays none of the usual symptoms after such a collapse!

"My Liege, drink this!" Aragorn opened his eyes to find himself lying on the floor. Imrahil was bending over him, holding a glass, while Aedred knelt beside him feeling his pulse. He sipped the drink tentatively, finding it contained the restorative Elven cordial, miruvor.

"Faramir?" he gasped, draining the glass.

"He lives. But whatever happened to you? We feared for your life!" Imrahil's usual ruddy features were as white as a sheet.

"The Valar be praised!" Aragorn exclaimed, looking at Imrahil and Aedred in bewilderment. "What happened? I cannot remember anything after calling Faramir in the darkness. Where is he?"

"You were in some sort of trance and then you collapsed," Imrahil explained, "Faramir is here, lying on the couch!"
"I must get up and tend his wounds!" Aragorn pronounced, trying to stand but finding his legs felt like jelly.

"My Lord, you should rest!" Aedred protested, "Lie down on the bed!"

"I cannot as Faramir needs me! Help me get up, I will be well in a moment!" Aragorn demanded in a tone that brokered no argument.

Part of him wished he could take Aedred's advice, as he felt overcome with weariness mingled with grief and guilt at Faramir's condition. Yet he knew that he alone might be able to save his Steward, as there was none other available, either with his natural abilities or trained in Elven healing techniques, which were far less painful for the patient. It had hurt Faramir far more when Caranthir had touched him and he was the most experienced Gondorian Healer.

Imrahil and Aedred helped Aragorn to his feet so he could see for himself that Faramir was now conscious and awake, an expression of total confusion in his haunted grey eyes. His wounds were bleeding again and the blood had seeped through his nightshirt and the blanket covering him.

"My Lord, will you not sit down?" Aedred asked anxiously as the King swayed slightly.

Ignoring him, Aragorn turned to Faramir. "How could you do that to me?" he demanded. "And have you no thought of Eowyn?" His tone was harsh as the shock and distress of the past few hours had affected him deeply.

"You have caused us great distress!" Imrahil added. "The King, he almost…"

Aragorn shot him a warning glance.

"I am sorry." Faramir whispered. As consciousness returned to him, so did the pain, and the memory of the past few hours. No wonder Aragorn was angry; he had killed the King of Rohan!

His arm throbbed painfully, he could hardly breathe for the pain in his chest and belly and he felt as if his back had been flayed open. A jumble of confused images crowded his brain. Eomer falling lifeless, the mob demanding war, Mahrod leering at him and then a wonderful dream that the King was snatching him from the very clutches of the executioner's knife, then holding him in his arms and telling him how much he was loved. Then he had been floating and could hear his mother and Boromir calling to him. But that was just a dream from which he had awoken to the harsh reality of the pain of his injuries and his betrayal of his King.

"We need to put you back on the bed now. Your wounds need tending." Aragorn said more gently, now the shock was starting to subside. He bent to lift Faramir from the couch but Aedred stopped him.

"My Lord, I accept your concern for your Steward, but you are in no fit state to lift him!"

Imrahil had already grasped Faramir's legs and Aedred took hold of his arms and together they carried him back to bed.

"Lay him on his uninjured side!" Aragorn ordered, conceding defeat as he moved over to join them. I must tend his wounds and quickly!"

"No!" Faramir moaned.

"I am sorry as I know you are in great pain." Aragorn replied. "I cannot just let you lie there and bleed though. Your arm must be stitched, as the wound is deep. I will try not to hurt you."
"No, please!" Faramir writhed in agitation.

"My Lord, you should rest!" Aedred fretted, "We feared for your life just then and any further exertion could damage your health."

Aragorn shot an anxious glance at Imrahil and then sat down on the bed and took Faramir's hand. He was taken aback when Faramir tried to pull away.

"Would you rather someone else did it for you, Aedred perhaps?" The King said gently, accepting it was small wonder that Faramir recoiled from him after all that had happened.

Faramir shook his head. "No, no one."

"Well just let me look then." Aragorn coaxed as he started easing the nightshirt from Faramir's battered frame. "I will be as gentle as I can."

Faramir struggled feebly. "Mercy, my Liege!" he cried, trying to evade Aragorn's hands.

"Peace, Faramir! I just need to see your hurts." Aragorn tried vainly to soothe him.

Aedred then joined him and tried to gently remove Faramir's nightshirt, only for the semi conscious Steward to become increasingly agitated as he slipped in and out of consciousness. He stepped back, knowing that in Faramir's weakened condition, any exertion could prove fatal.

Baffled by his Steward's reactions and not knowing what else to do, Aragorn gently massaged his head and neck with the Elven relaxation technique which usually calmed Faramir.

Aedred still hovered, looking anxious.

"Could I not at least mix whatever medicines you need?" he offered, "I would show Lord Faramir that not all Rohirrim mean him harm!"

Aragorn smiled weakly, "I very much doubt that he thinks that, Master Aedred. It is just he is very uncomfortable to be unclothed when others are present and some treatments I plan to use work only in the hands of the King!"

Aedred laughed, though not unkindly, "A typical man of Gondor then! We Rohirrim have no such inhibitions yet there is something rather endearing about the people here! Now may I mix some herbs for you?"

"I am treating him with rosehips and hawthorn berries, and also some poppy juice for the pain and liquorice for the shock, if you could mix them into a tea, please. The ingredients are on the table over there." Aragorn explained, finally excepting some help would be welcome. "Also bring me water and a towel so I can wash my hands between treating each injury."

Aedred set to work, keeping his back turned to Faramir.

Faramir finally lay limp and unresisting, allowing Aragorn to remove his nightshirt and replace it with a towel to preserve his modesty. Imrahil, still looking rather pale, sat beside his nephew and clasped his hand for comfort.

Amazingly, although Faramir's wounds still looked very serious, it appeared that bruising had faded a little and the flesh on his back seemed less brutally torn.

Faramir opened his eyes and saw how tired and drained the King looked. He was increasingly puzzled as why so much trouble was being taken merely to keep him alive for his execution.
He could not understand why Aragorn would not just let him die, as he had never considered him to be cruel. He could only suppose that Aragorn was bound to see the punishment carried out as the law demanded but his healer's instinct made him tend his wounds. But why was the King tending him himself as he was a traitor and a criminal? He wanted to ask but talking was as painful as everything else.

"Here is the herbal tea, My Lord," Aedred said, handing it to him.

Turning towards the bed, the Roherric Healer had to bite back a gasp of horror now that the Steward's injuries were bared to his gaze. Even on a battlefield it was rare to see so many hurts that hardly any undamaged flesh was visible.

"Open your mouth!" Aragorn instructed, as he tried to see where the earlier bleeding had been coming from and greatly pitying his Steward, as he now seemed to be the one taking his last shreds of dignity, as he lay with his mouth agape like a horse at a market.

Faramir's lips were badly bitten and a splinter of wood had pierced his tongue, which could account for the blood. Aragorn could only hope that he could still swallow.

The King supported his Steward's head with one hand and with the other held the cup of herbal tea. He was dreadfully thirsty and swallowed it obediently, followed by a cup of boiled water.

Meanwhile Aedred prepared a needle by lighting a candle and passing it through the flame to sterilize it.

"Why?" Faramir managed to croak, as Aragorn threaded the needle and began stitching the gaping wound in the muscle of his upper arm.

"Keep still!" Imrahil cautioned, still holding his hand, while Aedred held him still.

"Shush, do not try to talk now, save your strength!" Aragorn sounded choked and Faramir wondered why the compassionate grey eyes were moist as he carefully stitched the diagonal line of cuts tapering across Faramir's arm and side. The beatings had greatly worsened the injuries caused by Eomer's sword.

The King then steeped more athelas in water and bathed Faramir from head to toe in the mixture, hoping it would ease his pain and the scent refresh his wounded spirit.

Aragorn carefully bandaged the gashes after smearing them with honey to ward off infection before turning his attention to the other injuries, which necessitated turning the Steward on to his back to examine and treat him properly.

Faramir was by now weeping silent tears of pain and it took every ounce of Aragorn's self control not to weep too and concentrate exclusively on the task at hand.

He first laid a hand over Faramir's heart and was relieved that by some miracle the beat was slightly stronger than before.

Turning his attention to his Steward's ribs, he detected at least two broken and a further three cracked. Asking Aedred to prepare a poultice of comfrey, he gently applied it to the injuries as Faramir tensed with pain beneath his hands.

Moving down he gently probed and pressed the bruises disfiguring his belly, desperately trying to discover the true extent of the damage. As Faramir still lived, he dared to hope that no internal organ was crushed or bleeding heavily, but he almost certainly was badly bruised inside. The swelling was still too bad to properly judge how much damage was done, though he knew from
experience that even 'mere' bruising when inside, could mean weeks or even months of severe pain.

Faramir followed Aragorn's every moment with sad haunted eyes. He cried out with pain at the slightest touch and Aragorn had to look away to concentrate on what he was doing, as he knew much as he wanted to comfort his Steward, first he must heal him. He wished he were not so weary, as he would have liked to use his abilities to ease Faramir's pain but he was totally drained. As gently as he could, he applied a salve of arnica, comfrey and sweet clover to the bruised belly. Faramir still seemed barely aware of what was happening to him, but when Aragorn tried to move the towel aside to examine the bruises to the groin area, he clutched at it frantically.

Aragorn gestured for his helpers to stand back as he tried to reason with his semi conscious friend.

"Peace, Mellon Nin, I am sorry but I need to see your hurts." Aragorn said gently, hating himself for all he was having to do.

Faramir finally let go, resigning himself as far worse awaited when he was taken to the scaffold.

Not wanting to agitate him further and remembering how he had reacted to hearing of Legolas' rash in a similar place, Aragorn applied the salve as quickly and discreetly as he could, moving the towel just a few inches at a time.

He also applied goose grease to Faramir's hip, where he would be lying, to keep the skin supple and prevent pressure sores. This whole procedure must be a cruel torture to one as shy and modest as Faramir and he was all too aware how deeply humiliated he must be feeling.

Washing his hands again, Aragorn beckoned his helpers. "We are just going to turn you on your side to treat your back now." he explained to Faramir, "I will try to be gentle but I fear this will hurt." If Mahrod had stood before him now, exhausted though he was, the King would have killed him with his bare hands for the damage he had inflicted with the cruel whip.

All Aragorn could do was apply a special mixture of calendula, honey and garlic to the raw stripes on his back, which would hopefully prevent infection and aid healing.

By the way in which he clenched his fists and bit his teeth hard down on his lip while silent tears ran down his cheeks, it was obvious Faramir found the process excruciating as the mixture painfully stung his raw back.

The King would have liked to strap his ribs to support them, but that would cause unspeakable pain in his back, so for now, he could only wait and hope.

After Aragorn had done all he could to ease Faramir, painfully little though it seemed, the Steward lay sleeping fitfully on his side, heavily dosed with poppy juice and surrounded by pillows to cushion every movement. Even in sleep, pain and despair contorted his pallid features.

A soft linen sheet was draped around him, on top of which were light but warm blankets. It would have been pointless to clothe or bandage him just yet as he would need further examinations and more salve applying at frequent intervals. Instead a fresh towel was draped over his hips to give him some semblance of dignity.

Imrahil looked at the King questioningly

"His fate lies with the Valar now." Aragorn sighed. "He seems a little stronger but after such severe injuries combined with shock and blood loss we can only wait and hope."
A very big thank you for your very kind reviews. I will need a bigger hat! I was very touched to read that many of you found the last chapter as moving as I dared hope.

As I have not been able to post for several days, this is slightly longer instalment than usual, so I can return to Arwen in the next chapter.
"No one could have done more than you have to try and help Faramir," Imrahil reassured the King, who's drawn and stricken features betrayed the depth of his grief.

"I must see how Eomer fares now." Aragorn swayed on his feet and almost fell. Imrahil and Aedred rushed to his side, just in time to prevent him from falling.

"I will go to Eomer King," Aedred said firmly "You should rest now, My Lord as you are too weary to help anyone else at present. Let us assist you to lie down."

Too exhausted to protest, Aragorn allowed Aedred and Imrahil to help him on to the far side of the bed. Aedred pulled off his boots, while Imrahil fetched a clean shirt for the King. Aragorn was too exhausted even to pull it over his head without assistance.

"I will leave you to rest now, My Lord, please call me at once if you require further assistance."

Aedred said, as he tucked a blanket around the Aragorn, who was already half asleep.

"Thank you, Master Aedred." Aragorn, smiled wanly as the healer bowed and left.

"I will keep watch over Faramir." Imrahil promised, settling himself down on the couch, his eyes never leaving the still form of his nephew, who even heavily sedated, moaned softly in his sleep.

Back and forth, back and forth, Arwen paced like a caged animal, refusing to be soothed, despite the best efforts of her companions.

"Will this babe take forever to be born?" she groaned wearily.

"It could take many hours yet, Lady Elfhstone." Ioreth informed her. "Babies come when they are ready.

"It is not meant to be like this for Elves!" Arwen retorted.

"Your baby is half human, it could take after its father!" Eowyn replied.

"I will kill him!" Arwen snapped through gritted teeth as another contraction struck her." How
dare he get me in this condition!"

"If I had a coin for every woman who has told me that, I would be the wealthiest woman on Arda!" Ioreth informed her wryly, a smile ghosting her usually grim features.

"I want to go outside!" Arwen announced suddenly.

"My Lady, that is not seemly!" Ioreth protested in horror.

"I am an Elf, it is unnatural for us to be confined within walls of stone!" The Queen insisted." I need some fresh air and grass under my feet!"

"My Lady, you must not become agitated, it is bad for the child. "Ioreth chided.

"How can I not be agitated by these stone walls? This room is like a prison!" Arwen lamented, ignoring the scandalised expression on Ioreth's face. "If I were in my home at Imladis, I would have my bed under the trees and be soothed by the sounds of the river as I waited for my child to be born."

Eowyn felt a rush of sympathy for the Elven queen. She too hated the stone walls of Minas Tirith and longed for the day she could move to Ithilien, even though she was aware Faramir would have to live apart from her for a few days each week, while he performed his duties as Steward. Not that it would not have been much different had she married a Lord of Rohan, as the men were often away patrolling the borders, sometimes for weeks on end. As a result the Rohirric women valued their independence and enjoyed managing their households with little interference from their husbands. She would miss Arwen too in Ithilien, but this city was like the cage she had always feared.

"I see no reason, why we cannot go out in the garden for a while." she announced. "It is enclosed, so the Queen will have complete privacy. "I will send one of the ladies at the door with a message that none must look out of the windows."

"This is outrageous!" Ioreth complained, "The next thing will be that you will encourage the Lady Elfstone to give birth up a tree!"

"We like to do that." Arwen replied. "My mother was born high up in Lothlorien, for myself I would rather feel the grass under my feet!"

"Elves! It just isn't right or proper to behave like that!" Ioreth snorted as Eowyn took the Queen's arm and helped down the steps into the enclosed garden.

Arwen was soon walking barefoot on the grass. As another contraction hit her, she sank down amongst the flowers.

"How quiet it is in the city today!" She remarked when the pain has passed.

Eowyn listened carefully, as a mortal her hearing although sharp was far less acute than the Elf's. All she could hear were the sounds of birds singing and insects buzzing around the flowers, which was very strange as usually Minas Tirith rang with the shouts of traders, the chatter of passers by and the cries of children, while her favourite sound, the hoof beats of the many horses could be heard echoing from the lower levels.

"How strange!" she exclaimed, "But obviously it shows how much the people love their Queen as they must be keeping quiet to honour you! Or maybe the King requested them to be silent today?"

Arwen shook her head. "Estel would not do that, it would be abusing his authority. I hope
"everything is well with him?" she said anxiously.

"I am sure it is, our husbands can take good care of themselves." Eowyn soothed.

"I wish they were more careful about getting us with child! They ought to be the ones who give birth!" Arwen snarled as another contraction came. She lay back on the grass panting looking up at the branches of a mighty oak tree and watching a flock of geese fly overhead.

"Please, my Lady, come inside now!" Ioreth pleaded. "You cannot have your baby under a tree!"

"Why not have another bath and I will massage you?" Eowyn suggested.

Groaning, Arwen allowed herself to be led back to her chambers.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Despite his desire to remain alert, Aragorn fell almost immediately into a deep sleep, but his troubled mind would give him no rest.

He dreamed that Arwen had given birth and Eowyn brought the child to him to take to show to the populace.

He climbed the Tower of Ecthelion with the baby in his arms and looked down over the City.

All the people had turned into wolves, that were baying for blood, and at their behest he cast the child into their midst.

As the baby fell, it turned into Faramir who screamed in agony as the hungry beasts devoured his flesh.

One of the wolves then turned into Eomer and barked 'My sister is avenged!' as he bit off Faramir's head!"

He woke with a start to find Imrahil trying to soothe Faramir who was crying out in pain. Instantly alert, Aragorn bent over his stricken Steward, his heart still pounding after his nightmare.

"I will try to ease you," he murmured, feeling now he was rested a little, he could use his healing abilities

Faramir could only moan in distress as Aragorn pulled back the covers.

Aragorn's hands hovered again a few inches over Faramir's ribs and belly and then moved round to his back, trying to numb his Steward's pain with his healing powers.

Eventually, the cries subsided to whimpers, though Faramir's eyes continued to gaze at him with a look of haunted terror in their grey depths.

Aragorn gently rubbed more salve onto the bruises and flayed back, replaced the covers and then coaxed Faramir to sip some water to help counteract the blood loss and shock he had suffered.

His ministrations were interrupted by cries outside the door.

"Let us have justice for our King!" The voice had a strong Rohirric accent.

"We've heard he is lying here in luxury while our King lies dying!" shouted another.

"The King of Gondor promised justice but what justice is it to take the miscreant to his own room
to pamper!" Aragorn recognised this voice as Eothain's.

"You cannot pass!" The Guard standing by the door sounded panicked.

"And you cannot stop us!"

The sickening sound of a blow being struck was succeeded by that of swords being drawn.

"Halt in the name of the King!" Obviously the second Guard was trying to stop the intruders. There was a loud scream and then fists pounded against the door.

"We're coming for you, coward, we demand vengeance!" screamed the Roherrim.

Aragorn and Imrahil drew their swords as the lock on the door splintered and some twenty or more heavily armed men of Eomer's Eored burst into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" Aragorn demanded, brandishing Anduril.

"Your Steward killed our King, this means war!" Aragorn recognised the speaker as Aelfred, the Captain of Eomer's Personal Guard.

"Your King has a good chance of recovery." Aragorn said coolly." Have you not heard? I would remind you, that you have stormed our borders, not the other way round!"

"We heard that you confounded your Steward's infamy by cutting our King's head open!" Aefred retorted.

"A perfectly sound surgical procedure to save his life!" Aragorn said firmly, "Leave this room and return to your lodgings!" Too much blood has been shed today already."

"We will not leave until you surrender your Steward!" Aelfred replied.

TBC

A/N Thank you so much for all your kind reviews which are greatly appreciated. I have updated quickly to show my appreciation.

I hope Arwen fans will like this chapter, I have missed one of you recently. I promise she does play quite a large part later.

Aragorn and Faramir (if they survive the current crisis) have a long and difficult journey ahead to rebuild their friendship. I believe Faramir is even more distressed at letting Aragorn down than the consequences for him.

Faramir cannot comprehend that Aragorn loves him with the depth of unconditional love that a good parent has for a child whereas Aragorn cannot comprehend the depth of Faramir's insecurity caused by years of vainly trying to please Denethor.

Aragorn certainly does have a great deal to tell Arwen!

Apart from the relevance of her curse, Hanna plays no part in this story, though if my readers continue to enjoy my work, I may write a sequel which features her.

The Elfstone "Elessar" was given to Aragorn by Galadriel in the book and he has it with him in the Houses of Healing, where he appears to be in trance like state.

I am delighted some of my readers have found my writing helpful to them!
The flamer called themselves "crimson" but one pest might use many names!

It is possible Caranthir told Aedred that Faramir was beaten in prison.

The warnings will continue so my readers can make an informed choice over certain chapters. Chapter 20 was a recent chapter devoid of them.
Taking a Chance

Chapter Notes

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Faramir felt a great sense of relief as Aedred's words permeated his semi conscious brain. It would soon be over now, a far swifter and more honourable death than the one he was destined for. Why did Aragorn not hand him over? He could not bear to see his King harmed because of his acts.

He tried to say, "I am here and submit to your justice." but the words emerged as an incoherent squeak.

"Aragorn Arathornsson, surrender him!" Aefred menaced, advancing towards the bed.

Aragorn stood defiantly in front of Faramir, defending him with his sword. "You must kill me to reach him!" he told them. "I surrender him to no man as he is in my charge and I am the King of this Realm!"

Imrahil stood beside him. "No one touches my nephew!" he told the Rohirrim. "He has suffered far too much already!"

"Suffered from the scratches he received when he struck down our Lord?" Eothain sniffed, "Not nearly as much as Eomer King!"

Aragorn took a calculated risk. Still holding Anduril in one hand, with the other, he pulled back the bedcovers as far as decency allowed, exposing Faramir's battered body to the gaze of the Rohirrim.

He deplored displaying his Steward's injuries like this but it seemed better than shedding more blood as he could now hear the clamour of his own Guards approaching.

"There, behold the man! All this has been done to him since he was arrested!" he said fiercely.

Drifting in and out of consciousness Faramir awaited the fatal blow, with a mixture of relief and mortification at being uncovered in front of so many.

Eomer's men gasped and immediately sheathed their weapons, muttering amongst themselves as they backed away.

"You have had him tortured almost to death!" Aelfred said, aghast. "That is not our way. We do not like the way you dispense justice, Aragorn Arathornsson!"

"He deserved a swift and honourable death by the sword!" Eothain added. "Our King would have
wished that!"

Aragorn heaved an inward sigh of relief. The men of Rohan were fierce but not cruel by nature and as he had hoped were deeply shocked by Faramir's injuries.

"He has been punished enough." Aelfred said, as one by one the Rohirrim slunk from the room straight into the custody of Aragorn's Guards, who had were now just outside the open door, awaiting their orders.

"As will you be for attacking my guards!" Aragorn said under his breath as covered Faramir again. "I am sorry my friend." he murmured not for the first time that day. Faramir had already sunk back into unconsciousness.

Aragorn went to the door as more soldiers arrived and frightened servants started to emerge from the surrounding rooms and alcoves now the danger was over. The prone bodies of the two Guards who had been stationed outside the room were sprawled over the threshold.

The King knelt beside them, observing that much to his relief they were still breathing. One appeared to have merely been knocked out, while the other was bleeding from a deep cut to the sword arm.

Aragorn swiftly staunched the bleeding and ordered one of the men to fetch a healer. Another was despatched to fetch workmen to mend the door.

Once the two injured Guards were placed on stretchers and carried to the Houses of Healing, Aragorn tried to piece together what had happened from the servants and Royal Guards.

It seemed that the most hotheaded of Eomer's men had left the barracks where they were being confined, while their Guards were occupied having their midday meal. When Aragorn had sent Eothain back to them they had learned where Faramir was and after a further report about Eomer's scull fracture reached their ears, they had waited for a chance to avenge their King and unaware how badly Faramir was injured decided to storm his room. The few Guards that stood in their way had been taken by surprise and easily overpowered.

The King gave orders that they were to be escorted towards the Border ere nightfall and forbidden to ever again set foot in Gondor. He then ordered a through search to ensure there were no more intruders and that all the injured had been found. He then placed six heavily armed men outside the door while a locksmith and a carpenter repaired the damage.

Returning to Faramir's bedside Aragorn again tried to ease his friend's pain and strengthen his heart. Faramir moaned and cried out constantly but seemed unaware of his surroundings and oblivious to the soft words of comfort and apology the King spoke to him although he obediently drank another cup of the herbal tea the King mixed for him.

Eventually he fell into an uneasy sleep and Aragorn settled down to rest beside him. Scarcely had he settled back against the pillows when a loud knock came on the newly mended door.

Imrahil went to answer it.

"Master Caranthir requests the presence of his Majesty King Elessar," the servant announced, "He and Master Aedred are most concerned about King Eomer of Rohan!"

Aragorn swiftly got up and pulled on his boots wondering how much more could go amiss this day and praying that Valar would at least spare his wife and the child she was bringing into the world. He had dared hope that Eomer would recover as he had seemed to be improving when he left him but as for Faramir, he was very seriously ill indeed. How could he bear it if he lost
everyone he loved on this one dreadful day?

Hastening to where his other injured friend lay, Aragorn was filled with dread. If Eomer died, not only would he lose a treasured friend, but also it would most likely mean a bloody war between former close friends and allies, so close that even civil war within Gondor was one dreadful possibility, especially if Faramir were to die too as there were still many who only supported the King because Faramir himself would never have agreed to be used as a figurehead against him. Then there had been many marriages between citizens of Gondor and Rohan since the Ring War, which would lead to divided loyalties within every part of society.

Eomer was still lying exactly as Aragorn had left him a few hours ago, but whereas before he had been breathing fairly well, now his lips had bluish tinge and he was fighting for every breath.

Caranthir was examining his patient and barely looked up as the King entered but an agitated looking Aedred exclaimed, "It grieves me to trouble you when I know you are weary, my Lord, but a few moments ago Eomer King tried to cough in his sleep and then started to fight for breath!"

Caranthir stood aside as Aragorn approached his friend's bedside.

Motioning to Aedred, together they unlaced Eomer's nightshirt and slid it down to his waist. While Aedred, assisted by Caranthir unwrapped the bandages at Aragorn's command, the King stood for a moment gathering himself, then crushed a leaf of athelas before placing both hands a few inches above Eomer's damaged chest.

Aragorn chanted something that neither Caranthir nor Aedred could understand and appeared to fall into a trance. The green gem he wore on his breast started to glow as if of its own volition.

Eomer gave a strangled cough as both sides of his chest began to rise and fall. Aragorn then clasped both his hands. Slowly the colour began to return to the King of Rohan's features, as his breathing grew stronger.

Aragorn sat down heavily on the bedside chair as Caranthir hastened to Eomer's side.

"Well I have never seen anything like this before in a lifetime spent as a healer!" he exclaimed. "The collapsed lung is working again after only a few hours, quite remarkable! What powers do you possess my Lord King?" He looked at Aragorn with something approaching reverence.

"I hardly know myself until they are put to the test!" Aragorn said wearily. "Will you replace the bandages, and his nightshirt please?"

After they had done his bidding and he had somewhat recovered, he took Eomer's hand again and placed his other hand lightly on his brow.

"Eomer, my friend, awake!" he commanded.

Eomer coughed again and then opened his eyes.

"Aragorn?" Eomer murmured through dry lips. "Thirsty."

He swallowed the water in the proffered cup and closed his eyes again.

"He sleeps naturally, he will recover now, Aragorn said, his voice trembling slightly with the vast sense of relief he felt. "I think he will sleep now for many hours. Send for me if he shows any signs of nausea," he told the healers. "I must return to the Lord Faramir, call me at once if you have further need of my aid!"
"You should take food and rest first, my Lord," Aedred advised. "After what you did earlier for Lord Faramir, I fear for your own well being!"

Aragorn smiled wryly at his typical Rohirric outspokenness and promised to have some food sent up from the kitchens. Caranthir looked shocked, as in Denethor's day such forwardness would have earned the young man a severe reprimand.

"So old Ioreth was right!" Caranthir mused when Aragorn had left. "The King does indeed have the hands of a healer. I would never have believed it had I not seen it today for myself. I thought she was just exaggerating some Elvish tricks he knew how to use! Maybe there is even hope for poor Lord Faramir!"

An hour or so later, Faramir opened his eyes and the King coaxed him to swallow more water and herbal tea. He sipped it slowly through bruised blue tinged lips, all the while gazing at Aragorn with an expression of sheer anguish in his expressive grey eyes before looking away as Aragorn uncovered him and rubbed more salves on his many injuries.

Aragorn's guilt gnawed at him. How could Faramir ever forgive him for what he had done? Even if he lived, could he ever recover from such an ordeal?

He persuaded Imrahil to rest awhile on the couch, while he continued to tend Faramir.

As darkness fell, another of Aragorn's fears was realised as Faramir became feverish, no doubt on account of having his injuries doused in filthy water as well as being exposed to the general squalor of the prison.

It was a torment for the King to watch as every restless movement increased the Steward's agony.

Aragorn was constantly at his side, bathing his face, neck and limbs with lukewarm water and trying to soothe him as he pleaded with some invisible tormentor for mercy.

As the fever intensified, Faramir cried out again and again. The words were often indistinguishable but now and again they made out, "I am sorry, forgive me, please no!"

Aragorn could only add willow bark to the rosehip, poppy, hawthorn and liquorice herbal brew he was now giving him every few hours and constantly try to reassure him but he seemed oblivious to his presence.

He stared wild-eyed and unseeing at Aragorn, occasionally gripping his proffered hand for comfort while his friend and King fought for his life.

Tonight should have been so very different as he and Faramir should have been sitting here keeping each other company, while they waited for news of how Arwen's labour was progressing. He could just imagine how Faramir would have tried to find some topic of conversation to distract him.

A few hours later Faramir suddenly cried out clearly, "Love me please! Why don't you love me father? I didn't mean to let you down! Please don't hurt me any more!"

Realising Faramir was reliving his childhood, and thinking a slight deception excusable, Aragorn tenderly kissed him on the brow saying, "Of course I love you, my son. Your father loves you very much!"

A faint smile lit up Faramir's features and he sighed and settled a little more easily.
Aragorn bathed his Steward's face again. His words were no lie for he had indeed come to love this young man as a son and appreciate him, as Denethor never had done.

It had grown dark outside and the birthing chamber was now lit by candlelight.

The Queen had been in labour for over eighteen hours now and was growing exhausted though frequent bites of Lembas and sips of miruvor helped to sustain her. Ioreth and Eowyn were both satisfied everything was progressing, as it should.

Arwen gave a loud scream as the contractions became fiercer. They were now so frequent; she hardly had time to recover between them.

"It is almost time!" Ioreth announced as she examined Arwen, "Bring the birthing stool here!"

TBC

A/N

A very grateful thank you for all your much appreciated reviews and comments. I intended to post sooner to show my appreciation but was unable to.

I was touched to be missed.

Denethor did indeed know via the palantir that Aragorn was coming as you can read in "The return of the King" but he believed Sauron would win the war and the West would fall.

I do not imagine Aragorn being very security conscious and felt the Rohirrim would just push past or knock out the Guards at the doors.

Faramir did indeed love and was loved by, Boromir but I doubt he perceived his brother as an authority figure whom he needed to please.

Faramir is far too ill to really take in much of what is said to him and several of my readers have rightly noticed that his emotional trauma is very deep. As he has only been close to Aragorn for a few months, he still does not really know the King all that well.

However much the characters or my readers might wish it, I fear there will be no quick fixes in this story any more than in "Shadow and Thought"
Arwen, now alone with Ioreth and Eowyn positioned herself on the birthing stool, with the midwives supporting her either side.

The voluminous shift she was wearing got in the way and between contractions, she tugged it over her head much to Ioreth’s horror.

"Lady Elfstone!" she gasped, "This most unseemly!"

"Elves do not suffer inhibitions!" Arwen gasped through gritted teeth, "And it is not as if you are seeing anything you have not seen before!"

"She is right." Eowyn agreed with the Queen, though secretly amused how she had seemed to move back and forth between Elf and human in her attitudes during her pregnancy.

She moved behind Arwen, supporting her with one arm and massaging her back with the other while murmuring soothing words of comfort, wishing fervently that she had Aragorn's healing skills.

Arwen gave an ear-piercing shriek at an especially fierce contraction.

"Bear down, it is time to push now. I can tell from your breathing! You are almost there!" Ioreth commanded.

Arwen screamed all the louder as she felt as if her body were being torn asunder. She grabbed Eowyn’s hand in a bone-crushing grip.

"The head has emerged." Ioreth announced, "One more big push, you can do it, Lady Elfstone!"

Arwen made a final supreme effort and felt the babe slither its way into the world.

Time seemed to stand still and then the lusty cry of a newborn babe was heard.
The baby slipped into Ioreth's waiting hands. Gently she lifted it and placed it on Arwen's chest. "A fine healthy boy!" she announced. "Congratulations, Lady Elfstone!"

Blinking back a tear, Eowyn moved round to kiss her friend on the cheek before draping a blanket round her and the baby.

Tears of joy and relief freely coursed down Arwen's face as she held her firstborn in her arms. Although still covered in the detritus of birth, he seemed to her to be the most beautiful being she had ever beheld, with his tiny chubby body and fuzz of black hair.

Eowyn expertly tied the cord before cutting it with a sharp knife, while Ioreth called for water and towels to be fetched to bathe the newborn prince.

"Have you decided on a name?" Eowyn asked while they waited for the placenta to be delivered. "Estel and I decided on Eldarion if we had a son," Arwen replied, tenderly cradling her child. "Could you send someone to tell him he is a father if they have not done so already?" she asked.

"A good kingly name, though I hope it will be a very long time before he succeeds his father!" Eowyn remarked, as Arwen reluctantly relinquished her hold on her child and allowed Ioreth to bathe him and wrap him in a blanket while she dealt with the afterbirth.

Ancient tradition decreed that the baby could not be dressed until the King had inspected him and declared himself satisfied.

Ioreth then examined Arwen thoroughly and pronounced her healthy with no damage apart from some slight bruising caused by the birth.

"You will be able to give Lord Elfstone more children." Ioreth informed the Queen. "Do not mention it, this is the first and last!" Arwen snapped.

"Every woman says that." Ioreth cackled, "Including a lady of my acquaintance who went on to have ten more!"

"I think not!" Arwen retorted as Eowyn led her over to the bed where she gently bathed her and applied a salve of arnica, before helping her don a finely embroidered linen nightgown.

"Aragorn has been sent for so let me help you look your best." Eowyn soothed as she brushed the Queen's long black hair. "Later you can have a bath and I will massage you and the baby after he has spent some time with you."

"I want my baby!" Arwen fretted as Eldarion cried pitifully from the far side of the room. "I think he is hungry!"

Eowyn hesitated. The rules stated that the Queen was not advised to suckle her newborn child until after the King had acknowledged it, but knowing Aragorn's character, she was certain he would never disown his child.

Taking the baby from Ioreth, she handed him to his mother and helped Arwen unfasten her nightgown. It never failed to amaze her how so soon after birth, an infant knew exactly how to obtain nourishment.

Holding the babe to her breast, Arwen gazed at him with such fierce tenderness that it brought tears to Eowyn's eyes.
Despite her reassurances to Aragorn, she had been terrified that something would go wrong and she could lose her best friend to the perils of childbirth. She felt overwhelmed with joy and relief that everything had gone so well. Her guess had been correct, as Eldarion was obviously full term after the usual human term of gestation.

Lady Morwen was despatched to summon the King as soon as the midwives were satisfied that all was well.

An exhausted, Aragorn was still sitting beside Faramir when the Lady in Waiting knocked on the door.

The Steward was still very seriously ill but Aragorn was daring to hope that as he had survived so far, maybe he would live though his fever was now causing him grave concern.

When he heard the summons, he roused Imrahil, who was still dozing on the couch and then opened the door.

Lady Morwen beamed at him, her news obvious even before she opened her mouth.

"My Lord Elessar!" she said, "Your are summoned to the Queen's chambers if your Majesty pleases. Her Majesty has been delivered of a healthy child."

"And the Queen?" Aragorn asked anxiously.

" She is well, my Lord."

Aragorn gave a deep sigh of relief and would have wept had Lady Morwen not been present. At last something had not gone awry on this dreadful day. Arwen and their baby lived and were well! He offered a silent prayer of thanks to the Valar.

After hurriedly washing his hands and changing his shirt Aragorn summoned Caranthir to stay with Faramir together with Imrahil and told them to call him at once if there were any change.

His heart pounding with anticipation and relief, he made his way to the other side of the Royal Apartments. He wanted to rush inside and see his Queen but first there were ancient customs to observe.

As tradition dictated, twenty nobles and members of the Council were waiting in the anteroom outside the Queen's chamber.

On being informed of his arrival, Lady Meril brought the baby wrapped only in a blanket and unwrapped the bundle so that the King could inspect his child.

Aragorn saw a fuzz of black hair, sleepy blue grey eyes, perfectly formed limbs and ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes.

He felt an overwhelming sense of love towards this baby, so small yet so perfect. This at long last was his son, the child he had waited for so long.

" My Lord Elessar?" Lady Meril's enquiry jolted him back to the need of the ritual words he had to speak now, part of an obscure and ancient tradition where the King was required to publicly acknowledge his heir or the babe at best would be raised in obscurity, or at worse exposed on the mountainside. Aragorn shuddered, now he saw his child the very thought made him recoil in horror.

"This is my son. The King has an heir!" Aragorn said in a loud voice for the assembled nobles to
He wanted to scoop up his son and hold him securely in his arms but first Lady Meril had to parade the infant for the assembled Council Members to inspect.

The Lord of Lebennin prodded the infant curiously as if expecting the offspring of an Elf and a human to have four legs or some similar oddity. Indignant at such treatment, the baby started to howl.

The strain of this dreadful day was taking its toll and Aragorn suddenly found the whole procedure barbaric. This was his son, a living, breathing child, not some piece of prize horseflesh! No future child of his was going to suffer such indignities, tradition or not!

He strode over to the assembled nobles and took his son from the lady in waiting, wrapping him securely in the blanket and cradling him in his arms.

"You have seen the babe is healthy, now be gone!" he roared in a voice, which brokered no argument.

"But Sire!" Lord Devorin of Ringlo Vale protested.

"You have seen my son, now he needs the comfort of his mother and warm clothing on his skin. The demands of the law are fulfilled, you have seen the child and I tell you now to depart. I, King Elessar have spoken!"

Dumbfounded, the Nobles filed out. Lord Lossarnach alone remained as Aragorn made his way towards Arwen's chamber.

"Congratulations, Sire!" he said, "Shall I order the bells to be rung now as custom demands?"

Aragorn nodded and managed to smile at the young man. "Yes, the citizens deserve to know they have a Prince though whether they will welcome being awoken at nearly midnight is another matter. Thank you, my Lord, I fear today has been somewhat trying."

Still carrying his infant son Aragorn followed Lady Meril into the large bedchamber where his Queen lay resting.

Aragorn hastened to his wife's side, handing the baby to the hovering Eowyn, who quickly dressed him he took Arwen's hand. "My love, he is so beautiful, thank you!" he whispered. "Was the pain very bad?"

"It was worth it. Already the memory is fading. Estel, I am not made of glass!" She pulled him towards her and he took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

When they pulled apart, Eowyn handed the baby back to his mother and discreetly retired to the next room.

For a few moments, Arwen contentedly cuddled her son before looking up and studying her husband's face.

"Whatever is wrong, Estel?" she asked, "You look as if you were the one who had given birth. I have never seen you look so exhausted!"

A/N A very grateful thank you to everyone for your kind reviews. Every one is much appreciated.

I am glad my readers appreciate what I am trying to do with this story.
Aragorn's angst is emotional rather than physical in this story, but I believe that is just as hard to endure.

The Rohirrim caught everyone off guard as they rushed past the few guards, knocking them out.

A birthing stool is a low stool shaped like a horseshoe, which looks rather like a lavatory.
The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

Chapter Notes

*These characters all belong to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema with the exception of Caranthir who appears by kind permission of Evendim. This story was written for pleasure and not for financial gain*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times

Dickens - A Tale of Two Cities

Aragorn thought quickly, this was his wife's special day and he had no desire to let it be ruined for her. Before Arwen had become pregnant, she had easily been able to read his thoughts, and he would have been unable to hide the depth of his distress, but bearing a mortal's child had taken that ability away from her, though it would most likely return within days now that the baby was delivered.

"I was worried about you and I had an exhausting day," he replied evasively, "There was some trouble in the city I had to deal with."

"Could not Faramir have dealt with it?" she enquired, "I thought he would keep an eye on you today and offer you some support"

Aragorn took a deep breath, realising it was impossible to avoid telling her at least some of what had happened. "I am afraid there was a fight," he said as calmly as he could, "Faramir and Eomer were both injured."

"Faramir fighting with Eomer?" Arwen sounded incredulous. "Are they badly hurt?"

Although Aragorn had hidden some things from his wife during her pregnancy, as not to distress her, it was contrary to both his principles and the thought bond they shared to ever lie to her.

He sadly nodded the affirmative, though adding in an attempt to reassure. "I am caring for them both and have treated their injuries. I have yet to learn exactly what happened to cause them to fight."

Arwen looked distressed. "This is dreadful news! Poor Eowyn, she has been so good to me today, I could never have managed without her."

"Do not distress yourself, Vanimelda," Aragorn soothed, "I am doing all I can to heal them both."

"And you will succeed." Arwen reassured him, "Apart from my father, you are the greatest healer on Arda. If only he were here today to see his grandson and to aid you but alas he is preparing to sail. I do not know even if a message to tell him of the birth will get there in time!"

"It grieves me that your family are not here with you." Aragorn said sadly. Privately, he thought that Elrond could have at least lingered until after the baby was born but the Elf Lord was in great
hurry to depart now that the power of the Elven rings was no more.

"I love my father but I love you and now our son far more!" Arwen said fervently, kissing him again. "I have a new family now and my brothers and my grandfather are remaining on Arda for a while yet. Now as the hour we are allowed together is almost over, you had better return to your patients and take Eowyn to see her husband and brother. Then try and get some rest, my Love."

And you rest too, Beloved, and recover your strength. How can I ever thank you enough for our wonderful, beautiful son! I love you both so much!"

Aragorn bade a tender farewell to his wife and promised to return on the morrow; already her eyes were closing when he requested the midwives to come back into the room. "First I would thank you for all your help today," he said, "Then if you would stay with the Queen, Dame Ioreth, I should like to speak to Lady Eowyn alone."

"Your lady will sleep now, Lord Elfstone, that is until your son demands feeding. A fine boy you have there!"

Aragorn smiled at her with something approaching affection. Sharp tongued and garrulous, Ioreth might be, but she had looked after Arwen well and he had gained a new respect for her in recent weeks as despite her reputation, she had apparently not told anyone outside her immediate circle about finding Faramir, Legolas and himself clad solely in sackcloth as he had feared they would have been the laughing stock of Minas Tirith, yet no one had said a word. Now to think of that day, he could weep at the memory.

Bidding farewell to Ioreth he left the room with Eowyn

"I fear I have ill tidings," Aragorn said quietly, wondering however he was going to tell her what had happened.

Eowyn looked at him in alarm. "What is wrong? Tell me!" she demanded.

There was no easy way to put it.

"I am afraid Eomer challenged Faramir to a duel and they are both badly hurt," he said bleakly, hating himself for having to tell her this and fearing its effect on her unborn child.

Eowyn paled visibly "How badly? What happened? Take me to them!" she demanded. "Can I not leave you and Faramir for less than a day without some disaster occurring?"

"It seems not," he replied, taking Eowyn's arm to support her "You and Arwen have been greatly missed today. Come, I will take you to them and try to explain what happened on the way."

Aragorn first took Eowyn to the room where her brother lay, feeling it would lessen the shock somewhat if she saw that at least one of her loved ones was recovering. He also feared how she might react to her brother once she saw the extent of her husband's injuries.

Eomer was sleeping peacefully while Aedred maintained a vigil at his bedside.

Rising from the chair where he had been sitting the Rohirric Healer bowed to the King and Eowyn as they entered.

"How is he?" Aragorn asked, "I have brought Lady Eowyn to see her brother."

"He is recovering well," the Healer, replied, "He has a strong constitution."
Eowyn gasped at the sight of her brother, as he lay with his head swathed in bandages.

"Faramir did this?" she exclaimed in horror.

"He only caught him across the chest with his sword and I believe even that was an accident." Aragorn replied, gesturing with one hand and placing the other on her shoulder in a gesture of comfort. "His worse injuries occurred when he fell down the steps, but he is healing well you should have no need to worry."

At the sound of his sister's voice, Eomer opened his eyes.

Eowyn hastened to his bedside and clasped her brother's hand. Her eyes were full of tears at the sight of her usually strong and vigorous brother lying so weak and helpless.

"Eowyn, sister, is that you?" Eomer asked weakly

"I am here beside you holding your hand." she replied.

"I cannot feel your touch!" Eomer gasped in alarm, turning his head a little so that he could see her.

Eowyn squeezed her fingers tighter. "Can you feel that?"

"I cannot feel anything!" Eomer sounded afraid for the first time in years his sister could remember.

"Maybe you are numb from lying on it? Eowyn suggested without much conviction.

Aragorn grasped Eomer's other hand.

"I can feel your hand, Aragorn but my sword arm is numb!" Eomer's voice rose in sheer panic.

"Let me see!" The Healer in Aragorn took over, as assisted by Aedred; Aragorn eased Eomer's arm out of his nightshirt.

It was badly bruised near the shoulder but otherwise looked undamaged. Eowyn gasped as the thick bandages covering her brother's chest were revealed.

Aragorn felt along the length of Eomer's arm, at first gently, but on getting no reaction probed and even pinched it in the hope Eomer would feel something but the arm remained completely numb.

Eowyn then pinched her brother's arm really hard, as she had often done in childhood by way of retaliation when he pulled her hair, thinking that maybe Aragorn was being too gentle.

By now Eomer was sweating with agitation and when Aragorn checked, his heart was pounding. "I can feel nothing from my shoulder down!" he exclaimed, the fear in his eyes obvious. "What did that husband of yours do to me?"

Aragorn nodded a silent instruction to Aedred to mix a sedative to calm the King of Rohan.

"It is useless, I can feel nothing, you could stick a knife in my arm and I would not know! What is wrong with me?" Eomer demanded

"I cannot say for certain," Aragorn replied, frowning with concern, "You fell on that arm and dislocated that shoulder. It could be that the nerve is damaged. Drink this, it will make you feel better."
Eowyn supported her brother's head as Aragorn gave him the valerian tea.

"Will I regain the feeling?" Eomer asked fearfully.

"I hope so. You will need time to heal. I will do everything I can for you. There are Elven massage techniques I could use which might help."

Eomer snorted, "No thank you! Elvish tricks are for Elves or maybe women and children, not men of the mark!"

"As you wish," Aragorn said resignedly, wishing Eomer were a little more open to less orthodox treatments. "You are healing well, considering the severity of your injuries and should be back on your feet within a week or two."

"What use is a one armed King, even if I can walk?" Eomer said desperately.

"Do not say that!" Eowyn chided. "You have recovered from many hurts in the past and then you did not have the best Healer in Middle Earth as you do now! Why do you always get into such trouble?" Her green eyes were wide with concern.

"I thought only to protect your honour, sister." Eomer replied heatedly.

"My honour?" Eowyn sounded bewildered.

"You need to rest now." Aragorn soothed, his hand on Eomer's brow, realising he would have to use his abilities to make his friend sleep as the valerian would take too long. He cast a warning glance at Eowyn that this was not the time for questions.

He need not have troubled himself for the King of Rohan was already asleep.

"I will take you to Faramir now." he told Eowyn, as she rose from the bedside and planted a kiss on her brother's cheek "I warn you, though, he is in a far worse state that Eomer. Are you certain you wish to see him just yet, as I fear the shock could harm your unborn child!"

"The women of Rohan are strong as are our children!" Eowyn said staunchly, "Take me to my husband!"

Caranthir and Imrahil were seated either side of Faramir when they entered. Both rose to bow to Aragorn, but with a wave of his hand, he bade them be seated.

"How is he?" Aragorn asked, putting a protective arm around Eowyn's shoulders as they approached the bedside.

"There is no change, my Liege," Caranthir replied.

"Let me see how badly he is hurt!" Eowyn demanded.

"Please, Eowyn, it is best you wait a little!" Aragorn counselled, wishing at least to first examine Faramir again. The Steward had momentarily opened his eyes when they entered but now lay there as if oblivious to their presence, moaning as he feverishly shifted in the bed.

Despite the fever, his face was almost white in sharp contrast to his raven hair and his lips still bore a bluish tinge.

Ignoring the King's attempts to hold her back, Eowyn yanked the covers off her husband, determined to see for herself the full extent of his injuries.
She stared at him for a moment taking in the flayed back, the heavily bandaged arm and the heavy bruising, which covered him almost from shoulder to thigh.

Turning pale, she gave a cry and would have fallen had Aragorn not caught her. For a moment she let him hold her, but quickly recovered and demanded.

"How did this happen? My brother could not have inflicted all these hurts upon him! Nor would he, as he is a man of honour!"

Aragorn moved to cover his Steward, who even though only half conscious was recoiling was shivering and recoiling at the indignity of having so many pairs of eyes fixed on his naked and battered body.

"It is my fault," he replied, unable to meet her eyes. "I gave the order for him to be taken to prison where he was beaten."

Eowyn's green eyes blazed with fury. "How could you?" she raged. "You cruel, monstrous tyrant! How could you do this to him, my gentle loving Faramir? He loves you so much, and he trusted you, as he worships the very ground you walk upon! He would gladly die for you and yet you treat him worse than a drunken beggar would treat his cur! Are you going to burn him alive next?"

Incandescent with rage, she slapped Aragorn across the face. The force was so great he staggered backwards, blood pouring from his nose.

TBC

A/N

Thank you so much for all your kind reviews. I cherish every one and am touched and overwhelmed by your support for this story.

I have updated quickly to show my sincere appreciation.

I took the idea of the ritual involving the baby from ancient Sparta where any less than perfect baby was left out for the wolves. Of course, Aragorn would never do anything so barbaric.

Those of you who guessed that there is still plenty of angst ahead are correct!

Some of you said this was one of your favourite chapters, I am curious to know which others you especially liked?

I am setting up some adversaries for Aragorn for a possible future story, so I hope that explains the nastiness of the Lords.
Imrahil jumped to his feet and grabbed Eowyn's arm as she appeared poised to strike again. "Lady, it is treason to strike the King!" he cried, outraged at her actions, "He risked his own life to save your husband!"

"Let her go, I deserve her wrath!" Aragorn said wearily, still reeling from the blow and trying to wipe away the blood running down his face. "None could ever blame me as much as I blame myself! Leave her be!"

Released from Imrahil's grip, Eowyn bent over her husband and pressed a kiss to the bluish tinged lips and clasped the limp hand. "Faramir, my Love!" she cried, but he had lapsed back into unconsciousness and could not hear her.

Caranthir hastened to Aragorn's side and fussied round the King, pressing cold compresses to his bleeding nose and lip. Too weary to protest, he submitted to the ministrations patiently.

"Your nose, is fortunately not broken, My Lord, but I fear you will have a swollen lip for a few days." Caranthir pronounced, glaring at Eowyn.

Eowyn knelt by Faramir's bedside sobbing quietly and continuing to call his name.

After a few moments, she felt more composed and steeled herself to more closely examine his injuries. Uncovering him again, she prodded an especially nasty looking bruise on his belly, trying to ascertain for herself how severe his injuries were.

Although virtually insensible, Faramir moaned in agony and jerked away from her touch.

Aragorn hurried to his side and held his hand over the spot until the Steward quieted and then tucked the covers round him again.

"Will you leave us, please? " he asked Imrahil and Caranthir. "And Master Caranthir, you and Master Aedred should rest now as you have been here many hours. Please request two other skilled healers from the Houses of Healing to come and replace you while you get some sleep."

"Your should rest too, My Lord." Caranthir suggested.

"I will as soon as I am able." Aragorn told him, "Now I wish to speak to the Lady Eowyn alone."

They both looked doubtful at leaving the King alone with the Steward's enraged wife, but did as
they were bidden.

Aragorn led the now subdued Eowyn to a chair.

"How badly is he hurt?" she asked. "Tell me the truth as I can for myself that he is very ill!"

"It is impossible to tell for certain." Aragorn told her sadly. "With sword cuts, fever, a flogging and a beating all of which could have caused more damage inside. His lungs and limbs are sound, the only broken bones are several ribs and he should be able to father more children, but I fear his heart is damaged and most likely his kidneys too. Also he has lost a great deal of blood and is in deep shock as well as running a high fever."

"Will he live?" she demanded in her usual direct fashion, though her eyes were full of fear

Aragorn looked her directly in the eye. "I do not know. His fate is in the hands of the Valar. I will do everything within my power to save him though."

"So you ought to, as this is all your fault!" Eowyn snapped, looking as if she was considering striking him again. "Men! I turn my back for a few hours to help your wife bring new life into the world and then learn that my husband and brother have tried to kill each other! Then for some reason you send my poor husband to prison as if he and Eomer hadn't damaged each other enough already! However could all this have happened? I demand to know everything!"

Aragorn had not intended to show her the letter and risk distressing her further at present. It seemed though, unless she knew the whole story she would continue to rage at him. He was too weary to argue with her any more as well as not wanting Faramir to be disturbed by raised voices.

Sighing, he retrieved the crumpled and bloodstained letter and handed it to her to read, while he bathed Faramir's face and neck again.

The colour drained from Eowyn's face and Aragorn rushed to her side to prevent her from falling.

"Easy now!" he soothed, leading her to the couch and gently rubbing circles on the back of her neck, an Elven remedy to prevent fainting.

"I wrote this six months ago." she murmured brokenly, "I was angry when Faramir told me we were to go to the Hunting Lodge and even thought you were planning to make me your mistress with his contrivance. You know how bad things were between us then and I falsely believed ill of you both. I placed it amongst Faramir's papers meaning to send it to Eomer later. When we returned I was going to destroy it but I couldn't find it and assumed it had been thrown away."

"The new secretary!" Aragorn said grimly, "Faramir told me that he was always tidying papers away. He must have found this and sent it to your brother."

"I am sorry. It is my fault Faramir is hurt you are not to blame. I should not have struck you." Eowyn looked up at the King, her eyes brimming with tears.

"The letter only led to the fight with Eomer, not to Faramir's serious injuries." Aragorn replied, now understanding far more about what had happened.

Knowing Eowyn's share of the blame in no way lessened his own feelings of guilt though. As King it was his responsibility to have stopped the fight and have made his instructions clearer that Faramir was merely to be arrested for his own protection.

He placed a comforting arm around the distraught Eowyn.
"What have I done? I have killed my husband and almost killed my brother!" Eowyn wept, looking sadly at the still figure on the bed.

"They still live and may yet recover!" Aragorn tried to sound more hopeful than he felt. "I know you never meant any harm to come to either Faramir or your brother."

"I was so unhappy a few months ago but I only wanted Eomer to take me home." Eowyn said more to herself than to the King. "Then everything changed and I realised how much I loved my husband after all and that you were always a good friend to us both. I was overwhelmed at your goodness when you forgave me and told me you wished me to attend the Queen when she gave birth. Arwen! All this almost made me forget! I must return to her!"

"I am sure there must be a way around the rules and you can be permitted to leave Arwen to be with Faramir." Aragorn replied, "The law was never intended to keep a midwife from her sick husband!"

Leaning heavily on Aragorn's arm Eowyn made her way back to the bedside and stood despondently looking down at Faramir.

"You are far more use to him than I am at the moment, as you have healing powers beyond anything I understand." Eowyn replied, "You saw how he groaned when I touched him, I know I am not gentle enough to care for him at present! It is best that I stay with Arwen, as I promised her to. I think Faramir would want that, but I beg you fetch me at once if there is any change or he asks for me." She bent and kissed Faramir tenderly, murmuring, "I am so sorry, my Love!"

Aragorn nodded his agreement. Having experienced her none too gentle ministrations himself, he knew she was right and until Faramir was conscious, there was little she could do. "I will have you fetched at once if you are needed," he promised. "Please do not tell Arwen yet how badly Faramir is hurt though, as today should be a joyful occasion for her"

"As it should be for you and Faramir too! How can he ever forgive me for what I have done? How can anyone forgive me for my foolishness in writing that letter?" Eowyn reproached herself, as she slowly moved away from the bed.

"I already have." Aragorn said quietly, as she made her way towards the door, "I beg of you to think now of your unborn child and try not to fret over the letter. You could not have known what would happen. Now go and take care of my wife and son, they will have need of you before Ioreth drives Arwen to distraction with her tongue!"

Eowyn turned for a final look at Faramir and then managed a wan smile before returning to the Queen.

Alone with Faramir, Aragorn buried his face in his hands and wept. This should have been the happiest day of his life, as he had become a father after so many years of waiting. Arwen was well and the future of the monarchy was assured but how could he rejoice when it seemed that Eomer might be permanently paralysed and Faramir hovered between life and death due to his folly.

Faramir started to move restlessly and moan at the pain it caused him. Wiping away the tears, Aragorn mixed up more herbs to try and ease his friend.

TBC

A/N Thank you so much for your very kind reviews. Each and every one is greatly appreciated and I am updating quickly to show my appreciation of your interest and support.
Aragorn does believe he is to blame for the tragedy.

For those of you who have not read "Shadow and Thought" the background to Eowyn writing the letter can be found in chapters 6 and 37.

I am familiar with and enjoyed both Babylon 5 and Louisa Alcott's novels.

"The Valley of the Shadow of Death" is a quote from Psalm 23 in the Bible. I think that chapter is my personal favourite, though it had fewer comments than some of the others. I am pleased my readers enjoyed the contrast between the light hearted beginning and current situation.
Imrahil returned soon afterwards and persuaded Aragorn to lie down while he watched over his nephew.

Despite wishing to remain awake, Aragorn was soon overcome by exhaustion and fell deeply asleep until he was roused by Faramir crying out.

Most of his words were incomprehensible gibberish although the King could make out "Let you down," and "Please, no, forgive me!" amongst his feverish ramblings.

Aragorn quickly realised that his Steward’s fever had worsened and that his whole body seemed to be burning. Aragorn and Imrahil took away the blankets, so he was covered only by a linen sheet and constantly bathed his limbs as well as his face and neck but still the fever raged and his heartbeat and breathing grew ever more erratic.

At sunrise, Aragorn checked Faramir’s wounds to try and discover the source of the infection. The stripes on his back, although hideous to behold, were clean but when his arm was unwrapped, the wound looked swollen, red and angry.

Aragorn sighed as he knew the stitches would have to be removed and the wound drained and cleaned, which involved yet more pain for the hapless Faramir, who was already in constant agony from his numerous injuries. It seemed only the sheer force of the King’s will kept him clinging on to life as some inner despair appeared to be making Aragorn’s healing powers less effective than usual. The only hopeful sign was that it now seemed very unlikely that he was bleeding inside.

He decided that Aedred should be summoned as Imrahil looked ready to drop from exhaustion, so he sent the Prince to lie down in a neighbouring room.

He then sent a messenger to fetch Eowyn as Faramir’s condition worsened.

After her outburst of the day before, she appeared calm and resolute as Aragorn told her what was happening, though a tear glinting in her eye betrayed her inner turmoil.

"Why ever did I write that letter?" she groaned.

"You could not have imagined anything like this would happen." Aragorn reassured her. "It is I who must bear the greater blame!"
She stood looking down at Faramir sadly, hardly able to endure the pitiful sight and then said as much to herself as to the King. "You never realise quite how much you love someone unless something dreadful like this happens, do you?"

"I fear that is true," Aragorn replied sadly, "I only realised yesterday just how much I love is brother son and friend to me."

Eowyn suddenly grasped Faramir's hand between both of her own and said sternly, "Fight to live, Faramir, fight for your wife and your unborn child!"

After a few moments she felt a larger hand on top of her own.

"Fight Faramir, live, your King commands it!" Aragorn said, as together they willed the Steward to recover.

"I dare not risk carrying infection to the Queen and your son," she said at last, as Aedred hovered ready to drain the wound," I will return later."

Aragorn nodded agreement, "How are they both this morning?" he asked somewhat belatedly.

"Both doing well, and Arwen is being very kind," she replied, "She wants to know exactly what is going on, though .I have been careful not to upset her by telling her too much."

"Tell her I will explain everything later today." Aragorn replied, squeezing Eowyn's hand as she left. She returned the gesture all too aware that he needed comfort too.

Aragorn had taken to the Rohirric healer, as a caring and competent man of few words, with the added advantaged of not seeming at all overawed by his presence as many of the Gondorians were.

Aedred had already prepared a sharp knife by passing it through a flame, clean bandages, a basin of water with salt added, and an infection killing mixture of honey, garlic and vinegar.

He then held Faramir's arm steady, as Aragorn prepared to remove the stitches and drain the infection.

To his horror, the King found his hand was trembling and he could not bring himself to cut into the infected flesh.

"You hold him and I will do it!" Aedred said calmly.

"Why can I not do it?" Aragorn asked, "I have done this many times before!"

"You are exhausted and I can tell that Lord Faramir is as dear as a brother to you. " Aedred replied matter of factly, as they changed places.

Swiftly and expertly, he removed the stitches, and drained and cleaned the wound before coating it thickly with the salve.

Faramir flinched and cried out, but no more so than when his other wounds had been tended.

Aedred then left Aragorn to bandage Faramir's arm before saying; "Rest now, my Lord "

"Much as I would like to, I cannot," Aragorn replied.

"You can as I am here with Lord Faramir, Master Caranthir is caring for Eomer King and most importantly what would your Lady or Lord Faramir's wife say if you collapsed?" Aedred spoke
firmly but had a slight twinkle in his eye. "Also, My Lord, what if Lord Faramir needed some procedure that you alone could carry out, unlike a wound drained?"

"Very well, but wake me immediately if he gets any worse!" Reluctantly Aragorn conceded defeat and lay down on the far side of the bed. By the time, Aedred had picked up a blanket to cover him with, he was already asleep.

It was gone noon when he woke again, feeling somewhat refreshed. Aedred was patiently sitting beside Faramir bathing his face, while Eowyn sat holding his hand.

"How is he?" he asked anxiously, slowly sitting up and throwing off the blanket.

"A little better, I believe," Aedred smiled, "The fever is less than before and he is breathing more easily. I have taken the liberty of asking for some refreshments to be sent up from the kitchens for you."

Eowyn rose to her feet, "And be sure you eat it all or I shall spoon feed you!" she threatened.

"There is no need for that." Aragorn sighed, conceding defeat, though not feeling at all hungry. Yet when Aedred handed him a large bowl of broth followed by stewed fruit and strong tea, he found he cleared the dishes and felt stronger as result.

Eowyn satisfied herself that he was eating, then tenderly kissed her husband before returning to Arwen.

He then examined Faramir for himself and satisfied the Steward was a little better, went to visit Eomer to see how he was faring.

The King of Rohan was much improved in health but not so in temper.

"I want to get up!" he demanded.

"You have been badly injured and need to rest for a while yet," Aragorn replied firmly, as he changed the bandages. To his relief, the wounds were clean and Eomer showed no sign of infection or fever.

"Curse that Steward of yours for doing this to me!" Eomer fumed, looking down at his useless arm and the livid scar across his chest.

Aragorn bit his tongue, not wishing to agitate the injured man. "He did not seek you out to fight with." he said mildly, "Faramir is badly injured too."

"And so he should be for what he did to my sister!" Eomer snapped.

"If you could see him, you would think differently!" Aragorn remonstrated, the images of Faramir's wounds still fresh in his mind.

"I never want to see that scoundrel again!" Eomer retorted.

"He never harmed your sister." Aragorn replied, "Eowyn told me last night that she wrote the letter to you when she was in a bad mood and never intended to send it."

"He must have ill treated her or she would never have written it!" Eomer insisted, "Besides he admitted it himself that he profaned her honour by making her lie with one of his friends!"

Aragorn was somewhat taken aback by this information and wondered whatever Faramir had
meant. Granted when he had been seriously ill, Eowyn had slept in the same huge bed but at the far side of it, with Faramir between them and from what he could recall she had always been fully clothed.

"Your sister will tell you herself that Faramir never ill treated or dishonoured her." Aragorn said firmly, as he secured the bandage around Eomer's broad chest, "Now let me massage your arm and use my healing abilities on it! When the wound is closed I can treat you to remove the scarring."

"I told you, I want no Elvish tricks!" Eomer protested stubbornly.

" I only want to help you recover, my friend, there is plenty of time for you to change your mind." Aragorn replied, fearing that Eomer's head injury had affected his judgement as he had never known Eomer so unreasonable, ill tempered and unwilling to listen to him before. "I will return later."

" I want to get up and be able to move my arm!" Eomer told him, "When will that be? I cannot lie abed as I have a kingdom to govern!"

"I fear I do not know." Aragorn told him frankly, " But I will do all I can to help you. Now I must go to others who need me!"

" I suppose you mean my sister's worthless husband?" Eomer snarled but Aragorn had already left.

When Imrahil returned he brought tidings that the Council was in uproar and demanding immediate retaliation against Rohan

Aragorn hastened to the Chamber while they were still in session and tried to placate them making it quite clear he had no intention of starting a war which provoked a sullen response and barbed comments questioning if the King regarded the Steward as no longer of any worth in Gondor.

Angrily refuting them, Aragorn stormed out only to be met by a secretary carrying a pile of state documents, which needed his signature, the situation being made far worse by Faramir not being able to share the load.

The King decided to order the curfew to be lifted as Eomer's men were now under constant surveillance and also issued a statement saying, that both The Steward and the King of Rohan had been injured due to a disagreement and were being cared for, to try to stem the tide of rumours sweeping the city.

That evening when Aragorn visited Arwen, he faced the unpleasant task of telling her the full story of just how badly he had been injured six months previously when he had stayed at the Hunting Lodge with Faramir and Eowyn. He had always meant to enlighten her, but not a mere day after the birth of their son when she should have been basking in the joy of new motherhood.

"Why did you not tell me before?" she asked, the colour draining from her face as he told her that he had been too badly injured even to clearly remember all that had happened

"I feared for your safety and that of our unborn child." he replied. "Coming so close to death made me realise just how badly Gondor needed an heir and I needed my wife. I sought only to protect you and our baby."

She looked at him sadly," I understand but I still wish that you had told me. I wondered why ever you had such nightmares for months afterwards and thought more than an arrow wound was to blame. What else happened to make Faramir and Eowyn change so much?"
He poured out the whole complicated story of Eowyn's misdirected fury, and how Faramir's loyalty and devotion and Eowyn's contrition had inspired the bond, which had grown between them since then. He concluded the narration with a plea to her to forgive Eowyn.

"How could I not, as you obviously did sufficiently to allow her to care for me?" she replied, "Eowyn has become very dear to me and I could not have managed without her these past days. Estel, I ask you one thing only, to promise me never to keep anything like this from me again."

"I promise." he said, kissing her tenderly just as Eldarion started crying to be fed.

"But that does not explain why Eomer should attack Faramir." Arwen said in bewilderment, as she put the babe to her breast.

"She wrote it when she was angry when Faramir told her that they were going to the Hunting Lodge with me." Aragorn explained, "However, it was sent to Eomer by mistake months later."

"How I wish I had never suggested that trip!" Arwen lamented.

"If you had not, I am certain Faramir would still be terrified of me and Eowyn would still be consumed with hatred." Aragorn reassured her, "If I had not ordered Faramir to be arrested, he would not now be badly injured!"

"You should blame those who beat him, not yourself, Estel!" Arwen remonstrated, "Now go and use your healing skills on the poor man as he is a good friend to you!"

Although unconvinced by her reassurances, Aragorn tenderly kissed her and his baby son, lovingly running his fingers through the fuzz of dark curly hair, murmuring how much he loved them both.

Returning to Faramir's side, he sat mopping his brow as the fever gradually abated and his Steward fell into an uneasy sleep. His heartbeat was stronger now and the swelling disfiguring his belly had started to go down.

Aragorn finally dared to believe that he would live though his damaged body would take a long time to heal.

He struggled to stay alert until his Steward awoke as he wondered if he would see accusation and betrayal in the grey eyes which once had held only love and trust towards him.

TBC

A big thank you to my loyal reviewers for your kind comments. I have almost reached the 500 review mark much to my amazement!

Eowyn feels compelled to fulfil her duties and may also find the sight of poor injured Faramir almost more than she can bear, knowing her letter led to his injuries.

I can assure my readers that no horrendous modern medical procedures will feature in the story.

Eowyn will not be punished, (any more than the woman with the washing) as Aragorn understands her fury. Only Aragorn, Faramir (and now Arwen) know she once threatened Aragorn with his own sword, which was far worse.

Eomer usually is far more rational but head injuries often make people act out of character.
I am honoured to be on a favourites list!

I hope that naming the chapters helps my readers follow the story more easily.
Warning - This Chapter contains themes which some readers may find disturbing

The pain filled eyes flickered open and focussed on Aragorn's face. Anxiously, he tried to read the emotions reflected within them.

For a fleeting instant Faramir looked upon him with love and trust, only to be swiftly replaced with an expression of great pain and fear.

The King held a cup of water to the parched lips and waited while Faramir sipped it and moaned softly.

"Why?" Faramir whispered.

"I am so very sorry, I never meant you to be harmed!" Aragorn said remorsefully, grasping Faramir's hand only for his Steward to pull away.

"Why?" he repeated, "Why did you bring me back? If you ever loved me or Eowyn, or even our unborn child you would have let me die!"

"I know you are in a great deal of pain, Mellon Nin, but it will pass." Aragorn soothed, trying to conceal his dismay. "You must not think like that!"

"The pain I have now is nothing compared with that I will suffer when I die a traitor's death!" Faramir whispered, "I know I richly deserve it for killing Eomer but I had hoped for the sake of the love you claimed to bear me you would allow me to die of my wounds instead."

"What?" Aragorn gasped in horror, "How could you even think such a thing? To think that I would have you executed and in such a fashion too!" Dismay that Faramir should think him capable of such a thing made him sound harsh "You did not kill Eomer, he was badly injured but recovering well."

Faramir sighed but even that was painful. Although relieved that he was to be spared the dreadful fate he had envisaged, he wondered however could he endure living with the knowledge that he had attacked his own wife's brother and by so doing had betrayed both his King and his country?

The memories overwhelmed him; the fury of the Rohirrim, his time in the prison and the way Mahrod had leered at him and pulled at his clothing. What had happened to him while he was
unconscious? How could he ever hold his wife in his arms again after such shame or even embrace the King as a brother?

What right had he to live as a traitor, defiled both by his deeds and by what had most likely befallen him?

"Come you need your wounds tending!" Aragorn said rather curtly as he was so weary and disheartened. He had hoped so much that his friendship with Faramir would survive the appalling mistake he had made, but it seemed that Faramir thought even worse of him than he had feared.

He pulled pack the blankets and draped towels around Faramir to cover him as he worked.

Faramir groaned with pain and flinched away from Aragorn's touch while his many injuries were treated until the most embarrassing bruises were uncovered and coated with salve. Then he wished the earth would swallow him to escape the shame of it all.

The final humiliation came when he needed to answer a call of nature, which was when tears of both pain and shame rolled down his cheeks, despite Aragorn's best efforts to be both kind and discreet.

"Would you rather someone else tended you?" Aragorn asked feeling his friend's discomfort acutely and too weary to think of suitable words to calm him. "Eowyn or Caranthir or maybe someone else?"

Faramir shook his head. It was bad enough that even his closest friend should see him thus.' The one who was his closest friend,' he corrected himself, for how could Aragorn ever forgive him for what he had done? Sparing his life alone had been magnanimous beyond all measure.

He felt it was somehow defiling Aragorn to even touch one such as he, and yet much though he felt he deserved punishment he was in too much pain to bear the thought of anyone less gentle touching him and the humiliation of the far less discreet and understanding Healers from the Houses tending his wounds made him shudder.

"You need to be propped up for a while or your lungs could become congested, I will give you some dandelion root to help. Maybe tomorrow your back will be healed enough for me to strap up your ribs." Aragorn told him as he washed his hands and slipped several pillows behind him.

"Would you like a nightshirt to wear now, as maybe you would feel more comfortable?"

"Yes, please," Faramir, replied weakly.

Aragorn slid the garment over Faramir's head and pulled it down." I will have some broth sent up from the kitchens for you while you are awake. That should make you feel better as you have had nothing but water and herbal teas these past days."

With every fibre of his being, Aragorn yearned to comfort Faramir, draw the dark head against his shoulder and tell his Steward how sorry he was and crave his pardon. Then kiss his brow and tell him much he loved him and of his anguish when he thought he would lose him. Yet how could he when it seemed very obvious that Faramir could hardly endure his touch? He could only withdraw behind the mask of the Healer and do what he could in that capacity.

Aragorn fed Faramir the broth spoonful by spoonful. He swallowed obediently but without enthusiasm as his ordeal had left him unable to care whether he lived or died.

The King then sent a message to see if Eowyn could be spared from her duties with the Queen for an hour or two before sinking into an exhausted slumber on the far side of the bed.
"Faramir, you are awake! How are you feeling?" Eowyn asked as she hurried into the room and kissed him on the lips, before tenderly taking his hand in both her own

He barely opened his eyes when she entered and shied away from her touch. Knowing he had almost killed her beloved brother and was most likely defiled after his time in prison made him fear his touch would dishonour her

Eowyn sighed and blinked away the tears feeling it was little wonder Faramir pulled his hand away from hers after all the pain she had caused him. Were it not for her letter to Eomer, her brother would not be facing a lifetime of disability nor her husband be lying here in agony.

It seemed now that Faramir would most likely survive, but maybe only to face a lifetime of pain as even Aragorn was still uncertain just how severe his injuries were.

Bowing her head, Eowyn wept silently offering a silent prayer to the Valar that both her husband and brother would be restored to her soon sound in body and mind.

Two weeks had now passed since Eomer and Faramir's fateful encounter and while Eomer was well on the way to recovery, apart from still having no feeling in his arm Aragorn was still very concerned about Faramir.

Now Faramir was out of danger, Imrahil had returned to Dol Amroth where he was urgently needed to sort out a land dispute in which the parties were threatening to come to blows. Aragorn had greatly missed his help and support.

Today Aragorn decided he was now fit enough to return to his own apartments but although his body was slowly healing and the wounds were closing, he remained silent and withdrawn. His kidneys were working properly but his heartbeat was still too rapid and erratic, which worried Aragorn greatly.

Also the injuries were healing far more slowly than they should have done, given the healing and care, Aragorn had freely bestowed. It was as if something within Faramir's troubled soul was resisting any attempt to restore him to health.

That afternoon, Aragorn carried out the now familiar ritual of tending his wounds, first removing his nightshirt and then arranging blankets round him, both for warmth and dignity, so he could examine one injury at a time.

Faramir was monosyllabic in the King's company, which hardly surprised him, as he was the prime cause of his Steward's misfortune. He had reluctantly concluded that maybe it would be best to keep some distance between them for a time, though he would miss his friend's company very much but it seemed that only time could blunt the edge of the anger and hurt Faramir must be feeling towards him.

Not only that but the embarrassment the Steward felt when some of the injuries were treated was unpleasant for them both and Faramir doubtless needed time for the memories to fade.

Not that the Steward seemed any happier in the company of his wife as he pulled his hand away from hers and feigned sleep when she tried to talk to him. That was hardly surprising either as they had both contributed to Faramir's injuries though the greater part of the blame lay undoubtedly with him.

Increasingly he longed to embrace Faramir and tell him how much he loved him and plead for his forgiveness but how could he just yet when Faramir recoiled from even being in the same room as
the one whose orders had caused him so much pain?

He greatly desired to spend more time with Arwen and his infant son, but had always hoped that Faramir would be able to share his joy in fatherhood by regularly visiting with Eowyn, but it seemed only time might fulfil this wish.

Arwen had even offered to bring Eldarion to show the Steward but Faramir had shown no enthusiasm for the idea.

He had seemed genuinely pleased that the birth had gone well but insisted that his sickroom was no place for an infant.

Tearing himself away from his thought, Aragorn concentrated on his task as he very gently felt the bruises covering Faramir's belly and extending down into the groin area. There seemed to be no permanent damage and the swelling was gradually subsiding though Faramir would be sore, maybe for months, but he was hopeful that nothing was life threatening, though it worried him that his Steward recoiled in agony when certain areas were touched.

Poor Faramir looked ready to weep with shame as he finished applying the salve, despite his best efforts to be as discreet as possible.

"I see much the same every time I take a bath, just a little less colourful, so there is nothing to be upset about! Remember only a few months ago, you had to care for me and I survived the experience!" Aragorn soothed, trying to ease his embarrassment, "You can have the salve to apply it yourself from now on as I believe there are no worse hurts inside you apart from bruising which I fear could cause you discomfort for some time yet, though I will do all I can to lessen the pain."

Faramir nodded mutely as Aragorn helped him don his drawers and breeches.

He then turned his attention to removing the stitches from the wounds inflicted by Eomer's sword. "The cut on your arm damaged the muscle and you will need to use the salves frequently, followed by massage and healing. Then you also need to take the herbal teas daily, especially the hawthorn berries," Aragorn said as he re-bandaged the wounds. Maybe I should come and treat it daily for you?"

Faramir shook his head." You have already done a great deal for me, Sire. Eowyn is trained in the healing arts. Your wife and son need you, as does Gondor as I am unable to serve her at present."

Aragorn frowned at the formality but let it pass. "Yes, I am needed in many places but Arwen would never begrudge me spending time each day helping you recover" he said, thinking he would have to wait a week or two before offering the essential healing again, not to mention the Elven remedy for the livid scars disfiguring his Steward's back, which he was now rubbing salve into.

Faramir tensed at his touch.

'He must associate me with nothing but pain at present.' Aragorn thought sadly as he strapped Faramir's ribs and helped him into his shirt and tunic.

"Is there anything at all you would like?" he asked him, willing to offer almost any gift no matter how priceless to try to compensate for what he had done.

"I would like to see Eomer." Faramir replied.

Aragorn hesitated, wondering how Eomer would react to the sight of his brother in law as he still spoke of him with hostility, despite strenuous efforts from both Eowyn and himself.
Maybe though he would soften when he actually saw how pale, thin and contrite, Faramir was. As the meeting could not be postponed for much longer, it was perhaps best to get it over with.

TBC

A/N . A big thank you to all my readers for your much appreciated comments. I have passed the 500 reviews mark now!

In Chapter 11 Faramir blurts out "Only one and she was not forced and there was no impropriety as he was near death." in reply to Eomer's accusations over Eowyn's honour.

Eomer did NOT say "I need to use my arm as I am a King of Rohan!". I can only suggest that any readers who dislike my writing style find other stories which suit them better as the majority have told me they likethings as they are.

With Arwen's Elven abilities and close bond with Aragorn, I doubt he could keep any secret for long. Her pregnancy temporarily dulled her perceptions.

Eowyn does love Faramir but this was a very different era.

I promise I would never abandon a story unless unforeseen circumstances beyond my control made it impossible to continue, such as having no computer, being run over by a bus or serious illness.
"Come, I will take you to him, I warn you that being injured has not improved his temper!"
Aragorn supported Faramir by his good arm and led him down the corridor to Eomer's room, hoping fervently that seeing Faramir's obvious frailty would soften the King of Rohan.

"I can walk unaided, please let me be!" Faramir said.

Reluctantly, Aragorn released his arm, trying to hide the hurt he felt at Faramir's very obvious rejection.

The Steward's steps were slow and unsteady and he leaned heavily on a cane for support, continuing to refuse Aragorn's proffered arm.

How badly did I hurt Eomer?" Faramir asked anxiously.

"Your sword caught him across the chest," Aragorn replied, quickly elaborating when he saw the horror in Faramir's eyes, "Not that the wound was very serious as it touched no vital organ. It is healing well with no trace of infection. His worse injuries were sustained when he fell down the steps, which was not your fault."

"I am so sorry," Faramir sighed, breathing heavily with the effort of walking.

Eomer was sitting in a chair. He hated lying abed and had insisted on being up and dressed a few days ago, though he was still too weak to walk very far, much to his chagrin.

His injuries, though still bandaged, were mending fast, mainly thanks to Aragorn using his healing abilities when they were first inflicted and the gift of a robust constitution.

What troubled him most though was the loss of sensation in his sword arm, which hung limply by his side. Neither Aragorn nor the other healers knew what was causing the problem or if he would ever be able to wield a sword or even ride a spirited horse again.

He continued to refuse Aragorn's offers of Elven remedies, for having been brought up to associate powerful Elves with sorcery, he considered such matter as too dangerous for men to meddle with.

His sister had assured him they were quite safe and he concurred they probably were for women as they did not have to worry about their virility as men did. Had he not seen with his own eyes the Lady of the Golden wood and how her husband appeared in thrall to her? The fair Sorceress
had almost caused him and Gimli to come to blows!

Many of Eomer's men had now returned home, carrying messages to his Queen and his Marshals Elfhelm and Erkenbrand that they would have to govern in his place until he was fit to return, which could be not for some considerable time as the King of Rohan refused to even consider travelling until he could sit on a horse. The prospect of a Horse Lord returning to his lands in a wagon was too great a humiliation to contemplate.

Eowyn was sitting on the chair opposite her brother, vainly trying to improve his mood by haltingly reading an account of the Greatest Battles of Gondor to him and wondering if maybe she should have tried to find one about horse breeding instead.

Together with Aragorn and the senior Healers, she was one of the few prepared to tolerate Eomer's volatile moods, which had plagued him since his head injury. Both healers and servants alike had been reduced almost to tears by his behaviour.

Eowyn could see only the brother who had defended her fiercely when they had first come to Edoras as two friendless orphans under the care of a kindly yet often distracted royal Uncle and had continued as her protector ever since. The guilt gnawed at her relentlessly that her folly in writing that letter had brought both her husband and her brother so low.

Eomer had always been so strong and vigorous, his skills both on horseback and with the sword and spear, easily surpassing those of all his peers. It almost broke her heart to see him struggling to lift his useless arm, which had once been so strong.

Aragorn knocked and entered the room, closely followed by Faramir.

"Why have you brought my attacker here, Aragorn? " he asked with biting anger." Does he think to finish me off now? As if he hasn't done enough damage already by leaving me paralysed!"

" How dare you speak of my husband like that?" Eowyn snapped as she dropped the book and went to help support Faramir, who was now forced to accept help, for his legs grew unsteadier by the minute while his heart pounded as if trying to burst from his damaged chest.

"Peace, Eomer!" Aragorn said in a warning tone.

"I wish to apologise to you for the hurts I have caused you." Faramir said sincerely, trying un unsuccessfully to kneel. "I swear I meant only to defend myself and never intended you to suffer such injuries, although I take full blame for them and freely accept judgement at your hands! I will apologise again in public."

" No one is going to punish my Steward! He sought only to defend himself!" Aragorn interrupted in a tone so grim, that lesser men would have quailed.

"That is not all!" Eomer glowered unperturbed. "You dishonoured my sister as you made her lie with another! You did not attempt to deny it before we fought!"

Faramir flushed scarlet. "There was no impropriety. The King was near death and very cold, for us both to hold him close seemed to be the only way to save him."

Eomer turned to Aragorn. " It was you? You said nothing of this neither did Eowyn!"

It was Aragorn's turn to blush. "I did not know, I was only dimly aware that someone held me that night but thought it to be Faramir alone."
"I would gladly do the same for my injured brother but never would I be so base as to involve my wife and dishonour her thus!" Eomer snarled, "Whose idea was it to do such a thing? Did Eowyn choose freely?"

"I begged her to." Faramir replied.

Aragorn and Eowyn looked at him in bewilderment. It seemed almost as if he wanted Eomer to think badly of him and made no sense.

"I freely consented and there was no dishonour as I have kept trying to tell you these past days." Eowyn snapped. "I would not mention the King's name before as I had no desire to embarrass him. Whatever do you think of me, brother?"

"That I made a mistake in letting you marry this man! He must have mistreated you or you would not have written to me in such distress! Obviously you are too afraid of him to tell me the truth!"

"Faramir is a good husband who loves me and has never ill treated me!" Eowyn said indignantly. "We had some misunderstandings to begin with, but he always treated me with respect. As for my honour, none questioned it before you, brother, now half of Gondor must think I have none!"

Holding on to the chair with his good arm, Eomer slowly rose to his feet. "Lord Faramir, not only did you dishonour my sister, but you almost killed me and left Rohan without a King." he said. "For that I can never forgive you, attempting to kill a King is an offence punishable by death!"

It was Eowyn's turn to look uncomfortable but Aragorn gave her his most compassionate smile.

"Because my misguided sister seems to love you and Aragorn is my friend, I will not demand your life." Eomer continued, "But do not think that I can ever forgive you! I forbid you ever to enter the borders of Rohan for I do not wish to see you ever again so long as I live! If my sister wishes to visit me, she must leave you behind! I refuse to return to Gondor once I am well enough to leave while it houses this miscreant! My curse be upon you!"

Faramir would have collapsed had not Aragorn and Eowyn supported him.

"Why was I ever born to be the cause such misery? This is all my fault!" he whispered, "King Eomer, I accept your judgement on me."

"Eomer, remember it was you who started this fight and almost killed my Steward!" Aragorn remonstrated. "Faramir has said he is willing to make you a public apology and I expect the same of you!"

"Never! He almost killed me!" Eomer retorted. "Now leave me all you, am I not King? Must I call for my Guards?"

"Faramir has suffered a great deal too!" Eowyn remonstrated, "If he showed you his wounds, then maybe …"

"Please, no!" Faramir begged, looking very distressed.

"Get that good for nothing out of my sight before I have him thrown out!" Eomer raged," I cannot use my sword arm because of him!"

Aragorn bit his tongue, as this was not the right moment to remind Eomer that he was the High King with the ultimate authority. Getting Faramir away from his angry brother in law had to be his first priority, as well as avoiding further distressing the heavily pregnant Eowyn and preventing
Eomer from aggravating his wounds.

Together they made it through the door.

"Do you want to go and lie down again in my room?" Aragorn asked Faramir, who was pale and shaking visibly.

"No, I would go home if Eowyn still wants me there."

"Of course, I do, my Love!" Eowyn replied. "Do not worry about my brother, his anger will fade. He often speaks before he thinks and he is greatly distressed by his disability, for one such as he, it is a fate worse than death."

"I am sorry if I was the cause of any shame to you, Eowyn, I cannot remember the events of that night which so distress your brother." Aragorn said uncomfortably.

"There is nothing to remember. You were cold and in shock so Faramir and I kept you warm, that is all." Eowyn replied, "As for my brother, I have no desire to discuss the matter again with him! He seems to think I am no better than a whore!"

"I gravely wounded him. And I fear I did wrong you, Eowyn." Faramir said miserably.

"I was forgiven for far worse conduct." Eowyn replied, looking at Aragorn. "If only I had never written that letter!"

"Peace my friends!" Aragorn said, trying to soothe them. "All that matters now is that Faramir gets well! Eomer's judgement may well be clouded by the blow he took to this head. We can only wait and hope that he will soften in time."

He summoned the servants to carry Faramir home on a litter, where Eowyn directed them to the martial bedchamber where King then helped Eowyn put her husband to bed.

Faramir hardly said a word through the proceedings. He appeared to be in a state of shock and Aragorn mixed up a potion of hops and valerian to calm him and help him sleep.

"I am well." Faramir insisted as they fussed round him. Eventually Aragorn left, albeit reluctantly, leaving a supply of all the herbs Faramir needed with Eowyn and hoping once alone with his wife, Faramir might start to recover. After all, she had not given the order to arrest him, which had let to his serious injuries.

"I am sorry!" Faramir told Eowyn, "I understand if you wish to leave me and return to Rohan with your brother!"

"How could you say such a thing?" Eowyn replied, as she kissed him, noting sadly how he flinched away from her "I will hear no more of such foolish thoughts! Much as I love my brother I have no wish for him to come between us."

"I think it would be better if I slept in my dressing room as I might disturb you here." Faramir suggested.

"Indeed not, I need to be near you, so I can keep an eye on you!" Eowyn replied, "If you sleep in your dressing room, so do I!"

Faramir sighed and said no more, hoping that as it was a large bed, he would be far enough away from his wife so not to taint her with his shame.
Eowyn settled herself by her husband's bedside and cried quietly once he fell asleep. She loved him dearly, yet she also loved her brother and did not wish to be estranged from him. To think that her own folly should have left her so torn between those she loved the most!

"You look dreadful!" Arwen exclaimed, when Aragorn returned to their apartments.

"Faramir seems to hardly be able to bear the sight of me, Eomer refuses to forgive him and Eowyn is torn between them!" Aragorn sighed, "I just do not know what to do!"

"Go to bed!" Arwen ordered, noting with alarm how pale and haggard he had become. "You are exhausted and will be ill yourself if you do not take care!"

"I cannot, there is so much to do!" Aragorn protested, "Faramir and Eomer might need me and I have documents to deal with and the Council…"

Arwen threw his nightshirt at him. "We have other Healers in this city and Imrahil can deal with everything else once he returns tomorrow. Get into bed now!" she ordered, "Or do you want Ioreth and I to undress you as she is coming to see me today!"

Alarmed by her threat and too weary to protest, Aragorn obediently retired to his dressing room to change while Arwen sent to the kitchens for some broth, which she sat spooning into her husband's mouth once he was in bed.

He then fell asleep almost immediately. So great was his exhaustion that he slept for several days, only waking to eat and drink and answer nature's calls.

Arwen spent most of those days lying or sitting beside him while she nursed Eldarion and fretted over her husband's condition.

Prolonged healing sessions drained even her father, and Aragorn was a frail mortal, not an Elf. The King was also plagued by fearsome nightmares, which Arwen's touch alone could soothe.

When he finally had slept his fill, he was, much to her relief, fully restored in body, but she could tell his soul was still deeply troubled.

As soon as Aragorn was up and dressed, he immediately sent a message asking if Faramir would like to see him only for the servant to bring the reply that the Steward had no wish to trouble his Majesty.

Aragorn wept as his wife vainly tried to comfort him. "However am I to protect you and Eldarion as I could not even protect my Steward?" he wept, "I miss him so much! How he must hate me for having him arrested!"

"Give him time!" she counselled, "The hurts will fade and he will seek you out again. I am certain he will for he loves you too."

Aragorn tried to busy himself with matters of State and console himself with Arwen and Eldarion, but much as he adored them his mind kept wandering back to the friend he missed so much and remembering all they had shared in the past since Faramir was the first to hail him as King.

Eowyn came to visit intending to tell Aragorn how worried she was about Faramir who continued to shy away from her touch and hardly spoke to her. He was dragging himself out of bed each morning, only to shut himself in his study all day.

She had wanted to ask the King if he could tell her if Faramir's wounds were healing as he refused to let her see them and she assumed Aragorn was treating him when he saw his Steward on
Eowyn was horrified to see just how exhausted and haggard Aragorn looked. He seemed almost to have aged overnight which made her feel she could hardly burden him with her problems, as well as the dilemma of betraying the confidence between healer and patient, so she confined the conversation to women's matters such as how Arwen was recovering from the birth and her own pregnancy.

She avoided Aragorn after that as his obvious sorrow only emphasised her own guilt.

A/N

This story will be taking a short break before the next section as I have a special story planned for Midsummer, called "The White Tree". As time is passing in "Burden of Guilt", I thought the break would reflect that in real life. The events in "The White Tree" are maybe in Aragorn's mind as he ponders on the friendship with Faramir he is missing so much.

A big thank you for all your much appreciated comments.

"Divers Conversations " was not a misspelling of "diverse" .It is an old fashioned word, meaning "several" and is in the dictionary.

I feel like shaking my own characters too at times, but then they are all either, ill, depressed or crippled with guilt.

My reader who mentioned that Faramir is depressed is correct.

Aragorn has no idea that Faramir is worried about what Mahrod did or did not do. Faramir feels too ashamed to mention his fears.

I think Aragorn is already suffering enough with his guilt but who knows what I might do to him in future?

I promise to take care when any buses are passing.

Of course my stories are far from perfect and I do appreciate constructive criticism and suggestions, and have rewritten on occasion as result, but I do object to criticism over a sentence I never even wrote and am puzzled why people who so dislike the way I write read 27 chapters and don't seem to like anything in any of them, instead of looking for better stories to read of which there are plenty.
Four weeks later

It was now almost mid November and Aragorn was growing increasingly despondent.

Eomer's wounds had healed well and his broken ribs and skull had knitted but his sword arm hung limp and useless. He continued to blame Faramir for his misfortunes and became increasingly embittered as he struggled to learn to control his spirited mount, Firefoot one handed. Aragorn begged him to be cautious for a fall could have proved fatal while he was still recovering from his injuries, so he had still not been able to ride and he refused to return home by any other means than astride his warhorse.

Aragorn and Eowyn pleaded with him to try the Elven treatments but Eomer would have none of it and now was attended almost exclusively by Aedred to whom he had taken a liking.

Far worse though for the King was the continued estrangement between himself and his Steward. He sent messages almost every day asking to see him, but back always came the reply saying; " The Steward of Gondor thanks His Majesty for his concern but has no wish to trouble him", which Aragorn felt bound to accept given the wrong he had done him.

He had only seen Faramir a few times during the last weeks and those were always about official business and in the presence of others. Although Faramir was not well enough to attend the Council, he still insisted on having documents sent to him to work on.

He had noted that Faramir still looked far from well but if he preferred that Eowyn should tend his wounds, who could blame him?

Aragorn was broken hearted at the loss of his friend due to his own folly. Almost every time he closed his eyes he recalled the moment when he had ordered his Steward's arrest and the look in Faramir's eyes when he had been led away, blood dripping from his arm. That vision was always followed by the even more horrific memory of discovering Faramir being beaten almost to death.

Only the loving support of Arwen and delight in his infant son, combined with the extra workload of running Gondor without Faramir's help, kept him from crumbling under his burden of guilt.

What should have been the happiest time of his life, following the birth of the child he had longed for seventy years, was deeply overshadowed by the knowledge that he had all but destroyed his
closest and most loyal friend's life and the bond between them as well.

Almost every night he was plagued by nightmares in which he was holding Anduril and with it decapitating Faramir who begged vainly for mercy from which he would awake in a cold sweat. He was grateful to his infant son, whose hungry cries often roused him from his troubled sleep.

Eowyn often visited the Queen, but almost always when she knew Aragorn would be in Council meetings. She saw no improvement in Faramir's condition and was tormented by anxiety yet was loath to question the King. Obviously he cared very much about Faramir and she was well aware there was no finer healer to be found on Arda. As she had sent the letter which had led to her husband's injuries, she felt she could hardly complain about Aragorn's efforts to put right what her own folly had caused!

Arwen too was worried about Aragorn, as she perceived his increasing weariness and distress.

The King had found the duties of State almost overwhelming as Faramir was too ill to deal his usual share of the paperwork and despite Imrahil's help, he found most of his time was spent reading official documents. He had never quite realised before just how much he relied on his Steward.

The Council had also been especially demanding as some members, especially those who had served in Denethor's time were still demanding action against Rohan to avenge the attack on their Steward, demands which Aragorn staunchly resisted, despite their angry murmurings that the Stewardship and thus the honour of Gondor had been insulted.

That night, Aragorn was so exhausted; he had fallen asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow.

Arwen sang to him softly, smoothing his furrowed brow with her slender fingers to keep the nightmares at bay. Once satisfied he was resting peacefully, she tiptoed out of bed to assure herself all was well with Eldarion and then settled down to sleep beside her husband.

A few hours later loud banging and shouting outside their bedroom door startled the royal couple to sudden wakefulness.

"You cannot disturb his Majesty. It is two in the morning!" the guard outside the door protested.

"He will see me!" Arwen's keen Elven hearing recognised Eowyn's voice.

"It is Eowyn, something is wrong!" she exclaimed, climbing out of bed closely followed by her husband.

Donning his robe over his nightshirt, Aragorn opened the door of the chamber and was horrified to see a distraught looking Eowyn, being restrained by his Guards.

"Let the Lady Eowyn enter!" he ordered, dismayed at her obvious distress.

Eowyn would have collapsed had Aragorn's strong arms not caught her. Her blonde hair hung in disarray round her shoulders and she had obviously come in haste, as she appeared to be wearing only a nightgown with a cloak flung over it.

Aragorn noted with dismay that the formidable lady of Rohan looked exhausted, vulnerable and at a loss. Despite her advanced pregnancy, she appeared to have lost weight and her beautiful features were lined with worry.

Aragorn guided her to sit beside his wife on the bed who immediately drew her close in a
comforting embrace, while he lit the candles and poured a glass of Miruvor for their nocturnal visitor.

"Eowyn, whatever is wrong?" he asked anxiously. His eyes were full of concern as he held the glass to her lips.

"It's Faramir. I'm so worried!" Eowyn gasped, the words pouring from her in near incoherent haste, " He is saving such nightmares and I cannot wake him. He seems hardly able to breathe he is so distressed! I'm sorry to disturb you, but I thought you were the only one who could help him. He is in constant pain He won't let me see how his wounds are healing I am afraid for him; it is as if his heart is broken! I try to comfort him but he shies away from my touch even refusing me a good night kiss! It is worse even than when we were first married! He spends each and every day shut away in his study, refusing to come out. I had to plead with him to continue to share my bed but he sleeps as far away from me as he can. If you ever loved him or me, I beg you to come!"

Having finally poured out her troubles, Eowyn burst into tears. Arwen held her close, while Aragon soothingly rubbed the back of her neck.

"I am glad you come for me." Aragon said gently, moving away from Eowyn as she relaxed from his ministrations and going into his dressing room, leaving the door slightly ajar. "How often has he has been like this?" he enquired.

Eowyn sighed. " Almost every night that I've shared his chamber since he had the fight with my brother, "she replied. "I thought it would wear off but he grows worse rather than better and I am more and more afraid for him. I fear he may lose his mind as his father did! He hardly eats and his sleep is so troubled he can find no rest. He refuses to talk to me or to confide in anyone. Imrahil came to visit him more than once but Faramir claimed he was too tired for visitors each time. He has even lost interest in our child when before he was so happy at the prospect of becoming a father. He would lie in my arms, then in that shy way of his ask if I would place my hands on where it was moving." Sighing she settled back against Arwen. It was such a relief to finally tell her friends everything.

Aragorn emerged from the dressing room, fastening his breeches over his nightshirt. "Why did you not tell me this before?" he asked, his expression grave. "There is you and your child's welfare to consider too."

"I thought you knew much of it already. He told me he had business with you each day and I knew you were treating his injuries when you saw him. "Eowyn replied sounding totally bewildered.

"He has been sending his secretary, so I have not seen him for a while. I would have liked to but he made it very clear he had no desire to see me." Aragorn looked aghast as the realisation dawned.

At that moment Eldarion awoke and started crying.

"I am sorry but I will have to feed him." Arwen said, getting to her feet, giving Eowyn a final reassuring hug. "We have hardly seen Faramir these last weeks. I thought you were caring for him though. Aragorn has been so worried he has hardly slept."

"He is excused from the Council until he is well and has not sought me out." Aragorn said sadly. "It troubled me but I thought he might be angry with me over what had happened and who could blame him? I was giving him time to recover but I realise I was wrong not to insist on seeing him. I will come with you and see him now."
"Let us go quickly!" Eowyn begged, "He can hardly breathe and is so pale!"

"Stay with him as long as is needed." Arwen told her husband, as she settled herself back in bed, unlacing her nightgown in preparation to feed her child. "I am here if you need me, Eowyn."

Aragorn refused an escort as he accompanied Eowyn to the Steward's apartments. He blamed himself bitterly now for not following his instincts and insisting on tending his Steward personally but Faramir had been so adamant that his wife could care for him. The King had felt he needed time to recover from the injustice he had involuntarily done to him. Now it seemed that Faramir instead of gradually recovering might have become seriously ill due to his neglect!

TBC

A very big thank you for all your kind comments both for this story and "The White Tree" I am humbled and amazed by your interest.

All my stories are under the same pen name (Click on the link to see them) but I am aware of a story with a very similar title to my "Shadow and Thought" by another writer.

Faramir does indeed have far sight as he has prophetic dreams and knew Aragorn was King. The shared visions are my invention.

One of my readers is almost on the right track for a potential means of curing Faramir and another of you realises he is rejecting in order to avoid being rejected, a common trait amongst the severely depressed.

I assure you that Mahrod will be punished, I cannot yet say about Eowyn's child or if Faramir's fears about Mahrod are well founded or not but in time will be revealed.
Now Cracks a Noble Heart

Chapter Notes

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince:
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!- Shakespeare - Hamlet.5.2

They found Faramir was tossing restlessly in his vast bed, apparently trapped in some dark nightmare. The sweat poured from his brow and ran down his pale cheeks while he struggled desperately to breathe.

His eyelids twitched rapidly as he writhed and cried out. Most of what he said was unintelligible but Aragorn could make out occasional words, which sounded like "The King, Eowyn, must pay,betrayed, Mahrod, no!"

"Faramir, wake up!" Aragorn commanded.

There was no response. The King then gently shook his Steward but he remained unresponsive and locked in his dark dreams.

"Is he is like this every night?" Aragorn asked, lighting several more candles to add to the one already burning.

"Yes but this is the worse yet." Eowyn's voice trembled slightly as she replied.

"I think it would be best if I were to send him into a healing sleep for now and then examine him thoroughly tomorrow when he is awake," Aragorn told her, "He is obviously suffering both in mind and body."

He sat on the bed beside Faramir and placed one hand on his head, grasping one of the restless hands with the other. "Be at peace, sleep now!" he intoned firmly.

Almost immediately his Steward dropped into a deep sleep. Aragorn remained where he was, gently stroking the dark head, fearing that breaking the contact would allow the nightmares to resume.

Despite Aragorn's ministrations, Faramir continued to fight for breath despite now being in a deep and dreamless sleep. Alarmed, the King felt Faramir's pulse. He frowned when he discovered the speed at which it was racing.

"What is wrong?" Eowyn asked anxiously.

"I need to check his heart for his pulse is rather rapid." he replied, trying not to alarm her.
"I have tried to but he will not allow me to, " she replied bleakly, nodding her consent.

Aragorn pulled back the covers and unlaced Faramir's nightshirt then pressed his ear to the bared chest. A mounting sense of alarm seized him when he realised just quickly and erratically his Steward's heart was beating. He could also tell that Faramir's lungs were somewhat congested. If Eowyn had not come for him, he was doubtful her husband would have survived the night.

Swiftly, he started the massage the right side of Faramir's neck just underneath his jaw.

"What are you doing?" Eowyn gasped in concern.

"It is a technique Lord Elrond taught me to slow the heartbeat, " he explained, frowning in concentration as he worked. "This should not be happening! With the aid of the hawthorn berry infusions, his heart should have by now recovered from the beating!"

"Infusions? I thought you were giving him any he required. I did not know!"

Aragorn groaned inwardly, moving one hand to Faramir's chest to check what progress he was making. The heartbeat was gradually slowing and he held his hand above and concentrated, trying to strengthen the damaged organ but Faramir's will still resisted his healing powers.

"Have you some more pillows?" he asked Eowyn.

"Yes there are plenty," she replied handing him two, I sometimes need more when I have indigestion due to my pregnancy."

Carefully he slid the pillows under Faramir to help him breathe.

" I need to massage his chest now," he explained to Faramir's anxious wife, " I assume he has not taken his dandelion root tea either?"

"No, he has not. I swear I did not know I was supposed to give it him!" she protested vehemently.

"Peace Eowyn, I am not blaming you!" Aragorn soothed, pulling Faramir's nightshirt further open and gently yet firmly massaging his chest, hoping to loosen the congestion in his Steward's lungs and thereby ease him.

Having sent him into a deep sleep, he would not wake for hours to be given the hawthorn and dandelion mixture he badly needed. He decided to add some foxglove extract to the medicine, now Faramir's heart condition seemed to have become severe enough to warrant it.

He sighed deeply as his Steward's heart still raced and occasionally fluttered beneath his hands, though it was far better than a few moments ago and Aragorn felt Faramir was no longer in any immediate danger. He was now aware at just how thin Faramir had become as he could feel his ribs protruding just beneath his skin

Eventually he straightened and turned to Eowyn who was anxiously watching his every move.

"You should go and rest." he told her. " The worst is over now. You need to take care of yourself too. I will stay with Faramir as long as I am needed."

"I will lie down now if you will just make room for me!" she retorted, divesting herself of her cloak. Obviously some of her old spirit was returning now that she felt her husband was in good hands.

Aragorn, unable to suppress a smile, obligingly moved aside and turned his back while she
climbed awkwardly back in her bed, somewhat humbled that since he had gained her trust a few months before, she now gave it so freely. The Lady of Rohan was a law unto herself and cared nothing for convention.

Aragorn again pressed his ear to Faramir's chest and satisfied his treatment was working, continued massaging his chest until his breathing eased. He remained bending over his Steward, watching him anxiously.

"Take your boots off and stretch out beside him!" Eowyn ordered, "Otherwise your back will ache as much as mine tomorrow!"

"Be certain not to tell Eomer!" he warned with a wan smile.

"No doubt some 'helpful' servant will enlighten him, but he will have to learn to accept our friendship is entirely innocent!" she retorted, groaning as she tried to get comfortable.

"How are you feeling, Eowyn?" he asked gently, "Is everything well with the baby?"

"I just feel a little flustered by all this and my back aches badly," she replied, "The baby is kicking me vigorously so obviously it is well."

"I think I ought to check your pulse too," Aragorn told her, "Then I could ease your pain, if you will permit me to, though if I suspect anything is wrong, I shall send for Ioreth to examine you thoroughly."

"Very well." Eowyn held out her hand without protest. Her pulse was a little rapid yet she seemed amazingly resilient, considering all the upsets she was enduring. Aragorn then gently used his healing powers to ease her painful back through her nightgown.

"Thank you, that is much better!" Eowyn sighed. "You are so kind to us both!"

"I will see what Arwen can do to help you tomorrow," Aragorn promised, as he turned his attention to Faramir again. "I think she could ease you more than I can."

He gently re-laced the Steward's nightshirt before wearily stretching out on top of the covers.

After a few minutes elapsed, he clasped Faramir's hand to take his pulse again and to his surprise, Faramir's fingers twined around his though he remained deeply asleep.

He glanced across at Eowyn, who still awake, took her husband's hand with the same result.

"It seems when he is unconscious, he trusts us!" she said wryly. "He had learned to enjoy a loving touch before all this happened!"

"I know," the King replied, remembering how once Faramir had overcome his initial fears, he had craved the Elven massage and obviously enjoyed it, as well as freely showing him affection," I promise you, whatever it takes, I will restore him to health for all our sakes!" Aragorn's voice was low and fervent.

Soothed by his words, almost immediately Eowyn fell asleep.

The King stayed by Faramir's side until dawn, only when finally convinced his Steward was sleeping peacefully and breathing without difficulty, did he creep away to snatch a few hours rest.

Aragorn told Arwen all that had happened the next morning over breakfast. She listened sympathetically, and then insisted that he rest for a few hours before he returned to the Steward's
apartments just after the midday meal.

The King wore no mark of office and doffed his heavy outer tunic on arrival, wishing to appear as informal as possible. Eowyn still looking pale and agitated greeted him.

"He is working in his study as usual," she informed him, "He claims he was just having bad dreams last night and I am making a fuss about nothing!"

Aragorn knocked; only for Faramir's voice to bid him go away.

Ignoring the request, he turned the knob and on finding it unlocked, went inside.

Eowyn, determined to keep an eye on her husband, followed him into the study and settled herself on the couch, trying to find some relief from her backache, which was proving a curse of the latter stages of her pregnancy.

Faramir occupied the corner of the room, sitting on a chair in front of a table littered with paperwork.

The Steward rose to his feet as soon as the King entered.

"My Lord King, I am honoured by your presence."

Faramir bowed and Aragorn's keen senses noted the heartrendingly formal language for a private occasion, his stiff movements and that his whole demeanour was that of a sick man in considerable pain. His eyes were dull and once glossy black hair was now limp with white streaks visible at the temples.

"I have come to see how you are faring, my friend." Aragorn said gently, looking directly at Faramir.

The Steward lowered his eyes before replying "I am well, my lord. Last night was but an evil dream. Eowyn should not have troubled your majesty."

"My eyes tell me otherwise, your wounds pain you still?" It sounded more like a statement than a question. "I am troubled about your heart too, my friend."

"I am well, my lord. There is no need for concern. Now if I may be excused, I have much work to lady will offer you some refreshment." Faramir turned back to the mountain of paperwork.

"I should like to see your wounds for myself and examine your heart while I am here." Aragorn persisted.

"My wife has cared for me well." Faramir said evasively, not meeting the King's eyes.

Eowyn struggled to her feet, rubbing her back as she slid from the couch.

"You have never shown me your hurts and I thought until last night that Aragorn was caring for you," she said sternly. "Enough of this foolishness; take off your clothes this instant and let us see!"

"I would rather not." Faramir replied, crossing his arms defensively. Even that simple movement made him flinch.

"Please, Faramir, I only want to look. I will not hurt you." Aragorn said, gently approaching Faramir.
"Do not touch me, I beg of you, my lord!" Faramir pleaded, backing away.

Aragorn raised his hands soothingly as if trying to calm a frightened horse. "Then let us talk, at least, my friend," he said, "You can just pull your clothing aside, there is no need to remove it. I do not want you to feel uncomfortable."

"This is absurd!" Eowyn interrupted, her hot temper rising rapidly. "You are acting like some shy maiden, not a soldier and lord of Gondor! Command him to disrobe, Aragorn, as he would not disobey a direct order from you!"

Aragorn shot her a warning look, fearful what any agitation could do to Faramir's weakened heart. He knew how much she loved him but the depth of that love, combined with anxiety and her condition was making her act in a way that was far from helpful.

Faramir was now backed into a corner. He was paler than ever and constantly wiped his brow.

Sliding to his knees and beseechingly held out his hands.

"My lord, I beg of you, let me be! I am so weary of poking and prodding and people staring at my body as if I were some freak of nature!"

Aragorn knelt too. "How can I not want to help you, my friend when it is so obvious you are suffering?" he asked, his eyes full of compassion. He reached out to grasp Faramir's hands.

"My Lord must not kneel to a dishonoured traitor!" Faramir protested, "I beg you not to defile yourself by touching me!" What little colour he had left suddenly drained from his features and he slid to the ground, lying motionless at Aragorn's feet.

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you to all my readers for your much appreciated interest and kind comments.

Some of you are very near guessing what might happen next!

In my stories Aragorn has given up pipeweed to please Arwen and the Elven healing only works on a willing recipient.

Modern studies have shown that Chicken Broth does help to fight infection!
Filled with alarm, Aragorn hastily bent over the prone form of his Steward and reaching under his tunic, felt his heartbeat. Like the previous night it was far too rapid and again he massaged under his jaw until it slowed somewhat.

"What's wrong with him? What have I done?" Eowyn asked in horror, bending over the prone form of her husband, "Is it his heart?"

"I believe he has fainted. I do not think it is anything more serious, though his weakened heart may be to blame as it still beats too rapidly." the King told Eowyn, trying to reassure her. "Do not kneel on the floor in your condition, I beg you! I will move him to the some blankets, he needs keeping warm!"

He lifted Faramir and carried him over to the couch noting how alarmingly light he felt. Two months ago, he had been difficult to lift unaided but now he seemed to weigh hardly anything.

The servants brought blankets and built up the fire as Eowyn frantically issued instructions.

Eowyn moved back to her unconscious husband's side. "At least we can look at his wounds now. Help me undress him!"

Aragorn sighed, he hated going against Faramir's wishes, especially as he felt responsible for his current plight, but he could not let his friend fade before his eyes.

"Perhaps someone from the Houses of Healing should attend him in this case?" he suggested. "He made it very clear that he objects to me touching him."

Eowyn shook her head vehemently. "No, you are the only one skilled enough to help him! He needs you, whatever he might say, remember how he clutched at your hand last night?"

"He has little cause to trust me." Aragorn said sadly as he helped Eowyn lift Faramir's tunic over his head.

"The same could be said of me." Eowyn replied. "If only I had never written that letter or remembered to destroy it! We all failed him!"

Undressing Faramir was far from easy as he was a dead weight and was wearing both his tunic and shirt tightly laced.

Finally they succeeded in unlacing the shirt and eased it over his head. Eowyn gave a low cry
while Aragorn gasped in horror once Faramir's hurts were finally revealed.

Although the stripes on his back had closed they still looked livid and had healed badly as had the sword cuts across his side and chest.

Worst though was where Eomer's sword had sliced into his arm as the scar tissue looked inflamed and ugly, while the muscle in the upper arm had started to waste away.

Only the bruises had faded, though bluish tinged patches remained and the uncovered part of his belly was still distended and blotched in places.

The Steward had never carried much flesh but now was little more than skin and bone, each rib clearly visible. It appeared that nothing had been done to tend the wounds since the last time Aragorn had applied salves and the neglect was having disastrous consequences.

"Why?" Aragorn gasped. "He told me that you would care for him."

He could have wept at the pitiful sight before him as he remembered the day they went swimming. How he had rejoiced then that Faramir looked so well and happy! Now he was so frail, ill nourished and covered in scars that he was hardly recognisable as the same young man.

"And so I would gladly, but I thought you were tending his wounds. I thought you treated him when he saw you about the paperwork he deals with until last night." Eowyn too was near tears. "Little wonder he would not take off his shirt as he knew what we would uncover!"

"Obviously he does not want to heal, but why?" Aragorn's sensitive fingers were already probing the damaged arm muscle. "I tried to heal him weeks ago but felt that somehow he was resisting me. I put it down to him feeling angry with me."

"He doesn't blame you. You must help him!" Eowyn pleaded. "You have skills that I do not. You must find out what ails him!"

Aragorn pressed his ear to Faramir's chest and frowned again at his feeble and erratic heartbeat. Such damage was not uncommon after a brutal beating but his heart should have started to recover from it by now.

Obviously the events of last night were far from an isolated incident. It made Aragorn's task all the harder in treating his reluctant patient as any agitation could prove fatal while his heart was so weak.

Although still apparently unconscious, Faramir shivered and the King swathed him in blankets, while trying to decide what he should do next.

Eowyn started to remove her husband's breeches but Aragorn shook his head. "The bruising was fading when I last saw it." he said. "There is little point in distressing him further and it could further damage his heart. Just loosen his belt for now so I can see. I need to examine him more thoroughly when he is awake and can tell me where the pain is worst." He pulled the clothing aside to examine the fading bruises, before gently replacing it again.

Just then there was knock on the door and a servant announced.

"The Queen is here, my Lord!"

"Tell her to come in!" Eowyn bade her friend enter, while Aragorn hastily pulled the blankets up to Faramir's chin.
Arwen hurriedly joined the group clustered round the couch.

"Estel told me what happened last night so I came to see if I could be of any assistance, "the Queen announced, placing a comforting arm around Eowyn."Eldarion is sleeping in the care of his nanny."

Aragorn smiled at his wife for a moment before indicating with his eyes that he needed her help.

"What has happened to Faramir?" Arwen enquired anxiously.

"He appears to have fainted and I am also concerned about his heart still. His injuries are not healing well," her husband told her, uncovering Faramir's arm to show her. "He was very distressed at the prospect of showing me his wounds and collapsed."

Arwen bent over Faramir and laid a hand on his brow. She stood for a moment, concentrating, then straightened up, looking grave.

"His body cannot heal because his mind is deeply troubled," she said. "I fear he will break and descend into darkness if we cannot find a way to prevent it!"

"If he would permit me, I believe I could heal his body but only if his spirit is calmed." Aragorn said sadly.

"Oh, no, it is even worse than I feared!" Eowyn looked desolate. Her back now ached worse than ever and her head was beginning to throb too.

"I am sure, Estel will find some means of helping him." Arwen said reassuringly. "And you look in need of help too, my friend, come with me and let me care for you a while. Faramir will be safe with my husband."

"I ought to stay with him!" Eowyn protested.

"Even without Estel having told me, I can see you are in pain! " Arwen said firmly, taking Eowyn's arm and steering her towards the door, "You have your unborn child that you must consider too. Come with me and leave the men alone for awhile!"

"Very well, maybe you are right!" Eowyn freed herself and pressed a tender kiss on Faramir's pallid lips, before reluctantly allowing herself to be led to the Queen's apartments.

Aragorn sighed; relieved that Arwen had removed the distressed Eowyn from the scene but unsure if Faramir would even talk to him let alone allow him to examine and treat him properly.

As Faramir tensed as he examined the wounds, Aragorn suspected that his Steward was awake but too distressed to open his eyes. From the way Faramir flinched at the contact; it seemed obvious that after all that had happened, Faramir found his touch highly distasteful.

He could feel the Steward's will resisting his healing powers, so there seemed to be little he could do apart from applying salves and administering herbal remedies.

"Please, no!" Faramir whispered though bluish tinged lips. He slowly opened his eyes and stared at Aragorn with wild agitation.

Aragorn removed his hand.

"Why not?" he asked gently. "It must be causing you a great deal of pain. I seek only to ease your pain."
"I do not ask to be healed." Faramir said numbly. "I can still hold a pen and carry out my duties at present. I desire nothing else, my Lord."

His obvious distress combined with the stiff formality that Aragorn had fought long and hard to make him shed in private torn the King's heart. He greatly feared Arwen was right and his Steward would be lost to him if the torments that so obviously plagued his soul were not released.

Faramir's fear of his presence reminded him of when they first met; though then there had been hope that they might learn to be comfortable with one another. Sighing again, he settled himself on the couch beside his Steward.

"I understand your anger towards me," he said contritely, feeling Faramir would have every right to hate him now.

"No, my King, you never gave me cause." Faramir replied listlessly.

The Steward was so tense; he looked as if he could snap at the slightest movement. His breath came in shallow ragged gasps.

"Come!" he said, raising Faramir to a sitting position and drawing him close, unable any longer to resist the impulse to comfort him. He held him, as lovingly as he had cradled his infant son earlier that day but it was far easier to calm a crying babe than a despairing man.

For a few brief moments Faramir allowed himself to be held in those strong yet caring arms. His features relaxed as he buried his head against Aragorn's broad shoulder. He felt loved and secure; relishing the comfort he had denied himself so long.

Then the image of Mahrod groping at him and pulling at his clothing before he fainted returned. This touch was so very different but how could he allow one so pure and noble as Aragorn be tainted by one such as he?

The haunted look returned to his eyes and he pulled away. Sighing, the King laid him back against the cushions on the couch, his eyes full of pain that Faramir obviously found his touch so loathsome.

At last he dared risk taking up a pot of healing salve containing hypericum and calendula. "May I?" he asked and began to rub the salve in the stripes disfiguring his Steward's back in his most detached manner, devoid of any Elven techniques, deliberately being as impersonal as he could. Faramir recoiled still further as the touch could have been that of any gentle fingered Healer.

"I do not wish you to touch me!" he protested after enduring the ministrations with weary resignation for a few minutes.

"Why not?" Aragorn asked very gently. "I am treating you as any healer would though I understand your feelings towards me, yet maybe I can make amends somehow by tending your hurts? If something else burdens your heart, I would have you tell me."

For a moment Faramir hesitated, sorely tempted to tell Aragorn everything. His suspicions of what had happened while he was unconscious in prison and the constant nightmares that tormented him every time he closed his eyes. But how could he confess to such dishonour? Was it not shame enough to have almost killed Eomer and brought Gondor to the brink of war?

Aragorn waited patiently, all the while applying the salve. He had just started on Faramir's wounded arm when Faramir finally spoke.

TBC
A very big thank you to all my readers for your interest and kind reviews. To my amazement I have almost reached the 600 mark! Here is a quick update to show my appreciation.

You are right to be concerned about Eowyn. She is about eight months pregnant so the baby is not yet due.
Chapter Notes

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O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
Shakespeare- Hamlet 3.1

The Steward took a deep breath." I am afraid that…" He swallowed hard wondering how to approach such a shameful subject.

Not for the first time, he wondered if there were any way in what really happened could be discovered but the very thought of such a humiliating examination was beyond endurance.

Then he thought of how lovingly the King had held him a few moments ago. After all the crimes he had committed, it bewildered him that he still would show him affection. But if Aragorn knew everything he would surely shrink from him in disgust, unable any longer to maintain his façade of trying to be kind such a tainted creature as he.

He would always treasure that memory now of being held for the last time by a loving father figure, as he could never allow it to happen again. He had been shamefully weak to accept the comfort he so craved.

"What are you afraid of?" Aragorn prompted gently, his eyes full of compassion.

"That if my arm should ever heal I might use it to harm someone again," Faramir replied, compelled by the King's insistence to voice at least one of his fears aloud. The other could never be spoken of for there was Eowyn to consider as well. "I am afraid that I will only hurt someone else if I ever wield a sword again!" Faramir confided, "It is better that my arm should not heal!"

"You might need to defend yourself again." Aragorn said firmly, continuing to apply the salve, "Gondor might again have need of your sword arm too!"

"I would rather be struck down than take such a risk again." Faramir replied firmly, knowing it was time to tell Aragorn of the decision he had reached. "I know I should be ready to wield a sword to defend you as your Steward, so I beg your Majesty's leave to render up my office and retire from public life. I am a liability as Eomer is crippled for life and will never forgive me and Rohan is Gondor's most valuable ally."

Aragorn put down the pot of salve and gripped Faramir's cold hands. "Faramir, my friend, I beg you to reconsider. What should I do without you, what should Gondor do? Your family have served well as Stewards for over a thousand years!"
"I, the last of the Hurins have failed as my father always said I would!" the Steward replied bleakly.

The King cupped Faramir's face and raised his head. "Faramir, my friend, look at me, do not turn away!" he said earnestly. "You have never let me down, you were the victim in all this, not the aggressor."

"There could still be war with Rohan and Eowyn is torn between Eomer and myself. I see it affecting her health." Faramir said mournfully, trying to break free. "It is my fault that Eowyn was so unhappy that she felt the need to write to her brother to complain!"

"I love Eomer as my friend, but am not blind to his faults. I am certain that deep down he knows this was mostly his fault but is too stubborn to admit it." Aragorn said firmly "Eowyn understands that too and is loyal to you. You both had problems early in your marriage but that is hardly a crime, as you never ill-treated your wife. War is most unlikely, as Eomer would have to fight me, his sworn friend!"

"I no longer wish to be your Steward. Does Your Majesty accept my resignation," Faramir persisted.

"This is not the time to make such a decision we will discuss it again when you are recovered and after your child is born. A son might make you think differently," Aragorn replied firmly. "You suffered a dreadful ordeal in prison that even the lowliest of my subjects should never have had to endure and it will take time for you to heal. But I promise you, eventually the pain will fade."

Faramir looked unconvinced, and more distressed than ever at the mention of his time in prison.

"Is there anything else that troubles you? I would have you tell me." Aragorn said gently. It seemed Faramir was repressing the understandable anger he must feel against him. If only he would just strike him as Eowyn had done! It would be well worth the pain to see Faramir shed this dreadful lethargy.

"I thought I heard the Queen's voice. When did she come in?" was all Faramir could think of asking.

"Soon after you fainted. We had undressed you but you were swathed in blankets by then. She is looking after Eowyn now."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Aragorn struggled to suppress a smile that his suspicious were correct as to when Faramir came round and that he should be so troubled at the prospect of a two thousand year old Elf seeing him shirtless, though it would be considered insulting to a lady given the custom of Gondor.

"She did not touch me?" Faramir sounded agitated.

"Why would that trouble you?" Aragorn was perplexed, for Arwen was entirely innocent of any part in Faramir's ordeal unlike Eowyn and himself.

"I might still have some contagion from the prison." Faramir mumbled.

"That is impossible but I understand how your ordeal must haunt you.I am truly sorry you had to endure all these distressing experiences, my friend." Aragorn said with great sincerity as he grasped his Steward's hands again. "Your Uncle and I were glad to tend you and would do so again, yet it was one of the hardest tasks I ever faced. Can you ever forgive me for my thoughtlessness?"
"You did what you must as King. It is I who must crave pardon." Faramir replied, tensing as if he wanted to pull away.

His eyes held such great depths of pain and Aragorn feared unless he could think of some remedy his Steward's mind would give way completely.

"No one here holds anything against you, Faramir. There is nothing for me to forgive." Aragorn said firmly. "I know Eowyn understands too as she has made her own mistakes in the past. You shall put all this behind you eventually, when you are in less pain. I shall come daily to ease your hurts and you can have the Elven remedy for your scars. Even Eomer will come to his senses soon, I am certain, stubborn though he is and you will become closer than you were before this happened."

"He will never forgive me and the Elven remedy would be wasted!" Faramir said totally unconvinced by Aragorn's kind words. "You healed all my scars but it seems I cannot go for long without being flogged again!"

"And the man who did it will pay as dearly at his trial as if I had felt the lash myself!" Aragorn promised." I shall do all I can to make things right, you have my word as your friend and as your King!"

"I know you mean well but I am so weary!" Faramir whispered. "I cannot serve you as I ought as I am not the man you believed me to be. My father was right after all!"

"Stop speaking like this!" Aragorn said firmly, "What would your brother say to see you, thus? He died, believing it was to help create a better world, one in which you could live in peace and happiness!"

"I wish I had died with him." was Faramir's only reply, leaving even Aragorn at a loss for words in the face of such despair.

The King was filled with both pity and a growing sense of alarm. Faramir's family seemed to have a predisposition towards madness as Boromir was driven mad by the ring while Denethor had succumbed to the palantir.

Was Faramir about to suffer the same fate from the burden of his own conscience? The situation was made worse by the fact that everyone close to him, was also close to Eomer in some way too.

He looked again at the skeletal frame and blue tinged complexion of his Steward and feared he might not even live long enough for his mental stability to cause concern.

Aragorn suspected that years of being told he was unworthy and second best, were finally taking their toll. He felt exasperated both at Faramir's despair and Eomer's stubbornness, but the young King of Rohan was obdurate and probably felt that to forgive his brother in law and accept Elven remedies would seem like weakness.

"Can you walk if I aid you to bed?" Aragorn said, finally at a loss for anything else to suggest. He could only hope that Faramir would think over what he said once left alone."I will tend you again tomorrow."

Faramir nodded and managed to struggle to his feet. Slowly and painfully, he pulled his shirt over his head, refusing Aragorn's offer of help.

Aragorn escorted to his bedchamber and mixed up the medicinal herbs he needed while Faramir prepared for bed, undressing under his nightshirt.
"Drink this!" he told him, handing him the cup once he was settled in bed.

"No, thank you," Faramir said firmly but politely.

Aragorn finally lost patience with him. "As your King, I order you to drink it! It should not taste too bad!" he said in a stern tone, which Faramir dared not disobey.

Obediently, Faramir drained the cup, gazing reproachfully at the King. Aragorn sighed; hating himself and concerned he was abusing his authority over a totally broken man. Yet he despaired for his life if nothing were done to strengthen his heart and even with the help of the hawthorn and foxglove, he could still die.

Aragorn brushed his Steward's eyelids with his fingertips, sending him into a light healing sleep.

The lines of strain eased from his face in sleep but he still looked very frail and vulnerable.

Aragorn stood looking at him sadly remembering all the times they had shared both good and bad over the last two and a half years, He yearned to see Faramir contented and happy, eagerly awaiting the birth of his first child, using his formidable diplomatic and debating skills and most of all to see him healthy and relaxed, not shying away from his loved ones.

Then selfishly, he supposed, he wanted to enjoy Faramir's friendship again, though he supposed that was too much to hope for; given the way Faramir shrunk away from his touch and addressed him with such cold formality.

He so missed enjoying their shared interests together, all the lively discussions and just enjoying the loving brotherly companionship of one so intelligent and sweet natured. He needed Faramir as someone who would put rank aside, call him to task when needed and engage him in mock fights and teasing which eased the burden of kingship.

An anxious frown disfiguring his noble features, Aragorn went in search of his wife and Eowyn. There was much to discuss if Faramir were to be saved and he was determined that he would be.

He was certain that his Steward had not yet told him everything that troubled him nor did he believe the reassurances he had given him. Only once both these obstacles were overcome would he have any hope of recovery.

An idea was forming in his mind but first he must discuss it with Arwen and Eowyn. Then there was also the problem of getting Faramir to agree to the 'gift' he had in mind. If only he would though, they could both maybe find peace.

Arwen was enjoying far greater success in getting Eowyn to accept her help, than her husband was enjoying with Faramir.

As soon as they reached her apartments, she instructed her servants to fill the sunken bath with warm water, to which she added a selection of herbs, left over from her own pregnancy and known to the Elves to be beneficial to mothers to be.

"That should begin to ease your aching back," she told Eowyn. "Then when you have bathed you can experience Elven massage from the hands of an Elf! I know you prefer the remedies of your own people, but let me use mine on you today!"

"That sounds very tempting." Eowyn smiled wanly. "But should I not be with Faramir?"

"You had hardly any sleep last night and both Estel and I are concerned about you as we can see you are in pain. Let Estel try to help your husband!" Arwen told her firmly. "You are too near
your time not to take care of yourself! Now can you get in the bath by yourself or would you like me to help you?"

"I usually can manage but not while my back aches so!" Eowyn replied, readily accepting the Queen's assistance, much to her surprise. Eowyn was fiercely independent and rarely accepted any offer of help.

Arwen could have summoned her maids it seemed better to give her personal attention to a friend in need.

Eldarion was safely in the nursery with his nursemaid so she could give her attention to Eowyn with a clear conscience.

Eowyn had already shed all her clothing, somewhat to Arwen's amusement. Unlike the ladies of Gondor, some of whom even bathed in their shifts if others were present, Eowyn had no inhibitions at all and was perfectly content for Arwen to aid her into the bath and then lave her back and shoulders.

To the Queen's relief, Eowyn's haggardness seemed confined to her face, as her body appeared healthy and well nourished. It seemed she was sensible enough not to let her fears for husband endanger her or the unborn child.

Once the water cooled, Eowyn reluctantly left the bath and clad in a towel, went with Arwen to the adjoining bedchamber, where the Queen covered the bed with towels and assorted jars of remedies for tight skin, soreness and stretch marks.

A cheerful fire blazed in the grate and the entire room radiated an air of warmth and comfort much like the Queen herself.

Eowyn was eager to experience them all after having used them on her friend, though she had stuck to Rohirric treatments until today.

"I understand that the oil of primroses can ease the skin, but cactus juice?" She marvelled anew at the depth of Elven knowledge while Arwen sat beside her and applied the mixtures. The tightness across her belly was already easing.

"The Elves have had thousands of years to experiment with plants and learn their properties." Arwen explained. "I hope you will remember our lore and tell your children. Our time here has ended and we must try to pass on our knowledge.

"I will." Eowyn promised, rolling on to her side so Arwen could ease her aching back. She felt an almost indescribable sensation peace, tenderness and warmth as the pain ebbed away.

"Whatever is that?" she asked, puzzled.

"Elven massage. You are familiar with it, I believe." There was suppressed laughter in the Queen's voice.

"Aragorn did tell me you were the expert. I thought he was skilled but compared with you he…I did not know you were a healer…"Eowyn's voice drifted off as she fell into a deep state of relaxation.

"The more skilled you are, the more uses the massage has." Arwen explained, "It can be used for bonding, healing, relaxation, a diagnostic technique for skilled healers or even as a beauty treatment! I have had over two thousand years to perfect the techniques." The Queen grinned,
continuing until Eowyn was sound asleep.

TBC

A very big thank you for all your very kind and much appreciated reviews. I love reading your comments and some of you are very perceptive indeed. I am thrilled that I am able to make you feel for the characters. I am updating quickly to show my appreciation.

Faramir does indeed feel he is too worthless to bother healing; such is his state of depression.

I expect many of you want to throw something at Faramir (and at me) after this chapter but I hope as the plot progresses you will understand why I am writing it this way. One of my reasons is a desire to involve Arwen and Eowyn more.

I doubt anyone in Middle Earth would know about the dangers of alcohol to mothers to be. Fortunately, Aragorn only gave Eowyn a small amount of miruvor.
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She then placed a hand on her friend’s forehead and sat for a few moments in deep concentration. She could sense Eowyn's soul was troubled but unlike Faramir her life force was strong and she was not on the brink of falling into darkness. Moving her hand down to Eowyn's belly, she sensed the life essence of her unborn child was as strong as that of its mother's.

Although they would both need a great deal of love and support, which was willing to freely provide, she felt her friend was in no great danger. When Aragorn had returned to her bed just after dawn he had confided his fears, so at least she could now offer him some reassurance about Eowyn.

Rising to her feet, Arwen tucked a luxurious fur wrap tenderly around Eowyn and then went to collect Eldarion from his Nurse. She found it hard to be apart from her beautiful son for more than a few minutes.

He was just so perfect and the exact image of his father, the Queen was convinced; although Aragorn always insisted he was the image of her!

Settling herself in a comfortable chair and gently rocking her son in her arms, Arwen waited for her husband to return.

Eldarion felt hungry after an hour or so and started to cry to be fed, so Eowyn awoke to the comfortable image of the Queen sitting on the rocking chair suckling her child.

A roaring fire blazed in the hearth and the walls were lined with tapestries which Arwen had brought from Rivendell, giving the room an unusually cosy feel setting it apart from others within the cold stone walls of the Citadel.

"Did he wake you? I am sorry." Arwen said, smiling kindly at her friend.

"Don't worry, I didn't mean to fall asleep. I was just going to close my eyes!" Eowyn replied as she sat up and yawned.

"I thought you might be comfortable in one the robes I would wear while I was expecting Eldarion here on the bed for you. Aragorn could return at any time now." Arwen said, gesturing towards a comfortable looking silken garment. "Would you like some raspberry tea? I had my maid bring some up."

"Thank you." Eowyn slipped on the robe and sat on top of the bed drinking the tea, her mind soon returning to her troubles now she was awake. Not only was she very worried about Faramir, but
his inability to forgive himself brought back memories of her own conduct a few months before. How easily and readily she had accepted Aragorn's forgiveness, which maybe was unmerited.

"You should not treat me with such kindness, Arwen!" she blurted out. "I do not deserve it!"

"Why not?" Arwen asked gently, placidly shifting Eldarion to her other breast.

"I once thought about killing your husband as I wrongly believed he connived to force Faramir to marry me, I had his sword in my hand! And I spent a night together with Faramir holding him in my arms, that is one reason Eomer is so angry with him!" Eowyn's confession came out as an outspoken, albeit somewhat jumbled muddle.

"I know. Estel told me." The Queen said equally placidly, turning momentarily away from her child to look Eowyn in the eye. Her gaze was compassionate and totally devoid of either anger or horror.

"You don't hate me for it?"

"Estel forgave you and so do I," Arwen said quietly. "We all make mistakes at times. I admit I would find it hard to forgive, if you had killed my husband as the grief would most likely have killed me too! Yet I cannot deny I have wanted to kill him myself on occasion, especially when I was in labour! As for holding him, Estel cannot even remember the incident and I would gladly do the same for you or Faramir if the need arose, so put your mind at ease!"

Eowyn rose from the bed to kiss her friend warmly.

"I am blessed indeed to have you and Aragorn as my friends!" she said.

"We feel the same about you and Faramir. Arwen smiled, returning the kiss. Eowyn had changed a great deal since her return from the Hunting Lodge and had become much more open and affectionate in her manner with her, much as Faramir had done with Aragorn before the fight which appeared to have destroyed him. "Now all we need is a cure for your husband!" Arwen continued," He needs to put the past behind him like you have learned to do."

"Aragorn made me promise to talk about anything that troubled me," Eowyn confided.

"And that was sound advice!" Arwen replied, "I only wish you had confided in me when you were so unhappy!"

"I thought I was the only one who saw how 'bad' Aragorn was and everyone else was wrong!" Eowyn said ruefully, "I made a dreadful mistake as he is the noblest and kindest of men!"

"It took me a while to love him too!" Arwen confided, "He fell in love with me at first sight and although I had a foreshadowing of my future, I saw only a love struck youth whom I tried to be kind to. It was not until we met again years later that I realised how much I loved him!"

They sat in companionable silence both lost in memories until a knock on the door roused them from their reverie.

"Arwen, Eowyn! May I come in?" Aragorn called.

"Come in! We are waiting for you." Arwen called.

He entered and she was immediately struck by how weary and dispirited he looked.

"How is Faramir?" Eowyn asked anxiously.
Aragorn shook his head sadly. "Not well, I fear. He is sleeping now and I left a servant is with him. He will neither forgive himself nor believe that I that I do not blame him for what happened. He is convinced he let me down and now wants to resign his Office, though I told him I would not allow it. I have tried treating him, but nothing seems to work as his will resists mine and prevents the remedies from working! He will not heal until his troubled spirit allows it and will not even permit me to examine him thoroughly. All I could do was apply a salve and give him some herbs to take. My heart cannot heal either as I brought these woes upon him!"

The King slumped dejectedly in a chair.

"Eomer's anger troubles his spirit too." he added, "Maybe if he forgave him it would ease him so that he could heal. Then why does he keep saying that he is tainted and no one must touch him? He acts as if he carries some dire contagion!"

Eowyn shook her head." I have no idea either. I can only assume that he considers that injuring my bother has in some way stained him given that Eomer is a King though it baffles me why he is so horrified if either of us try to touch him."

"He seemed horrified at the notion of you touching him either, Arwen." Aragorn commented, "It is very strange. It is almost as if …"

"If what?" Eowyn asked.

"He is afraid of being shown affection since he wounded Eomer." Aragorn concluded rather lamely, dismissing the suspicion in his mind almost as soon as it arose. There was no way Faramir could know of the examination he had carried out while he was unconscious and it was far too delicate a subject to burden him with in his current state of distress. nor was it a suitable topic to discuss with a heavily pregnant woman.

Arwen placed a now sleeping Eldarion in his cradle and placed a comforting arm round her husband.

"My brother would soften if he saw Faramir's wounds." Eowyn said thoughtfully, "If he but knew what cruelties had been inflicted upon him, he would be horrified!"

"That is true." Aragorn conceded, "But as Eomer refuses to see Faramir and Faramir refuses even to let me see his wounds as his healer without great difficulty."

"There must be something we haven't tried!" Eowyn fretted, "What about sending him away to somewhere more peaceful?"

"Maybe that would help if one of us could go with him," Aragorn replied, "But that is impossible at present with your condition and all the added cares of state I have to deal with at the moment. Imrahil is still preoccupied with a dispute over land, which needs his diplomatic expertise. It would be both highly dangerous and cruel to send him anywhere alone as he would feel more isolated and rejected than ever. Also with his heart condition he is far too weak to travel.

"What about herbal potions?" Arwen asked.

"He is resisting healing, so they will do little good, even when I order him to swallow them. Hypericin might lift his mood but would he take it, as he seems to want to suffer? There is one thing though I believe would help him but it is a big step to take."

"You should try it." Arwen said, a note of eagerness creeping into her voice.

"I had thought of gifting it to him long before this happened but I hesitated wondering if it were
fair to you to share something so emotionally intimate." Aragorn said doubtfully. "Yet now it seems to be the only possible way of helping him."

"Faramir is a gentleman, he knows where not to pry. Remember, I love him too, I know not as deeply as you do, but it pains me greatly to see him thus."

"Whatever are you talking about?" Eowyn interrupted.

"Thought Bonding," Aragorn replied.

"Whatever is that?"

"It is the greatest gift of spiritual love that both our people and the Eldar can share." Aragorn explained, "Though it is rarer in these times as the blood of Numenor is almost spent though it used to be the usual way a close friendship was cemented, an engagement was celebrated, or a coming of age was marked between loving parents and children. Once the bond is formed it lasts a lifetime."

"But you haven't told me what it is!" Eowyn protested.

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you for all your kind and much appreciated reviews. Your interest and enthusiasm is a great source of inspiration to me and I am updating quickly to show my appreciation. Also thank you to everyone who pointed out typos which I have endeavoured to correct.

I would like to reassure readers that there is nothing indecent in any way about "Thought Bonding" I admit I borrowed the idea from "Star Trek"!

The complete story exists in draft form already.

Aragorn does occasionally lose patience in the books. I try to portray Arwen as patient but firm.

As Tolkien suggested that Faramir's mother faded, I assume he could too.

I wanted to step back from Faramir for a little while for some calm before the storm, and explore how Arwen and Eowyn are dealing with the situation. Aragorn is all too aware that time is running out.
"But you haven't told me what it is!" Eowyn protested.

"It is when two minds are linked telepathically and all thoughts and feelings shared. Usually it is only wholly possible when those of the right bloodlines reach full maturity and are in full accord with each other, though sometimes even young babies can sense emotions if they have the ability. You usually place your foreheads together to do it, though to those with a strong bond, just about any touch to the head suffices."

"But how could that help Faramir?" Eowyn was feeling thoroughly confused by now.

"Many of those with Numenorean bloodlines such as Faramir and myself have enhanced mental abilities. For example, we both have visions and premonitions." Aragorn explained. "Such gifts are both a blessing and a burden, as we also tend to feel especially deeply. Sharing another's mind promotes mental stability as it clears away misconceptions and is also a great source of reassurance. Faramir would know how much he was loved and that I bore no anger towards him if he could read my thoughts!"

"It sounds like some sort of magic like the way you and Faramir often seem to read each other's thoughts!" Eowyn exclaimed.

"It is just a natural gift of our people, for as you have noticed it has happened to some degree between Faramir and myself many times already, though I do not think it is something he has ever done consciously." Aragorn replied. "The first time it happened was when he took me to task for removing the old tree and I showed him the sapling. He had a vision and I could see it too. That was a wonderful moment for me! I knew then we were destined to become close as brothers as only those with a special affinity glimpse each other's minds!"

Aragorn smiled at his wife and son, remembering how Aragorn had told her on their wedding night of Faramir's vision of their line blossoming like the White Tree.

"Maybe if Faramir and his father had been sufficiently close to bond their minds, Denethor would not have lost his wits!" Aragorn said thoughtfully. "But would it trouble you, Eowyn if we linked minds? I might see every thought, feeling and memory of your husband's, though naturally I would not seek to pry into any personal aspects of your marriage."

"There is nothing about that, that would shock you! If it will help him, you can do it this
moment!" Eowyn replied in her usual forthright manner. "If anything will give me back my husband try it, even if it involves being painted green and running naked through the city streets!"

Aragorn paled at the thought.

Arwen laughed commenting, "There is nothing about us that would shock him either!" making her husband blush scarlet.

"I am certain it would cure Faramir," Aragorn said. "I would learn exactly what is troubling him so much and he would know how sorry I am, which no words can express. The problem is, getting him in a suitable state of mind to agree to it! He might feel that his mind is the only thing he has managed to spare from my probing after all that has happened. He processes great mental abilities. For example, he knew who I was when I healed him of the Black Breath though he had never met me before. Then there are those prophetic dreams and visions he is prone to."

"I think he might be intrigued by the idea," Eowyn said thoughtfully, "We will just have to do our best to see that he tries it!"

"Over the next few days, I will give him herbs to relax him before suggesting it, if you agree?" Aragorn said, "Meanwhile I will continue to treat him with salves and potions to try to strengthen his heart."

"Do whatever you think is best!" Eowyn said wearily, "This should have been such a happy time for us both!"

"You will feel better once you hold your baby in your arms!" Arwen soothed, gazing fondly at Eldarion.

"I ought to get dressed and go and see how he is." Eowyn said. Sighing she rose from the bed and gathered up her clothing from where the maid had placed it on a chair.

"Are you in pain?" Aragorn asked her anxiously.

"No, it is just difficult for me to move around now I am so huge! Then the baby kicks so much it is hard to rest," she replied, "Arwen can tell you what it feels like! And I still have several weeks to wait before it is born."

She guided Arwen's hand against her belly where the Queen could feel the movements through the thin silk of her robe.

"You have a lively baby there!" Arwen smiled, "It kicks as much as Eldarion did! That is a good sign that it is healthy."

"It gladdens me that at least you and your child are well." Aragorn smiled, though his eyes remained sad. "I will visit Faramir again tomorrow. But do call me at once if you are worried about him."

"And you must come to me again." Arwen added, "I will massage your back again if you wish."

"Thank you, you are both so good to me!" After kissing them both warmly, Eowyn managed a watery smile and retired to the dressing room to change before returning to see how Faramir was faring.

As soon as she had gone, Aragorn collapsed on the bed and buried his head in his hands; unable to maintain his façade of iron control any longer. His body shook convulsively as he fought to hold back the tears.
Arwen was immediately at his side, wrapping her arms around him and holding him close as she tried to contain her rising alarm.

She could not remember ever having seen her husband so distressed before. He had been upset when he had bid her farewell on the eve of his departure with the Ring bearer but not in such despair.

The Queen was starting to fear greatly for his future well-being for if Faramir were to die, she wondered if he would ever recover from the loss of his companionship and the part he had unwittingly played in his Steward's decline.

She sat there beside him for some time, letting him weep, all the while cradling his head against her breast and tenderly stroking his tear stained cheeks.

"My Love, what is it?" she asked when the worst of his tears were spent, "Faramir will be well again soon, I am sure of it!"

"Will he? I see him dying before my eyes!" Aragorn raised a tear stained face to look at her. "How can he be when I have almost killed him? If you had seen his injuries, his back almost flayed to ribbons and more bruises than I could count over his body! It was my command that brought him to such a state, one whom I love as the little brother I never had! I thought I could give him all that was lacking in his life before and I rejoiced to see him well and happy. Yet one careless word from me took all that away. And much as I try to reassure Eowyn that thought sharing could cure him, how can I get him to agree to it with one who wronged him so much? He claims he does not blame me, but how could he not? I should have somehow stopped the fight between him and Eomer and protected them both!"

"And what good would it have done if you had been injured during the fight? Eomer and Faramir both had need of your skills that day." Arwen told him, lovingly running her fingers through his mop of unruly hair before starting to massage the tense muscles in her husband's neck.

"I remember the first time I met Faramir." Aragorn said softly, "He was burning with fever and very close to death. All I could think of was that this was Boromir's little brother. On the journey from Rivendell, Boromir spoke of him with such love in his eyes and told me how much he hated being parted from him. One night, while we were in Lothlorien his heart was filled with foreboding and he asked me to care for his brother should he fall. I gave him my oath.

"And you have kept your vow and cared for Faramir as a brother would." Arwen soothed.

"Have I? When Faramir awoke from the fever caused by the Black Breath he looked at me with such love and respect . I hoped even then we could be friends, brothers of the soul, but he was so afraid of me.

"I remember, that is why I suggested you go away from the Court with him and Eowyn."

"And there he saved my life and cared for me as a brother would. He lost his fear and became the man he should be once he threw off his father's shadow. Yet he has fared far worse with me that with Denethor! I swore to him that none should ever harm him again. I have broken my oath!"

"Do not be so foolish! You never meant for him to be beaten nor ordered it." Arwen chided. "Did you ever try to burn him alive? I think not! What happened was just a mistake, cruel though it was. Time and care will restore Faramir to us, you will see! You both feel especially deeply because of the Elven ancestry you both have. Anyone with your capacity for bonding breaks their heart if they feel they have let a loved one down."
Arwen understood how her husband felt to some extent, partially as one of the Eldar and also partially because as the youngest in the family, she had always been protected when she wanted to be the protector and Estel had been in a similar position, though to a much greater extent being younger by two thousand years and more and a frail mortal amongst Elves.

He was a natural protector and in Faramir had found both someone in need of his care and a man so like himself they could have indeed been brothers or even father and son as they had so much in common. Her own affection for Faramir stemmed mainly from the fact he was so like her beloved husband as well as a desire to protect.

"How can I manage without him if is not restored to health?" Aragorn sounded in a state of near panic. "I am a simple ranger not a bureaucrat, Faramir has been running this country not I! All will come to ruin without him despite the best efforts of Imrahil and myself! It is all my fault!"

"Yet it was I who suggested you go away with Faramir and Eowyn, Eowyn who wrote to Eomer because she was angry, Faramir's secretary who sent the letter, Eomer who demanded that Faramir fight with him, and two miscreants who beat Faramir in prison. How can it all be your fault?" Arwen demanded.

Eldarion awoke and began to cry fretfully, no doubt sensing his parents' distress. Arwen went over to his cradle and picked him up, assuring herself he was neither hungry nor needed changing.

"Then there is Eomer." Aragorn lamented. "I cannot heal him and being unable to ride properly is a living death to one of his race! What sort of protector am I to you and Eldarion? I bring misfortune to all I know as you will be separated from your family for all eternity because of me!"

"That was my choice to make," Arwen replied and I do not regret it unless maybe you start turning into the dour ranger I once knew again!"

She carried Eldarion back to the bed and sat beside her husband again.

"Shame on you, Estel!" Arwen snapped in exasperation. "You have upset your son while blaming yourself for what is not your fault! Were it not for you, Faramir and Eomer would both be dead. They will be well I know it! I thought what I liked about humans and especially you, was your unquenchable hope despite your short life spans and frail bodies but maybe I was wrong!"

"I am sorry, Arwen," he replied humbly, kissing her tenderly on the lips" I know I am truly blessed to have you and no man could desire a more loving or wiser wife!"

TBC

A/N

A big thank you to all my readers for your kind reviews.

Events take a dramatic turn in the next chapter.

This story is roughly two thirds complete as I still have a few plot twists left, Faramir's illness is not the only plot thread to unravel.

The only sexual attraction ever felt by my heroes in any of my stories is towards their lawfully wedded wives as in Tolkien's original.

Arwen discussed her decision to breastfeed Eldarion in Chapter 7.
When the Bough Breaks

Chapter Notes

These Characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has or will be made from it.

For Julia, who likes Arwen, Aragorn and Eldarion.

Aragorn's face lit up with a smile of joy. "I must soothe Eldarion," she said, regretfully pulling away from his embrace and turning her attention back to her child who continued to wail despite her best efforts. "You try calming him, Estel!" she ordered, "Take off your shirt!"

"What?" He looked rather taken aback, as he was accustomed to disrobing in his dressing room. "I am sorry, I did not mean to wake Eldarion and burden you with my cares."

"I know." Arwen said gently, her brief outburst spent. I just think it is time you bonded more with son. Stay there on the bed!"

He pulled off his tunic and shirt, complying with her request, albeit rather sheepishly. He never felt he fared very well alongside Elven perfection, despite Arwen's reassurances to the contrary.

Murmuring soothing words in Elvish, Arwen undressed Eldarion down to his napkin and gently laid him across Aragorn's bared chest next to his heart. "Hold him!" she instructed.

To Aragorn's great surprise, the baby soon stopped crying and nestled against him. His frustration and despair melted away as he gazed lovingly at his tiny son

He kissed the soft fuzz of hair and lovingly stroked the tiny limbs. A perfect tiny hand grasped one of his fingers.

"He is so perfect!" Aragorn choked, "To think that we made one so beautiful, I love you, I love both of you!" He nuzzled his head against Eldarion's mass of curls, hoping even at this tender age, the infant would sense how much he was loved.

"He looks like his father." Arwen smiled, lying down on the bed beside her husband and son and nestling close to them. He kissed her gratefully, thanking the Valar inwardly for granting him such a loving wife.

Aragorn placed her hands on his head, tenderly running her fingers through his hair and as their minds touched, he knew then that her faith in him was unshaken and that she was confident he could restore Faramir and Eomer to health.
Aragorn smiled at her, his confidence restored by her faith. He gazed lovingly at his son, gently stroking and massaging the tiny body. Eldarion gurgled contentedly before settling to sleep, the dark curls pressed against his father's heart.

Exhausted after the day's events, Aragorn soon followed his son's example.

Arwen sat gazing at them, filled with overwhelming love for them both, her beautiful son and noble husband.

After a while, not wanting Eldarion to become chilled, she lifted him off his father's chest then dressed him and placed him in his cradle. To her great relief, he was too sleepy to protest.

Settling down beside her husband again, she traced slender fingers down Aragorn's strong arms and across his broad chest and taut muscular belly. He carried not an inch of surplus flesh, a legacy from his days as a ranger in the wild.

He was so different from an Elf, the grey-flecked unruly mane, the hair on his chest, his manly beard, even the way he was now snoring softly as he relaxed beneath her healing touch. Yet she loved him all more for his mortal frailty.

Kissing him again, she tucked a blanket round him and then sat keeping vigil over her husband and son.

The next morning Aragorn went again to see Faramir. The Steward's demeanour was very different from that of the day before for instead of near hysteria, he now had an air of weary, yet tranquil resignation about him.

For some reason it reminded Aragorn of his last meeting with his mother when she had told him that she kept no hope for herself and it chilled Aragorn's heart to see a young man in his prime thus.

Faramir was behind his desk and after rising to greet his King, had sat down again, using it as an effective barrier between them.

Aragorn tried pleading, cajoling and even ordering his Steward to allow his hurts to be treated and Faramir politely listened, staring at him with large sad eyes but refused to as much as remove his shirt. It was almost as if he wanted the full weight of Aragorn's wrath to descend upon him.

It seemed he only tolerated Aragorn out of an innate respect for his office rather than due to the bond of friendship which had previously been so strong and most certainly not from any desire to be healed.

All the King could do was order him to drink the herbal potion he had mixed for he felt it would be grossly abusing his authority to order Faramir to undress, not to mention the danger to his weakened heart that agitating him might cause.

Faramir then repeatedly told him to go away until he had almost lost his temper and was sorely tempted to retaliate by sternly asking him what did he mean by speaking to his King in such a fashion. Aragorn had left before he said or did something he might regret later.

The King felt both frustrated and distressed at the situation. He was certain that linking minds with his Steward was the solution, but in his current state Faramir would dismiss any such suggestion and he hardly knew how to even approach the subject. He could only hope that once the herbs he had given him had time to work he would relax sufficiently to permit it.

"Nothing seems to restore Faramir's confidence or mend his broken spirit." Aragorn later confided
to Arwen. "And how shall I ever persuade him to link minds with me? It only works when both are in mental harmony and wish to form a deeper bond. It cannot be commanded, not that I would, even were it possible, I have harmed him enough already!"

"This is destroying both of you, you need each other's trust and friendship!" Arwen replied, "Have you told him how much it is distressing you to see him like this and have your offers to help him refused?"

"How can I?" Aragorn replied sadly, "It was I who caused his misfortunes. How can I burden him further?"

"Listen to me, Estel!" Arwen said sternly, gripping his shoulders and looking him straight in the eye, "You are so consumed with your own grief and guilt that it is preventing you from helping either Faramir or yourself! Tell him how you feel and appeal to his kind and gentle heart, then hold him, use some Elven relaxation techniques and refuse to let go until he tells you what troubles him and accepts your help! Lay down this burden of guilt before it breaks both of you!"

Aragorn bowed his head for a moment and then returned his wife's gaze. "I will do what you advise My Love, I give you my word!" he said at last, "This afternoon I will send for Lamrung, and see if he can shed more light on Faramir's time in prison and tomorrow I will return to Faramir and do what you suggest and then ask him to share my thoughts though I do not think it will be easy."

"I know what might work," Arwen said, her eyes brightening, "Tell Faramir that it is to help you rather than him that you require him to bond with you. Stop trying to be so stoical, let him see your anguish and he will take pity on you if he still bears you the love that I think he does! When there is love, there is always a way."

Aragorn smiled at her. "Beloved, you are so wise!" he exclaimed, "Whatever would I do without you?"

"I do not know!" Arwen replied with a wry smile.

Aragorn spent a considerable part of the afternoon with Lamrung, who was now a member of his personal Guard, a position he had given him as a reward for his help, and from him learned that Mahrod bore a personal grudge against Faramir and had seemed determined to hurt and humiliate him as much as possible.

The jailor was now languishing in his own jail awaiting trial. No trace had yet been found of the drunkard but Aragorn was determined that the search would continue until he was found and punished.

The next morning Aragorn awoke in a slightly brighter mood and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast with his wife.

He planned to spend the morning working on official documents and then visit Faramir in the afternoon. Eowyn had told Arwen that Ioreth was visiting her in the morning and she wanted to be available for more Elven treatments from the Queen's skilled hands.

In happier days, he and Faramir would have worked side by side either in his study or the Steward's and by working together and sharing the load, the business of State had seemed far less arduous.

Today, not wanting to be alone, he asked for the documents to be brought to the living room rather than to his study and was reading them while Arwen sewed a tapestry and Eldarion slept in
his cradle.

Their peace was shattered when without waiting for a servant to announce her, a white faced Eowyn burst or rather waddled into the room.

"Faramir has gone!" she informed them, her eyes full of anguish as the words poured from her lips. "I overslept as the babe's kicking kept me awake well into the night. Faramir got up before me and went to his study, or so I thought. I breakfasted alone as I had to hurry as I was expecting Ioreth. She stayed talking long after she was satisfied the baby and I were well. You know how she can talk! When I finally went in Faramir's study to see how he was, I found this!"

With a trembling hand, she thrust a paper into Aragorn's hands, and then collapsed into Arwen's waiting arms. The Queen led her to the sofa and tried to soothe her while Aragorn read the letter aloud.

TBC

A/N A big thank you to all those who have been kind enough to leave reviews.

I felt it was important to show Aragorn's feelings as well as Faramir's as they are both suffering.
"My beloved wife, I am a burden to you, the King and to Gondor, so I shall take my leave of you." Aragorn read, turning almost as pale as Eowyn. He sat down heavily beside her on the couch.

After taking a deep breath, he continued, noting the scrawled writing, unmistakably Faramir's but so unlike his usual neat script, "You will be far happier without me during what little time I have left as I know that without the King's treatments I will die soon and would not have him trouble himself over one such as I.

I am a failure as a husband and Steward and would make a far worse father to our child than ever Denethor was to me.

Once I am gone, you and your brother will again be accord, as will Rohan and Gondor. I alone must bear the guilt for all that has happened and my actions can never be forgiven.

Forget me and find a good man worthy of your love and enjoy the happy life you deserve and can only enjoy if I am not part of it.

Please show this to my King and ask him to appoint a new Steward, a man worthy to serve Gondor and her people. I am so sorry that I let him down after all the kindness he showed me. Tell him I loved him dearly. He was not only my Lord, but also the father I never had, the brother I lost and the best and kindest of friends. Had I but been worthy, I would have gladly served him until my life's end.

Farewell, dearest and best of wives! Please tell our child I loved it

Your unworthy husband, Faramir."

Overcome by emotion, Aragorn buried his face in his hands.

"The poor, confused, honourable fool!" he gasped, quickly collecting himself "I must find him and quickly! How can he hope to survive in the wild in his fragile state of health? Did he take anything?"

"Nothing seems to be missing, though I assume he must have taken Iavas." Eowyn replied, "However did he even find the strength to mount his horse?"

"The herbs I gave him would have stimulated his heart though the effect will only last for a few hours," Aragorn said grimly, "I should have had a watch kept on him! He is as strong willed as his
father was!

"Stop blaming yourself!" Eowyn said sternly, "If anything it was my responsibility to watch him but neither of us could have known he would do this! But whatever are we going to do?"

"You must go after him!" Arwen addressed her husband. "I will look after Eowyn."

"Why should he do this?" Eowyn started weeping again. "He is out there alone and ill with no means of depending himself!"

Aragorn took her hand. "As he says in his letter, he felt he had let everyone down after the quarrel with Eomer." he explained, "It was irrational but none of us could make him believe otherwise as he was so conditioned by his father to think himself worthless. He has resisted all my efforts to heal him as he feels he has failed me, though it was I who failed him in truth! I will bring him back to you, Eowyn, I swear it!" He slowly released her hand and rose to his feet.

"But where is he?" Eowyn sobbed.

"I would imagine he might make for Ithilien as he is familiar with the countryside and would know how to live off the land there." Aragorn replied. "He is in no fit state to hunt but he may believe he could live for a time by setting traps and fishing as well as roots and berries. I should soon be able to find him, I was a ranger far longer than he was!"

"I will come with you." Eowyn said staunchly, getting to her feet.

Aragorn shook his head. "No you cannot, think of your child. You are in no condition to ride."

He spoke kindly but his tone brokered no argument.

Eowyn looked as if she would protest then changed her mind, realising it was useless.

"How then can I help my husband? " she asked brokenly.

"Have the servants put together warm clothes and blankets for me to take with me." Aragorn told her. "Given his current condition, he could take a chill. I will gather my healing supplies and see if I can find one of the men from his ranger days to accompany me and act as a guide. I will take six men of my personal Guard with me that should suffice to bring him home. I will send a message for Imrahil to come and take charge here in my stead. Until he arrives, Arwen, I leave Gondor in your capable hands! My seal is on my desk if you should need it!"

"I will do what I can, Estel, though I have little experience in matters of government," Arwen replied, "What about the trade delegation from Rhun and what do I tell everyone?"

"You are more than capable of handing them as you are far wiser and more diplomatic than I!" Aragorn reassured her, "Tell those who ask that I have gone hunting. Most of the nobles here think of me as highly eccentric so let them think I cannot resist the call of the wild! I know I have responsibilities but how can I abandon a friend I love so much? I must find Faramir myself not have him dragged home by my Guards like some criminal. That would break him completely!"

"Should I tell Eomer what has happened?" Eowyn asked.

Aragorn shook his head; "I think it best not to at the time being as he would only accuse Faramir of abandoning his sister in his current state of mind! I do not think Faramir can have gone far in his weakened condition, so I hope to return with news of him very soon. Then we can decide what to tell your brother and everyone else. Until then, just make excuses."

Eowyn nodded all too aware that the King was too tactful to say 'if he is still alive and we can find
him.'

He bent and kissed her cold cheek, murmuring, "I promise I will do everything within my power to bring your husband home to you,"

"Look after her My Love and our son!" he told Arwen, drawing her close and bidding her a loving farewell.

Aragorn hastened first to the stables and questioned the head groom who told him that Lord Faramir had come early that morning and asked for Iavas to be saddled as he wished to exercise her. The grooms had been surprised as he had not ridden for the past two months and looked most unwell but had not considered it their place to question the Steward and after one had helped him mount, he had ridden away but no one had noticed in which direction.

Aragorn was sorely tempted to rebuke the man for not sending for either himself of Eowyn before letting an obviously sick man leave on horseback but words would only serve to waste precious time.

He nodded curtly and then went in search of a suitable guide.

The barracks were fairly quiet at this time of day as most of the men were about their duties and the Guard was not due to change until noon. As always in such establishments, small groups of off duty men clustered talking and drinking, while others sharpened their weapons and polished their kit.

They all stood smartly to attention when they saw the King enter.

"At ease!" he ordered, and then asked, "Are there any here who served with Lord Faramir during his days as a Ranger in Ilithien?"

A tall young man with olive skin and black hair came forward from where he had been sharpening arrows until the King had entered.

"I did, my Lord," he said.

"And you are?"

"Damrod, Sire. I served with Lord Faramir while he was Captain in Ilithien.

"You know the area well then?"

"My family lived there for generations, my Lord."

"Good. I need you to leave with me within the hour. How soon can you be ready?"

"At once, my Liege."

Aragorn clapped the man on the shoulder; delighted to have found one of Faramir's fellow Rangers so easily. He knew many had perished during the War, while others had left active service due to their wounds.

He returned to the stables and requested that Roheryn be saddled and went to collect his supply of healing herbs and salves together with the warm clothes he had asked Eowyn to have packed.

They set out shortly afterwards. Aragorn and Damrod went on foot, leading their horses and studying the ground for any signs that Faramir had passed that way.
Behind rode a small company of Aragorn's personal Guard and two packhorses laden with tents, blankets, clothing, food and medicines as Aragorn wanted to be certain he had the means to care for his Steward, were Faramir in no fit condition to ride home with him immediately, which he very much feared would be the case.

The men were all sworn to secrecy, as the King had no desire for Faramir's fragile condition to be made public, especially not after what had happened to Denethor.

Faramir remembered the fateful day when he had last ridden this way, believing then he was going to his death. He was now certain he was.

The day was as gloomy and overcast as his thoughts. The mist hung heavily over the mountains and the damp chill seemed to permeate his very bones.

His first instinct had been to go to Rohan and surrender himself for judgement as Eomer had forbidden him ever to cross the border on pain of death. However on closer reflection, he realised that such a course of action would only lead to further tensions between the two nations and cause problems for Aragorn and maybe for Eowyn too. And that was the reason for his leaving to spare them the pain that his tainted presence was causing.

He decided to head towards Osgiliath and die where so many of his friends had fallen and where he would have received a mortal wound had Aragorn not intervened.

His heart thumped wildly and he felt so weak and tired that it was a struggle to remain on Iavas's back.

It was pouring with rain now and the icy drops soaked his hair and ran down the back of his neck.

Once such hardships had been an everyday occurrence but for more than two years now he had lived in luxury as Steward of Gondor, basking in the favour of the King.

The thought of Aragorn tore at his heart, he had never desired to leave the friend whom he loved, who had become as a caring father, any more than he had wanted to leave Eowyn and their unborn child but he knew he must as he had become a liability to them all and to Gondor.

Despite everything, he could not bring himself to wish the last two and a half years undone, as he had known more love and acceptance than at any other time in his life.

He knew it was unmerited but he had basked in it and known the wonder of loving rather than fearing the one he answered to, the joys of marriage and impending fatherhood. How too he had enjoyed being able to spent his days amongst books rather than swords and bows!

Without him, relations between Rohan and Gondor would quickly be restored to normal, and Aragorn and Eowyn would not be torn between himself and Eomer, nor be forced to endure the company of one whose criminal folly had led to the brink of war.

Aragorn had tried to persuade him that he did not carry the burden of guilt for all that had happened but he knew he was just trying to be kind. If he had tried harder to make Eowyn happy, she would never have complained to her brother and if he had tried harder to make Eomer listen, his blow would never have crippled the King of Rohan. Denethor had been right, his younger son was a failure who failed to make an effort.

He was certain Aragorn and the Queen would care for Eowyn and their child would be born free from the disgrace of its father.

He wanted to weep now, but no tears would come when he though of his beautiful wife and the
child he wanted so much.

But how could he stay with her after almost killing her brother and then what dishonour might have befallen him while he was unconscious in prison?

The thought had haunted him for weeks but how could he mention anything so shameful to either Eowyn or Aragorn? He knew that after such dishonour he could never again enjoy the intimacies of marriage, the brotherly embrace of his King or even hold his child in his arms.

Lost in his thoughts, he did not see the tree root which lay across his path. Iavas stumbled and although she quickly regained her footing, Faramir slid from her back, unable to hang on in his weakened condition.

Landing heavily on his side, he tried to get up, but his ankle gave way and refused to support him. A sharp pain throbbed in his chest and side, followed by a duller pain in his leg. His heart thumped so rapidly it felt as if it would burst.

He resigned himself for death, as he could not survive out here in the open, crippled and without food and water. How he wished he could have seen his child, grown old with Eowyn and enjoyed the King's friendship through the years ahead, but it was not to be, his fate was sealed the day he struck Eomer down.

Soon he would be reunited with his beloved brother and mother but at the cost of leaving behind two whom he loved as dearly.

It was so very cold and he was soaked to the skin. He was weary, so very tired now. When darkness overcame him, he embraced it gladly.

TBC

A very big thank you to everyone who has reviewed. I always greatly enjoy and appreciate your comments and often incorporate some of your ideas in the story.

This story has passed the 700 reviews mark, my first story ever to do so! Thank you all so much! I am updating quickly to show my appreciation

I am pleased my Arwen fans enjoyed the last chapter. The scene with Eldarion was enjoyable to write.
And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; Ruth 1.16

There was a mass of tracks outside the city gates but they soon thinned out as few travellers ventured further than the outlying villages in November.

Aragorn had lost none of his old tracking skills and Damrod proved an able companion as the two former rangers soon picked up the tracks of a lone rider heading away from the city.

As the hours passed, Aragorn became more and more worried, his concern mirrored in the increasingly grim set of his features. Never in his worse nightmares had he ever imagined that Faramir would flee like this to seek death in the wilderness.

Yet he must have planned it carefully as his air of resignation the previous day now seemed an all too obvious indication that he had made a fateful decision. Ioreth’s visit would have been the perfect opportunity for him, as he would know the garrulous midwife would keep Eowyn occupied for hours.

The rain was coming down harder than ever now and the King feared they had not much time left if Faramir was to be found alive. His heart was now so weakened that the slightest exertion or agitation could easily kill him. If Faramir had not carried the heritage in his veins of Numenorean vitality, he would have surely been dead long ago.

He briefly closed his eyes remembering Faramir as he used to be, his grey eyes sparkling with enthusiasm and intelligence, his steadfast loyalty, and the comfortable companionship they had shared when Faramir would freely seek the affection from him that Denethor had always denied his younger son. He had seen how Faramir had blossomed even shaking off his shyness sufficiently to tease his King and engage in mock fights with him.

He knew that if they found him, this would be his last chance to save his Steward and save him he must, or his heart would surely break to lose him in such circumstances! Then there was Eowyn and her unborn child. Faramir needed to be restored to them as both husband and father. Eowyn appeared strong and yet his heart feared for her, knowing the depth of love she bore for her husband.

Devastating though Faramir's letter at been, in one respect, it had heartened him as there was no doubt from his anguished words that Faramir still loved his wife and his King.

He was startled from his reverie by the agitated whinnying of a horse. A fine chestnut mare
saddled and bridled but devoid of a rider was galloping towards them.

Even before she reached him and frantically nuzzled his arm, he knew it was Iavas.

Faramir must be nearby! He broke into a run and followed the horse, which made off down the path and halted a few hundred yards ahead.

He discovered Faramir sprawled in the mud by the side of the path, with Iavas nuzzling her master, trying vainly to make him get up.

Aragorn rushed to his Steward's side and knelt by him, oblivious of the muddy surroundings, overwhelmed with a feeling of sick dread and fearing the worst as he felt for a pulse.

Unable to find one, he tore open Faramir's tunic and laid his ear to the Steward's chest. The heartbeat was there, far too slow and ragged, but his friend was still alive.

Faramir's flesh was icy to the touch but he still drew breath. The King gave an audible sigh of relief that at least he still lived though he feared what new injuries he would uncover on the reed thin body, once the sodden clothing was removed.

It appeared that he had fallen from his horse .At least he had not broken his neck but he could have sustained multiple fractures lacking any flesh to cushion his fall. Then there was the risk of lung fever from lying out in the cold and rain.

Damrod finally caught up with him and for a moment stood catching his breath and looking in amazement at the sight of his Sovereign kneeling in the mud beside his former Captain

"How is Lord Faramir?" he asked.

"Alive but only just .He is injured, cold and soaked to the skin. We need to get him to shelter and quickly," Aragorn replied, his voice choked with emotion," I do not think he could make it back to the City."

"There is a hovel nearby the rangers would use .It used to belong to a shepherd, but he fled as Sauron's forces encroached and he never returned." Damrod informed him.

"Lead the way! It will have to suffice." Aragorn replied.

Aragorn pulled off his cloak and wrapped it round his Steward then carefully lifted the unconscious Faramir and set him on Roheryn's back. Damrod held him steady while he settled on behind him and held him close, trying to warm him with his own body. Faramir was now so emaciated ;he was hardly an extra burden for the Elvish mare to carry.

The hovel Damrod spoke of was less than a league away and they arrived there within minutes.

It was dilapidated and bare, yet watertight and with a fireplace that would suffice for their needs.

Aragorn carried Faramir inside and sat cradling him to keep him warm; all the while checking him for injuries.

He ordered the men to get a fire going and carry the supplies of bedding, clothing and medicines inside and then make camp and erect their own tents outside.

He next took a blanket from one of the packs and put it by the fire to warm, while the soldiers covered the dusty floor by the fireplace with animal skins and placed lighted candles round the small room. He then told the men to heat some water.
"Damrod, you are with me!" Aragorn said, as the ranger was about to join his colleagues outside. "I need your assistance while I tend Lord Faramir. We need to get these wet clothes off him and quickly!"

"I am at your service, Sire," Damrod replied obediently.

Aragorn unrolled a bedroll in front of the fire and together they lifted Faramir on to it.

"I was a ranger for many years." Aragorn explained to Damrod, as he unfastened the lacings securing Faramir's tunic.

Damrod looked at him wide eyed as he removed Faramir's boots.

"I will not eat you, Lieutenant!" Lord Faramir has spoken highly of you, you tended the wounded when you served together, did you not?" Aragorn asked, aiming to put the tense young man at his ease, as they needed to work together if Faramir were to be saved. Faramir was suffering from exposure and they might yet need to use body heat to warm him, a method far more effective with two than one. He wondered not for the first time, what it was about being King that made so many of his subjects appear so terrified.

Damrod merely nodded in reply to his question.

"Did you ever tend Lord Faramir's wounds?" Aragorn persisted, anxious to draw him out of his shell.

"Twice during the year before the Ring war, my Lord, once when he took a Southeron blade in the hip and once when an Orc arrow caught him in the back." Damrod replied shyly.

"That cannot have been easy, unless Lord Faramir has changed a great deal?" Aragorn asked a hint of humour lighting his troubled features as he envisioned the struggle Damrod must have had with his shy and stubborn Captain.

"No, it was not, Sire, Lord Faramir was most embarrassed by his wounds and it took a great deal of persuasion to allow me tend them, the poor Lord has suffered a great deal." Damrod confided.

"I fear that is so," Aragorn said sadly.

"Lord Faramir was the best Captain I ever had and the others thought the same, my Lord." Damrod said as the rain soaked and muddy breeches were removed.

"That does not surprise me, knowing the man." Aragorn replied as he finally managed to ease Faramir's sodden tunic and shirt over his head. At least his Steward did not appear to be bleeding apart from a few scratches.

Damrod then gave an involuntary gasp as Faramir's wasted and scarred body was finally revealed.

"Aragorn grabbed the warmed blanket and covered his Steward with it to protect his modesty before his drawers were consigned to the heap of sodden clothing.

"Your Captain was cruelly beaten when he was wrongfully imprisoned after the incident with King Eomer," Aragorn explained, "You were telling me about when you served with him?

"He never asked us to do anything he would not do himself, was always the first to face the enemy and he really cared about us." Damrod replied, now eager for the opportunity to praise a man he greatly admired, "When I was sick with fever after taking an Orc arrow, he sat beside me day and night and was most caring. He was a stern Captain; yet we obeyed him because we loved
him, rather than because we must and he rewarded our loyalty by treating us fairly and with great kindness. Only once did he order a flogging and that was for a most heinous offence!"

Aragorn's ears pricked up, wondering if Damrod might have some information that would help for the forthcoming trial, but now he concentrated on swiftly examining Faramir as best he could. He first felt his head and neck, looking for any sign of injury and then quickly checked his body and limbs for signs of fractures. A more thorough examination would have to wait until he was warmed and hopefully conscious.

To his great relief, the only new injuries he could find were three damaged ribs, the ones which had failed to heal properly before, and severe bruising down one side, obviously caused by the fall from the horse.

Dark bruises disfigured Faramir's chest and side, which spread downwards across his hip and tapered down his leg culminating in a badly sprained ankle. These were but minor hurts though, compared with the deathly chill of his flesh, his weak and erratic heartbeat and the despair that permeated the Steward's soul.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Aragorn could not suppress a wry smile as he observed that Faramir did indeed have a scar on his hip, which he had obviously been too shy to request the Elven treatment for when he had the chance.

Instinctively, Aragorn tried to heal the latest hurts by placing his hands over them, but even in his current state, he could still sense Faramir's will resisting.

Damrod tried to watch impassively as the King attempted the healing, but Aragorn could see the curiosity in his eyes, as like many in Gondor, he had heard the stories circulating about the King's powers.

"It is an Elvish technique which can heal the sick." Aragorn explained, "However they have to wish to be healed for it to work. Now help me bathe Lord Faramir, the water should help warm him!"

Damrod shouted to those outside to bring water and waited for more instructions while the King tested the temperature with his elbow. Elessar was proving to be totally unlike anything he had expected a King to be!

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you for your greatly appreciated reviews.

Aragorn's grief and guilt have hampered him so far in helping Faramir.

I agree Faramir is a perfectionist, which makes things far worse for him.
The Guards fetched Aragorn a bowl of steaming water, the temperature of which he tested with his elbow. Once satisfied it was the right warmth, he began bathing his Steward.

He knew it was his body that needed urgent warming, yet felt compelled to first cleanse the mud from his face. A task, which took but a moment, yet served to restore some vestiges of dignity to the unconscious man.

Nodding to Damrod to take up a cloth to assist him, he continued to bathe Faramir with the warm water, all the while working under the blanket to preserve warmth and modesty.

"You mentioned that Lord Faramir once ordered a flogging, can you tell me what you know about it?" Aragorn enquired.

Damrod looked puzzled but obediently answered the question. "It was a very unpleasant incident, which took place about a week before the fall of Osgiliath. We were in a high state of alert and everyone was on edge. Night had fallen and those not on duty were trying to rest. I remember I was wrapped in my blanket alongside Lord Faramir and was relieved that he was finally sleeping after he had driven himself so hard. Suddenly, we heard screaming and rushed to see what was happening and found one of our men in the process of committing rape."

Aragorn never paused from his task but listened intently, his grey eyes glittering.

"Lord Faramir was outraged and ordered the attacker to be bound and kept under guard while he decided what to do. We returned to our bedrolls and discussed what had happened. Lord Faramir thought the man deserved death but felt unable to pronounce such a verdict without a proper trial in the City. The situation at that time made it impossible to take a prisoner back without endangering our defences. I could see he was very distressed about what had happened."

The King nodded his understanding and bade Damrod continue.

"The next morning Lord Faramir sat with two Lieutenants in judgement and pronounced a sentence of twenty-five lashes, the maximum allowed by law, followed by instant dismissal from
the army.

The sentence was carried out immediately and the prisoner took it very badly, screaming and pleading for mercy but Lord Faramir was adamant telling him that he should have thought of that before carrying out his wicked crime."

"He acted correctly," Aragorn commented.

"One of the sergeants carried out the sentence while Lord Faramir watched to see it was done correctly, though he could have asked one of us to do it instead. I shall never forget the expression on his face! It was the first time he had ever needed to order such a one of the rangers had ever done anything worse than drink a little too much then oversleep or some other minor infringement of regulations. Usually, knowing we had let our Captain down and seeing the reproach in his eyes, was punishment enough as we all revered him so much."

Damrod paused, finding it difficult to recall such dreadful events within his own Company.

"Then what happened?" Aragorn prompted.

"When it was over," Damrod continued, taking a deep breath, "Lord Faramir walked away and I followed, for he was so pale. I supported him as he almost collapsed and was violently sick. Poor Lord Faramir, I don't think he ever dreamed such a thing could happen within his Rangers. Although he was a good soldier, he truly hated violence. We were a close-knit community but I suppose every barrel has a rotten apple somewhere."

"What was the man's name?" Aragorn asked, his tone strangely intense.

"He was called Mahrod," Damrod replied," As he left, he vowed he would have his revenge for his punishment." He flushed, wondering if he had said too much, but Aragorn had somehow compelled him with those intense eyes of his, to recall every painful detail.

Aragorn gasped. It all fell into place now. He even now remembered Faramir mentioning the incident while they had been at the Hunting Lodge eight months previously. "What happened to the victim?" he enquired.

"They died during the War, which was maybe as well for who could live with such shame despite all Lord Faramir's kindness and sympathy?" Damrod replied sadly. "That is all I know, your majesty, maybe Lord Faramir recalls more of the incident?"

"Thank you," Aragorn said at last, "I might need your assistance at Mahrod's forthcoming trial as it was he who attacked Lord Faramir in prison."

"Gladly, sire, that man is truly evil!" Damrod looked shocked at this latest was unable to resist a horrified glance at Faramir's damaged body. Anger welled within him, that the likes of Mahrod, should dare to lay a finger on his Captain.

"I need some more warm water!" Aragorn ordered, "I wish you to bathe Lord Faramir's limbs!"

When it was fetched, Aragorn applied warm compresses to Faramir's neck, chest and groin, while Damrod bathed the Steward's limbs.

"We dry him now!" Aragorn said after a few minutes, casting the damp cloths to one side and wondering how best next to proceed." You concentrate on his limbs and I will dry his body. Do it as vigorously as you can without aggravating his injuries."

Some colour started to return to Faramir's skin and his breathing deepened much to Aragorn's
relief, though his lips still bore a bluish tinge. He moaned and stirred slightly when despite Aragorn's attempts to be gentle the towelling jarred his injuries.

Then much to Aragorn's relief, his Steward started to shiver violently, a good sign that he was slowly warming up.

He pressed his ear to his chest again and was glad to find that his heartbeat was a little stronger though it still resembled a trapped bird trying to escape from its cage.

He debated whether he should leave Faramir wrapped in blankets and keep him warm between the two of them or dress him and hold him on his own until he came round. He decided that, as Faramir was gradually warming up, the latter course of action would be the least distressing for him, given his recent near hysteria at the prospect of even removing his shirt.

Taking some clothes from the packs, he placed them by the fire to air. Then with Damrod's assistance dressed Faramir in the warm dry clothing.

Once the Steward was dressed, the King could only now wait for his friend to regain consciousness.

"Thank you, Damrod, you have been most helpful" he said, giving the young man a kind smile, "Go now to rest and eat with your comrades. First though, send a messenger back to the city to inform the Queen that the Lord Faramir has been found alive. I will call you again when I have need of you!"

As soon as the young man had left, he quickly shed his mud-stained clothes and donned a simple linen shirt and woollen breeches and then settled himself on the pelts by the fire, cradling Faramir in his arms to warm and comfort him.

Although still unconscious, Faramir moaned and nestled his head against the King's shoulder, which somewhat heartened Aragorn. It seemed on some deep level that his Steward still trusted him and sought the comfort of his presence.

He feared though, his friend had little cause to, after all he had suffered as result of the King's thoughtless orders. Yet the words of his letter had given Aragorn hope that the Steward still felt some affection towards him despite everything.

Gradually, Faramir settled into what appeared to be a natural sleep and when Aragorn checked his temperature again, it appeared to be almost back to normal. He vigorously chafed the cold hands between his own warm ones.

The King then decided to wake him.

"Faramir!" he called softly, gently shaking him, "It is I, Aragorn, wake up!"

Faramir groaned and opened his eyes. It took him a few minutes to focus, before he asked,"Where am I? So cold!" His teeth chattered as he spoke.

"In a hovel near Osgiliath. You fell from your horse."

"I am still alive!" Faramir exclaimed with a look of abject misery. Already he was trying to pull away from the King.

"Yes, the Valar be praised! Whatever would I do with you, and what about Eowyn? Why ever did you go off like that?"
"To put things right! You would be better off without me. Everything would be well again, if I were not here! You have your wife and son and Eowyn has her brother."

"We both need you too." Aragorn said as he gently laid Faramir down on the bedroll and went to the hearth where water was boiling to make tea.

He held a steaming cup to Faramir's lips. "Drink this; it is just tea to warm you! No, you are mistaken there, my friend, a good many people need you as does Gondor herself!"

Faramir drank the tea in silence, but swallowed without complaint. A little colour slowly returned to his cheeks and Aragorn now hoped his friend was no longer in immediate danger of succumbing to his physical injuries, the mental ones however were another matter. His twisted ankle was something of a relief as there was no way he could walk well enough to try and flee again.

"Why did you come after me, sire?" Faramir asked, his tone bitter.

"Because I love you too much to ever abandon you, my poor foolish friend, I could not bear to see your wife suffer and I care about the welfare of Gondor! How could I forsake you, when you are as dear to me as my own son? Did you want to break all our hearts?"

Faramir just fixed him with large sad eyes. "You do not know me!" he choked, "I am tainted and maimed, a curse to you and to Gondor!"

Aragorn poured himself a cup of tea and knelt beside his Steward looking into the dull pain filled eyes. He could weep for the shadow of a man that Faramir had become.

"Tell me, Faramir, have you ever used the gift of our race to thought share? " he asked, in an abrupt change of subject, while he slowly sipped his drink.

"I tried with Boromir but he lacked the ability as only some of our race can do it. My father had the ability but said he would never share anything so intimate with a worthless younger son. I had hoped to be able to share thoughts one day with my child but it is too late now."

Faramir's matter of fact bleakness tore Aragorn's heart.

"Why, my lord do you ask?" Faramir looked both hurt and bewildered as the flickering firelight illuminated his features. "You should not be kneeling to one as tainted as me!"

Aragorn put down his cup and gripped Faramir's hands with his own then looked directly into the haunted eyes. "Why do you feel tainted?" he asked, "I desire to know!"

"I am a traitor!" Faramir mumbled trying to break free of Aragorn's grasp. Remembering Arwen's words, the King refused to let go.

"I have told you are not, more than once, and how could that taint me even if it were true? In my ninety years I have met all manner of people and none left me feeling tainted. Why then should you? You are a good man and very dear to me. There is something else that troubles you and I want to know what it is!"

"It is nothing, my lord, I cannot speak of it. I beg of you not to touch me!"

"You can tell me!" Aragorn still held his hands tightly, though careful not to injure his Steward in any way. "What has changed so much? You let me tend your hurts many times, you enjoyed the Elven massage treatments and more than that, you were happy to embrace me as a brother! You said in your letter that you still bore me some affection, so why must I not touch you? Tell me, I
am not letting you go until you do!"

"I cannot! The shame is too great!" What little strength he had spent, Faramir slumped forward and would have collapsed had Aragorn not been holding him. The King released one of his hands and with the other supported him.

"Was it something to do with Mahrod?" It was cruel to press him in this condition but it had to be done.

"Yes," the whispered word was barely audible," I think that he…" Faramir swallowed unable to continue.

TBC

A/N

A very grateful thank you to all my readers for your kind and much appreciated comments. I am also grateful to be told of any mistakes.

Faramir's heart was initially damaged from shock and blood loss but now his frame of mind is preventing any of his injuries from healing properly.

I am pleased my readers liked the addition of Damrod. I wanted through his eyes to show what a great Captain Faramir was before he was crushed under his misfortunes.

I try to show Aragorn and Arwen not as truly good and noble but like the rest of us at times, tired, impatient and able to lose their tempers!

I do indeed mention things for a reason!
A Time to Speak

Chapter Notes

These Characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has been or will be made from it.

Warning – This chapter contains content, which although non explicit in nature, some readers may find chapter was not easy to write.

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; Ecclesiastes 3.7

Faramir then fell silent and flushed scarlet.

Aragorn moved his hand to feel the pulse at his Steward's throat, which was racing wildly. He knew all too well that it was dangerous to agitate him, yet he believed not to discover what was troubling him posed a far greater danger to his health. Without the Elven treatments, which he alone could provide, his friend would be unlikely to survive for more than a few weeks at the most.

Faramir could only be healed if he desired it and the King felt this was probably the last chance he would have to help him.

"I cannot speak of it!" Faramir whispered, "Please let me go!"

Aragorn ignored the request and continued to grip one of the trembling hands while with the other; he massaged the back of his neck in an Elven relaxation technique.

Faramir continued to struggle feebly but gradually calmed a little.

"Now tell me what burdens your heart," he said firmly, "Then you can rage at me all you wish but I want to know the truth!"

"When I was in prison," Faramir said, swallowing hard, "I think that when I was unconscious that Mahrod…" He stopped unable either to continue or to look Aragorn in the eye.

"Do you believe that Mahrod violated you?" Aragorn asked bluntly, though his eyes were full of compassion. Maybe it was brutal to force Faramir to put his fears into words but if it were not done, the fear would forever fester like an open sore.

Faramir nodded, still unable to meet the King's eyes. "How could I lie with Eowyn again or embrace you as a brother were I so dishonoured?" he mumbled. " It was the way Mahrod leered at me. He was groping at me and pulling at my clothing. I lost consciousness then so I have no idea what he did to me! Then afterwards there was so much pain everywhere. I have nightmares about it every time I close my eyes!"
He sagged forward and Aragorn caught him in his arms noticing with alarm how his breath came in ragged gasps from his shaking body.

"Now do you understand?" Faramir whispered trying again to break free." You must never touch me again! I am an outcast bereft of all honour!"

Aragorn could have wept but forced himself to remain calm "I would never shun you, whatever happened, Mellon Nin," he said gently " But I can give you my word that nothing happened apart from the beating, though that was bad enough. You were not violated, I am certain of that. There were no injuries to suggest it and your clothing was untouched apart from where it had been torn across your back. Of course, there is no way to tell if Mahrod touched you indecently but I tend to think not and I know for certain you were not violated." Aragorn said firmly, finally relaxing his grip on his Steward.

"How can you know?" Faramir raised his head to ask the question, flushing as he did so.

" One of the other jailors told me that he interrupted Mahrod groping at your clothing, so in the presence of your uncle, I deemed it best to examine you for signs of any such assault," Aragorn replied, looking rather uncomfortable, "We did not mention it before, as we had no wish to distress you further. I had no idea you were so troubled about what happened while you were unconscious until I learned Mahrod's full history. I am only sorry that it was necessary to look for signs of such horrors. It pained me to do so as it made me feel that it was I, who was in some way violating you. Can you forgive me?"

"As someone needed to do it, I am glad it was you and my uncle as I trust you and you are both pure of heart." Faramir replied unhesitatingly.

"No one would have shunned you, whatever we had found. I love you for yourself, as I know Eowyn does too and nothing that could happen to you could ever change that." Aragorn told him firmly.

Faramir still looked doubtful. "The memory of him groping will always haunt me!" he said miserably.

Aragorn decided a blunt approach was best now. "You took no pleasure in it though?"

"What? The very thought sickens me!" Faramir was outraged despite his weakness and lethargy.

"Nor did you enjoy being kicked and beaten?" Aragorn persisted.

"Of course not! Why do you ask such a question?" Faramir sounded bewildered.

"Then from now on think of it all as part of the injuries that you suffered," Aragorn said firmly, "From what the other jailor, Lamrung told me, he came in just as Mahrod started to grope at your clothing, so it seems nothing happened apart from what you remember. Mahrod acted not out of lust but a desire was to hurt and humiliate you."

Faramir nodded but his eyes were still dull and the healing tears that Aragorn had hoped for did not start to flow.

"Remember, Faramir, that you can always tell me what troubles you" Aragorn said gently, " You have become the brother I always wished for and the grown son I could have had if only Arwen and I had been permitted to wed when we wished to!"

"You do me great honour, My Lord." Faramir said in an emotionless tone. Aragorn felt torn
between weeping for him and shaking him, though his healer's training told him all too well that he was dealing with a deeply wounded soul.

" Now your secret fears have been laid to rest, I would be honoured if you would share thoughts with me," he said quietly. "It should be easy for us as we have similar bloodlines and a strong bond of love between us exists already, which is necessary if thought sharing is to be possible."

Faramir flinched. "Maybe I was not violated but I have still betrayed you! I am not worthy of such an honour. Once we were close, but how can we be now, after all that has happened? Why can you not just let me be?"

" I will give you my word to let you resign your office and do as you will once you are strong enough if you will but grant me this request." Aragorn said, taking a calculated gamble. He genuinely desired to share the bond with his Steward but had hoped for somewhat happier circumstances in which to do it.

"I am tainted with madness and broken." Faramir protested. "Why do you want this of me?" Despite his protests and deep state of dejection, a part of him did desire the Thought Bond, as it was something he had yearned to experience and as his mind was set on death, this would be his only chance. Yet he could not allow the King to offer such a gift of love to one such as him.

"Because it should ease the pain for both of us." Aragorn told him. "This is my birthright and yours too, I plead with you after all we have been through together! No matter what words I use, I cannot make you understand how much I regret all that has happened!"

"If you cared anything for me, you would draw Anduril and make everything right with one stroke!" Faramir said bitterly "Then Gondor could be reconciled with Rohan, Eowyn and her brother would be in accord again, our child would be born free of my guilt and Eowyn could find a worthy husband and you a worthy Steward! Run me through and have done with it!" He tore open his tunic and shirt, baring his heart.

His eyes full of compassion, Aragorn placed his hand on Faramir's chest. The Steward's heart churned beneath his fingers.

"And what would that solve, my friend, save to break my heart too?" he asked, taking a leaf of athelas from inside his tunic and crumbling it, so that a living freshness filled the hut. "You would destroy your King, leave a broken hearted wife, a fatherless child, and Gondor without a Steward! As for Eomer, he could not live with the guilt nor could I! Agree to this to ease my pain if not your own, I beg of you!"

Faramir hesitated. He desired no healing for himself but if the King needed his help, how could he refuse?

"Please grant me this one favour. This is my birthright and yours too!" Aragorn was openly weeping now, remembering Arwen's advice not to hide from Faramir what he truly felt.

Too drained of emotion to protest further, and as Aragorn had hoped moved by his plea to help him, Faramir reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Very well, he whispered, "I will try though I do not know if I have the gift!"

"Oh, but you do!" Aragorn choked, "Remember the day you came to me after I found the sapling of the White Tree and you had a vision? I saw it as clearly as if it were mine own! I knew then we would become close."

Wiping away his tears, Aragorn went to his pack and took out some herbs, which he crushed and
mixed with a cup of wine.

Kneeling beside Faramir again, he drank half of the mixture and then offered the cup to his Steward.

"Drink this, it relaxes the mind and facilitates the sharing of thoughts," he said.

Faramir obediently complied and then sank back on the pelts, grimacing at the pain every movement caused him.

It took all the King's willpower to resist insisting on treating his hurts without further ado.

As the herbs started to work, Faramir felt himself start to relax while at the same time, his perceptions sharpened.

"We have touched thoughts many times, let us do it properly today!" Aragorn said quietly, his voice full of a strange compelling power." Now breathe slowly and concentrate. Will you do this for me? I would not ask if it did not mean a great deal, I have only done this with my mother, Halbarad and Arwen, as there has to be a strong bond to make it possible. I hope one day to share my thoughts with my son too and will you with your child. Your grandfather desired it of me, but I had to reluctantly refuse or he would have known who I truly was for nothing is hidden during a Thought Bond!"

Intrigued by this narration, Faramir settled a little. Aragorn traced soothing circles across his forehead with his fingertips, a proven method of calming, used by the Elves for Millennia.

Once satisfied the racing heartbeat had slowed somewhat, Aragorn placed both hands on Faramir's shoulders to support him.

"Just to relax, and place your head against mine and eventually you will sense my thoughts." Aragorn told his Steward," You have the ability and it is not difficult."

Time seemed to stand still as they knelt there with foreheads touching; seeking each other's minds.

The fire suddenly blazed up and enveloped them both in its crimson glow. Aragorn offered a silent prayer to the Valar that it was a sign that he could finally help his Steward.

TBC

A/N .A big thank you for all your kind reviews and comments. Every one is greatly appreciated and I am updating quickly to show my gratitude.

In many ancient cultures, a rape victim would often be seen as bringing shame on their family. Unfortunately this belief still prevails in some parts of the world. As Tolkien's universe is rooted in the past and Tolkien said if an Elf were raped they would die, I have given this attitude to Faramir and Damrod.

I am indeed laying the groundwork for a possible sequel.

Mahrod is awaiting trial for his misdeeds.

I doubt Faramir could have survived another attack in his current condition.

Like one of my readers, I too remember my Mother testing the bath water with her elbow !
Aragorn found himself remembering the other times he had shared thoughts with loved ones. From a very early age he had the gift of being able to sense the emotions of those especially close to him, a gift, he suspected Eldarion shared, but the first time he had actually shared thoughts, was with his mother when he reached maturity.

The wonder of actually knowing he was loved rather than merely believing it was an experience he would cherish for always.

Then there was Halbarad, the memory of whose cruel death still haunted him. When they had first met, they had initially disliked and distrusted each other, for Halbarad as acting leader of the Rangers, had somewhat resented a mere twenty year old supplanting him.

Aragorn for his part had been afraid that the men would choose to follow the older and more experienced man rather than himself should any conflict arise.

Yet after Halbarad had saved his life when they were ambushed by Orcs, they had become close friends and cemented their friendship with a Thought Bond which finally laid to rest any misunderstandings between them.

He had shared thoughts with Arwen on the night before he left Lothlorien forever, and been consoled by actually knowing the depth of her love and her willingness to abide the Doom of Men and to wait for him until they could be united in wedlock. Now they were together, their Thought Bond enriched their marriage greatly since each instinctively knew what the other was thinking.

Faramir swayed again, his frail body finding it a great effort to keep upright despite Aragorn supporting him.

The King hoped desperately that this would work, and that Faramir still felt sufficient love for him for their thoughts to meet. It was all too obvious that no amount of words would ever convince him that he was still loved and had not brought disgrace upon his King, Country and family.

"How do I do this?" Faramir asked, sounding lost and bewildered.

"Remember all the happy times we have shared together and the occasions our minds have touched before," Aragorn advised, gradually lowering the mental defences he had constructed
during long years spent in hiding.

Experienced at the technique, he was the first to make the contact, despite his hope that Faramir would sense his thoughts first, thought the very fact he was able to showed the link was working.

The methods used for calling a sick person back to the land of the living were quite different, as healing could be given to anyone whether or not they were of similar bloodlines or beloved of the Healer.

Apart from the overwhelming impression of despair and a sense of the familiar from the times their minds had touched before, Faramir's thoughts were still largely uncharted territory to Aragorn.

He reached out into his Steward's mind trying to share some of his own strength with him as well as to read his thoughts.

Images began to flash through his mind of a child little more than a toddler, being thrashed on his father's orders for running after his nurse unclothed, then a young boy bereft of a mother's care, desperately seeking love from his father always to be rejected and belittled whether it was for his love of learning or sensitivity towards his fellow beings.

He felt Faramir's deep love for Boromir and the emptiness his death left, then to his surprise and awe realised he held an equal if not greater share of love in Faramir's heart. He could sense too, Faramir's love for Eowyn.

Here was the mind of a man of great honour and courage, who had fought bravely against the odds during the long struggle against Sauron, but also a mind now dominated by feelings of pain and inferiority.

A terrible fear of madness and of blighting the life of his unborn child as Denethor had blighted his, was one of the many strands of fearful thoughts racing through Faramir's brain, combined with guilt over what had happened to Eomer and the conviction he had lost all the love he had gained from his wife and the King.

Aragorn felt humbled by Faramir's love and loyalty towards himself and amazed that Faramir felt no trace of anger or resentment towards him. With a shock he realised that though Faramir freely gave unconditional love, receiving it was a concept quite alien to him.

He could see now that Faramir had set almost impossibly high standards for himself and his perceived failure to live up to them, had destroyed what little self esteem he had when events had spun out of his control and sent his world crashing at his feet.

So many things that had puzzled Aragorn were now all too clear to him. He focussed his energies on projecting his own interpretation of the fight with Eomer into Faramir's troubled mind.

At last Faramir also started to experience Aragorn's thoughts.

Initially he wanted to break away from the power of such a mind, but now the link was created, it was too strong to break.

He could see his Sovereign's childhood at Rivendell, happy but with a sense of isolation, as a human amongst Elves and then becoming even more isolated as Elrond discovered his foster son's love for Arwen.

Faramir then glimpsed with some surprise the many years of great hardship that Aragorn had endured in his struggle to protect Middle Earth.
This was a mind full of great heroism and nobility, but most of all brimming full of love, including his devotion to Arwen and Eldarion, a special affection for the Hobbits and also a great love for his Steward, who to Faramir's amazement was dearer to him even than Eomer or his other companions from the Ring War.

He could now perceive clearly the terrible guilt over all that had happened to him as result of a simple command misinterpreted and also that he blamed Eomer for starting the fight rather than him. He was aware too now of Aragorn's desperate fight to save him, freely risking his own life for his.

He clearly saw too the loneliness of kingship and a yearning for the simple, brotherly companionship they had previously shared.

Humbled and amazed, Faramir had to draw away, like one blinded by the light of the sun. For one so cruelly deprived of love and paternal bonding, as he had been most of his life, the experience of was overwhelming in its intensity, beauty and wonder.

"Be free now of your burdens, my friend!" Aragorn said gently." Is there anything you would ask me?" Although he could still sense Faramir's thoughts, some matters were best spoken aloud.

"I have not forfeited your love and your trust then?"

"You could no more do so than my own son. I value your friendship far too highly to ever cast it aside. I love you for yourself not for what you do or do not achieve." Aragorn reassured him, saddened that the younger man's upbringing, made him feel so insecure that he felt love had to be earned rather than freely given.

"I love you too!" Faramir whispered, "You are the father I wanted and never had !"

Covering his face with his hands, the Steward wept, the first true healing tears since the day Eomer attacked him.

All his life he had been taught that weeping and desiring to be held and comforted were shameful weaknesses, but the Thought Bond now reassured him, he was permitted to accept the fatherly comfort that only Aragorn could provide. He mutely reached out towards him in a silent plea to be held in the fatherly embrace he had denied himself over these last months and desperately needed.

The King, his own eyes brimming, drew him close and simply held him with the same love and tenderness he usually reserved for his infant son until his tears were spent.

"Thank you, Aragorn. You have given me such a wonderful gift," Faramir said at last, looking Aragorn straight in the eye for the first time since that fateful day." I understand now. I did not know, I thought… I have been so foolish! You almost gave your life for me and I never knew it!"

" That was the one thing I did not want to burden you with, yet there must be no more concealment. What I did, I did gladly as I could not bear to lose you. From now on we will very easily be able to bond like this again. It is your birthright to experience it." Aragorn said quietly, still overwhelmed by Faramir's generosity of spirit towards him. "Now forgive yourself as I know you have forgiven Eowyn and myself, little though I merit it!"

" There is nothing to forgive, Aragorn," Faramir said quietly," I have never blamed you, you only did what you had to prevent Eomer's men attacking yours and maybe all out war." He pressed a kiss on his Sovereign's brow to underline his words

"Is it too late to be healed?" Faramir asked longingly. He desperately wanted to live now, to continue to serve his King and be a loving husband to Eowyn and father to his child.. But he
could feel himself growing weaker by the moment as the emotion of the Thought Bond drained away his last meagre reserves of strength.

T B C

A/N

A very big thank you to all my readers for your much appreciated comments. I have endeavoured to update quickly to show my appreciation.

I assure my readers, I would never write slash, it being quite contrary to Tolkien's ethos. Faramir's prison experiences were based on real life horrors publicised in the literature of organisations like Amnesty and the Medical Foundation.

I do indeed intend to cover Mahrod's trial and hope my readers are interested.

My apologies for the shortness of this chapter but it seemed a convenient place to break. The Thought Bond did stretch my powers of imagination to the limits, I can only hope my readers enjoyed it.

I give more detail of Faramir's childhood in "Shadow and Thought" Chapters 20 and 22.
A Time to Heal

Chapter Notes

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; Ecclesiastes 3.3

Faramir sighed resignedly as he felt himself growing weaker. He doubted that even Aragorn’s skills could help him now. At least if he were to die, he would now do so comforted by his King in the knowledge that he was still loved.

"I fear it is too late?" he asked Aragorn again. The King seemed lost in thought.

"While you live, it is never too late!" Aragorn replied adamantly, smiling at him "I was just thinking, how best I could help you! I would first need to see just where you are hurting now that you are awake, bathe you with water to which athelas has been added, which should ease both your bruises and lighten your soul, then use a mixture of healing, salves and massage. Would you agree to that? You might find the first part unpleasant but the rest should not be."

Faramir nodded sighing with relief, while chiding himself inwardly for doubting Aragorn's abilities;" I trust you, so please do everything you need to." he replied. He then blanched, as a twinge in his bruised hip reminded him that he would have to remove his clothing.

"It should not be so uncomfortable for you this time," Aragorn soothed, sensing his qualms "The Thought Bond should make it much easier for you to relax. I want to make this as comfortable for you as possible, but you must tell me at once if I am hurting you and you want me to stop. It is time to help you now in the way you want."

The King called to the Guard outside to fetch a basin of water, which he placed on the fire to heat. He then lifted Faramir on the bedroll.

Determined to get this over with, Faramir immediately and without prompting tried to undress but was too weak to do so unaided.

Wordlessly Aragorn assisted him, tactfully protecting his modesty with a towel He forced himself to stifle the involuntary cry of dismay that rose to his lips on seeing the now darkening bruises spreading across his Steward's side and chest and leg.

Faramir was all too aware of his emaciated and scarred frame and also knew all too well that he could have been healed weeks ago in the comfort of his own rooms rather than causing the King to come after him and seek shelter in this cold and miserable hovel while Eowyn sat and worried about him in Minas Tirith.
The candlelight harshly illuminated his stick thin body, with every rib clearly visible through the wasted flesh. It cast harsh shadows round the small room, making Aragorn appear to tower over him like a giant.

Faramir struggled to relax and stop shivering as he fought against the urge to defensively cross his arms, telling himself he was foolish to feel so ill at ease.

"Put this blanket over you! "Aragorn said sympathetically, tucking it round him "I can work under it."

He did consider it probable though, that the mental bonding would soon remove all shyness apart from natural modesty between them, for once the soul is laid bare, the body seems as little by comparison.

Thank you .I should be warm once you start, " Faramir replied, clutching it to him gratefully.

Aragorn nodded as he settled on the floor beside him, his long sensitive fingers gently prodding the new bruises disfiguring his Steward's chest and side, only properly able to judge their severity or otherwise now Faramir was awake. His ribs were painful and made an alarming grinding noise when touched, but Faramir barely flinched, so gentle was the probing. His hip and the length of one leg were black and blue and his ankle twisted. That was just the recent injuries.

Of the older ones, only the bruising on the lower part of his belly and the groin area seemed to have completely disappeared, the other injuries still being all too obvious, especially the still livid scars and the amount of swelling just beneath his ribs.

Faramir flinched and bit back a cry when the area was touched, albeit very gently.

"Is that where it pains you most?" Aragorn asked.

Faramir nodded "I still remember the agony as the drunkard ground his boot into me there until I fainted from the pain. My arm is painful where Eomer's sword sliced into it. Then my heart thumps and races all the time too."

He flinched at the memory, as this was the first time he had spoken in any detail about what had happened.

The King gently felt the hurts ascertaining how deep they lay from the amount of pressure needed before Faramir showed any sign of discomfort.

"I think you still have bruising deep inside, maybe even some scarring as the area still feels swollen." he sighed, secretly worried about just how severe the damage was, "I will do all I can to ease it."

"How do you manage to be so gentle?" Faramir asked curiously. "It felt different a few days ago!"

" I am using some Elven massage techniques as well as feeling for the hurts, now that I know you want my help." Aragorn explained with a smile."

"Thank you, it is much less painful this way," Faramir replied gratefully

"You have been fortunate this time!" Aragorn sighed with relief," One broken and two cracked ribs, a sprained ankle and some nasty bruises but no great damage has been done today."

"I will not be so foolish again, I could easily have broken my neck!" Faramir finished the thought.
"Obviously the Valar smiled on you today as when I found you, I feared every bone in your body could be broken!" Aragorn replied.

Satisfied now he finally knew the true extent of Faramir's hurts, Aragorn took some athelas leaves from his pack and breathed on them, before crumbling them in the now warmed water. "Can you sit up now?" he asked Faramir.

"I think so."

"Come nearer the fire then, you must not get chilled!" Aragorn said, moving the bedroll as he spoke.

Already he felt a little stronger, as if Aragorn's mere touch contained some power to heal and calm.

Forcing himself to discard the blanket, Faramir expected to feel very uncomfortable and exposed with just a towel for covering. Yet he found the whole experience no more daunting than when they had shared the Elven mud bath, so complete again was his trust in his King and healer.

Aragorn began the healing by bathing Faramir with the athelas water; beginning with his face and working down his shoulders and back then across the badly bruised chest and still tender belly, then finishing with his limbs, paying especial attention to the bruised hip and damaged ankle. He found himself flinching in sympathy at just how much pain his unfortunate Steward had endured.

The wholesome scent of the herb combined with its slightly astringent quality gave the whole process an almost ritualistic feel and Faramir felt his soul was being cleansed as much as his body as all the shame, misery and pain of the last weeks felt as if it were being washed away.

The green gem on Aragorn's breast glowed in the firelight and Faramir bowed his head in acceptance of the ritual purification he could sense taking place. Not only did he feel cleansed of the past but also the throbbing in his injured ribs and side grew less. The King then fetched a towel and gently dried him.

"I did this for you the day you were attacked to wash away all traces of the prison and ease your pain." Aragorn told him while he helped him to don his drawers and breeches again after applying some comfrey and marigold salve to his bruised leg.

"I feel better to know that," Faramir replied.

"Would you prefer just firelight for the healing and massage?" Aragorn enquired.

Faramir nodded and the King blew out most of the candles. Almost immediately he found himself recalling the night at the Hunting Lodge when Aragorn had used similar treatments. How beautiful Eowyn had looked that night! He smiled at the memory.

Faramir sighed contentedly and finally relaxed completely.

The King sat holding his hands a few inches above his injuries and pouring his healing energies into the now highly receptive Faramir.

The mental link between them was still strong, that there was no need for words as Aragorn could sense that Faramir now greatly desired what care he could bestow while in his turn Aragorn yearned to reach out to his Steward.

The healing was less draining than usual for Aragorn as Faramir was unusually receptive to his powers in his current state and a wave of pure energy flowed between them, as the King freely
poured out the gift of Elendil's heirs upon his Steward.

Faramir no longer shivered, and was glad he had discarded the blanket, as he now sought to feel the healing warmth emanating from the King's hands.

Aragorn first placed his hands over Faramir's heart and felt the beat grow stronger and more regular even as he did so.

It amazed him just how quickly the damaged organ seemed to be healing and he guided Faramir's hand to feel it too. They smiled joyfully at each other as Faramir's strength grew and some colour slowly returned to his pallid features.

The King then applied a salve of comfrey, hypericin and rosehips to the many hurts Instead of flinching away Faramir leaned towards him acceptingly, burying his head against Aragorn's shoulder as he tenderly rubbed the salve into the cruel stripes on his back

Aragorn's warm, gentle fingers moved down and very thoroughly yet gently massaged the scarred back and shoulders and then turned Faramir around to concentrate on his chest and belly,

Faramir remained resting his head against his King's shoulder in a gesture of complete love and trust as he finally allowed the damaged muscle in his arm to be tended, followed by his shoulders, neck and head.

The long sensitive fingers tenderly eased his many hurts and seemed to be wipe away the pain of the past weeks as they kneaded the damaged muscle and scar tissue before making relaxing circular movements with his fingertips, which felt as if they were erasing the hurts in his very soul rather than just his aching muscles.

The gentle soothing strokes continued until Faramir was almost asleep, relaxed now as a contented cat. For the first time in weeks he felt very little pain either in mind or in body.

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you for all your kind and much appreciated reviews. I have now passed the 800 mark for the first time ever and am thrilled at your continued interest.

I am pleased you enjoyed the Thought Bond and hope you like the healing too.

I based the Thought Bond on a mixture of the 'Mind Meld' from 'Star Trek' (Though that could be between a Vulcan and any other species and forced) and the spontaneous telepathy that often occurs between close friends and kin.

I think every fan has to have their own ideas who will be Aragorn's best friends when he becomes King. By the time of this story, Gandalf and Frodo have left Middle Earth, and Legolas seems closer to Gimli than Aragorn. If Tolkien gives any hints they seem to point towards Eomer.
Aragorn completed his ministrations, satisfied that he had done all he could for the time being to help his Steward.

Faramir opened his eyes, aware of the cessation of the lovely soothing touch he had so been enjoying.

"I have done all I can for now," Aragorn told him, "I shall need to continue treating you for some time yet to heal you completely, though, and the ligaments in your ankle are torn, which need time to mend, though I have eased the pain as best I can. You need to keep taking the herbs for a while too."

Faramir slowly stretched and found already he could move much more easily and the pain, which had tormented him for two long months, was almost gone.

"Let me help you dress now. I will leave your ribs unbound until you need to travel, as I think you will be more comfortable that way." Aragorn said, helping Faramir into his shirt and tunic as he spoke.

He felt delighted at the change he could now see in his Steward. Already he looked more like his old self as his features relaxed and the colour returned to his pallid cheeks.

"Thank you! How can I ever repay you for your kindness to me!" Faramir exclaimed with heartfelt gratitude while he looked at his King with something near veneration in his eyes. He reached out his arms and drew his friend close.

Delighted to have the old Faramir back, Aragorn returned the gesture, and then placed his hands on his head in blessing. "Be thou blessed and healed! It gladdens my heart to be able to help you!" he said smiling. "Now are you hungry?"

"I believe I am!" Faramir replied, somewhat surprised. He had almost forgotten the sensation of having a healthy appetite.

Aragorn relit the candles and then called to the guards outside to bring in the provisions he had brought, though when he had ordered them packed, he had hardly dared to hope that Faramir would so soon be willing to share them with him.
As the Guards brought in a large wicker basket, Faramir recognised a familiar face.

"Damrod! It is good to see you, old friend!" he exclaimed, smiling with pleasure.

"And you, sir!" Damrod found it hard not to stare in blank amazement at the change that had come over his former Captain in the past few hours. "It is good to see you looking better, sir!" he exclaimed.

"You have Damrod to thank that we found you so quickly, I think he deserves both a promotion and a pay rise, do you not think?" Aragorn said, clapping Damrod on the shoulder warmly.

"I do indeed!" Faramir agreed while Damrod and his companion served them with a simple but hearty meal of bread, cheese and fruit, washed down with a fine wine.

It was growing late and they went outside to answer nature's call, then afterwards pausing to speak to the Guards, sitting around their campfire.

Faramir found he could hobble along quite well, either by grasping Aragorn's arm or using a stout branch cut from a nearby tree as a walking cane.

He hobbled over to pat Iavas and assure himself that she was being well cared for and then together with the King bade the Guard on Sentry Duty outside a peaceful night.

They found that in their absence the Guards had laid out bedding in the hovel and built up the fire for the night.

"May I stay beside you tonight?" Faramir asked shyly, wanting to be near to the one who had served as his anchor, yet not wanting to be thought childish. Now he no longer felt tainted, he craved human contact after so many weeks of shunning his loved ones and repressing his need for affection. After the trauma of the day's events, he sought the comfort of Aragorn's presence nearby.

"A sensible idea as the air is chill." Aragorn replied, sensing his need for reassurance, and arranging their make shift bedding side by side.

Even fully clothed, they needed to lay their now dried cloaks on top of the blankets for extra warmth. They settled down for the night watching the fire as it bathed the hut in a comforting red glow.

"I am glad you found me." Faramir said, nuzzling his head against Aragorn's broad shoulder, knowing he had been lost in more ways than one. He knew now the King would not push him away like his father had done so often.

"So am I." Aragorn replied, huddling protectively close to the younger man he had come to love as his own child, and placing a paternal kiss on his brow. "You are far too precious to lose, to me, to Eowyn and Gondor!"

Faramir was transported back to a time when as a young child he used to creep into bed with Boromir for comfort during a storm.

It was a chilly and damp November night, yet Faramir felt warm for the first time in weeks as well as being almost free of pain despite his new injuries. He fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

Aragorn lay awake for a while listening to his companion's quiet breathing. He found himself blinking back tears of relief. Today he had come so close to losing his Steward and had dreaded nothing more than returning to tell Eowyn she was a widow. Soon he could restore her husband to
her, sound of mind and healing fast in body too for Faramir was recovering faster than he had dared hope. After the treatment for scarring, he hoped he would be whole again. The King rejoiced.

He slept fitfully, constantly feeling Faramir's brow for signs of fever, which seemed all too likely after the day's events. To his relief, there was none as yet and the Steward slept peacefully, his head still resting on the King's shoulder.

Several hours passed and Aragorn eventually fell into a deep sleep, exhausted after the day's events.

A choking cry from Faramir roused him, jolting him fully awake. Alarmed, he realised his Steward was struggling to breathe.

He swiftly lit a candle from the fire and eased Faramir into a sitting position.

"What is wrong?" he asked, feeling Faramir's forehead. He was now slightly feverish to the touch.

"The baby! Hurts to breath!" Faramir gasped.

"Let me see." Faramir nodded his consent as Aragorn anxiously lifted his tunic and shirt to uncover the damaged ribs and pressed his ear against the bruised area on Faramir's chest, fearful that one of the cracked ribs had pierced his lung, but everything appeared normal, if anything the bruising looked less angry than it had done earlier. Even his heartbeat, although rapid from his agitation, remained strong and regular.

"Take shallow breaths!" he advised the Steward as he gently felt the cracked ribs with one hand while with the other he covered Faramir's mouth to stop him from over breathing. "All will be well, trust me! Your lungs are sound; there is nought to fear. I will not leave you."

Calmed by his voice, Faramir began to relax.

Satisfied, nothing serious was wrong, Aragorn removed his hand then fetched the salve and applied it, before pulling Faramir's shirt down again. He sat beside him, rubbing his back and murmuring soft words of comfort, while waiting for the Steward's breathing and heartbeat to return to normal.

Were you dreaming?" Aragorn asked, once Faramir seemed calmer.

"Yes," he replied, shuddering as he recalled his nightmare, "I was with Eowyn and our child was being born and the midwife told her to take deep breaths. The child was born but it did not breathe and I was weeping! Then the pain woke me. It was all so vivid!"

"What you have experienced is commonplace for those with damaged ribs. It hurts to breathe too deeply and you fear you cannot breathe at all I sedated you when you were beaten to prevent that happening." Aragorn explained, trying to reassure him, yet filled with alarm.

His thoughts were still closely attuned to Faramir's and he sensed his Steward was having one of the premonitions he was prone to. He knew from experience they tended to occur when they were in close proximity to each other and heightened emotions generated these fey visions, both factors that applied tonight.

"I feel such a fool but the dream was so vivid!"

"How could it be true?" Aragorn asked, questioning himself as much as Faramir, "Whoever heard of a father being present when a baby is born? You have a slight fever, which must have helped
prompt your dream. I will mix you some herbs to ease you. Then you need to rest. You are much better but you need time to recover completely"

Aragorn soothed his Steward while he placed water on the fire to boil. He then fetched two mugs and made two cups of tea, using some Pippin had sent from the Shire. To Faramir's cup he added rosehips, catnip and valerian.

Handing Faramir a cup, he settled beside him, coaxing him to drink the tea and telling him the latest news the Hobbits had sent from the Shire until Faramir became sleepy when the valerian took effect.

Aragorn settled his Steward under the blankets, propping him up with extra pillows to make it easier for him to breathe.

"Thank you, Mellon Nin," Faramir said gratefully, "Do you really think that Eowyn is well?"

"Why should she not be?" Aragorn replied, "I left her Arwen's care. She would call Ioreth at once if she were worried, though I see no reason she should be as she senses your child is strong. It is not due yet for several weeks in any case."

"I should not have left her!" Faramir sighed.

"You were not yourself and you will soon be together again." Seeing that Faramir was still trembling slightly as he fretted over his wife and unborn child, the King placed a comforting arm around him.

"Peace, Mellon Nin, come sleep, you are safe now!" he murmured, as Faramir settled his head again against the broad shoulder and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Faramir slept; comforted his friend was close beside him. The King however, remained wakeful, hoping fervently that Faramir's dream was but a figment of a fevered mind, as it was far too soon for Eowyn's child to born yet. He wished fervently that Arwen were here to offer him some comfort and her shrewd insights as to whether Faramir were suffering a mere feverish nightmare.

Mentally, he shook himself, convinced his wife would chide him for indulging in such overwrought imaginings without foundation.

They slept until late the next morning. Much to Aragorn's relief, Faramir's fever had subsided and he was recovering well but still frail from weeks of ill health followed from the trauma of the previous day's events and a restless night.

"I am sorry for waking you last night!" Faramir exclaimed sheepishly," I should not have reacted to a mere nightmare as if I were a small child!"

"Do not worry about it!" Aragorn replied with a rueful grin, " I can react just as badly at times, especially if I have to sleep alone in those enclosed stone walls of the Citadel!"

He went outside and discovered it to be one of those rare November days when the sun shines from a blue sky and the mist hovers over the trees with an almost ethereal quality. Brooding over nightmares seemed absurd on a day like this!

Even before examining him, Aragorn decided it was best that they stay here for at least another day. They had sufficient provisions and he felt Faramir needed more time to recover away from the public gaze.

Also, if he were honest with himself, he was in need of rest almost as badly as the past weeks had
taken a heavy toll on him too. It would be good if they could ride home together as if returning from a hunting excursion and reassure the people that their Steward was on the road to recovery.

It was good too to be able to enjoy Faramir's company again as they were kindred souls with much in common. Aragorn had missed him dreadfully during his illness, for much as he adored Arwen; he needed Faramir's companionship too. His wife's analogy to love being like a rainbow had never seemed more apt, as he knew now more than ever that he needed all the different hues to feel complete.

He counted himself truly blessed to have a wife, a son, a friend akin to a brother and Legolas, Gimli, the Hobbits, Eowyn and Eomer to surround him with their love.

The thought of Eomer made him sigh though, when he thought of his friend's crippled condition and stubbornness. He could only hope that he would eventually come to his senses once the effects of the head injury had abated.

Today though, he was determined to enjoy a respite from the cares of state in Faramir's company.

Later that morning, when his wounds were tended, Faramir was relaxed and seemed untroubled at baring his injuries in broad daylight.

The King was delighted at how well Faramir was healing for as well as the bruises healing fast the Steward was much less sore when touched, though he was still worried by the painful and swollen patch under his ribs. He bathed his hurts once more in water in which athelas had been steeped, then applied salves to the injuries.

Aragorn used his healing powers again as well as Elven massage, which seemed to be working very well as Faramir was now so responsive.

They spent a quiet but pleasant day, sitting outside in the winter sunshine all afternoon and chatting to Damrod who showed a keen interest in the part Elven healing had played in his former Captain's recovery.

Faramir had also developed a hearty appetite much to Aragorn's relief and when that night, he settled to sleep beside his friend, he was untroubled by dreams and slept soundly, only once waking to complain that the King was snoring.

By noon the next day, Aragorn felt that Faramir was well enough to travel and the Steward was ready now to return to Minas Tirith, as he felt much stronger and was eager to be reunited with Eowyn.

The King had just given the order to break camp to the Guards when they heard the sound a horse approaching at speed.

Aragorn and Faramir, thinking it was just a passing traveller, ignored the rider's approach, as Aragorn was intent on strapping Faramir's ribs prior to riding home.

Faramir was just donning his shirt again when Damrod rushed into the hovel crying, "Pardon, my Lords for disturbing you but you are needed at once!"

TBC

A very big thank you for all your much appreciated kind reviews. Here is a speedy update to show my appreciation. I am pleased you liked the healing chapter. I reworked it several times.

I am in the process of writing a sequel in which Faramir is strong and hope my Muse will
cooperate to complete it! He has been strong under torture in all my stories but I would like to explore different aspects of his and Aragorn’s characters.

This story will return to Eomer, Eowyn and Arwen and I hope my readers will continue to follow it to its conclusion, as only one of the plot threads has been resolved and I still have a few twists up my sleeve!

My dream is 1,000 reviews but that of course depends entirely on my readers continued enjoyment!
As Flies to Wanton Boys

Chapter Notes

These Characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has been or will be made from it.

Warning – This chapter contains material, which some readers may find distressing.

Special thanks to Lily for her help with this and the subsequent few chapters.

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport."
William Shakespeare - King Lear

Aragorn he leapt to his feet and hurried outside. Hampered by the sprained ankle, Faramir could only sit and wait to find out what was happening.

He pulled on his tunic, thinking that if a messenger had come on official business, he should at least aim to look presentable.

Outside the hovel, a bedraggled and rain soaked Eowyn was struggling to dismount from Windfola and refusing all offers of help from the Guards.

Aragorn waved them back as he approached her. "What is wrong, Eowyn?" he asked, his eyes full of concern. "Why are you here instead of with Arwen in Minas Tirith?"

"The messenger told me where you had found Faramir and that he was still alive but nothing more, so I felt I should come to see what was happening. They said he fell from his horse, so I feared it was badly hurt." she replied, while Aragorn lifted her from the horse. "Then when you did not return, I became more and more worried. But now I think the baby is coming, the pains started on the way here!"

She bit back a cry and would have fallen, had Aragorn not held her. He sighed inwardly at her folly, but this was not the time to berate her.

"I know I shouldn't have ridden so far in my condition, but I was so worried," she said, reading his expression. "How is Faramir?"

"Much better than he has been since the day he was attacked." Aragorn told her, as he carried her inside." He fell from his horse and sprained his ankle and cracked some ribs, but after sharing a Thought Bond with me, he allowed me to heal him and is recovering well, though it will take time for him to heal completely. His heart is strengthening and the beat is almost back to normal. His appetite has returned too."

"The Valar be praised!" Eowyn exclaimed momentarily forgetting her own plight until another
contraction hit her. "Oh why was I such a fool to endanger our child, it is far too soon for it to be born, it should not be for at least another month!"

"I will do all I can." Aragorn promised, though inwardly dismayed at the turn events had taken. "Though I know very little about childbirth, it being entirely a women's matter.

Damrod came out to see what was happening and Aragorn thought quickly. This man was native to the area and every village had a wise woman who would attend those in childbirth. It was doubtful such a woman would be a skilled midwife, but it would be better than nothing as there was no time to fetch Ioreth, as despite his limited knowledge, he knew when the contractions were as frequent as Eowyn's, the birth was imminent.

"You know this area well, Damrod. Are there any nearby villages?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire, the village where I was born is but a few leagues from here. The people have returned since Sauron's defeat. The land is fertile and good for farming in these parts."

"Then take Lord Faramir's horse and ride there as fast as you can and bring the village wise woman here! " he ordered "Or failing that any woman who has attended another in childbirth. Go quickly!"

"Yes, Sire!" Damrod was already saddling Iavas as he spoke. Apart from Roheryn, the chestnut mare was the swiftest horse present and the most fully rested. From the way she tossed her head, she was obviously eager for some exercise.

Aragorn carried Eowyn inside and carefully set her down on the bedroll, which fortunately had not yet been packed away.

Faramir hobbled anxiously towards them. "Eowyn what has happened?" he enquired anxiously, dropping on his knees beside her and drawing her close to place a tender kiss on her lips.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, reaching out for his hand. "I came after you and I've endangered our child!"

"I should not have run away like that, My Love, I am sorry too."

"This is no time for recriminations!" Aragorn said firmly, unearthing a clean shirt and some blankets from the packs. "The baby is on the way! Faramir, help your Lady change into that dry shirt and wrap a blanket round her.

He tactfully turned his back and busied himself sorting out his healing supplies, to give her what privacy he could.

Faramir looked about to faint. "The baby now?" he gasped.

"I am no expert on the subject but it seems like it," the King replied soberly without turning around.

"You must do something, help her!" Faramir pleaded.

"I spent the first part of my life with Elves who had not had children for the past thousand years or so, the remainder of the time either as a soldier or with the Rangers, so I know little more than you do, I am afraid." Aragorn informed him gently, wishing fervently that he had the required expertise. Not that it had ever entered his head to wish to study such a delicate female subject!

"But you are the most skilled Healer there is!" Faramir protested.
"For wounds and fevers maybe, but childbirth is a woman's affair. I have sent Damrod to fetch a woman from the nearest village to help." The King replied, trying hard to keep calm, aware his friends were relying on him.

"I would be glad of any help you could give as I can tell you what to do, Aragorn. I am not troubled about propriety at a time like this and you are as a brother to me." Eowyn said surprisingly calmly.

Faramir looked at her slightly shocked yet admiring of her courage, for a Gondorian lady would surely be having hysterics by now at being in such a situation.

Eowyn had discarded her wet clothes without needing his help and was now clad in one of the shirts she had packed for Faramir. It looked decent enough as it reached almost to her knees. She covered the bedroll with the clean blanket and spread another over herself.

Another contraction hit her, this time so severe that she screamed. "Help me please!" she begged. "Save my baby!" She was now starting to panic and sweat dripped down her face.

"I can ease your pain a little." Aragorn said and knelt at her side, holding one hand a few inches above her swollen belly while with the other rubbing circles on her brow in an Elven relaxation technique.

He had resigned himself to the possibility of delivering the baby, despite the dire impropriety of the situation, as he would do anything to help his friends, though he would rather fight Orcs any day! "Faramir, hold her hand, I need to boil some water," he told his Steward White as a sheet, Faramir did as he was bidden.

While the water boiled, Aragorn spread Eowyn's clothes by the fire to dry. It had rained heavily during the last few hours and everything from her heavy cloak to her shift was sodden.

Returning to Eowyn's bedside, he washed his hands and then bathed her brow.

"I have to push!" she told him.

"Well you had better do so, you know far more about this than I do!" Aragorn replied, turning almost as pale as Faramir.

"Yes and I know I need to push hard but it is too soon for our baby to survive!" She lamented, dragging herself upright and pacing a few steps before sinking back on the bedroll. "It is too late to do anything thought! It will be born very soon, I know it!"

"I was born too early." Faramir told her, trying to comfort her and becoming calmer now Aragorn had taken charge, "I was tiny but I survived."

Aragorn washed his hands again and slowly rolled up his sleeves, grimly resigned to the fact he must deliver the baby as best he could. He had once helped a horse bring a foal into the world and could only hope that this would be much the same.

"Can you see the head yet?" Eowyn asked, breathing hard between contractions.

Aragorn blushed as he prepared to investigate.

"Let me go, how dare you bring me here, Master Damrod!" An indignant female voice was suddenly heard outside.
Aragorn smiled with relief. "I do believe Damrod has brought help!" he exclaimed, "Be patient, Eowyn, I will go and bring the midwife to you!"

"Babies come when they want to!" Eowyn retorted as Aragorn rushed outside.

A gnarled and formidable looking lady who appeared even older than Ioreth was struggling indignantly as Damrod lifted her from Iavas' back.

"She wouldn't believe that she was needed to deliver a baby." Damrod explained, "So I just scooped her up and brought her here."

"We apologise, madam, but we urgently need your help. You will be well recompensed for your trouble" Aragorn told her, grasping her arm and shepherding her inside. She relaxed somewhat on hearing Eowyn scream, confirming the veracity of Damrod's story. "Are you an experienced midwife?"

"She is," Damrod called from outside. "She delivered my sister and most of the other babies in the village where I grew up."

The old woman was already washing her hands in the basin the King had been using.

Aragorn and Faramir discreetly turned away and studied the wall intently while she pulled the blanket aside to examine Eowyn.

"Everything will be alright now, Dearie." the old woman soothed, "I'm Dame Enye and have delivered as many bairns as I've had hot dinners! I've only just got here in time, I see, now breathe deeply and push hard!"

Aragorn placed a reassuring hand on Faramir's shoulder as his wife's screams rent the air. "We will wait outside now," he told Eowyn.

"Please stay, don't leave me!" she begged.

"This is most improper but one of you needs to support her, she should have her mother or sister with her!" Dame Enye said. "Who is the father?"

"I am." Faramir said, trying vainly to stand on his damaged ankle.

"A fine lot of use you will be!" Dame Enye snorted, "Your friend here will have to do!"

"He is a Healer," Faramir explained.

"It still highly improper but he will have to do so long as the husband consents?" Dame Enye retorted.

"I do. I trust him both with my wife and child's lives as well as my own." Faramir said without hesitation.

Eowyn was struggling into a squatting position, so Aragorn positioned himself behind her and while he supported her with one hand, rubbed her back with the other, focussing his gaze on the back of her neck.

He had to admit that, as a healer he was curious about what was happening, but this was his best friend's wife! He could only hope to live up to Faramir's touching faith in him.

"The head is coming, one more big push!" Dame Enye instructed,
Faramir gave a choked cry keeled over in a dead faint. Aragorn hesitated, uncertain whom in most urgent need of his ministrations.

"Concentrate on what you are doing, you dolt, don't let her fall!" she barked at Aragorn, "Never mind about him, it is commonplace if the father is within earshot. You men take your pleasures with little thought of the consequences!"

Eowyn gathered all her strength for a final push and screamed loudly.

She felt as if she was being torn apart as the baby slid from her body into Dame Enye's waiting hands. To their horror it was bluish tinged, unmoving, and made no sound.

"A little girl." Dame Enye announced. "But I fear she isn't breathing."

Eowyn bust into tears." Save my baby!" she pleaded, " She can't be stillborn, she can't be!"

"I'm sorry, Dearie, there's nothing I can do. It obviously isn't meant to be!" the midwife said sadly.

TBC

A/N A very big thank you to all my readers for all your kind comments and responses, which continues to amaze and delight is a swift update to thank you all.

I can only beg you all to keep reading after this dark chapter, as the story is not over yet.

Some of you already have guessed what was going to happen!

I do indeed hope to include Elbeth in a sequel.

Eomer is still recovering (and moping) in Minas Tirith.

I like to make my characters as true to life as possible as it is hard to identify with characters that are never tired, hungry, in pain or anything else we do or feel!

I believe Tolkien based Aragorn's use of athelas on a legend in which Charlemagne cured people of a plague using Milk Thistle after a vision!

I have just noticed that this story now has more chapters and comments from my much appreciated readers than "Shadow and Thought" which I never expected to beat!
A few lines are taken directly from Tolkien.

"When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,

Thy touch can call us back to life again;

Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:

Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green."

John MacLeod Campbell Crum (1872-1958)

"Give her to me!" Aragorn demanded urgently.

Dame Enye gaped at this sudden interruption; "The cord will need cutting first and I can't see what the hurry is as the poor child is dead!" she protested.

"Cut the cord then and be quick! There is no time to lose!" Aragorn snapped, thrusting his hunting knife towards the old woman.

"I've got to tie it first or the poor woman will bleed to death as would a living child. You men know nothing at all!" Dame Enye said grumpily, without making any move to do as she was bidden.

"Do as I say, woman and make haste!" Aragorn replied in his most commanding tone.

"Who do you think you are to speak to me like that?" Dame Elan said indignantly though she did as she was bidden without further argument. "Have you no respect for your elders?"
Ignoring her, Aragorn snatched up the pitifully small and lifeless infant and stood with it by the roaring fire. He cleared its nose and mouth with his finger before gently pinching its nose and blowing into its tiny blue tinged mouth.

He could hear Eowyn weeping pitifully a few feet away while the midwife tried vainly to console her.

It seemed a hopeless task and yet how could he not try his uttermost to save this child? What would it do to Faramir's fragile health if he were to lose his daughter like this? And what of Eowyn? She had been so courageous these last months. Was she to lose everything through one foolish act?

Not only was this babe the child of his dearest friend but also he sensed had too that it could have a great destiny ahead when she was conceived. She was not meant to die at birth.

The infant still showed no sign of life and Eowyn's heartrending sobs of "I killed my baby!" rent the air. Dame Enye could only murmer soothing words and settle her back on the bedroll and cover her decently with the blanket.

As well as trying to breathe for the baby, Aragorn slapped its back and rubbed the waxy skin vigorously.

Faramir groaned, gradually regaining consciousness and becoming aware of his wife's cries of distress, crawled to Eowyn's side and grasped her hand, trying vainly to comfort her as the tragedy of what had happened dawned on him.

"How can you ever forgive me?" Eowyn choked. "It is my fault our baby is dead!"

"This would never have happened if I had stayed with you." Faramir lamented, "I am as bad as my father destroying my own offspring!"

"You are wasting your time." Dame Enye informed Aragorn, who was now frantically rubbing the baby's chest, all the while still blowing gently into her mouth.

He ignored her and continued his ministrations; all too aware they seemed doomed to be fruitless.

He turned and looked at his friends, shaking his head sadly. He was a skilled healer but no man could raise the dead.

"Aragorn!" Faramir's cry of anguish tore at his soul. Now that they were Thought Bonded he could actually feel his friend's pain.

"I am sorry but I cannot bring back the dead," he said bleakly.

Jumbled fragments of the prophecies he had heard about himself suddenly began to course though his brain. 'A great doom awaits you, either to rise above the height of all your fathers since the days of Elendil –The dead awaken –Life to the dying in the king's hand lying!' The prophecies did not apply to a situation like this and yet….

A far away look now on his face, as he took an athelas leaf from his pocket, left there in case Faramir needed it again, and breathed on it then crumbled it, hardly aware any more of what he was doing, only that he must.

He placed his hands on the lifeless child. "Come to me, little one, I command to come to where love awaits you!" he called.
The firelight shone on his brow, making him look as if he were crowned with living flame as he sank to his knees and poured out his life energy into the child.

"Whoever does he think he is? He is mad, quite mad!" Dame Enye muttered disapprovingly, totally uncomprehending of what Aragorn was trying to do.

Faramir, seeing the look of rapt concentration on the King’s face, realised what was happening and knelt beside him.

He found himself hardly daring breathe as the awareness dawned upon him that he was witnessing a miracle.

The baby suddenly jerked and gave a strangled cry. Aragorn looked on the verge of collapse yet continued rubbing the tiny chest and back. The infant started to take more confident breaths and the blue tinged skin gradually turned to a healthy pink.

Silently weeping, Faramir returned to his wife's side and took her hand.

Now grey with exhaustion, Aragorn struggled to his feet and carried the baby over to her parents.

"She lives!" he told them, his own eyes full of tears. "I think she has a chance now."

"How can we ever thank you?" Eowyn sobbed, the tears now ones of joy.

"You have saved our daughter, thank you so much, my Lord Envinyatar!" Faramir was almost too overwhelmed to speak. He knew he had witnessed a miracle and not for the first time was awestruck by the powers his friend and King possessed.

He stumbled over to the King and sank to his knees kissing his hands in heartfelt gratitude while gazing at him with complete veneration.

Aragorn smiled at him through his weariness.

Faramir looked away as though blinded by the sun. Having so recently both shared his man’s thoughts and seen just what depths of both power and love he was capable of left him completely overwhelmed.

"Nothing has changed about me, Mellon Nin, I still snore and forget to comb my hair!" Aragorn said gently, sinking down beside his Steward and squeezing his hand, the other still clutching the baby.

He felt completely drained having given so much of his life energy first to Faramir and then to the child, but he could not allow himself to rest yet.

"She needs bathing and clothing!" Dame Enye said, gaping at him open mouthed. "I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen with my own eyes! You must be some sort of magician!"

"Do it then and quickly, she must be kept warm." Aragorn said curtly, forcing himself to stand upright and ignore his weariness.

His large hands still clasped the tiny infant while Dame Enye fetched the water, into which he crumbled another athelas leaf. Together they bathed the tiny girl, who was covered in a waxy substance as well as the detritus of birth. On closer inspection they could see that apart from her eyebrows being very thin, she appeared perfectly formed.

"She needs to be wrapped in something soft and warm." Aragorn said, as Dame Enye dried the
infant. Going to the other side of the room, he pulled off his tunic and undershirt, replaced the tunic and brought the soft garment, still warm from his own body to wrap round the baby.

"That is the royal cipher!" Dame Enye gasped, as she caught sight of the crest lovingly embroidered by Arwen's hands. "You have stolen it from the King, I thought all along you looked a rogue!"

"Madam, I am the King." Aragorn informed her calmly, as he tucked the soft fabric round the crying baby and handed her to Eowyn. Only then did he take a few sips of miruvor from his flask.

The old woman shook her head and could be heard muttering, "That lunatic should be taken to the asylum!"

She busied herself tending to Eowyn, dealing with the afterbirth and bathing her then clothing her in a clean shirt of Faramir's.

Aragorn and Faramir went outside for a few minutes to give Eowyn some privacy. They sat down on a fallen tree trunk, Aragorn resting his weary head in his hands, while Faramir was still too overwhelmed to feel like conversation.

Damrod approached them rather hesitantly before summoning up the courage to ask.

"How is your Lady faring, Lord Faramir? I hope Dame Enye could be of help?"

"She was indeed, Damrod, thank you, I have a little girl and my wife seems well."

Damrod beamed his congratulations before returning to his companions.

As Dame Enye came out to empty a bowl of dirty water, Faramir collected himself sufficiently to enquire; "How is my wife faring now and the baby?"

"They are both doing well." Dame Enye replied, "The child is breathing strongly now and as for your wife, no bleeding or tearing. She will make a full recovery. An exceptionally strong young woman! Who is she?"

"Eowyn, lady of Rohan, Slayer of the Witch King Princess of Ilithien and wife to the Lord Steward of Gondor." Faramir replied.

"You should not jest in such matters, sir! It was bad enough your friend claiming to be the King!"

"Have you not heard the King has the hands of a healer?" Faramir challenged.

"I am telling the truth, madam. Damrod, come here!" he called. When the man came towards him he said, "I believe you know Damrod, Dame Enye?"

"Indeed I do, since before he could walk. A fine healthy baby he was too!"

"Damrod, tell the good lady who I am! "Aragorn commanded with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

"This is King Elessar Telcontar, High King of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor, Heir of Elendil and wielder of the Sword Reforged. The other gentleman is Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ilithien, under whom I had the honour to serve for many years." Damrod announced with a flourish and a bow to the King.

This time it was Dame Enye's turn to faint. Aragorn sighed, he was beginning to wonder if the
best way to dispel a rebel army might be to simply to ride up and announce his identity, as it seemed to have such a strange effect on people!

TBC

A very big thank you to all my reviewers for your kind comments and continued interest. You are greatly appreciated.

A/N The word "dolt" is found classic literature such as the works of Shakespeare and Dickens.

I always feel Eowyn can be somewhat impulsive as she did ride out to battle despite being ordered to stay behind.

You are very good at guessing that Aragorn's presence will save the baby!
Dame Enye blinked and opened her eyes to find that Aragorn was bending over her, a cup of water in his hand.

"Drink this!" he said gently.

"You should have told me you were the King rather than going and frightening a respectable woman like that!" Dame Enye protested in between gulps of water.

Aragorn found himself temporarily rendered speechless by the old woman's audacity.

"You should be in your palace, not gallivanting around with a heavily pregnant woman!" the old midwife scolded, "Whatever were you thinking of?"

Faramir opened his mouth to speak but Aragorn answered first, not wishing his Steward's misfortunes to be the talk of half Gondor, which he feared they could easily become, if Dame Enye knew the truth as the woman could easily be Ioreth's twin sister, if garrulousness were a mark of kinship!

"We were on a hunting trip," Aragorn explained rather lamely after a moment's thought.

Dame Enye snorted, "Well I hope you have more sense in future.

"What is happening?" Eowyn called from within.

"I will go to her," Faramir, with some help from Aragorn, struggled to his feet and hobbled inside.

"We will bear your advice in mind, my good lady!" Aragorn assured her solemnly, inclining his head a little.

Dame Enye rose to her feet, her lack of inches compared to the King, more than made up for by her imperious manner. "I have done all I can now for your Steward's wife," she said, "So will you be so good as to have Master Damrod take me home? One of my neighbours is due to give birth any day and I should be with her! But tell the young man not to travel with such haste, it is not good for my nerves!"

"Yes, of course!" Aragorn said meekly, "Damrod will take you home and I will see that you are well recompensed for your trouble."
"I have a further errand for you, Damrod," Aragorn announced after beckoning the young man to his side again, "I should like you to take Dame Enye back to her home at a nice steady pace and then ride with haste to Minas Tirith and ask for a covered wagon to be brought here so that Lady Eowyn and her daughter can return to the city as soon as possible. This hovel is no place for a babe."

"Certainly, Sire." Damrod replied eagerly "It is my honour to do so."

"Once Iovas is stabled, you can then take the rest of the day off, Captain Damrod!" Aragorn said smiling, "And no you did not misunderstand me!"

"Thank you, Sire! I will endeavour to be worthy of the honour!" Damrod was grinning from ear to ear as he settled Dame Elan on Faramir's chestnut mare and rode away at a somewhat more less frenetic pace than before.

Aragorn went back inside to see how his friends were faring. The baby was now a healthy colour and crying lustily but Eowyn looked distressed.

"What troubles you?" Aragorn asked her gently.

"I have no nourishment for my babe nor can she latch on to me!" she replied, almost on the verge of tears. "I know it is because it is too early for her to be born!"

"You can soon find a wet nurse in the City." Faramir soothed, "One of my mother's maids nursed me, it meant she was able to keep her job despite having a young baby of her own."

"But the Rohirrim never use wet nurses unless the mother dies giving birth!" Eowyn wailed, "Where would I find one at such short notice and my baby seems hungry now! I have failed her as a mother! And what if she is too early to know how to suckle?"

Aragorn put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Surely Dame Ioreth will know what to do." he said, trying to calm her, "The baby will not starve as we will be back in Minas Tirith soon. One of Arwen's seamstresses recently had a child, I recall her telling me, maybe she could serve as a nurse if need be? I should not have sent the midwife away so soon!"

"I doubt she could have done anything!" Eowyn sniffed.

"I thought it did take a few days for the milk to come properly? " Aragorn said, flushing slightly at the mention of such delicate feminine matters, "At least that is the impression I had from Arwen."

"I fear this little one is just too frail to suckle!" Eowyn sobbed, "I have failed her!"

"Eowyn, please, I am sure all will be well!" Faramir soothed, "At least she lives!"

The baby howled all the louder

"You take her, Aragorn!" Eowyn begged, "You saved her while I almost killed her!"

"Please, Eowyn, do not think like that!" Aragorn replied, tentatively taking the infant and impulsively offering his smallest finger to the tiny girl, which she immediately started to suck.

Faramir tried to comfort his wife, all the while marvelling how Aragorn's large hands could be so tender with his tiny daughter. He almost feared to touch her, as she looked so fragile.
Aragorn rocked the baby in his arms and murmured soothingly in Elvish to her. She quickly settled and went to sleep.

"You must hold her!" he told Eowyn, "Make a napkin for her out of some of these spare bandages in my pack!"

Giving Eowyn a task to concentrate on seemed to make her less hysterical much to the relief of both men.

Aragorn was able to turn his attentions to donning a shirt, borrowed from Faramir as the scratchy embroidery on his tunic next to his skin was driving him to distraction and then checked Faramir's pulse, concerned that he should have fainted.

Much to his relief it seemed Dame Enye's dismissive attitude was quite justified for the rate was no more rapid that could be expected under the circumstances.

Wishing he did not feel quite so drained and weary, he then finished packing and they could then do nothing but await the arrival of the covered wagon.

Despite the relative comfort of the wagon, driven by a skilled coachman, the journey back to Minas Tirith was grim as Eowyn, now clad in another borrowed shirt with a blanket draped round her as a makeshift skirt, wept at her inadequacy as a mother, and seemed almost afraid to hold her child.

Faramir fretted at his own helplessness as Aragorn deemed it unwise for him to hold his restless daughter alone until his ribs were healed for she could easily do him further injury given the vigorous manner in which she was kicking.

The baby cried until Aragorn tucked her under his shirt, where warm and comfortable, she settled to sleep, her tiny head cradled against his heart. He was left holding it for most of the journey, consoling himself that at least it was practise for soothing his son, which would please Arwen.

The King instructed the coachman to ignore the usual rule banning horses on the first level. Faramir and Eowyn were hardly fit to walk any distance and it seemed most unwise to expose a newborn infant to the chill November air. There were unique circumstances in which it caused more harm to abide by a rule than to break it and this was certainly one of those times he was glad of his authority to be able to authorise bringing the wagon to the door.

The Queen was anxiously awaiting them, having already been told what had happened by Damrod.

"Why ever did you run away like that?" she asked Eowyn accusingly then immediately softened and embraced her lovingly on seeing her stricken face, "Never mind that now!" she said calmly," I have sent for Ioreth and she is waiting for you in my apartments. Faramir, it is good to see you looking so much better! Where is the baby?"

"Here!" Aragorn replied, pulling his shirt aside to allow Arwen to see.

"He saved her life!" Faramir choked, looking gratefully at Aragorn, total veneration still in his eyes.

"I will take her now!" Arwen bent to take the infant but not before exchanging a tender kiss with her husband.

She led Eowyn first to her dressing room where she suggested the other woman shed her unorthodox attire in favour of one of her loose robes, so as not to scandalise Ioreth, who was
grimly pacing the bedchamber awaiting her runaway patient.

"You foolish girl!" Ioreth greeted her, "Of all people you should know better than go off riding like that! Lie down! I need to examine you thoroughly but I had better look at your unfortunate child first!"

Arwen handed over the baby who started to scream the moment Ioreth unwrapped her. "Well, she seems healthy enough, though she is dreadfully small!" she pronounced at last, "You are extremely lucky she was born alive!"

"I know!" Eowyn choked.

Arwen then say by Eowyn's bedside, holding her hand as Ioreth examined her, the elderly Healer at the same time all the while soundly berating Eowyn with her tongue.

"Why ever did you act so foolishly?" Ioreth scolded, "Little wonder you have no nourishment for your child! Not that there appears to anything wrong with you!" She prodded Eowyn painfully causing her to almost crush Arwen's hand.

"Peace, Dame Ioreth!" Arwen said coldly, suddenly she was every inch the Queen as she rose suddenly to her feet, towering over the old woman "I think the Lady Eowyn has suffered enough and will certainly not repeat her mistakes! Is the lady well?"

"She has been lucky, there is no damage at all and she should have no trouble giving poor Lord Faramir more children, providing that is, she doesn't go gallivanting around on horseback like that again!" Ioreth sniffed.

"You may go then." Arwen said regally.

Ioreth glared at her as two strong wills clashed. Ioreth was the first to drop her eyes. "Very well, Lady Elfstone, I shall return tomorrow then." she said in a piqued tone, "Do you wish me to find an experienced wet nurse who might coax the child to feed as there seems to be nothing else I can do at present?"

"I will let you know, thank you." Arwen replied in a softer tone. Ioreth curtsied and left.

Eowyn sighed with relief to be free of the probing bony fingertips. She ached more than ever now.

"Thank you, "she said, "Though maybe I should have told her to find a nurse. If she cannot help me, it seems I have little choice!"

"Do not despair!" Arwen comforted, "She does not even approve of aristocratic ladies feeding their own children, so I doubt she is such an expert as she claims to be!"

As if on cue, the baby started to wail even more loudly.

"I do need a nurse, though, alas. I am sure she must be hungry by now!" Eowyn lamented, "We must send for one, Aragorn said your seamstress might be suitable?"

Arwen picked up the baby and smiled at Eowyn, "I am sure she would be as she is a good woman, but why not look nearer at hand? I have milk to spare if you would permit me? I know I am an Elf but it should make no difference, Eldarion is thriving and he is half human!"

"You would do this for my child? But you are the Queen! Won't Aragorn mind?"
Arwen gave a soft musical laugh as she unlaced her gown.

"I just wish to aid you as a friend. As for Aragorn, I am sure he would do the same if only he could! I just wish that I could have been with you at the birth! As I could not be, let me nourish your child until you are able!"

"Thank you." Eowyn whispered tearfully as Arwen, cooing soothingly in Elvish, held the infant girl close to her breast, guiding the tiny mouth to latch on. Almost at once the infant stopped crying and started to suckle.

Eowyn felt overwhelmed by relief mixed with a sharp pang of jealousy, which she immediately felt ashamed of. She knew how fortunate she was to have friends like the King and Queen and yet it seemed so unfair that the Queen was able to nourish her baby when she could not. Trying to push such unworthy thoughts aside she said "Aragorn performed a miracle today. My child was stillborn and somehow he gave her life. I can never thank him enough."

Arwen smiled at her, "Estel's abilities are truly amazing, I think he may surpass even my father now on occasion. He has a great gift." she said dreamily, her eyes full of love and admiration for her husband.

"He also helped deliver my babe." Eowyn added, "Though he tried very hard to avert his eyes, the poor man was dreadfully embarrassed!"

Arwen chuckled "I can just imagine it, he is so sweet when he is shy! Never tell Ioreth though, the poor woman would be scandalised! I fear she would never get over the shock!"

TBC

A very big thank you to all my readers for your kind comments and interest in this story. I am truly overwhelmed to have had a record number of comments for the last chapter and to have passed the 900 reviews mark! It was lovely to hear from old friends and to welcome new readers too.

My sincere apologies for the delay in updating as you deserved a rapid update. Unfortunately I have been unable to be at my computer for the last few days.

I am so pleased you enjoyed the last chapter so much. The tune that goes with the verse I quoted, suggests to me the rather eerie yet inspiring mood.

Tolkien does indeed only mention Elboron as succeeding his father as Steward, but there is no reason Faramir why could not have had more children, especially daughters.

Arwen still has a further part to play in the story.
Now she was no longer hungry, Eowyn's infant daughter had fallen asleep and Arwen tried to hand her back to her mother.

Eowyn shook her head, "No, you hold her. I am a hopeless mother," she lamented, "Will you ask Faramir to come in now, please?"

Arwen sighed. It seemed that Eowyn's guilt over giving birth too soon was causing her to reject her child and that could not be allowed to happen.

"You must hold her as she needs her mother!" she said gently but firmly, returning the baby as she spoke. "You told me yourself that every new mother needs to learn, as well as that it can take some time for the milk to come!"

Eowyn took her daughter but held her as if she were made of spun glass.

Faramir and the King had been anxiously waiting in the next room.

When the Queen called them in she took her husband into her dressing room and told him what Ioreth had said.

Faramir immediately hobbled over to Eowyn's bedside with the aid of a cane.

"Ioreth cannot help, I have failed our child, I feel so guilty!" Eowyn lamented.

"It is all my fault for running away, not yours, Beloved!" Faramir said sadly, as he squeezed Eowyn's hand.

"But had I not written that foolish letter to my brother none of this would have happened!" Eowyn choked.

"Stop it, Eowyn, this will help neither you nor our child!" Faramir's words were softened by the tender kiss he placed on her lips. Since sharing thoughts with the King, he could see the situation
quite differently. "It is pointless for either of us to dwell on the past, we must concentrate on caring for our child now. What shall we call her?"

"I had thought to name her after either your mother or mine if we had a daughter but after the manner of her birth, I would prefer something different."

"We should name her to honour the King," Faramir said firmly, "He saved her life and it is only thanks to him that we have a daughter to rejoice over at all!"

"I agree, but what? It would be different were she a boy but Aragorne or Elessarne are not really proper names for a girl!"

"Let me think." Faramir gazed thoughtfully at his little daughter. "The King gave us hope and his childhood name was Estel which means 'hope', so how about 'Elestelle, hope of the Elves'? That is a pretty name for a beautiful child!"

"That would be perfect!" Eowyn smiled for the first time since Aragorn had told her child lived.

"Elestelle' she shall be as long as Aragorn approves. You should rest now, My Love, I will keep watch over our daughter." Faramir said, a yawn underlying his own exhaustion.

"I should so like a bath first." Eowyn insisted, eager to shed the aftermath of the birth and the feel of none too gentle hands prodding her. "Would you send for my maid to assist me, please?"

"There is no need for that!" Arwen had re-entered with her usual Elven silence, "I will look after Eowyn. Faramir, you and Estel ought to go and get something to eat. I will ask Eldarion's nanny to look after both babies while I care for Eowyn. Have you a name for your daughter yet?"

"We thought Elestelle in honour of the King." Faramir said shyly, struggling to his feet as he held Arwen in great awe, for not only was she his Queen but also one of the Eldar.

"After all, she belongs to Aragorn as much as to us." Eowyn added, "We would never have conceived her had he not helped us relax and he was in the next room at the time. Then he helped to bring her into the world and saved her life."

Faramir flushed scarlet at Eowyn's revealing of such intimate details.

"An excellent choice!" Arwen smiled, tactfully ignoring both Eowyn's comments and Faramir's embarrassment. "Now go with Estel while I care for your lady!"

Faramir kissed Eowyn and then stroked the bay's tiny hand before hobbling slowly to the door while Arwen summoned Eldarion's nanny and the servants to fill the bath.

"We were given several cradles when the Prince was born, so can you find a suitable one for Little Elestelle and also some of Eldarion's outgrown clothes for her?" Arwen asked the nanny who appeared with Eldarion in her arms.

The Queen cuddled her son while Eowyn's bath was prepared and then placed both babies in the care of the nanny and helped Eowyn to the bathing chamber.

"This should ease your aches and make the water sting less," she told her friend, adding some special Elven salts to the steaming water.

Eowyn grimaced, "Nature's calls are bad enough at the moment, this can hardly be worse!" she sighed. "I have warned many other women but until you experience childbirth for yourself, you realise you know nothing!"
"It will soon pass, I promise." Arwen soothed, as she helped Eowyn undress and get into the bath.

While her friend was bathing, Arwen collected the jars of Elven salves that she had used after Eldarion's birth and placed them on the bedside table.

"Come!" she said, after she had helped Eowyn from the bath and swathed her in towels, "Lie down and I will give you a thorough massage as you did for me following Eldarion's birth."

"I deserve no pampering as unlike you I endangered my child!" Eowyn lamented, clutching her towels around her.

"The better you look after yourself the better you will look after Elestelle." Arwen told her. "I promise I will be very gentle."

"I know you will and I am very tempted as I ache everywhere but I am not worthy of your care!" Eowyn protested miserably, "I will just put on my nightgown and lie down."

"And what of Elestelle?" Arwen said firmly, gripping her shoulders, "Does she not deserve a healthy and relaxed mother?"

"Of course she does!" Eowyn replied, "I fear I am unworthy of her!"

"Then it is time you tried to be worthy!" Arwen retorted, "Lie down, stop clutching that towel and let me use the arts of my people to aid you!"

Eowyn looked ready to burst into tears but she nodded and cast the towels aside and settled herself on the bed. As well as being sore from the birth, her back ached; her belly and breasts were extremely tender, and her head was throbbing.

Arwen could tell her friend was very tense and began by massaging her head, neck and shoulders with her sensitive fingertips, then gradually moved down her body applying Elven massage techniques for sore muscles, stretch marks and to stimulate milk production. She then began again this time using a variety of salves to heal and soothe.

Eowyn soon relaxed to the gentle and expert touch of Arwen's fingertips though at times she flinched when the most tender areas were touched, whether due to the birth or Ioreth's none too gentle probing was hard to judge but by the time Arwen massaged her back she was as languid and sleepy as a contented cat.

Arwen aided her into one of her own nightgowns and noted the pain in the other woman's eyes when she realised it was one of those Arwen was wearing while she nursed Eldarion.

"You will feel better when you have rested," she said gently giving her a wafer of Lembas to restore her strength and a special tea containing fenugreek, raspberry and red clover to stimulate milk production.

"Thank you, you are like a mother to me! I am so sorry I ran away and caused you so much worry!" Eowyn sipped the drink gratefully and then allowed Arwen to ease her back on the pillows and tuck the covers round her.

"Well you are back now and that is all that matters. You must stay here with me for a while. Aragorn will care for Faramir." Arwen told her in a firm maternal tone as Eowyn drifted off into an exhausted slumber.

Arwen then summoned the servants to empty the bath and bring her some food before the babies awoke demanding to be fed.
A short time afterwards here came a light tap at the door and Aragorn entered, looking ever more exhausted than Eowyn and Faramir if that were possible.

"How is she?" he whispered, tiptoeing over to the bed. A candle burned on the table illuminating Eowyn's pale features.

"Exhausted, dejected and in pain. I have done all I can and will stay with her while her baby needs my milk. She needs to stay close to her or I fear she will reject it." Arwen sighed.

Aragorn stood looking at the Lady of Rohan, a look of great compassion on his face.

"I fear I am just too weary tonight to use my healing abilities further. I have nothing left to give her," Aragorn said sadly," I feel completely drained! I have just been to see Eomer and tell him he has a niece but he is not interested and refuses to see her!"

"He will surely soften eventually," Arwen said, trying to reassure him, "From what Faramir and Eowyn told me, it seems you did something truly miraculous with their baby today ".

Aware she was curious and deserved to know more, Aragorn led her aside to her dressing room, so as not to awaken Eowyn.

"I hardly know what happened with the baby," he said haltingly, "It was stillborn and I tried to make it breathe but nothing seemed to work. I was about to give up and Faramir and Eowyn were distraught but then suddenly I decided to try calling her and the next moment I was kneeling beside her and she was alive much to my joy and theirs!"

Arwen smiled at him, her eyes glowing with love and admiration. "If only I had kept a closer eye on her, you would not have been called upon to give so much of yourself as I can see you poured your life energy into the child!" she said," I tried to watch her day and night but she slipped away while I had a meeting with that trade delegation you left in my charge."

"She did something similar when she disobeyed her Uncle and rode to Pellenor Fields so I do not think you could have stopped her," Aragorn said thoughtfully, "There is an untameable and unpredictable streak in Eowyn !"

"Maybe it was the will of the Valar?" Arwen mused thoughtfully, "If the baby had been stillborn here in Minas Tirith, you would not have been in the same room to save her. Even if we had defied all convention and sent for you it would have been too late!"

"Who knows?" Aragorn replied, "I am only glad that I could save the child."

"Then Faramir too, I hardly recognised the man, he looks so much better!" Arwen continued.

Despite his weariness, Aragorn smiled, "I thought I had come too late when I found him lying in the mud after falling from his horse," he told her," But with Damrod's help I soon found he was not seriously injured and managed to revive him though he was in dreadful despair. I did what you told me though and refused to let him go until he confided in me and pleaded with him to share thoughts to ease my pain. Then after the Thought Bond, such a change came over him as if scales had fallen from his eyes!"

"I thought it would work!" Arwen said sagely. "So he allowed you to heal him?"

"He begged me to and it proved a wonderful experience for us both. I have never before known a healing quite like it the way he was reaching out to me with his spirit, more like an Elf than a man!" Aragorn's eyes were glowing as he recalled the events of two days ago," I could actually
feel his heart grow steady beneath my hand and see the worst of the bruises fade as he was responding so well. I am still concerned about some of his hurts but he is so much better. The change in him as he went from shunning me to wanting to stay close beside me which was just as well I was beside him as he had one of his visions about the baby being stillborn during the night before last which I, alas dismissed as a feverish dream! Then yesterday, although of course, I missed you, we spent a pleasant day just talking and relaxing while he regained his strength."

"And I hope you did too!" Arwen commented, "It does you good to get away from the Court at times. You should take him camping next summer and play at being rangers again! I want to keep Eowyn here with me while I coax her to bond with the baby, so Faramir can enjoy your company for a while longer."

"I will miss you tonight as you give me strength but I see your wisdom," Aragorn told her," Faramir and Eowyn have both been too deprived of love in the past so we must give them all the support we can. That reminds me, I must have a look at Faramir's injuries before we have supper." He yawned as he spoke.

"I thought you had already eaten!" Arwen said sternly, "On no account must you risk giving him any of your energy tonight though unless his life is in danger!"

Aragorn shook his head. "I am too weary, Vanimelda, I will come and bid you goodnight later," he said, kissing her lovingly before going to look for Faramir, whom he had left sitting in his room while he had told Eomer about his sister having given birth. He then was forced to listen to the King of Rohan's tirade about Eowyn's 'feckless, dishonourable scoundrel of a husband' as all pleas to be reasonable had fallen on deaf ears. It seemed that Eomer's head injury had completely changed his personality and just now Aragorn was too weary to even begin to think of what he might be able to do.

TBC

A big thank you to all my readers for your comments. Each and every one is greatly appreciated.

One of you was very close to guessing the name, well done!

Eowyn is indeed in danger of postnatal depression as Arwen realises.

Eomer will return to the story very soon.
Soul of Adoration

Chapter Notes

'The characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has been or will be made from it.

Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,
          Our debts, our careful wives,
          Our children, and our sins lay on the King!
      And what have kings that privates have not too,
     Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
    O ceremony, show me but thy worth!
What is thy soul of adoration?
 Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form,
Creating awe and fear in other men?'

Shakespeare King Henry V (IV, i) (abridged)

Aragorn wearily made his way to his own apartments where he had left Faramir. As soon as he entered, the Steward struggled to his feet and bowed.

"Please sit down, Faramir" the King sighed, settling himself beside his Steward as he spoke, "Does this room trouble you? We can go somewhere else if you wish."

Since he had tended Faramir through those terrible days and nights when his life hung in the balance, he had replaced the bedspread and wall hangings, but it was still the same room where he had suffered much, hovering between life and death.

"No, Sire, not at all. I remember only how kind you were to me!" Faramir replied.

Aragorn frowned, unhappy at the sudden formability. "I need to look at your ribs to see that you sustained no damage during the journey," he said, "Then we will eat and get some rest as Arwen wants to stay with your wife for a while."

He was going to miss his wife but agreed her plan was sensible as custom forbade Faramir sharing his wife's bedchamber so soon after her giving birth and Faramir was still too frail to be left unattended. Truth to tell he would be glad of his company for while he was content to sleep alone under a hedge, he still found it hard to settle surrounded by stone walls as they seemed to close in on him.

"Is it fitting, My Lord that you who have power beyond all mortal imaginings should busy yourself with such menial tasks?" Faramir asked, his eyes still filled with the veneration the King had noticed earlier. "Should not one of the City Healers tend me?" The revulsion he felt at the prospect of being poked, pummelled and prodded by their none to gentle hands was all too clear
in his eyes as he spoke.

Aragorn sat beside him on the window seat and gently gripped his shoulders. "What happened today has not changed me, Mellon Nin," he chided gently, "I am just a man as any other though I am gladdened that the Valar chose to use me as their instrument to spare your child! I desire your friendship, not your veneration for any subject might offer me that, whereas friendship for one in my position is much harder to find! Then as it seems we are to stay together for a while longer, if you continue to place me on a pedestal, my head will grow too large to fit my crown and then what shall I do!"

Faramir was forced to smile at the image Aragorn's words evoked and relaxed somewhat.

"You can read my thoughts again if you wish," Aragorn offered knowing his Steward could be very stubborn at times and he could not expect otherwise.

"I believe you!" Faramir was already unlacing his tunic and shirt, "It was just so incredible what you did today!"

"I fear it has left me too weary to offer you any healing tonight," Aragorn said regretfully as Faramir pulled the garments over his head.

"I am not in much pain," Faramir replied as the King unwrapped the tight bandaging and Faramir sighed with relief as it was loosened. "How is Eowyn?"

"She is asleep now and should not wake until morning. Both Arwen and Ioreth are satisfied that she is recovering well from the birth. She is just very distressed at not being unable to suckle the baby as yet."

"She should not be so upset," Faramir commented as Aragorn felt his injured ribs. He was aware that although his touch was extremely gentle but his hands were not as warm as they usually were. "The high born ladies of Gondor always employ wet nurses from what I know of such matters! We have a beautiful child which is all that matters surely?"

"But that is not the custom of either the Eldar or the Rohirrim," Aragorn informed him, "The women of Rohan are extremely self sufficient and see any failing on their part as a grave weakness. I lived amongst Eowyn's people for many years and became familiar with their culture."

"I am proud of my wife for giving me such a beautiful daughter and so long as she is properly nourished do not mind who nurses her though I am extremely grateful to the Queen!" Faramir said ardently, "I especially wanted a girl, though I think Eowyn desired a boy. I am determined to give her all the love that my father never gave me! When can I hold her?"

"Tomorrow, I hope when she is sleeping, as your ribs are healing well and your heartbeat is steady," Aragorn pronounced before proceeding to gently feel the still swollen patch on the upper part of his Steward's belly.

Faramir immediately yelped with pain and Aragorn frowned at the reaction.

"What exactly is that?" he asked anxiously, his face white with pain.

"A knot of scar tissue, I believe and it is pressing on a nerve. Unfortunately it does not respond well to healing," Aragorn told him honestly, "There are plenty of other treatments I can try now, so try not to worry about it.

He fervently hoped he would not have to cut it out, as a drastic last resort for he knew only too
well that left too long, it could adhere to some vital organ and threaten Faramir's life but there were several other treatments he could try first.

"I trust you to do what is best," Faramir said simply.

"I have told Eomer he has a niece but I fear he does not seem interested," the King said, eager to change the subject.

Faramir sighed. "I feared as much though I hoped for Eowyn's sake he would be pleased. Maybe it troubles him that a child of my blood is direct line to succeed him until my cousin gives him children?"

"He will surely soften soon," Aragorn said thoughtfully as he applied salve to Faramir's many bruises. The pitiable scarred and bruised body was still a shocking sight even to an experienced healer such as himself. "If he saw just what had happened to you?" he mused.

Faramir vehemently shook his head. "I want no man's pity and have no desire to be paraded like some freak for his inspection!" he said firmly.

"I am sorry, I should not have said that nor should I have shown your wounds to his followers!" Aragorn said contritely.

"With that you had no choice but the thought of him inspecting me like a broken down horse repels me!" Faramir replied, yawning as he pulled his shirt back over his head.

"I would feel just the same!" Aragorn assured him. He stood up and washed his hands in a bowl of water left on the washstand for that purpose." I am going to order some supper for us and go and say goodnight to Arwen while they are bringing it," he said, "You can borrow one of my nightshirts and prepare for bed while I am gone if you desire some privacy. And please no bowing when I return!"

Faramir merely grinned at him. "Say goodnight to my wife and little one for me please if you see her?" he asked.

Aragorn summoned a servant and told her that he required a light supper for two sent up to his room and then made his way to his wife's apartments.

Arwen almost immediately opened the door when he tapped lightly. Eowyn lay sleeping peacefully in the vast bed. Arwen led her husband into the adjoining room.

They tiptoed to where the babies were lying in their cradles. Aragorn stroked a tender finger across his son's cheek and was rewarded by a smile.

"Look!" he gasped. "He smiled at me for the first time!"

Arwen smiled too. "He must sense that you will now be able to smile back at him!"

Overcome with emotion, Aragorn tenderly kissed his son and then laid a hand in blessing on Elestelle's head before giving her a goodnight kiss on behalf of her father.

"Faramir told me her name." he smiled, "I am honoured! I suppose I had better return to him now, I left him waiting for his supper."

"You look weary, I hope Faramir will not keep you awake though it is best you stay with him while I look after Eowyn. They both will need our care for a while yet." Arwen drew her husband close and he laid his weary head on her shoulder after they exchanged a tender kiss.
An hour later, Arwen looked into her husband's room and found both him and Faramir side by side on top of the vast bed. Both were fast asleep and Aragorn was snoring loudly.

Faramir, with his head nestled against his King's shoulder, looked the slightly more comfortable of the two of them as he was at least properly on the bed and minus his boots.

Despite the size of the bed Aragorn had one leg dangling over the edge and looked likely to fall off any moment. He was still wearing his boots, obviously having fallen asleep as soon as he had settled Faramir before he could take them off.

Two nightshirts lay folded on the foot of the bed, their owners obviously too weary to change into them.

At least the tray of empty dishes on the bedside table suggested that they had eaten their supper before falling asleep.

Arwen smiled, suppressing an urge to giggle at the spectacle and eased her husband's leg on to the bed before carefully removing his boots, leaving them by the bedside before throwing a warm blanket over them both. Although both were fully clothed, it was a cold November night and she did not want them to wake up chilled.

Aragorn continued snoring peacefully, oblivious of her presence.

"Sleep well, Beloved!" she whispered, kissing him gently before tiptoeing from the room.

Faramir, somewhat less exhausted than the King, woke at the sound of the door closing. Thinking it was Aragorn's snoring that had roused him; he dug his elbow in his ribs to wake him.

"What?" Aragorn murmured sleepily.

"You were snoring!" Faramir grumbled.

"I told you I was only human!" Aragorn laughed and promptly fell asleep again.

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you for all your kind reviews and comments, which have led to this story being a few chapters longer than, was my original intention as well as a considerable amount of revision to my first draft!

I have slightly changed the baby's name due to advice I received.

I enjoyed the film of "Romeo and Juliet "very much.

Faramir is much better but not yet fully recovered which would be unrealistic.

I do indeed have a plan up my sleeve for Eomer, with a twist naturally!

Faramir and Eowyn had a daughter to fit in with Aragorn's vision in "Shadow and Thought" chapter 28.
Fathers and Mothers

Chapter Notes

These Characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has or will be made from it.

For everyone who wanted to see Faramir with his daughter and Elenhin who is the master of depicting poor Aragorn's and Faramir's mountain of paperwork.

Faramir awoke feeling safe, warm and comfortable, still a novel feeling after two months of fear and agony when every day the first sensations he had been aware of were his pounding heart, pain everywhere and a struggle to breathe.

Even worse had been the feeling that he was tainted and had betrayed all those he loved and to be relieved of such a burden gave him a wonderful sense of freedom.

For a moment he felt disorientated, believing he was still in the hovel as Aragorn was beside him. Then he realised he was back in Minas Tirith and in Aragorn's room.

The winter sun streamed though a chink in the curtains illuminating the King's face. He still looked somewhat drawn and weary and with his eyes closed, bore a closer resemblance than usual to Faramir's own father.

Then the events of the previous day all came rushing back. He was a father now himself!

He must have spoken the wondrous thought aloud as Aragorn yawned, stretched and slowly sat up.

"Is it not amazing to be a father?" Faramir exclaimed.

"Indeed it is!" Aragorn grinned, "I grow to love my son more each day, which reminds me, you have not met him yet!"

Faramir flushed, " I am so sorry, I regret now that I did not accept the Queen's offer to bring him to show me."

"Well I hope you can meet him today," Aragorn said good humouredly, climbing off the bed rather stiffly and realising he was still fully clothed. He had been so tired the night before that he remembered nothing after giving Faramir his herbs and helping him on to the bed.

"When can I see my daughter and Eowyn?" Faramir asked.

"When you have bathed, allowed me to treat your hurts and changed into clean clothes and had some breakfast. Then Arwen and Ioreth need time to tend to them both," Aragorn told him.
Faramir looked somewhat crestfallen.

"At least you do not have to parade your daughter in front of a heartless throng of nobles who treat a baby like prize horseflesh! " the King said dryly, "Not that I will permit that to happen to any future child of mine!"

Faramir suddenly looked worried, " Will the lack of proper protocols mean Elestelle is not regarded as my heir?" he asked anxiously.

Aragorn shook his head. "While you were unwell, I had the law amended so that the presence of a Royal representative at the birth of your heirs confers legitimacy and the presence of a representative from the House of Stewards confers legitimacy on my future heirs. Of course, I intended Arwen as your witness, but I should serve well enough! Now can you ask a servant to bring you some clean clothes and breakfast for us both?"

He disappeared into the bathing chamber as he spoke.

Eowyn awoke to the sound of a crying baby. For a moment, she thought it was Eldarion and then realised it was her own child.

Arwen was sitting on the rocking chair beside the bed cuddling her son, whom she had apparently just finished nursing.

She rose to her feet and smiled at Eowyn, replaced Eldarion in his cradle and picked up Elestelle and brought her to her mother.

"She is hungry," the Queen said, "You must try to feed her."

"You know I cannot!" Eowyn was reluctant to take her child. She looked so fragile and her features were red and contorted with crying.

"You must try! " Arwen said in a tone that brokered no argument, "I will not let her go hungry but you must try first."

As Eowyn made no move to unlace her nightgown, Arwen did it for her and placed Elestelle in the correct position to nurse. The baby bawled all the louder and seemed quite unable to latch on. Eowyn stiffened and tears pricked behind her eyes.

"Take her away!" she demanded," She does not even like me!"

" She senses your unease and is hungry. That is all." Arwen calmly took Elestelle over to the rocking chair and soothed her before offering her own breast. At once the baby started to suckle contentedly.

Eowyn felt oddly detached. This child hardly seemed to be hers at all. She and Faramir might have conceived her and she had carried her for eight months but it was Aragorn who had given her life while Arwen was nourishing her. Surely it would have been better had she been born to them?

Ioreth’s arrival a little later did little to raise her spirits for although the midwife pronounced her to be in excellent health, Eowyn could see the disappointment in her eyes that she had failed to carry her child to full term even though today she was much kinder and refrained from scolding.

Aragorn and Faramir arrived soon after Ioreth’s departure, by which time Eowyn was dressed in one of Arwen’s loose robes and on the Queen’s instructions watching while the Nanny bathed her daughter.
Aragorn intended to spend a precious hour with his wife and child before applying himself to the growing mountain of paperwork that awaited him, though Faramir was now eager to help; the task would be far less onerous.

While Elestelle was being bathed, Aragorn took Faramir to show him his son.

Eldarion gurgled happily to see his father and smiled when he lifted him out of his cradle.

"My Prince! It gladdens my heart to meet you!" Faramir said formally kissing the tiny hand and bowing, "I am your most loyal subject!"

Eldarion frowned, obviously puzzled by this stranger who looked rather like his Ada but behaved so oddly.

Aragorn laughed, though not unkindly, "I think he would prefer a less formal greeting!" he grinned, "He is after all only two months old!"

Faramir kissed the dark head and offered a finger to be grasped. He was rewarded by a beaming smile from the young prince.

"He is adorable!" Faramir gasped, "Though I think my baby prettier!"

"You are her father so you should!" Aragorn retorted as he retired with his son to Arwen's sitting room.

Arwen and Eowyn emerged a few moments later, the latter looking pale and distressed after watching her child being bathed and dressed. Minus her clothing, Elestelle looked more tiny and frail than ever and she could not help but compare her to Eldarion when he was born, who had been so plump and robust looking.

"How are you today, Beloved?" Faramir greeted her.

"I am well," Eowyn said flatly.

"Do sit down, Faramir! Would you like to see your daughter?" Arwen asked.

"Yes please, My Lady!" Faramir hobbled over to the couch and sat down with his wife beside him.

Arwen brought the now clothed and very sleepy Elestelle and placed her in Faramir's arms, the opposite side from his damaged ribs then went to join her husband and son.

He felt overwhelmed with love towards this tiny daughter of his and it seemed that she sensed it as she gurgled contentedly, nestling against his chest.

Tenderly he caressed her soft downy head and tiny hands.

"She is just perfect and so beautiful!" he breathed, swearing inwardly to love her unconditionally as long as he lived.

"She is too small." was Eowyn's only reply.

Three days passed and Faramir's health continued to improve though Aragorn was still worried by the scar tissue on his belly. The Steward obediently accepted the Elven healing and massage as well as taking the herbs to aid his recovery. He continued to limp as the King had not considered a sprained ankle serious enough to concentrate his energies on and it did serve to keep him from...
exerting himself too much while his heart strengthened.

He was still sharing Aragorn's room and helping the King with State papers, but proving a most attentive father and husband to his wife and child.

Eowyn was becoming more distressed by the day as she was still unable to feed her daughter and hardly seemed to be able to endure the sight of her, despite Arwen's insistence that she keep trying to nurse her and helped to bathe and dress her.

Late one night when both Eowyn and Faramir were sleeping, she summoned her husband to come and see if he could help Eowyn.

"How is she?" he asked, moving to stand by her bedside, "Faramir is worried about her and was glad when I told him I was coming."

"Totally dejected and very tense though I have tried every art I know," Arwen sighed, "I am certain she does have milk for her child but is too overwrought to feed her, I only wish I had your healing abilities! She is in pain and rejecting her child! I think the events of the past months have finally caught up with her. Could you do something?"

"Does she desire to be healed?" Aragorn asked.

"I believe so though she is consumed with guilt at her failure to bring the child to full term and to feed her. I believe her brother's lack of interest in the child distresses her too as they are very close and she wishes she had never written the letter to him."

Aragorn looked at his friend's wife sadly, "I am no expert in women's ills but I will do what I can," he promised. He gently stroked Eowyn's eyelids, sending her into a deep healing sleep, thankful now that his strength and healing abilities were fully restored after a few days of relative calm.

"I should be able to ease her while she sleeps." Aragorn said. "I think it should work through clothing, but it would be best if you take the heavy blankets off her."

Arwen pulled back the heavy coverlet and blankets, leaving Eowyn covered by just her nightgown and a thin linen sheet and watched as Aragorn sat on the edge of the bed, closed his eyes and held his hands a few inches above Eowyn's body.

It never failed to amaze her that her husband, a mortal had such powerful healing abilities as usually only the Eldar possessed such gifts. Her father had taught Estel to use his innate abilities, which now he was King seemed to have grown even stronger. It was maybe his uniqueness that had first attracted her towards him as here was a rare treasure amongst men.

Eowyn sighed and smiled in her sleep but did not stir as the King then massaged her neck and the upper part of her shoulders. He gestured to his wife to replace the blankets and then placed both hands on Eowyn's fair head in blessing and then did the same to Elestelle.

"May the Valar protect them both! I have done all that I can," he told Arwen, "I sense that she feels guilt over Faramir's misfortunes too."

"How is he now?" Arwen asked.

"Growing stronger by the day though he has some scar tissue inside which I fear may have to be cut out," Aragorn told her, "I am the only one with the skill to do it but the thought of cutting him appals me!"
"You are thinking too much like a man!" Arwen chided, "Although the Elven treatments for such hurts are painful we are too civilised for such butchery!"

"I only hope you are right!" Aragorn sighed.

"You need to rest. Healing always drains you," she said as they exchanged a loving and lingering goodnight kiss, " Be sure to at least take off your boots before you go to sleep!"

She then settled down beside Eowyn and felt convinced her friend looked better already. She could only wait for morning to see if Aragorn had managed to work another healing miracle or not.

TBC

A/N A big thank you to all my readers for your kind and much appreciated reviews.

I have written this as an extra chapter in response to your interest in the baby. The main story resumes in the next chapter.

I love Shakespeare's works as I imagine you must have guessed by now!

Lothiriel is governing Rohan with the help of Eomer's Marshals and anxiously awaiting his return.
The next morning Eowyn awoke feeling much better though she had no idea why that should be. The night before she had decided if was unfair that she was keeping the King and Queen apart and had planned to ask Arwen today if she would keep Elestelle while she returned to her own rooms and was worried how her friend would react as she was so insistent that Eowyn show some interest in her child.

Arwen was drawing back the curtains to allow the weak November sunshine to enter the chamber.

The Queen was singing a soft melody in Elvish and looking even more beautiful and serene than usual in a loose scarlet robe, embroidered in silver.

The more time that Eowyn spent with her, the more convinced she was that her previous dreams of marrying Aragorn had been sheer folly. No other couple that she had ever known complemented each other more perfectly than Aragorn and Arwen. They were the highest and noblest beings she had ever met and also the most caring and humble.

A baby’s crying could be heard from the cradle at the foot of the bed. Arwen always brought Eldarion into her room while she slept.

The Queen went to the cradle and lifted out not Eldarion but Elestelle. She was about to unfasten her gown but changed her mind and brought her over to Eowyn.

"You try." she said gently.

"You know I cannot," Eowyn said sadly, "I think it best that you should keep her for a while as she is thriving on your milk."

"Just try, I can feed her if you are still not able too." Arwen coaxed, "She needs her mother far more than she needs me!"

More to please the Queen than from any hope that she would succeed; Eowyn unlaced her nightgown and put Elestelle to her breast.

Today the baby looked much stronger and Eowyn felt an unexpected surge of love towards her. This was her child, hers and Faramir's and despite being born too early, was she not the most beautiful babe?
Elestelle gurgled contentedly. To Eowyn's amazement, she was suckling and her tiny lips were coated in milk!

Tears of joy ran down Eowyn's cheeks. She was actually nourishing her babe!"

"I knew you would be able to you just needed to relax!" Arwen exclaimed in delight. She had no idea whether it was the herbs, all the massages she had given Eowyn, something that would just have happened naturally or Aragorn's healing that had worked, though she strongly suspected the latter.

She kissed her friend affectionately on the cheek and then went to ask her maid to bring them some breakfast.

When Faramir came to visit Eowyn an hour later he was delighted to find her lovingly cuddling their daughter while she sang a Rohirric lullaby.

Aragorn continued to treat Faramir's hurts twice a day with healing, massage and salves and was delighted at how quickly his damaged ribs were knitting together and the bruises were fading quickly too.

His heart would still need time to regain its former strength and the wasted muscle on his arm would probably require months of healing massage but Faramir made no complaint and the King suspected that his Steward rather enjoyed the treatments, which for his part were a joy to administer to such a willing and grateful recipient.

Only the knot of painful scar tissue continued to worry the King and he spent hours pouring over Lord Elrond's healing texts while he decided what to do.

He concluded that cutting it out was the very last resort as such a procedure carried a dreadful risk of infection, as well as being a mutually harrowing experience and could not in any case be attempted for months to be certain Faramir's heart was strong enough to survive the trauma of his flesh being cut.

It sickened him to think that Faramir's attacker could have ground his boot into him with sufficient force as to inflict such damage and was determined he would be most severely punished for his cruel crime.

After much deliberation, he concluded that although it was probably going to be agonizing, Faramir needed the Elven scar treatment as quickly as possible now to try and repair the damage both inside and out.

Eomer was almost recovered apart from his useless arm and had announced his plans to return home very soon. He still refused to see Faramir or Elestelle despite Aragorn's repeated requests and Eowyn had not seen him since her child was born though she was planning to do as soon as she was fully recovered from the birth.

A week later Faramir, leaning on his cane and accompanied by his wife, made his way to the bathing chamber. The Steward was as eager as the King to get the Elven treatment for his scars over with quickly, although he was nowhere near as apprehensive as he had been the first time.

The King had told him that the mud bath would also help any scarring he might have inside but warned him the experience might be very painful. As a former soldier, Faramir was accustomed to bearing pain bravely, but was weary of it, as he had endured so much in these past months. He felt much stronger now, thanks to Aragorn's abilities but he would be frail for a while yet the King had warned him.
Eowyn had accompanied him to the bathing chamber, as she was curious to see the mud bath for herself. When they arrived, the large sunken bath was filled and Aragorn, dressed in his oldest clothes was tipping in the powder and waiting for it to fully dissolve.

"You didn't exaggerate then!" she exclaimed, "I am sure I could find something more pleasant if I scraped the river bed! It looks like what Eomer and I would make mud pies with when we were children. Still, if works like last time, it is well worth it! Arwen is looking after Elestelle and expecting me, so I will leave you men to play in the mud, good luck!"

She gave her husband a fond kiss and left him to his ordeal.

Faramir looked at the mud bath rather doubtfully, as the thick mixture reminded him of a devouring quicksand in appearance.

"If I remember rightly, I must be completely submerged?" he asked, wondering if he were in any danger of drowning.

"Yes, apart from your head. You need to resist the temptation to emerge when it touches your wounds." Aragorn said. "I will go and wait in the bedchamber to apply the salve when you are ready. I have left you a robe and a towel here by the tub."

"I would rather you stayed." Faramir said impulsively, "Please, if you do not mind?" He was amazed at himself even as he spoke for until this moment he had considered it would be so much easier to undergo the treatment alone. Last time it had been so embarrassing initially to have to remove all his clothing. Aragorn was mercifully unblemished in body by recent events so there was no need for them to be treated together.

"Of course." Aragorn smiled understandingly, "Would you like me to come in with you too? The mixture has health giving properties even when one is not scarred and maybe you would feel more comfortable than if I just sat here watching?"

"Thank you." Faramir started to undress before he had second thoughts. "That is so kind of you."

"I will just fetch another robe then. It will be better this way, as I would get covered in mud in any case, hence my oldest clothes! Do you want me to get in first?"

"Please." Faramir flushed at his own lack of courage. He knew Aragorn was almost as shy as he was himself and appreciated him volunteering for what must be somewhat of an ordeal for him.

While Aragorn was gone, he quickly finished removing his clothing, draped a towel round his waist and hobbled to sit on the edge of the bath.

When the King returned with another robe and more towels, he was likewise attired. Faramir discreetly studied the floor as his Sovereign climbed into the bath and sat down, though he kept his arms out of the mud.

"It is nice and warm, come on!" Aragorn coaxed, holding out a steadying hand as Faramir tried to hobble down into the bath.

Much to his annoyance the steps defeated him.

Put your arms on my shoulders. I have you, let go of the towel now I am not looking! Peace Mellon Nin, you are quite safe, I will not let you fall!" Aragorn repressed a chuckle.

Aragorn bodily lifted him into the tub much to Faramir's shame. He marvelled at the King's patience with him.
The Steward was prepared for the harsh drawing sensation as the mineral salts seeped into the scars on his arm and back but was unprepared for the wave of agony as the mixture started to permeate his chest and even worse, his belly.

A cry involuntarily escaped his lips as he instinctively tried to press his hands over the worse hurts but strong arms grasped him and held his hands away from his body.

"I know it hurts but if you can bear it, you should be in much less pain in the future. Try not to clutch your injuries, you need the salts to penetrate them rather than your hands." Aragorn soothed. "By the time I count to a hundred, the worst will be over."

The King was right and the agony subsided to a dull and barely noticeable throb. Aragorn released him and he leaned back at the far side of the tub and flexed his limbs, which was easier that the thick mixture suggested.

"Watch out, you kicked my ankle!" Aragorn laughed as he stretched his own long limbs. The mud bath was quite pleasantly relaxing once one became accustomed to it and they were both far more at ease with each other since the Thought Bond.

Faramir leaned back and closed his eyes as he adjusted to the strange environment. He could almost learn to enjoy it.

Aragorn tensed as his keen hearing detected a sound from the outer room. He groaned inwardly, thinking Eowyn's curiosity had enticed her to return. Fond though he was of Faramir's wife, he did not relish her seeing him here, for though the mud covered him decently enough, he looked less than dignified. If she saw him and Faramir like this, her teasing would be well nigh unbearable!

He nudged Faramir. "I think Eowyn has been unable to resist seeing how we look covered in mud!"

Faramir groaned and flushed scarlet as the door opened but it was not his wife who entered but Eomer his handsome features contorted with fury.

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you for all your kind comments and reviews. I greatly appreciate each and every one! A warm welcome to new readers and my grateful thanks to those of you who have loyaly supported me for a long time. Maybe I will reach my magic 1,000 in this chapter?

I did intend this story to have about 45 chapters, then 50 but your ideas and suggestions have made it keep growing and there should be 5 or 6 more chapters left!

I hope to explore Aragorn's relationship with his Council in a sequel. They believe he has been away hunting.

I set out in this story to explore how guilt and depression affects different people in different ways but never expected so many of you to be interested in it!

I am hopeless at romance writing so fear that writing about Eomer and Lothiriel is beyond me!
We sit in the mud ... and reach for the stars - Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818–1883)

Eomer stormed awkwardly into the bathing chamber then froze, somewhat taken aback at the strange sight that greeted him.

"Where is my sister?" he demanded. "I was told she came in here."

"Eowyn is with the Queen, Eomer. Now will you please leave my bathing chamber! It is hardly good manners come in like this!" Aragorn was as commanding as one could be when submerged up the neck in mud.

How he wished that he had locked the door but he had trusted the guards to keep out unwelcome visitors. He could hardly blame them though, as they would be too respectful of Eomer's rank to deny him access to his brother King

Eomer ignored his command.

"So this is how you spend your time, Aragorn wallowing in the mud plotting to involve my sister in orgies with her perfidious husband!" he snarled. "I loved and admired you once, Aragorn, but how low you have fallen since the glorious days when we rode together in battle! You spend your nights in my sister's room and drag her off on hunting expeditions when she is about to give birth and all with the connivance of that scoundrel she married! Where have you hidden Eowyn? I will not have you use her as your plaything!"

"I happen to treating my Steward for his scars, some of which you inflicted upon him," Aragorn replied in a tone of icy calm." I shall not tell you again, your sister is with the Queen and caring for her child. You should know better than to listen to servants' gossip as we both respect Eowyn's honour and that of every other woman we encounter!"

"Eowyn was out riding because I…" Faramir began.

"No! This is neither the time nor place for explanations!" Aragorn told his Steward firmly, afraid that his obsession with telling the truth would only make matters worse.

"The way you pamper him beggars belief!" Eomer raged, "He dishonoured my sister, wounded me so badly I am stranded here, unable to mount my horse to go home to rule my Kingdom and pleasure my bride! While I suffer, you neglect me, your friend and ally long before you met this cur, whose scratches you are so concerned over!"
Aragorn wondered whether to call the Guards for while Eomer in his weakened condition hardly posed a threat, he was at a considerable psychological disadvantage being covered in thick sticky mud.

He decided to wait, knowing that he and Faramir would be the subject of barrack room jokes for weeks to come, if they were seen in such undignified circumstances.

"You have never been neglected." Aragorn said coldly. "I treated your hurts before Faramir's, who almost died because I could not reach him sooner. I then left you with the finest Healers that could be found and tended you myself as often as I could though as Faramir was so close to death I was often unable to leave him. Then later, when I tried to keep you company, you ranted at me, which I will not tolerate in my own house! Gladly I would have continued to tend your hurts but as you refused the Elvish methods I use, despite my pleas to permit me to help you, my ministrations would have been wasted. And as for your brother in law's scratches, I fear they are far more than that! I would gladly have given you the same treatments but you refused."

"Battle scars are honourable, I would not lose mine." Eomer raged, "I need no witchcraft!"

"Witchcraft?" Faramir was baffled.

I saw what Grima did to my uncle! You men of Gondor are just as bad with your libraries filled with scrolls of sorcery! I will have my revenge for you turning both Aragorn and my sister against me!"

"Peace, brother!" Faramir pleaded. "Can we not apologise to each other and be in amity?" He could hardly follow the thread of what Eomer was saying and was beginning to fear that his brother in law had lost his wits.

Eomer's handsome features were contorted with rage. "Apologise to you, never! I will teach you a lesson, though that you won't forget for a long time, which I obviously I failed to do so before! Come out of there and face me!" he roared.

"No! I will not lift my hand against you in anger again." Faramir said firmly, not at all happy at the thought of venturing out of the tub in front of Eomer, not that his weak ankle would allow him to, even if he were so minded.

"Get out or do I have to come in and get you!" Eomer demanded. "I order you as King!"

"You are not King of Gondor and I command you to leave my bathing chamber!" Aragorn rarely spoke so forcefully but when he did, he expected and usually received instant obedience. He was becoming increasingly anxious about the situation, especially with regard to Faramir's health. The Steward needed this treatment and in as calm and atmosphere as possible, especially as the unpleasant part was yet to come and Faramir was still frail in body and mind and could yet suffer a relapse.

Eomer's only reply was to tear off his clothing with his good arm. Unlike Aragorn, Faramir, and indeed most of the Gondorians, he was completely devoid of any inhibitions about baring his body.

Although shorter than either Aragorn or Faramir, he was well favoured in all senses of the term and still handsome and well muscled despite his many battle scars. He had something of a leonine air about him and the Steward felt somewhat puny by comparison to such magnificence.

Faramir fixed his eyes on the still livid mark on his brother in law's chest, inflicted by his own hand.
"Why do you stare?" Eomer demanded "Haven't you seen a real man before in Gondor? Maybe not as my wife wishes me to wear a nightgown like some blushing maid! Get out so I can see what you are made of!"

"Get dressed and we will talk later." Aragorn ordered sternly, gazing fixedly at Eomer's face framed by the mane of golden hair, so like his sister's " You are not yourself!"

"I am not your subject to be ordered. It is time you were both taught a lesson!"

Eomer strode towards the steps and Faramir tried to get up.

"Stay there, Faramir!" Aragorn ordered. "You need to remain here until the mud is about to congeal otherwise the treatment will not work. It takes too long to prepare just to waste! Eomer, get out of my bath!"

Eomer was by now standing on the last step leading into the tub; leaning forwards and tried to grab hold of Faramir's hair to drag him towards him.

Lunging forward, Aragorn grabbed the King of Rohan's ankles, which was all he could reach. Eomer lost his balance and slid down into the mud.

He thrashed helplessly, letting out a cry as the salts permeated his still healing wounds.

"I warned you to get out of my bath!" Aragorn raged, "But now you are here, you had better remain and have your own wounds treated!"

"I carry my scars with pride!" Eomer huffed, now the shock was abating, "Unlike that coward you married my sister!" He started to slide across the bath.

"Keep still or I will call my guards to restrain you if I have to!" Aragorn roared.

"Peace, brother!" Faramir pleaded, "I would rather we were in amity for your sister's sake if nothing else. She is saddened you have not yet been to see our child. She is your own niece after all!"

"How you I even know whose brat it is?" Eomer snarled, "The way you treat my sister, it is most likely his!" He gestured towards Aragorn.

"How dare you insult both my wife and my King!" Faramir was incensed.

Aragorn's simmering fury finally boiled over and he struck Eomer a glancing blow across the face. "No man speaks thus of me!" he roared.

"I am King of Rohan, you do not strike me like a naughty child!" Eomer retorted, scrambling out of the bath. "I know what you get up to with my sister when you go to her room in the middle of the night to take your pleasure!"

Too furious to even remember, he was clad in nothing but mud, Aragorn followed him.

Hampered by his frailty and injured ankle, Faramir could only sit helplessly and watch as his King and his brother in law grappled furiously with each other, each unable to land a proper blow and slipping from each other's grasp because of the mud.

He felt he ought to avert his eyes, though the mud was so thick, it provided a modest enough covering for the combatants, but found himself forced to watch in horrified fascination.
Had the situation not been so fraught, it would appear hilarious to a casual bystander.

Aragorn had the advantage of knowing the properties of the mud and managed to wipe one hand on the heap of discarded clothing, while fending Eomer off with the other. He caught Eomer a glancing blow on the jaw, which sent the King of Rohan flying. As he fell, he struck his head a glancing blow on the tiles.

"Eomer!" Aragorn gasped in horror his anger quickly forgotten as he hastened to his side. "Are you hurt?"

Eomer did not reply as he was dazzled by stars.

TBC

A/N

As a thank you for your wonderful level of interest and support, I have decided to update early. I am thrilled to have passed the 1,000 reviews mark, something which when I first posted this story I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams.

Because I had to delete some comments due to my mistake yesterday, it is hard to say who my 1000th reviewer was but every comment is greatly appreciated.

My sincere apologies for the mix up last night when by mistake I posted a draft copy of the sequel to this story. I did appreciate the comments but deleted them as they gave some of the plot away, which I wish to remain a surprise.

Eomer is indeed out of character due to his head injury.

We don't have mud wrestling in the UK as far as I know but I have heard about it, though never seen any.

For those of you who enjoy stories featuring Eomer and Lothiriel romance I have discovered a gem called "The Healer and the Warrior"
Even the utmost goodwill and harmony and practical kindness are not sufficient for friendship, for friends do not live in harmony merely, as some say, but in melody. We do not wish for friends to feed and clothe our bodies,—neighbours are kind enough for that,—but to do the like office to our spirits. For this few are rich enough, however well disposed they may be. -Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

"Eomer, are you hurt?" Aragorn repeated, his eyes filled with concern. He hastily wiped his hands on the first thing he could find, which was unfortunately Faramir's discarded shirt.

Oblivious to his state of undress, he knelt beside Eomer and felt the bump on his head.

Eomer blinked and looked around him. He appeared dazed as he replied, "I am well, my friend, I was just stunned for a moment."

"Do you feel nauseous or is your vision blurred?" Aragorn asked, relieved that Eomer was at least consciousness and lucid.

"No, but I have a headache," Eomer replied. The fury, which had blazed in his eyes but a moment before, was now replaced by expression of bewilderment and remorse.

Aragorn gripped Eomer's left arm to help him to his feet. He accepted the help, while with his right arm he instinctively steadied himself.

Aragorn stood staring at Eomer in amazement.

"What is wrong?" Eomer asked.

"You just used your right arm then!" Aragorn told him, hardly able to believe his own eyes.

"What?" Dumfounded, Eomer flexed the limb and found although it was weak and stiff he could move it almost normally.

"It's a miracle!" he gasped.

"I suspect you were suffering from some sort of clot which the mud bath, followed by so much exertion, has dissolved. Or maybe hitting your head had something to do with it?" Aragorn told him, instinctively assuming his healer's manner of speaking.

To both Aragorn and Faramir's amazement, Eomer burst out laughing. "You look so funny
making solemn pronouncements while standing there covered in nothing but mud! " he chortled, sitting down again on the heap of clothing as he was laughing so hard.

"So do you!" Aragorn retorted dryly. Suddenly remembering his state of undress and feeling very self-conscious, he reached for one of the now mud encrusted robes, only to catch his leg in the belt in his haste and end up sprawled on the floor.

He sat looking up at Eomer, who was still encrusted with mud, not only all over his body but also across his face where Aragorn had struck him and also in his hair, and found himself unable to resist the urge to laugh too.

Realising it would be a long time before he saw two mud encrusted Kings again, Faramir was powerless to stop himself joining in the laughter.

His mirth finally subsiding, Eomer gripped Aragorn's arms and clumsily embraced him. " I am so sorry!" he said contritely, " I do not know what came over me as you are the last person I desire to fight with for I love you as my brother!"

Before Aragorn could reply, Eomer scrambled to his feet and still totally unperturbed by his state of undress, went straight to the edge of the tub. Faramir involuntarily stiffened.

"It seems we can both be healed of our hurts, brother, so shall we begin to put the past behind us?" he asked, smiling at Faramir.

"Gladly I will offer you my hand in friendship again once we are more suitably attired!" Faramir replied trying to conceal his emotions over the latest turn of events.

Sighing with relief at the conciliatory gesture, Aragorn held out a robe to Eomer. "You had better put this on or your arm will get cold, as you need to wash off the mud with clean, warm water." Eomer did as he was bidden and Aragorn then embraced his friend.

"I cannot embrace you properly yet!" Eomer lamented. "I am so sorry, my friend, for ever doubting your honour, I spoke in madness as I know you would never dishonour my sister. You are the most honourable man I know."

"It is already forgotten." Aragorn said sincerely, greatly relieved at the outcome of what could have been a disastrous series of events. It seemed that the blow to the head had somehow restored Eomer to his rightful senses. "Have no fear as your arm will heal now and you will soon be riding Firefoot and wielding Guthwine again .I can treat your arm with salves and massage to strengthen it more quickly if you wish."

"Thank you. I will consider that" Eomer replied, "You have convinced me that your strange remedies might have some virtue after all! I will go now to my own apartments to wash off this mud."

"I will send a special salve to your room once you are bathed," Aragorn said, knowing Faramir would be embarrassed if Eomer remained, once the modesty the mud afforded was rinsed away, and feeling also that his Steward deserved some privacy for his treatments after all the humiliation of the past weeks, "Your scars can only be removed if you use it on them."

"I meant what I said that I wear my scars with pride." Eomer said a trifle huffily then without another word, gathered up his clothing and left.

Aragorn went to the door and called for a servant to escort him for not only had Eomer received a blow on the head but also the mud bath tended to make the user feel light headed afterwards. He also sent a message asking that Aedred go to attend the King of Rohan immediately.
As soon as he had gone, Aragorn heaved a deep sigh of relief and turned his attention to Faramir, "The Valar be praised that he is starting to come to his senses!" he exclaimed, "Come Mellon Nin! Time for you to get out of there!"

Faramir slithered over to the foot of the steps while the King worked out the best way to get him out of the sunken tub. Realising his robe would only get in the way, he discarded it in favour of a towel and knelt on the steps telling Faramir to put his arms around his neck, while he placed his own hands around his back, not an easy manoeuvre as they were both so slippery.

Faramir's eyes were brimming with tears of relief he had not wanted to shed in front of Eomer as Aragorn lifted him out of the bath and draped a towel round him as the robe he should have donned was being worn by his brother in law.

He waited patiently, perched on the side of the bath while Aragorn fetched more robes for them both.

"Give him time," Aragorn said gently as he helped Faramir into the next room. "Eomer is a proud man and stubborn though his heart is in the right place."

"I am content," Faramir said, "It was too much to hope that he should apologise to me and more important that he did so to you as I still feared the quarrel could eventually lead to war. I will ask Eowyn to invite him to come and see our baby as that should melt him further."

Aragorn laughed as they settled down waiting for the servants to clean and refill the bath. "I am certain he is very eager to return to Rohan and father his own child with your fair cousin!"

Faramir was glad that only Aragorn was present to witness the amount of pain he felt as the mud dried. It was far worse than last time but then his injuries had been slight compared with Aragorn's.

Also his head was spinning and he felt rather queasy and needed to lie flat to stop the room from spinning around.

Although Faramir did his best to hide his discomfort and make light of it, Aragorn could sense it and was filled with compassion, especially as he knew that far, far worse was to come. His own light-headedness passed quickly as he was not suffering from any illness or injury.

He sat beside Faramir holding a cup of ginger tea to his lips and encouraging him to sip it until the nausea and dizziness passed.

The tub of clean water seemed especially inviting as with the interruptions the mud had dried hard and was starting to feel very uncomfortable.

They both lay back and relaxed, both relieved that they could now be so at ease in each other's company even in a situation like this, at least until it was time to leave the water.

Aragorn got out first while Faramir studied the tiles as if they were something of great interest while the King dried his arms and draped a towel around his waist prior to lifting the Steward out of the sunken tub.

He handed Faramir a towel and towed and dressed himself while the Steward dried himself thoroughly. He then helped him into the next room and settled him on the bed with a towel wound round his hips for modesty.

As Aragorn prepared to administer the next stage of the treatment, he was both surprised and
touched that Faramir did not initially tense at his touch nor was his heartbeat racing even though he was well aware the salve would sting.

The King felt unreasonably guilty as what he planned to do was entirely for Faramir's good and could even save his life, if it worked to remove the knot of scar tissue on his belly before it could cause any problems. It was going to be excruciatingly painful, though as he had dared not give Faramir poppy juice before the bath in case he became drowsy and it was too late to give it him now as the potion took a while to take effect. The treatment had to be completed swiftly while the skin was still very permeable as result of the mud.

Faramir just lay there, limp and relaxed with his eyes closed in an attitude of complete trust and acceptance.

TBC

A very grateful thank you to everyone for your kind comments. Each and every one is greatly appreciated.

I think Aragorn's temper is hinted at in the books and like to show it sometimes as not to make him too perfect. He was especially furious when he saw Faramir being beaten.

I imagine the 'real' Eomer to be as I portray him in "The Hidden Days of Healing".

I see Lothiriel as a very prim and proper lady of Gondor rather like her father!
I will begin with your arm," Aragorn told him, picking up a pot of brightly coloured orange salve, made mostly from rosehips. He gently applied a thin layer to where Eomer's sword had cut into the muscle.

Faramir tensed as the ointment stung and then relaxed again as Aragorn used his healing abilities to ease it.

He then applied a thin layer over the damaged ribs and sprained ankle to help repair any damage inside.

"If you need any applying lower down, I will leave you to do it and spare your blushes, such as with that scar on your hip!" Aragorn said grinning as he handed him the jar.

"Damrod pointed it out, I suppose, I will kill him!" Faramir retorted without rancour despite his threat.

Aragorn busied himself fetching a jar of rosehip oil from his cupboard of healing supplies while Faramir dealt with the old scar then wound his towel back in place.

"What troubles you, Mellon Nin?" he asked, sensing the King's apprehension as he returned to the bedside. "Is it this?" he asked, gesturing towards the very visible swelling just beneath his ribs, where the skin was mottled and disfigured.

Aragorn nodded, finding it hard to meet Faramir's trusting gaze.

"That scar tissue could in the future attach itself to some vital organ which could kill you," he explained, thinking Faramir deserved to know the truth," I have tried to heal it but the method I use encourages wounds to close and this already has. I could eventually cut it out, but that would be a very dangerous procedure and might cause infection and more scarring. I could, though try to treat it with this rosehip oil, which combined with the mud bath has a good chance of curing you."

"That sounds a good idea." Faramir had initially blanched at the mention of being cut but now seemed very tranquil." But why do you look so worried?"
"Because the oil needs to be massaged vigorously into the scar tissue and I fear that is going to hurt you a great deal," Aragorn told him truthfully," I will of course try to ease the pain but it will still hurt, I fear. If I send you to sleep, you would not wake for a good many hours, which would not be wise so soon after a mud bath."

He tentatively felt the knot of scar tissue causing Faramir to give a squeak of pain, and then held his hands over it attempting to ease him.

"Will you permit me to try this?" the King asked, looking Faramir straight in the eye.

"Please do it. I want to be healed." Faramir said resolutely, trying to hide his fear, as he knew all too well what pain the lightest touch caused. He could not even wash the swollen area properly."I trust you."

"Tell me if the pain is too much and you want me to stop," Aragorn replied, first checking Faramir's heartbeat and then pouring some of the oil onto his belly and smearing his hands liberally with more. "I need you to lie flat and keep as still as you can."

"Do it quickly, please!" Faramir begged, tensing in grim anticipation of what was to come. He stretched out and took a deep breath.

Ideally for a procedure like this, the patient needed restraining but Aragorn could not bring himself to summon some burly assistant to hold Faramir down and witness his discomfort. It was just too much humiliation for a man who had endured so much already. He preferred to take the risk that Faramir might reflexively strike out at him.

He swallowed hard, took a deep breath and started to vigorously massage the rosehip oil into Faramir's belly, kneading it deep into the scar tissue.

Faramir dug his hands into the mattress, curbing the instinctive urge to lash out to protect himself from such pain. He bit his lips so as not to scream but still groaned and cried out in agony at the unrelenting pressure on the damaged nerve.

Aragorn forced himself to continue, working as quickly as he could, steeling himself not to respond to his Steward's obvious distress. He could only hope and pray that this was going to work.

After what must have been only a few minutes but felt like hours, Faramir had drawn up his knees and silent tears were running down his cheeks.

"It is nearly over now," Aragorn soothed, as he applied some of the salve and wound a bandage round to trap the oil against the skin.

He then held his hand over the place and Faramir felt the pain slowly subsiding.

Aragorn wiped the oil from his hands then mopped his brow. The whole procedure had been almost as much of an ordeal for him as for Faramir.

He placed his hand on his Steward's chest, and as he had feared his heart raced wildly while sweat poured from his body, which was shaking as result of the ordeal.

He had writhed so much that he had lost the towel he had been draped in but so great was his pain that he had not even noticed. Quickly Aragorn picked it up and replaced it before its loss added to his distress.

"I am sorry, little brother, I did not want to hurt you, he murmured, still bending over him. He
expected Faramir to berate him soundly but the younger man's only response was to bury his head against Aragorn's shoulder.

The King held him for a few moments both comforting him and recovering from his own distress at having to hurt him thus. His fury against those who had inflicted the original injuries was intense.

"I have had word that the drunkard who did this to you has been captured," he told Faramir, aiming to distract him.

"Good!" Faramir finally pulled away and turned over on his side, prior to having the ointment applied to his back." I am sorry to react like this. I am a coward!"

Aragorn shook his head," No, pressure on a nerve is one of the worse kinds of pain," he reassured him," A coward would have begged me to stop .You steadfastly endured it despite still not having recovered from your injuries."

The King checked his heart once more and frowned, for it was still beating too rapidly. It worried him, as Faramir was still so frail and he feared a relapse.

Impulsively he tucked the bed covers around his Steward, no longer caring if the orange ointment stained them. Despite the fire blazing in the hearth, he would most likely be cold once he stopped sweating.

"We still have some time left to apply the salve before the effect of mud bath wears off, so I am going to massage your neck and shoulders for a few minutes," he told Faramir, "It should ease you."

"Thank you!" Faramir buried his face in the pillow and relaxed almost at once as Aragorn's skilled fingers worked their magic.

A few minutes later he was calmed, limp and sleepy and when Aragorn next checked his heartbeat, it was normal.

"I will apply the rosehip salve to your back now if you are ready, " the King said.

Faramir nodded," I feel much better now," he announced.

Aragorn now arranged the covers around his Steward so as to leave his back bare. It would take some time to undo all the damage that Mahrod had caused during the vicious beating. Despite his long years of experience, he still could not look at Faramir's back without a shudder, especially as his actions had indirectly led to the damage being inflicted.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Aragorn began applying the salve. This was not such a great ordeal as the actual wounds were healed and the ointment only stung slightly and Faramir was now relaxed and comfortable again.

A sudden tap on the door jolted him back into wakefulness.

"Who is it?" Aragorn called. He had ordered the servants not to disturb them and was certain that Arwen and Eowyn would be too preoccupied with the babies to appear. As for Eomer, he had made it clear he was determined to keep his scars.

"It is Eomer. May I come in?"

Aragorn looked at Faramir who reluctantly nodded and then called for the King of Rohan to enter.
"I changed my mind." Eomer said, a trifle sheepishly, "I have been talking to Aedred and he says you are the only one who knows how use Elvish treatments. I was foolish to jump to conclusions about my sister without giving you both a chance to speak and I regret forcing you to fight so I …" His voice trailed away as he moved round the bed and saw Faramir's back clearly for the first time. He gasped in horror, "Whatever has happened to you Faramir? I don't understand! I only dealt a blow with my sword! I would never strike at a man from the back!"

Faramir sat up quickly; self consciously hugging the covers closely around himself.

"He has suffered a great deal." Aragorn said sadly," More at my hands than he ever did at yours!"

Eomer's eyes flashed. "How could you beat him like this? You think you have a superior culture to us Rohirrim, but we do not practise such cruelty!"

"Peace!" Faramir pleaded, "This was not Aragorn's fault. He had me taken into custody for my own safety and I was beaten in the prison by an old enemy."

"Why was I never told?" Eomer demanded.

"First you were too unwell and then too angry to listen." Aragorn said quietly.

"Brother, I would see your wounds." Eomer towered over Faramir who still sat clutching the blankets.

Faramir sat up and slowly and reluctantly pulled the covers down to his waist. Eomer circled the bed an unreadable expression in his eyes.

"I am so sorry, I had no idea," he said at last and had Faramir not known him better, he could have sworn a tear was glittering in his eye. "I will kill the curs who did this to you!"

"The Elven treatment will remove the scars on my body which will in turn help heal those in my soul," Faramir said, reassuring his contrite brother in law. "The miscreants will be punished according to the law."

Eomer turned his attention back to Aragorn asking almost shyly "I came to see if you could treat the scar Faramir inflicted on me. That is one scar I am not proud of, as I should never have forced him to fight me! What must I do?"

Aragorn gestured to the pot of salve, which lay open on the bedside table. "It just requires the scar to be rubbed with that salve. I will apply some for you as soon as I have finished treating Faramir. You will need to either remove your shirt and tunic or pull them up."

Eomer sat on the side of the bed fingering the jar of ointment; he casually pulled off his shirt and tunic and flexed his finely muscled body, delighting in being able to move his arm again His back was turned to Aragorn and Faramir, apparently to give Faramir some privacy as the King finished applying the salve.

Faramir discarded the towel and pulled on clean drawers under the covers and then Aragorn helped him don a shirt and long, loose robe.

Suddenly the King of Rohan gave an ear splitting shriek and leapt to his feet.

TBC

A/N
Many thanks to all my readers for all your kind comments.

I was initially going to have Eomer soften once he could move his arm but you all seemed to want him to be hit on the head again and it made better sense!

I'm pleased you enjoy the quotes.

I agree Lothiriel must have a sense of adventure to marry Eomer!
To Err is Human

Chapter Notes

To err is human, to forgive divine.

Alexander Pope

(1688 - 1744)

With thanks to Laerien and Raksha who gave me the idea for this chapter.

Water!" Eomer gasped, "Help me, I'm on fire!"

"Whatever is the matter?" Faramir exclaimed as Aragorn rushed round the bed to his fellow monarch's side.

"That ointment!" Eomer groaned, "I thought I would save you the trouble of applying it but it feels like salt rubbed in a raw wound!"

Aragorn bent over him to see and struggled to repress a giggle for Eomer appeared to have smeared half the bright orange contents of the pot of ointment across his chest, which now he was clutching in agony.

Aragorn grabbed a towel and dipped it in a basin of water he had been using to wash his hands in then spread it across Eomer's chest and started to rub off most of the ointment.

"You should only use a tiny amount. " he explained, "No great harm is done though, you will just feel rather sore for a few hours." He then removed the wet towel and held his hands a few inches above Eomer's chest, using his healing powers to ease the pain.

"What are you doing?" Eomer asked curiously, a contented sigh escaping him as the pain ebbed away. "It feels wonderful!"

"Just a little Elven healing!" Aragorn grinned, "That is if you do not want me to stop immediately as you told me you objected to my unorthodox methods?"

Eomer s looked sheepish. " Please no, I was wrong, it is most effective! You are a brave man indeed to endure that agonizing ointment, Faramir!" he said at last.
Faramir smiled. "I have become accustomed to it," he said enigmatically, "Will you dine with Eowyn and myself tomorrow? We would like to introduce you to your niece."

"Gladly." Eomer replied," With a father like you and Eowyn as her mother I am certain, she will grow up to become the bravest of Shield maidens!"

The three men chuckled together contentedly.

Faramir was resting after the ordeal of his treatment, Eomer was dictating a letter to Lothiriel with the aid of a scribe and Aragorn had decided to spend a quiet evening with Arwen and his son.

They had just finished dining when a servant came to inform Aragorn that the Chief Warder from the City Prison wished to speak to him on a matter of some urgency.

"Let him come in!" Aragorn sighed; he had so been looking forward to enjoying some uninterrupted time with his family but duty always had to come first.

Since Faramir's arrest, all the warders at the prison had been sacked and replaced with former soldiers of good character who were running the prison with military efficiency and ensuring that Faramir's ordeal was most unlikely to ever befall anyone else. The cells now had clean straw and only contained one prisoner each and punishments had to be carried out publicly and only when properly authorised by the Court. The prison was also inspected at regular intervals by senior officers to assure that all was running smoothly.

As the Chief Warder entered, Aragorn wondered whatever could have gone wrong now, as the new regime had so far been running very smoothly.

"My Lord, forgive me for disturbing you, but I have news which I believe you would wish to hear!" he replied. "I am no healer but I do not think that he has long to live as he is spitting up blood is a curious colour that I have seen on heavy drinkers turn shortly before they have died. I have not come on account of his imminent demise though, for who would mourn such as him? But since you have expressed a keen interest in the case and he has asked to see you, I felt you should be informed. I also await your orders on what I should do with him. Do you wish me to summon a healer?

"Have him taken to the Houses of Healing under Master Aedred's care and kept under close guard!" Aragorn pronounced, " I will come as soon as he has been moved if you send a message when that is done."

As soon as the Chief Warder had left Arwen rose from her chair and came and put her arms around her husband, " I know how difficult this is for you, Beloved, yet I know you will do what is right," she said.

"At least I do not have to go the prison!" Aragorn replied, "What happened to Faramir there haunts me as he is still enduring the pain!"

She kissed him tenderly and then summoned a servant to fetch his outdoor cloak to be ready to leave as soon as the summons came.

Accompanied by his guards, Aragorn made his way down to the Sixth Level, where he was greeted by the Warden of the Houses of Healing and taken to a small room where a man lay on a
bed covered by a sheet. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be either sleeping or unconscious.

A guard stood either side of him, one of which was arguing with Aedred over what treatment he should receive.

"What ails him?" Aragorn asked Aedred, reluctant to look at the prisoner.

"Drinking disease, Sire," the Healer replied, "He will not last the night! I wish to give him poppy juice but the guards say that is a luxury forbidden to prisoners."

"You are certain he is dying?" the King said.

Aedred pulled back the sheet to reveal his naked patient. "The guards said not to give him any clothing and just one sheet in case he tries to escape," he explained," Not that this poor man will be going anywhere!"

The prisoner finally opened his eyes and vainly tried to cover himself with his arms. It was obvious that Aedred's diagnoses was correct, as he was painfully thin, his skin was a vivid yellow hue and his belly grotesquely swollen.

He groaned and Aragorn knew that he had it in his power to ease his pain but for the first time ever in his life, he could not bring himself to touch the man. Faramir's anguish from what he had been forced to do to him earlier that day, was still too fresh in his mind. Then the was the memory of the dreadful sight that had greeted him when Imrahil had helped him remove Faramir's clothing and they had revealed the Steward's body so badly bruised that hardly an inch of undamaged flesh remained.

He had over the years helped wounded foes after a battle, but that was different for they had fought bravely and with honour, however misguided their allegiances.

He nodded curtly for Aedred to re-cover the man and backed further away from the bed as to his shame he could not trust himself in this evildoer's vicinity.

"Sire?" Agond muttered," Is that the King?"

"It is," Aragorn replied coldly, "You wished to see me?"

"Wanted to ask you something afore I die. They say Lord Faramir wasn't no traitor after all? Is that true?" The words emerged as a harsh whisper forcing Aragorn to reluctantly move nearer to the bed.

Agond coughed and there was blood on his lips. Aedred moved to the bedside, wiped his mouth, and offered him a sip of water.

"Lord Faramir was never a traitor. You did him a most grievous wrong!" Aragorn replied sternly.

"Tell 'im then I'm sorry. I don't 'old with no traitors I don't and the warder 'e said that 'e was one and it made me angry, me being a soldier once in your Majesty's army and fighting against traitors! I knows I'm dying and that I deserve to but I wanted to say I was sorry I did!"

Aragorn felt a sudden surge of anger mixed with compassion as he realised that this wretch was in his own way another of Mahrod's victims.

"I will tell the Lord Steward what you have said, you have my word." Aragorn said quietly.
"You're a good man, you is, your Majesty, I'm sorry I'm not dressed proper nor able to bow to you and all."

He coughed again and closed his eyes, exhausted with the effort.

Aragorn swallowed hard to overcome his revulsion and placed a fleeting hand on the man's head. "Be at peace!" he intoned then turned to leave.

Agond smiled and lapsed again into unconsciousness.

"Give him some warm blankets and if he wakes again poppy juice and a nightshirt to wear," he instructed Aedred, "Now could you take me somewhere where I can wash my hands, please?"

When he returned to the Citadel he went first to Faramir's rooms, feeling he deserved to know what had transpired.

The Steward was lying on the couch resting while Eowyn fed Elestelle in the nursery.

He sat beside Faramir and clasped his hands he told him of Angond's words.

"I forgive him," Faramir said simply lifting his downcast eyes and looking straight at his King.

"You have a noble heart indeed, my friend!" Aragorn replied amazed at Faramir's generosity of spirit. He had suffered so much at the hands of so many and yet could still forgive.

"How are your wounds?" Aragorn asked him, having already noted his pulse was strong and steady.

"Much better, the pain has eased greatly thanks to all you have done for me!" Faramir told him, "Today cannot have been easy for you but I shall sleep well tonight knowing that Eomer is reconciled with us both and you have tended my hurts!"

"Be thou blessed!" Aragorn placed his hands on Faramir's head and sensed a new tranquillity within him as well as being able to read his thoughts, which tonight were brimming with love, faith and gratitude.

He could only hope that such faith was justified and the painful treatment would have indeed cured his Steward and friend.

He kissed him on the brow and bade him goodnight then went to seek solace in Arwen's comforting embrace as today had been almost as painful for him as for Faramir.

TBC

A/N

My sincere apologies to anyone who tried to read this chapter and found the previous one instead!

A big thank you for all your kind reviews which are much appreciated.

I did not want Faramir to strike Aragorn in this story.
Where did you get your eyes so blue?

Chapter Notes

BOG53

BOG53

These Characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has or will be made from it.

Where did you come from, Baby dear?
Out of the everywhere into the here.
Where did you get your eyes so blue?
Out of the sky as I came through.

George MacDonald (1824–1905),

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who wanted to see Eomer meet the baby with especial thanks to Raksha for her suggestions

When Aragorn visited Faramir the next morning, he found him in considerable pain, though trying hard not to show it.

Ashen faced, he was sitting propped up in bed in his dressing room. Convention decreed that he did not share Eowyn's bed so soon after her having given birth.

"Why did you not send for me?" Aragorn chided gently, feeling that he maybe should have kept Faramir with him the previous night after the ordeal of the treatment.

"You needed your rest as you had as much or more to endure yesterday than I did," said Faramir, unlacing the neck of his nightshirt and sliding it from his shoulders," I did not wish to disturb Eowyn either and thought it best to wait until she was with Ioreth and the Queen."

"I fear this sometimes happens," Aragorn sighed once Faramir's upper body was bared to his gaze. A large bruise had appeared across his chest, while the scars on his arm and back looked red and angry. No doubt the scar tissue concealed by the bandage looked as bad, but it was important not to unwrap it until three days had passed.

"The scars itch too!" Faramir lamented, wriggling violently to avoid scratching. "Do those on my back look as bad as they feel?"He vainly tried to crane his neck to look.

"They do but as they itch they must be healing!" Aragorn smiled for the first time since he had entered the room, " And that is a good sign!" he said. "Sometimes the mud bath does cause pain and irritation if the wounds were very severe."

He closed his eyes and held his hands over the scars and Faramir sighed with relief as he felt the pain slowly ebb away.

" I just been informed that Agond died in the night without regaining consciousness after I left
him,” Aragorn told his Steward, noting his heart was beating a little too quickly but not dangerously so.

"May the Valar grant him peace!" Faramir's nobility of spirit was awe-inspiring, given that the man had caused much of his current pain.

"I am told he was a soldier in Lossarnach for many years and did many deeds of valour but then he was wounded during the war. He took to drink to numb the pain while he recovered, but was unable to stop drinking afterwards. He was dismissed from the army and took to begging in the streets. That was when he was arrested and attacked you," Aragorn explained.

Faramir merely nodded.

"I have some salve that will ease the itching" Aragorn told him," I brought it in case it was needed. Lie on your side and I will apply some to your back!"

"I must be well for the trial tomorrow!" Faramir fretted as gentle hands rubbed the soothing calendula salve into his itching scars.

"I think it best that you do not go," Aragorn said gently but firmly, "I will see that justice is done upon Mahrod but seeing him again would only distress you and you need to rest for three days after the mud bath,"

"Surely it is my duty?" Faramir protested.

"There is no need as there are witnesses aplenty of what he did to you!" the King replied.

Aragorn could feel the shudder convulsing his Steward's still painfully thin body. "Once this treatment has had time to work, you will look very different than you did on that dreadful day!" he soothed, "Trust me to deal with this!"

Faramir turned his head to look Aragorn straight in the eye. "I will do as you bid me," he said quietly.

"You need to rest now," Aragorn said gently but firmly as he helped Faramir ease his nightshirt back over his shoulders.

"I need to prepare for Eomer's visit this evening!" Faramir protested, "I cannot lie abed! Please, Aragorn, could you, the Queen and your son, join us for dinner too? Eowyn and I would be very grateful if you did!"

"We will be delighted to!" Aragorn reassured him, "Now lie down as you have plenty of time to rest before tonight! But remember when you get up, you must not wash your scars until the three days have passed!"

Conceding defeat, Faramir lay back on his pillows and closed his eyes. Aragorn gently brushed his eyelids with his fingertips sending him into a light refreshing sleep.

He stood for a moment looking down at him, his eyes full of compassion.

He then made his way to Eomer's apartments as the King of Rohan had sent a message begging for some Elven treatments for his arm.

That afternoon Eowyn had just fed Elestelle and replaced her in her cradle when a knock came on the door of the nursery.
"Come in!" she called.

Her eyes lit up when her brother rather hesitantly entered the room. He was clutching a bunch of the few winter flowers to be found in Minas Tirith.

She raced across the room and enfolded him in a loving embrace exclaiming, "Eomer, it is so good to see you!"

"Um, your um husband invited me to see the baby," Eomer said awkwardly, handing her the flowers.

"Come and meet your niece then!" Eowyn smiled, leading him towards the cradle and lifting her child out.

"This is Elestelle!" she said proudly, "Elestelle, meet your Uncle Eomer!"

Eomer looked rather doubtfully at the bundle his sister held out for his inspection. Tentatively he held out a finger towards the infant in greeting and found it clasped in a surprisingly strong grip. Filled with an overwhelming sense of tenderness towards his niece, his fierce warrior's heart melted. He knew then he would be her slave for life.

"She is beautiful!" he choked, blinking away a tear, "A true daughter of Rohan, just like her mother!"

"Would you like to hold her?" Eowyn asked, gesturing for her brother to sit down on the couch.

"What if I drop her?" he asked anxiously.

"You won't!" Eowyn reassured him as she carefully positioned Elestelle in his arms and showed him how to support her head.

"Eowyn, I am so very sorry about your husband!" Eomer said flushing slightly, after sitting in silence for a few moments, raptly contemplating his niece.

"Faramir has suffered a great deal but I should never have written that letter!" Eowyn replied, "We must share the blame over what happened!"

"I swear when I set out from Edoras, I only meant to bring you home with me," Eomer said ruefully, "But during the journey I had time to imagine all manner of horrors that I believed your husband had inflicted upon you and that combined with the copious amounts of ale we consumed and the boasts of my men about what they would do if their sisters were harmed, set my blood a boil! I shudder now though to think what I did, for not only did I wound your husband and cause his arrest, but by acting in the way I did, I broke all my oaths of friendship to Aragorn, the man I admire above all others!"

"Faramir and Aragorn have forgiven you and so do I!" Eowyn replied, kissing his cheek "I have my brother back and Elestelle has her uncle. That is all that matters!"

Faramir felt much better by dinnertime and was able to stand beside Eowyn at the appointed hour to receive their guests. He was wearing a loose black robe embroidered with silver, while Eowyn wore a flowing gown of blue.

The King and Queen with their son, were the first to arrive and Eowyn was touched to notice that Aragorn too wore a lose robe, forsaking his usual attire of tunic and breeches in order to make Faramir more at ease. The purple velvet, embroidered with gold, made him look especially regal though and Arwen was unable to resist casting frequent adoring glances in his direction. She wore
a simple red gown, which highlighted her exquisite Elven beauty to perfection.

Eomer was more simply attired in a green tunic and brown breeches, which suited his muscular masculinity far better than any formal robes could.

The babies were settled in adjacent cradles and as the soup was served the talk turned to whom they most closely resembled.

"Eldarion is just like his father!" Arwen pronounced as she daintily took a piece of bread.

"He cannot be! He is far too attractive!" Aragorn protested, "He is like you, Vanimelda!"

"No, he is just like you, Estel!" Arwen said firmly, jabbing the bread into her bowl and crumbling it.

"Who do you think he is like, Faramir?" Aragorn asked, turning to his Steward for support.

Faramir groaned inwardly at being posed such a difficult question. "I think he resembles you both!" he said tactfully.

Aragorn laughed; "You are always the diplomat!" he chuckled, "Now your Elestella is like both her grandmothers! I remember both of them, though I think she will have Rohirric colouring and a Numenorean bone structure!"

"I hope she does not have my nose!" Faramir said wryly, "But do you really remember my mother, Aragorn?" There was a note of longing in the Steward's voice.

"Indeed I do!" Aragorn replied, "She was very beautiful and had a gentle nature, in which you take after her. I remember when your brother was born. He was a lovely baby though Elestelle is prettier as a little girl should be!"

Eomer, who had been concentrating on his soup, suddenly joined in the conversation. "Elestelle looks just like her mother as I remember when she was born!" he said, "There was no fairer babe in the whole of the Mark!"

Eowyn looked unsure whether to be pleased or not at this comment as she glanced between her brother and her husband.

"I warrant she has her father's eyes though!" he conceded, clapping Faramir heartily on the back and causing him to wince slightly and splutter slightly as he swallowed a mouthful of hot soup too quickly.

"You are not the only diplomat present, Faramir!" Aragorn teased, determined to enjoy himself tonight before the trial on the morrow.

Faramir and Eomer smiled at each other.

"Now I am almost healed I am looking forward to being reunited with my wife and then maybe soon we will have our own little one to introduce to you!" Eomer said, "Seeing these babies has made me yearn to be a father myself!"

Aragorn and Faramir could not help but both look rather smug.

TBC

A big thank you to everyone who found the correct chapter 54 for your very much appreciated
reviews. My sincere apologies to anyone who has been looking for it, I was starting to think it must be my worst chapter ever as it attracted so few comments and then realised in trying to revise it, I somehow had posted the previous chapter twice!

The Drinker's Disease is Cirrhosis, unfortunately no figment of my imagination.

This is the last of the "extra" chapters.

I hope to have a new angst filled sequel ready very soon after this concludes.
The Force of Temporal Power

Chapter Notes

His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;

Shakespeare The Merchant of Venice IV. i

The next day, Aragorn, soberly yet regally attired, made his way to the Hall of Kings where the trial was due to take place. The Star of Elendil gleamed on his brow and he carried the sceptre of Annuninas in his hand. All eyes were upon him as he regally processed through the Hall and took his place upon the throne, where he would sit in judgement.

The area set aside for spectators was packed with curious citizens, not only from Minas Tirith but from he outlying villages as well. Faramir was well loved and the news of the attack upon him had aroused feelings of horror even amongst those who only knew the Steward by reputation and had never actually set eyes upon him.

The previous evening, the trial had been discussed after dinner and Faramir had tried to persuade Aragorn to let him attend after all. The King had promised to consider his request but when Faramir had again woken up in severe pain that morning, it was obvious that it would be impossible for him to be there.

Eowyn however was determined to be present for as long as she could safely leave Elestelle and was sitting in the area of the Hall reserved for the Nobles, accompanied by her brother.

Aragorn was now ready to begin the proceedings. On either side of him stood noble Lords, well versed in the laws of Gondor, carrying scrolls detailing the charges as well as the penalties for the crimes committed against Faramir.

A herald blew his trumpet to announce the trial was beginning and cried, "Let the prisoner be brought forth!"

When Mahrod, surrounded by guards, was led before the King, the people jeered and Aragorn’s sharp hearing could make out comments such as "How dare they hurt our Lord Faramir?"
"Whatever was King Elessar thinking of sending him to prison?"

Aragorn rose to his feet and addressed the assembly "People of Gondor, we are here today to see justice done upon one accused of conspiring against the life of Lord Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien and is thereby charged with high treason!
"Let the first witness be called!" the herald cried, "Come forth Tarung of Lossarnach!"

A rather shamefaced young man came forward and bowed deeply to the King.

"Please tell all assembled what happened on the mid day of September!" Aragorn told him.

"You ordered Lord Faramir to be taken into your custody, Sire," the young man began.

A howl of outrage erupted from the crowd, which was quickly quelled by Aragorn raising his sceptre and rebuking them sternly.

Prompted by a nod from the King, Tarung continued, "I was a member of the Citadel Guard at that time and together with my colleague, Vorogond, we arrested Lord Faramir and escorted him to the City Prison as we did not realise then, that King Elessar wanted him confined within the Royal Apartments."

"Was Lord Faramir injured when you escorted him to prison?" Aragorn asked.

"He had what appeared to be a deep wound on his arm and some cuts to his side and chest. They were bleeding but did not appear very serious. I bound them as best I could and then we left Lord Faramir locked alone in a cell and returned to our duties."

"Did you consider Lord Faramir's life to be in danger when you left him?" Aragorn asked.

"Indeed not, Sire!" the young man replied, "We were satisfied that he would fare well enough until a Healer saw him!"

"Thank you, you may go now!" Aragorn told the young man.

Tarung scuttled away, thankful that he too was not on trial. However, the King had decided that dismissal from their coveted posts in the Citadel Guard was sufficient punishment for himself and his colleague.

"Come forth Lamrung of the Citadel Guard!" the herald cried.

Lamrung, resplendent in his uniform came forward and bowed deeply to the King.

"Please tell all assembled what you recall happening at the City Prison on the mid day of September!" Aragorn told him.

"The prison was very quiet that day, Sire," Lamrung began, "The Head Jailor was late that morning and Mahrod was in charge of the prisoners until he arrived. I do not recall Lord Faramir being brought in but soon afterwards Agond, a violent and drunken man was arrested. I recall seeing Mahrod put him in a cell which I later was told was already occupied by Lord Faramir."

"Were there no empty cells vacant?" Aragorn asked.

"There were plenty, Sire!" Lamrung replied.

"And was Agond's violent nature well known?" Aragorn questioned.

"Very well known, Sire. When he was drunk, which was often, he would attack people on the slightest pretext, kicking and beating them and eventually the Guards would arrest him whenever he was seen drunk on the streets before he could do any harm. He was a nice enough man when sober but vicious as an Orc once he'd been drinking!"

"When did you first encounter Lord Faramir in the prison?" Aragorn enquired.
"Mahrod sent for me, Sire, as I usually carried out the floggings, being the youngest and strongest there," Lamrung said gravely, not proud to recall what he used to do for a living. "I saw a man lying crumbled on the floor and to my surprise recognised him as Lord Faramir. Mahrod was bending over him when I came in, and seemed taken aback at my presence. I thought he would send me to summon help but instead, he ordered me to give Lord Faramir one hundred lashes!"

"And what did you do?" Aragorn prompted.

"I refused, Sire," Lamrung replied, "I could see that Lord Faramir was covered in blood and obviously injured. Regulations prohibit flogging an injured man and in any case, the maximum allowed by law is twenty-five strokes of the whip. Also there was no official order signed by Your Majesty to authorise the punishment. Mahrod brushed my objections aside and told me he would flog Lord Faramir himself and enjoy doing it for he claimed he had ruined his life. He then threatened me with the whip and I went to get help, which was when I found you and Prince Imrahil, Your Majesty! I escorted you and His Highness to the room where the punishment was being carried out and saw Mahrod about to administer the thirty ninth stroke when you prevented him from doing so. He then spat at Your Majesty!"

"Thank you, Lamrung, you may go," Aragorn told him. He shut his eyes for a brief instant recalling the dreadful moment when he had discovered Faramir being virtually flayed alive.

Murmurs of outrage echoed around the Hall. Aragorn opened his eyes again and met the smirking gaze of Mahrod, who had sat listening to Lamrung's story licking his lips with obvious enjoyment until the witness had come to the part where Aragorn interrupted the flogging.

Eowyn whispered something in her brother's ear and rose to her feet. As she passed Mahrod on her way out, Aragorn could see she looked pale and drawn, yet she glared fiercely at the prisoner, who leered back at her unpleasantly. Eowyn stood her ground and Mahrod was the first to lower his gaze, leaving all present to wonder if she had glared in the same manner at the Witch King.

"I call upon the Warden of the Houses of Healing to come forth and bear witness!" the herald cried.

"Tell us what you observed when you examined Lord Faramir in my presence and that of Prince Imrahil on the mid day of September!" Aragorn ordered, feeling relieved that now neither Faramir nor Eowyn were present.

"I found the Lord Faramir prone on a bed in the King's private apartments," the Warden began, "He was lying on his side covered by a blanket. I removed it to examine him and was shocked by the extent of his injuries. He was bleeding from wounds in his arm, chest and side and from his severely lacerated back, which looked virtually flayed. He was also severely bruised from shoulder to thigh, my examination uncovered cracked, and broken ribs and very severe bruising, some of which was inside and most likely causing further bleeding. He was scarcely consciousness but obviously in a great deal of pain, for my examination was obviously agonising for him, though I conducted it with great care. His heartbeat was weak and rapid and I did not expect him to survive, neither did my assistant, Master Aedred, who examined him later.

"Which of the injuries did you deem the most likely to prove fatal, Master Warden?" Aragorn enquired, his eyes like flint. "And what in your opinion had could have caused such hurts?"

"The cuts were obviously caused by a sword or dagger and if properly tended, were unlikely to be life threatening though the rough treatment he had obviously received afterwards had aggravated them" the Warden explained, "The life threatening injuries were the bruises which could have caused much damage inside and crushed vital organs or caused the ribs to pierce the lungs. In
addition, the flogging could easily have proved fatal from blood loss, infection and damage to the heart and kidneys. I have known a man die from as little as thirty-six lashes if his heart were not strong. I am amazed that Lord Faramir still lives though I doubt that he could ever fully recover from such an ordeal."

"Thank you, Master Warden, you may go." Aragorn's visage was exceptionally stern to mask the emotion he felt at the brutal treatment metered out to his gentle and sweet natured Steward." He glanced at Mahrod who had listened to the Warden's description with ill concealed pleasure.

Eomer, who had remained behind after his sister left was ashen faced and clutching his sword, his expression strongly suggesting that only supreme self discipline was preventing him from running Mahrod through on the spot.

The crowd now stunned to silence looked appalled at the Warden's description of Faramir's injuries.

"Let Captain Damrod come forth and bear witness!" the herald cried.

As Damrod passed the prisoner on his way to stand before the throne, he glared at him almost as fiercely as Eowyn had done. Mahrod's response was a rude gesture, which earned a stern rebuke from his guards.

"You knew the accused when you served together under Captain Faramir in Ithilien did you not? " Aragorn enquired of Damrod.

"I did, Sire and he was the only one of our company ever to be dismissed in disgrace, Sire!" Damrod replied, disgust in his voice evident even though almost four years had elapsed since the events had taken place. "We never liked the man much but he was a fierce fighter. Then one night about a week before the Fall of Osgiliath, I was awakened from sleep by loud screams and ran to investigate with Lord Faramir close at my heels. We discovered Mahrod in the act of committing rape. Lord Faramir ordered his immediate arrest and with two lieutenants tried him the next day. By rights he should have been taken to the City after committing such a grave crime, as Lord Faramir was loath to sentence him to death, though he could have done. As war was raging all around us, no escort could be spared to take a prisoner to Minas Tirith so Lord Faramir sentenced him to twenty-five lashes and instant dismissal from the army. Instead of being grateful for a punishment, we all considered very lenient, he took it very badly and vowed revenge on Lord Faramir in the hearing of us all!"

The crowd gasped at Damrod's revelation.

Aragorn thanked him and he returned to his seat, the last of the witnesses to be called. He could have summoned many others, such as the former Chief Warder, now languishing in his own prison for neglecting his duty, Damrod's surviving colleagues or Aedred to name but a few but he felt enough had been said to establish Mahrod's guilt.

He turned his stern gaze towards the prisoner saying, "Let the accused now speak!"

TBC

A/N

A very big thank you to all my kind reviewers. I am truly blessed to have such loyal and supportive readers.

I originally only devoted 600 words to the trial but felt it deserved more detail. I have tried to base it on the trial of Beregond as much as possible and avoid the modern conventions of lawyers,
juries and cross-examinations.
Mahrod glared at the assembled company who jeered at him angrily. Aragorn raised his hand for silence and ordered the prisoner to face him. As he showed no sign of obeying, the guards forced him to turn around. He scowled contemptuously at the King but was unable to endure the suppressed fury in stern grey eyes for more than a few seconds before turning away.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Mahrod, son of Bergrod?" Aragorn enquired, "How do you plead to these most grievous charges against you?"

Mahrod did not reply for a few moments and Aragorn braced himself for a display of false contrition, which he had learned to harden himself against since he had become King. The most hardened criminals were masters of hand wringing, insincere tears and many promises to reform, which were invariably broken as soon as they were released.

"Why did you conspire against the life of Lord Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien?" Aragorn asked for a third time, his patience beginning to wane.

"Why shouldn't I, as he ruined my life?" Mahrod sneered contemptuously, though he could not bring himself to look at Aragorn," Had me half beaten to death he did, when I was just having a bit of fun! And if that wasn't enough my wife went and left me and the rest of my family threw me out all on account of oh so virtuous and self righteous Lord Faramir!"

"That's not true!" a woman called from the crowd, "I was going to leave you in any case after the things you did to me that no decent man would! Your crime was just the final straw!"

"Peace, good lady!" Convention demanded that Aragorn rebuke the woman but his tone was kindly. "How many lashes were you given, Mahrod?" he continued in a much sterner tone.

"Twenty five but the no good lieutenant that beat me did it very hard!" Mahrod said sulkily. "It just weren't fair!"

Aragorn turned and consulted with one of the Lords at his side, who then held up a scroll.

"It is written here," the King said," That the penalty for committing rape is death, so it seems that Lord Faramir was exceptionally lenient with you! When did you next see Lord Faramir after he
dismissed you?"

"The only place I could find work after he ruined my life was in the City Prison," Mahrod replied, obviously not impressed in the slightest by his former Captain's mercy. "I was there doing my duty on the mid day of September when they brought in Lord Faramir, after he committed treason by attacking the King of Rohan. Now, I don't say that I haven't been a rogue in my time, but I was never a traitor and I was determined to give him what he deserved! I was doing my duty, I was, when he comes along and gives me a clout with my own whip!" He looked accusingly at Aragorn.

The crowd tittered and murmured approvingly at the revelation.

"Lord Faramir is no traitor and it is for the law to decide who is guilty or not," Aragorn said coldly.

"Where is Lord not a traitor Faramir then?" Mahrod asked, "If I beat him like you say I did, he should take off his fine clothes before us all and let us see his scars on his soft and delicate flesh!"

"That is out of the question!" Aragorn snapped, feeling very relieved indeed that Faramir was not present to be distressed by this man's outrageous behaviour. "No one would thus demean so noble a gentleman! Are you impertinent enough to believe all these good witnesses would lie?"

Eomer, who since the Warden of the Houses of Healing's testimony had been gripping his sword so tightly that his knuckles were white, finally lost his temper. To the surprise of the spectators, he leapt from his seat and strode forward until he was nose to nose with Mahrod.

The guards hesitated awaiting Aragorn's orders. Eomer was himself a King, and kings were not to be trifled with in their opinion.

Aragorn nodded to Eomer, indicating that he should speak.

"Would you doubt the word of a King?" Eomer demanded, "I have seen my brother's scars and I was shocked by them, I Eomer Eomundsson, veteran of many a fierce and bloody battle! I swear it before all here assembled and call on my trusty blade, Guthwine to bear witness!" He drew his sword and placed his hand against the blade, a gesture used by the Rohirrim to solemnise an oath.

"Indeed, I fought with my brother, but it was a mere squabble and he is no traitor! We may not always see eye to eye but he is part of my family and no one, least of all scum like you, gets away with hurting him! If any scars are to be revealed, how about yours? For if my brother injured you as you claim, you must still carry the evidence of it on your body!"

The crowd roared their approval. Aragorn was about to deny Eomer's request, for vile though Mahrod undoubtedly was, he would not stoop to humiliating a prisoner. Eomer was too quick though, and drew his sword, and with it slit Mahrod's tunic and shirt. He stared closely at the bared back before announcing contemptuously: "Whoever flogged you, did so with goose feathers!"

The crowd tittered, craning the necks for a better look.

Eomer turned, levelling his blade at Mahrod's throat and looked him in the eye. For the first time, the criminal shivered.

"I could cut your throat now, you cur! That would be far more honourable a death than you deserve though, " he said, sheathing his sword again.

Inclining his head to Aragorn, the two Kings exchanged a faint smile. Without another word, he
turned and left the Hall.

At a nod from Aragorn, one of the guards removed his cloak and draped it around Mahrod.

The crowd murmured their disapproval at this gesture of compassion towards the prisoner.

As if no interruption had taken place, Aragorn raised his hand for silence before saying, "Mahrod, son of Bergrod, having heard the evidence and carefully considered it, I now pronounce sentence upon you."

A page appeared from the back of the Hall carrying two swords reclining on a velvet cushion. The blades stood out glittering against the dark material. One was an ordinary sword, sharp and ready for battle, while the other had a blunt point and was known as the Curtana. He knelt before the King and waited for him to select one of the blades. If the blunt sword of mercy was selected, the prisoner would either be released or granted a lenient sentence, if the sharp sword was chosen, the prisoner was condemned to die.

The crowd were now in uproar as the climax of the trial approached. "Flog him!" they cried, "Give him a traitor's death, hang him high, cut out his guts and despatch his quarters throughout Gondor! Let him suffer as he made our Lord Faramir suffer!"

Outwardly a picture of complete composure, none could have guessed the turmoil within Aragorn's heart. He wanted to strangle Mahrod with his bare hands or have him flogged until his back was torn to ribbons.

How he wanted to make him suffer as he had made Faramir suffer! He still had nightmares about finding his Steward beaten half to death. He knew all too well that had he not been gifted with exceptional powers of healing, his beloved friend and advisor would never have survived, so broken was he in both mind and body, due to this one man's evil.

He had always found the traitor's death barbaric, and had determined never to sentence any to it. Yet, was it not designed for such as Mahrod? Grisly it might be, but it acted as a powerful deterrent. Yet there were other ways he could decree an unpleasant death. There was beheading with a blunted axe, or shooting by inexperienced archers or boiling in molten oil.

Aragorn chided himself mentally for even thinking such things. He was standing here in judgement as King of Gondor, representing the impartial majesty of the law. He was Faramir's friend and protector, but that could not be allowed to influence his judgement anymore than could his upbringing amongst the peaceful Elves of Rivendell.

Mahrod had proved himself to be a menace to society and for that he must die. If he were imprisoned, he might escape and if exiled, he would only bring more suffering to those he dwelled amongst.

Holding the Sceptre of Annunimas in his left hand, he grasped the sharp sword of justice in his right and pointed it at Mahrod.

"Mahrod, son of Bergrod, I sentence you to death by hanging!" he said solemnly, looking at the prisoner straight in the eye, hoping to find some flicker of remorse. There was none. "You will be hanged by the neck until you are dead tomorrow at dawn."

Mahrod's response was to spit at him.

Ignoring the insult, Aragorn turned and swept regally from the Hall, the jeers of the crowd echoing in his ears. There was no doubt that they thought Mahrod had escaped lightly.
He went straight to Faramir's rooms, where the Steward was lying on the couch, his features drawn with pain. A pile of State Documents lay untouched at his made to rise when the King entered in full regalia but Aragorn shook his head as he settled beside him, laying the sceptre on a nearby table.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to rise when we are alone!" he chided gently, grasping Faramir's hands "How are you feeling?"

"How can I not want to show you my respect when your full Majesty is revealed?" Faramir replied sighing, "I itch and my arm and all of my belly is very sore."

"I fear there is a great deal of scar tissue inside you," Aragorn told him, "More than you or I could detect, but I used a good deal of rosehip oil and can only hope by tomorrow you will be healed. I will get you some salve for the itching."

"It will do later. What happened at the trial?" Faramir asked, feeling it was somehow inappropriate for the King to be rubbing salves on his back while still wearing royal robes.

"I have sentenced Mahrod to death," Aragorn said sombrely. "He has been convicted of treason and die as a traitor tomorrow!"

"I thought you said you would not order that gruesome penalty." Faramir said in horror.

Aragorn shook his head: "He will hang until he is dead and then be buried in an unmarked grave," he reassured Faramir, as always amazed that his friend was so merciful, especially as his pulse raced beneath his fingers at the mere mention of his attacker. "I dislike ordering executions but I will not tolerate any harming my Steward!" he added, looking contritely at Faramir. "It was I who was to blame though for putting you where you could be harmed. Can you ever truly forgive me?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that there is nothing to forgive? You never wronged me in any way." Faramir's grey eyes were full of love and loyalty as he met his King's eyes. He then kissed him on the brow to underline his words, before being overwhelmed again by the urge to scratch his back.

"I will go and fetch the salve," Aragorn said rising to his feet and smiling at Faramir. His Steward was a true jewel in his crown.

"Change out of your robes first!" Faramir said sternly.

Aragorn laughed. "You sound like your wife or like Eomer!" he teased, "I wished you had seen Eomer at the trial today! He insisted on giving evidence and was quite magnificent as were all the witnesses!"

"I am certain he is telling Eowyn about it now as she took Elestelle to see him." the Steward replied as he tried vainly to reach a spot between his shoulders only to groan at the pain in his belly the movement caused.

"You will feel better tomorrow," Aragorn soothed, hoping desperately that he was telling the truth. The Elven treatment was usually highly effective but never before had he used it on that type of injury and he had no idea if it would work or not. Elves did not kick each other or use the cat of nine tails.

When Faramir awoke tomorrow, he would know whether he would make a full recovery or be maimed for life.
A big thank you to all my reviewers. Your comments are greatly appreciated. I have now passed the 1,100-review mark thanks to your kindness and support. I am truly amazed this story has proved so popular!

Do please tell me of any errors I make.

The Curtana is a blunt sword used at British coronations, which together with a sharp sword is presented to the Sovereign to represent justice and mercy.
Many a Good Hanging

Chapter Notes

Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), British dramatist, poet. Feste, in Twelfth Night, act 1, sc. 5, l. 18 (1623).

Warning – This chapter contains material, which may distress some readers.

Dedicated to Stoneage Woman, whose interest in Mahrod's wife inspired this chapter and to everyone who wanted to read about the execution!

The next day, Aragorn rose before dawn and after dressing made his way to the place of execution.

A scaffold had been erected in the Public Square near to the prison and already the crowds were gathering, eager to see the one who attacked their popular Steward meet with his just desserts. Usually Minas Tirith was virtually deserted at dawn but it seemed that today a sizable proportion of its citizens were willing to forgo an extra hours sleep.

The time of the execution had been chosen, so that those who wanted to be present could attend without inadvertently distressing those who had no desire for such a gruesome spectacle.

Aragorn bore no insignia apart from Anduril and the Ring of Barahir and had he not been accompanied by his guards, who remained at a discreet distance, could easily remain unrecognised. He took no pleasure in seeing a man killed, however evil he might be, yet felt as King it was his duty to witness the law being upheld.

He sentenced far fewer to die than Denethor did, reserving the penalty for the very worse criminals of which Mahrod was undoubtedly an example.

Not only was the man a brutal rapist, who had beaten Faramir half to death, but also he had also deliberately put Agond in the same cell, an act comparable to setting a savage beast on an unarmed victim.

He was glad though, that Agond was not also facing the hangman's noose this day. He too in his own way was victim. Lamrung had told him that they arrested the drunkard to prevent him harming anyone for he had little control over his actions when inebriated. Mahrod had released him after his purpose was served and the man had been unaware of what he had done until he was arrested again two months later. It was better that his fate was now in the hands of the Valar and beyond temporal law.
He suddenly noticed a woman in the crowd, who was clutching the hand of a toddler and perturbed, went across to speak to her.

"Madam, this is no place to bring a child!" he said sternly, "Please take her home at once!"

"I have nowhere to leave her and I needed to be certain that he really was gone forever!" She turned to face him and he was surprised to recognise Mahrod's wife, whom he had glimpsed briefly at the trial. He had not noticed then though how pale and thin she was.

The woman looked half starved, as did the little girl clutching her hand. Her voice was surprisingly cultured for one of her kind and the threadbare cloak she wore, looked as if it had once been of good quality.

"I assure you, madam, there is no way that he could escape," Aragorn assured her, guessing that she did not recognise him without his royal regalia. "Go home now with your child!"

"That is easy for you to say! You have not been trying to escape from him for almost three years!" she replied vehemently, "I also assume that you have a home to go to, which I do not!"

She turned even paler and swayed as if she were about to faint.

Aragorn grabbed her arm, trying to assist her, "Come and sit down, you are not well!" he said gently.

With a supreme effort of will, she broke away from him. "Leave me alone!" she snapped, "I have had my fill of men after him and want no other to touch me!"

The guards sensing trouble moved forward but Aragorn waved them away, "You are obviously unwell, madam and I insist you sit down!" he said firmly, leading her towards a low wall, which enclosed the square.

Either the presence of the guards or something in his tone caused her to now recognise him. When she looked at him again there was an even greater fear in her eyes. "Please, Sire, let us be!" she begged, "There is nothing wrong with me, it is just I have not eaten for a while."

Aragorn looked around. The prison gates were still closed, so obviously there were still a few minutes left before the execution. "Why not tell me about it?" he said gently, taking her hand and leading her towards the wall. The child had started to cry adding to her mother's distress.

Something about the King's touch obviously calmed her for she made no further attempt to resist. He settled himself beside her still holding her hand, noting it was icy cold and the fingers were covered in chilblains. Her pulse raced beneath his fingers.

"My name is Alis," she said, unable to resist the gentle yet compelling voice and the compassion in his eyes." I used to be a maid to Lady Lothiriel of Dol Amroth until I met Mahrod."

Aragorn's eyes widened slightly, though that did at least explain her cultured manner.

"He seemed a good catch at the time, a gallant young ranger, or so I thought until were married. Then the beatings started. I bear the scars to prove it, though he was careful it was never where anyone could see and there was worse too, things too shameful to speak of. Within months of the marriage, I wanted to return to my family but he swore to kill me if I left him. I know a wife should love her husband, but I dreaded him coming home on leave. Then when I was with child, he returned home one day in a dreadful rage and told me he had been dismissed from the army and flogged. I tended his wounds, but that night while he slept, I family were all killed in the war
and I had nowhere to go, but I would rather have starved than remain with him! I have been running ever since and I..." Her voice trailed off and then she suddenly slumped forward and would have fallen to the ground had Aragorn not caught her. The child's sobs rose to near hysterical pitch.

After ascertaining that she had merely swooned, Aragorn called a guard over to escort her to the Houses of Healing at the same time, worried how Alis would react when she came round.

The prison gates were opening, so he needed her and her child removed from the scene quickly. To his relief, he spotted a woman, he recognised as one of Arwen's dressmakers. He beckoned her over.

"I should like you to escort that lady and her child to The Houses of Healing," he said, "See she is placed in the care of old Ioreth and tell her that I will see she is found suitable employment." He vowed inwardly that Mahrod was not going to be allowed to destroy any more lives.

The woman looked surprised but did as she was bidden taking the child by the hand while the guard carried Alis up to the Sixth Level.

A sombre procession emerged from the prison gates led by a drummer beating a solemn rhythm, which echoed ominously throughout the square. The crowd immediately fell silent.

Mahrod, his hands bound behind his back, was led to the gallows, preceded by the Chief Warder and flanked by his assistants. Behind him walked the executioner, masked as custom dictated and a Healer required by law to attend.

The crowd parted to allow the procession through. Mahrod was still smirking and making obscene gestures until he reached the foot of the gallows.

"Mahrod son of Bergrod, you have been found guilty of high treason by conspiring against the life of Lord Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien! Have you anything you wish to say before you pay for your crimes?"

"You can't hang me, you can't!" Mahrod protested indignantly, "I was only having a bit of fun with him! He deserved what he got and I'm glad I gave it him, though not nearly enough!"

The crowded jeered and booed wildly.

Aragorn nodded to the warders to proceed. It had maybe been too much to hope for some sign of contrition but that he should still boast of his evil acts was too much!

The executioner placed the rope around the struggling Mahrod's neck and as was the custom asked the prisoner's pardon.

"Are you joking? Never! Who do you think you are? I curse you Elessar, you and your good for nothing Steward, I curse you!" Mahrod shouted, followed by a string of spat out obscenities.

Aragorn drew Anduril and pointed the blade at the prisoner, the signal for the executioner to do his work.

Whether it was due to lack of skill or deliberation was unclear, but Mahrod's death was far from swift as he withed and twisted his features turned blue and his eyes bulged in their sockets as he struggled for air.

The crowd cheered with delight at the spectacle.
Finally, it was over and the Healer came forward and pronounced that Mahrod was dead.

Feeling nauseated, Aragorn turned and walked away, the crowd's merriment still ringing in his ears. He was a seasoned warrior but killing in cold blood was something different and he found himself half wishing that Eomer had cut Mahrod down in righteous anger the day before. He did not envy the executioner his task, however necessary it was to rid Society of evildoers.

He had meant to immediately go and see if Faramir's treatment had worked. However, he felt he needed some time to compose himself and instead made a detour to the Houses of Healing. Faramir deserved his undivided attention today and he was still deciding how best to thoroughly examine him as painlessly as was doubtful too that he would be awake yet.

On entering the Houses, he asked a messenger to fetch Ioreth.

He had expected a long wait as Ioreth was no respecter of rank but to his surprise, she arrived quickly, bustling along in a state of high indignation.

"I hope, Lord Elfstone, you have not come to tell me that your wife or Lady Eowyn is unwell as I told your Lady Elfstone that she should not be sleeping with the window open, whatever Elves might like to do! And as for Lady Eowyn, she should not be eating venison so soon after giving birth as it heats the blood! And as for that woman you have just sent to me, it is a disgrace I have never seen the like!"

Taking his chance to get a word in, Aragorn hastily said, "I have indeed come to ask how Mistress Alis fares?"

"Very ill, Lord Elfstone, very ill though with food and rest she will recover but never in all the years I've lived have I seen a woman so ill used. There's scarce an inch on her body has is unscarred or a rib that hasn't been broken. The poor woman is half starved too, as is the child! Whatever murdering devil that could treat a woman like that should be hung! So sweet and gentle a lady too!"

"He has been this very morning, Dame Ioreth," Aragorn informed her.

For the first time he could remember in their acquaintance, Ioreth could think of nothing to say.

TBC

A big thank you to my readers for all your kind reviews. It a pleasure to hear from you all, and I am honoured by your continuing interest.

This chapter was meant to be about Faramir but Alis jumped into my head and demanded that her story be told!

Nowadays, we would deem Mahrod a psychopath.

Through history, ill treated women have run away from violent husbands. They might take shelter in a convent or in mediaeval Italy a malmaritate, a hospice for the unhappily married.

Eomer's oath was inspired by Wagner's opera Götterdämmerung.
Chapter Notes

Oft expectation fails, and most oft there
Where most it promises.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

All 's Well that Ends Well. Act ii. Sc. i.

Faramir was awakened early by Elestelle’s howling, which could clearly be heard through the walls of his dressing room.

He sat up slowly and was delighted that the severe pain he had been experiencing had subsided to a dull ache. He was comfortably familiar with this type of pain, from his days as a ranger when his muscles were sore from constant exertion. His back still itched slightly but no longer did he feel as if a thousand hungry fleas were intent on devouring him.

Pulling on his robe over his nightshirt, he first visited his bathing chamber and then entered the main bedroom. He missed Eowyn’s presence beside him and would be glad once their enforced separation was over and they could share the same bed with their baby daughter in her cradle beside them.

His wife was lifting their daughter from her cradle as he came in and trying to soothe her. With a final fretful wail, she stopped crying.

Eowyn settled on the side of the bed and unlacing her nightgown, began to suckle her child.

"See how eager she is for her breakfast! She is growing bigger and stronger every day!" she exclaimed happily, smiling at her husband.

Faramir tenderly kissed first his wife and then the top of his infant daughter's head. He stood for a moment gazing at them both. "May she grow up as strong and beautiful as her mother!" he said ardently.

"You seem as if you are getting stronger too at long last!" Eowyn replied, returning her husband's kiss, "You look much better today! Aragorn will be pleased when he examines you."

Faramir sighed. He had been both dreading and eagerly awaiting this day. It seemed too much to hope for that his hurts completely healed, especially the scar tissue in his belly. He had seen how worried Aragorn had looked when he examined that.
He supposed he would have to endure a good deal of prodding this morning, something he was not looking forward too and the thought of the scar tissue being touched again made him shudder. Not only was the experience likely to be painful but also being closely scrutinised made him feel self-conscious.

He knew though that he was very lucky as Aragorn was extremely gentle and he had come to actually greatly enjoy his healing and massage treatments. He feared though, there could be no gentle healing for the damage Agond's boot had inflicted and despite all Aragorn's efforts, the swollen tissue would have to be cut from his body.

"I had better get dressed to spare our shy Sovereign's blushes!" Eowyn announced, once convinced her daughter had taken her fill.

Faramir nodded, though secretly loath to relinquish the vision of his wife in her thin nightgown, which clung seductively to her newly accentuated curves. Her golden hair tumbled freely over her shoulders; looking far more alluring than it did when pinned back in the manner, she wore it during the day.

"Will you take Elestelle or shall I send for her nurse?" Eowyn asked.

"I should like to hold our daughter," Faramir replied eagerly.

"You'd better get in the bed then. There is no point in you taking her back to your room," Eowyn replied.

Eowyn waited while her husband shed his robe, climbed into bed and settled his back against the pillows.

He eagerly stretched out his arms to receive his little daughter.

However, Elestelle was not at all pleased at being disturbed and started to howl again much to Faramir's dismay. Eowyn hastily retired to her own boudoir and dressed quickly in a loose simple gown, which easily opened at the front. Arwen had introduced her to the Elven design and her own dressmaker had made several for her friend.

The baby was wailing so loudly that Faramir failed to hear the knock on the door and was surprised when Aragorn walked into the room.

"What is wrong with her?" Aragorn asked, trying to make himself heard over the cacophony.

"I just don't know what ails her today!" Eowyn sighed, coming back into the bedroom. "She has been changed and fed yet still she cries and refuses to settle."

"Shall I try to calm her?" Aragorn asked, his voice full of concern. He felt extremely protective towards the infant whose life he had saved.

Faramir nodded, hoping fervently his daughter would not decide to regurgitate her breakfast over the King's tunic.

Aragorn bent to take Elestelle from her increasingly dismayed father and cradled her in his arms. With one hand, he supported her against his shoulder; with the other, he gently caressed the restless head and stroked the tiny body.

Elestelle almost immediately stopped crying and nuzzled against the King, much to the amazement of her parents.
"I wish you had been here when Eomer came to see her last night," Eowyn said wryly, "She cried the entire time. It was such a shame, as he adores her, though I think he is wondering if his own children will be quite so she likes you!"

"I love this little one almost as my own." Aragorn smiled, "But I expect she is just responding to an Elven technique to calm babies that Arwen showed me."

"I shall ask Arwen to show me then." Eowyn replied wryly.

"How do you feel today?" Aragorn asked Faramir. "Have you looked yet to see if the scars have healed?" He continued to tenderly soothe Elestelle while he spoke.

"I feel better and the pain is less. I wanted you to be here before I looked at the scars," Faramir replied. "They still itch but not like they did yesterday."

"I should like to bathe them, if I may," Aragorn said, adding before Faramir could protest at him taking on such a menial task, "Water, to which athelas has been added, should wash away all the dried salves and cure the itching."

The Steward nodded for by now he was almost accustomed to the humility of Aragorn's ways. He could never have imagined his father performing such a lowly task even for Boromir.

While Eowyn called for a servant to fetch a bowl of hot water, he looked at the King closely for the first time this morning and noted with concern the deep melancholy in his eyes.

"I have need of the athelas, as much as you do, my friend!" Aragorn confessed somewhat ruefully.

"You have witnessed Mahrod's execution then?" Faramir asked.

The King nodded. "He died as he had lived, totally unrepentant of his crimes! I am relieved it is over now. One of the duties, I least enjoy as King is watching the executions of those whom I have condemned to die however much they deserve it. The crowds were appalling today. They seemed to find the whole spectacle entertaining!"

Eowyn snorted. "I would have given them something to really entertain them after what he did to my husband! In Rohan, we would have had him trampled by wild horses!"

"I came upon Mahrod's wife this morning. It seems he treated her cruelly too," Aragorn told them," I saw her in the crowd with a child and went to speak to her. Her name is Alis. She was near to collapse and I took her to the Houses of Healing. Ioreth told me later that when she examined her, she found most of her body scarred from his ill treatment!"

"The poor woman!" Faramir exclaimed sympathetically, "Is there anything you can do to help her?"

"I shall ask Arwen to see if the Elven mud bath would help her," the King replied, "I found Alis a woman of some refinement and grace even though she is destitute and half starved. She told me she used to be your cousin Lothiriel's personal maid."

"Perhaps Eomer would take her back with him and she could serve her old mistress again?" Faramir suggested, "I doubt it would be wise for her to stay in Minas Tirith at present."

"I will need a refined woman as a nurse for Elestelle!" Eowyn exclaimed, "If this Alis is of good character, maybe she would be suitable in the future?"
"I will write to Lothiriel and see what she has to say about her," Aragorn said, "She could perhaps go to Rohan for a year or two and then return once Elestelle is old enough."

Just then, a servant brought the water they had requested. Aragorn handed the now peacefully sleeping Elestelle to her mother, who succeeded in placing her in her cradle without waking her. King, Steward and Princess all sighed with relief.

Faramir slowly and self-consciously started to unlace his nightshirt.

Aragorn had brought a pouch with him containing his healing supplies. From it, he took a leaf of athelas and crumbled it in his hands, murmuring words in Elvish as he did so.

At once, a living freshness filled the room, and a change came over the King as the shadows of care and sorrow left him.

The scent reminded Faramir of the seashore at Dol Amroth where he had spent many a happy hour during visits to his Uncle. He sat upright and without being prompted, let his nightshirt slide over his shoulders, uncovering him to the waist.

"Your arm looks so much better!" Aragorn smiled; setting the bowl down on the bedside table. The ugly scar left by Eomer's broadsword was now so faint as to be almost invisible. "Now may I see your back?"

Eowyn came to stand beside the King "You will be your handsome self again once that orange ointment is washed off!" Eowyn exclaimed. Faramir, blushing scarlet under their scrutiny, turned to display the now well-healed scars. What had been a mass of ugly scar tissue was now just a few slightly reddened patches of skin which would surely fade in time.

Aragorn had dipped a cloth in the water and laved his Steward's arms, chest and back. Faramir sighed blissfully as the last vestiges of the itching vanished with the traces of orange ointment.

It seemed his ribs were healing too, as he felt no pain as the cloth passed over them, though doubtless the prodding that was surely to come would prove more uncomfortable.

Eowyn handed him a towel and he rubbed himself dry quite vigorously, delighting in the freedom from pain and discomfort.

Aragorn took a deep breath inhaling the invigorating scent of the athelas before steeling himself to unfasten the bandage just below Faramir's waist.

TBC

A very big thank you for all your kind reviews. Each and every one is greatly appreciated.

Unless some startling new plot thread jumps into my head, I expect about three more chapters.
Yesterday's Errors

Chapter Notes

Sarah Chauncey (Susan Coolidge) Woolsey (1845–1905)

Faramir stiffened as soon as his belly was touched with the damp cloth. He was trembling slightly, though had he been clothed, it would have been imperceptible.

He finally dared to glance down only to see that the skin round his waist was a vivid hue of orange. From his angle of vision, it was hard to see whether the swelling had gone down or not. He knew the Elven treatment worked miracles with scars, but that it could cure something that resisted even Aragorn's healing powers, seemed too much to hope for.

"Do you plan to cut the scar tissue out today if it is still there?" he asked, a feeling of panic welling up within him.

Aragorn shook his head. "No, it would not be for many months, when you have fully recovered your strength," he said gently, beginning to wash away the dried on ointment. Faramir was flinching at every touch, though it was impossible to tell, whether it genuinely caused him pain, or he had come to expect it to.

He placed his hand over his Steward's heart, which still beat strongly but far too swiftly, most likely because he was uncomfortable and apprehensive.

Faramir tensed in anticipation of being painfully poked and prodded. After so many months of the scar tissue being so painful, it was hard to imagine tentatively dabbed at his belly with the towel Eowyn handed to him.

"I should like to give you a thorough massage if you are agreeable?" Aragorn suddenly announced, leaving both Faramir and Eowyn looking dumfounded.

"I thought you would want to examine him today and see if his hurts were healed." Eowyn sounded bewildered.

"I do, but in Elven fashion!" the King replied. Lord Elrond had taught him many years ago how the Elven massage could be used as an accurate diagnostic technique as well as for the more usual healing and bonding. Time was perceived differently by the Eldar, who considered it perfectly
reasonable to spend hours using soothing massage techniques to tend their injured.

He had a good deal of paperwork awaiting his attention and had not even breakfasted, nor yet spent any time with his wife and son this morning. Faramir deserved though to experience the full benefits of his Elven could only know for certain if the scar tissue were healed if the Steward were relaxed enough not to be anticipating pain and resisting his touch as result.

"A massage sounds delightful!" Faramir sighed, the tension already visibly ebbing away from the thin body.

"Lie down on your side then, and I will start with your back," Aragorn instructed.

Faramir settled against the pillows for the promised massage, arranging the covers as to leave only his back uncovered.

Eowyn seated herself on the bedside chair, unable to resist the urge to magic Aragorn could work with his hands fascinated her, for no matter how hard she tried to learn, her efforts were very clumsy by comparison.

Faramir was now totally limp, the last vestiges of his pain and stiffness melting away under the King’s blissfully soothing fingertips.

It was almost as blissful for Aragorn to be confronted no longer by the evidence of Mahrod's cruelty and his own folly. The skin felt smooth and unspoiled, as did the flesh beneath, which now appeared healthy and undamaged so that it was hard to believe the vicious beating had ever taken place.

Faramir’s arm was another matter, though, for although the scarring had disappeared, the muscle had visibly wasted.

"Does your arm pain you at all still?" Aragorn enquired, his sensitive fingertips kneading the muscle.

Faramir shook his head. "Not since you healed it," he replied, "I can use it normally now."

"I shall have to continue treating it for some time yet," the King warned him.

"I think I should be able to endure that," Faramir murmured. He was starting to feel very sleepy.

Eowyn chuckled. "You cannot fool me, Faramir as you enjoy Elven treatments!" she snorted, "You were actually sorry when your shoulder was completely cured!"

"You do not have to be injured, Elves enjoy this massage purely for relaxation," Aragorn told him, exchanging a smile with Eowyn. "Now I need you to turn over before you fall asleep!"

Long sensitive fingers kneaded the Steward's shoulders and chest. The damaged ribs were knitting with remarkable speed and Faramir only flinched slightly when they were massaged quite vigorously. His heart beat strongly and steadily, and Aragorn finally dared to hope that soon Faramir would have no further need of the hawthorn berry tonic.

He was heartened that he could no longer see any visible swelling on Faramir's belly and the mottled and discoloured skin was now a healthy colour. Only by touch, though, could he know if any scar tissue remained.

Faramir was lying with his eyes shut and appeared completely relaxed, his earlier apprehensions soothed away by Aragorn’s healing touch. He hardly seemed aware that the King’s hands were
edging nearer to the place just beneath his ribs.

Rather tentatively, Aragorn placed his hands on his Steward's belly and started to massage the area where Agond's boot had caused such damage. He could feel nothing but supple healthy flesh beneath his fingertips. Even so, he feared Faramir would suddenly yelp with pain, as he continued gently but thoroughly massaging his belly.

The look of concern on Eowyn's face mirrored his own feelings and when Faramir opened his mouth to speak, they both froze in anticipation.

"However do you manage to have such warm hands in the middle of winter?" Faramir enquired calmly.

"It is the sign of a natural healer." Aragorn informed, his grim features relaxing into a smile as he finally dared to breathe again.

"Which is obviously something I am not as my hands are always cold!" Eowyn added, her rueful tone disguising the relief she felt.

"Well, it seems the Elven bath has healed your hurts!" Aragorn told his Steward, the massage finally completed.

"It was you who healed me!" Faramir replied, pulling his nightshirt back over his upper body. "It is appropriate that it should be today!"

"It was I, though, who was to blame though for putting you where you could be harmed in the first place. Can you ever truly forgive me?" Aragorn found Faramir's gratitude harder to bear than any resentment.

"How many times do I have to tell you that there is nothing to forgive? You never wronged me in any way." Faramir's grey eyes were full of love and loyalty as he met his King's gaze, "Now I am healed I should like to attend the Council meeting later today. I have been absent too long."

"I shall apologise to you before the Council for breaking the vow I made to protect you." Aragorn said with tears in his eyes.

"No, Aragorn, you must not!" Faramir said firmly, "I forbid you, as you above all must show no weakness in public and it would be a falsehood to say you failed to protect me! No one could have done more to aid me once you knew I had been arrested! Peace my friend!"

He reached up and placed his hand on Aragorn's head letting the King read his thoughts and affirming his conviction that Aragorn was not to blame.

Aragorn pressed his head against Faramir's, awed by the simple goodness of his friend. He could be certain now Faramir did not blame him, as the Steward was now not in any way feverish, overwrought or distressed.

Eowyn shook her head slightly observing the gesture. She found the Numenorean mental abilities somewhat uncanny to witness and was glad she did not inherit them from her grandmother.

She stole a furtive glance at her daughter, wondering if the infant would grow up to inherit this somewhat alarming ability and rather hoping that she did not. She could accept her husband linking minds with the King, for it obviously was highly beneficial to them both. The thought of her own daughter being able to do something so strange, unnerved her though, as it would give her a unique closeness to Faramir that she could never know.
Perceptive as always, Aragorn smiled at her. "We Numenoreans find the Rohirric ability to communicate with horses beyond our comprehension!" he told her.

Reassured, Eowyn smiled back remembering that he was married to an Elf whose mental abilities far surpassed those of any mortal and might have passed some of them on to his son.

"I will bathe and breakfast then see you later at the meeting," Faramir said as the King took his leave, "Thank you for everything, my friend."

A low murmur rang round the Council Chamber at Faramir's appearance. Aragorn formally welcomed him back and invited him to take his usual seat at his right hand. In reply, he knelt and kissed Aragorn's hands in fealty. Both men fought to hide the flicker of amusement in their eyes for Aragorn truly detested such formal gestures and Faramir well knew it.

"Your Steward is very loyal, my Lord," said the Lord of Lebbenin in a tone only just short of impudent. "I heard that you had him thrown in prison in order to please the King of Rohan!"

"I never thought I would see the day when Gondor sacrificed its Steward to the Horse Lords!" Lord Lamedon exclaimed. "We have all heard how our esteemed Steward was beaten while in prison!"

Aragorn glared at them and was about to speak when Faramir caught his eye. He nodded his consent for the Steward to have his say.

"My Lords," Faramir said in a clear and commanding tone, "I know there has been much debate and rumour concerning what happened to me. I should like to make it clear that King Eomer and I are fully reconciled after our unfortunate misunderstanding. It was not the fault of King Elessar that I was briefly imprisoned. His Majesty has always treated me with great honour and has had the miscreant who beat me executed this very day!"

He sat down again to cheers from some and murmurs of disapproval from others.

Aragorn then rose to speak. "You have heard what the Steward has said and I will hear no more talk of reparation against Rohan. To mark the friendship between our lands, I am holding a State Banquet a week from today. It will also be a celebration of the birth of my heir and of Prince Faramir's daughter. It is my hope and expectation that you will all attend."

The Lords could only voice their agreement. Aragorn then continued with the rest of business of state that needed attending to. He felt like smiling with joy that once again his Steward was at his side. Gondor was surely in safe hands now they were working together again.

TBC

A/N

A big thank you to everyone who has been kind enough to review. Your comments are greatly appreciated.

The sequel to this tale is almost complete, so I hope not to leave my readers for long without a story!
What have I to give you back, whose worth
May counterpoise this rich and precious gift?

William Shakespeare (1564–1616),

The feast was magnificent one. Not since the marriage of the King and Queen, had such a banquet been held. Never again though, would so many of the High Elves be present for a feast on Arda, as the greatest had now departed to Valinor.

Tonight's banquet was still a splendid occasion, attended by the King and Queen of the Reunited Kingdoms, the Prince and Princess of Ithilien, the Prince of Dol Amroth, the King of Rohan, and all the Nobility of Gondor, together with the ambassadors to neighbouring kingdoms.

For the first time in Gondor's long history, there were common folk present too, as Damrod, Lamrung Ioreth, Aedred and the Warden of the Houses of Healing had been invited to attend.

The King and Queen both looked especially magnificent tonight, Aragorn was clad in a richly embroidered tunic of plum velvet and black breeches. The Star of Elendil adorned his brow and the Elessar gleamed on his breast. Arwen had chosen to wear a gown of deep blue embroidered with silver. She wore a mithril coronet, set with diamonds and sapphires on her head while a necklace of mithril and diamonds adorned her slender throat.

Faramir and Eowyn looked only slightly less magnificent in their most regal attire. Faramir had chosen to wear a black velvet tunic embroidered with silver and dark grey breeches. Eowyn was attired in a green gown embroidered with white and gold, which set off her golden hair to perfection.

The meal began with a beef and vegetable soup with wine and spices followed by chicken stuffed with pork and currants. The main course then followed, which consisted of roast lamb, simmered with almonds and spices and then a dessert of dates stuffed with almonds and baked in honey, especially created by the Royal cooks for this evening. There were many other dishes too and wine and mead flowed freely.

To Aragorn and Eowyn's relief, Faramir ate with obvious relish. This was the first State Banquet he had been able to truly enjoy. On previous occasions, he had been too nervous to truly enjoy the delicacies the cooks had prepared.

When everyone had eaten their fill, Aragorn, who was seated at the head of the table, rose to propose a toast. " Let us drink to my royal brother Eomer of Rohan and my Steward Faramir,
Prince of Ithilien and the continued friendship between Gondor and Rohan and peace and prosperity to both our lands!” he said.

The company drank and then Faramir, instead of sitting down again, proposed a toast of his own.” Let us drink to the good health and long life of his Majesty King Elessar, Queen Arwen and their son and heir Crown Prince Eldarion and the good health of my brother, King Eomer of Rohan!” he said, smiling at the assembled company.

The assembled company sat down again and nibbled at grapes with slices of melon and mint leaves, a refreshing way to end the meal.

Much to their surprise, Eomer suddenly rose to his feet and beamed at the assembled company. He had not brought any ceremonial garb to Minas Tirith and had borrowed a green tunic embroidered with silver from Aragorn. Worn over simple dark breeches, he looked magnificent in it, with his golden mane of hair flowing over his shoulders.

He beamed at the assembled company and announced: "Instead of fine words, my brother, I would seek to mend the hurts between us with a gift to my niece, Elestelle. You will have heard of the Mearas, noblest and most rare of horses, the steeds of the Kings of Rohan, brought to our lands from the west by Lord Bema himself.

A beautiful foal was born to Snowdrop, daughter of Shadowfax, a few days before I set out on my journey here to Gondor. She is the one of the most beautiful foals I have ever seen even amongst our herds! I give her now to my niece, the latest daughter of our Royal house and will command her that she bear Elestelle on her back as long as her life does last!"

Faramir and Eowyn both gasped, as this was the greatest gift Eomer could have bestowed. The Mearas were the most prized processions of the House of Eorl and the only time one had been given as a gift before was when Theoden had presented Shadowfax to Gandalf.

That had come to pass only after the Wizard and the horse had developed a strong bond with each other, for Gandalf had greatly angered Theoden by borrowing Shadowfax instead of a lesser horse. A Mearas was far more than an ordinary horse as it understood human speech, and would only let one of royal blood ride it. It also had an exceptional life span for a horse and could live to be about eighty years old.

"Thank you giving our daughter the greatest of gifts!” Eowyn beamed at her brother.

"I thank you too from the bottom of my heart, and only wish I had something of equal value to offer,” Faramir exclaimed, overcome with joy at Eomer's generous act, which more than proved that he no longer harboured any resentment towards him. "I for my part would ask you and King Elessar to act as guardians to our daughter should any misfortune befall Eowyn and myself before she is grown to womanhood as there are none I hold in higher esteem!"

"Gladly I accept, "Eomer replied and now I propose a toast to his majesty, my brother in arms and friend, King Elessar and his Queen, and to my brother Faramir and sister Eowyn!”

He reached across and took the hands of Aragorn and Faramir, clasping them in a gesture of friendship.

Eowyn blinked away a tear. The Mearas were very rare and highly valued. It would have cost her brother dear to part with something so precious.

The Queen, knowing that Eldarion would be hungry rose then to take her leave and Eowyn followed her, embracing her brother as she left.
The men folk lingered drinking and talking. Imrahil, now back in Minas Tirith after settling a prolonged land disputier, was delighted to see his nephew looking so much better.

At last, Aragorn left the table followed by Faramir and Eomer

After they left, the Lords of Gondor began to chatter amongst themselves.

"Strange that the Horse Lord should give our Steward a fine gift and yet King Elessar who sent him to prison has not even offered an apology!" Devorin of Ringlo Vale murmured to his neighbour.

"What can you expect from a Ranger from the North who goes hunting and leaves affairs of State to his Queen?" snorted Fosco of Lamedon who sat beside him."He has even invited a bunch of peasants to sit at his table!"

They then noticed Imrahil's eye upon them and fell silent.

Outside the Great Hall of Feasts the two kings and the Steward embraced ,then went their separate ways.

Eowyn was already asleep when Faramir reached the apartments, which were currently their home.

They were planning the next week to move into their new home at Emyn Arnen where Eowyn and Elestelle would spend most of their time in future.

Faramir would join his family whenever his duties as Steward permitted him to, and stay with Aragorn and Arwen when he was needed in Minas Tirith.

Eowyn was eager to dwell in the countryside, away from the stone city she so disliked She yearned to be able to ride out whenever she pleased and for the independence she had always craved.

As for Faramir, he would finally have a home to call his own with his family, while at the same time spending a great deal of time in Minas Tirith with Aragorn, who too was very dear to him.

He quickly changed into his nightshirt and slid into to bed next to his wife. It felt good to be beside her again after so long apart. He soon fell into a dreamless sleep.

Arwen was still awake and sitting up feeding Eldarion when Aragorn came to bed.

"How he is growing!" Aragorn exclaimed as he did almost every day, amazed at the progress his son was making.

"If he takes after his father he will be tall!" Arwen replied, "I thought the official banquet went well. It was good to see Faramir smile again."

"It truly gladdens my heart to see him recovering." Aragorn replied "I think my friend is finally restored to me. I hope he likes the surprise I have for him tomorrow."

"Did I not tell you all would be well?" Arwen said rather smugly.

"As always you were right, my Love!" Aragorn replied, happy to humour her."Could any man be more blessed to have you, my son and my best friend at my side and my Kingdom secure and at peace with her allies?"
Kissing her and Eldarion tenderly, he turned on his side and was soon snoring.

Arwen sat gazing at him tenderly. Not only was this man her beloved husband, but also a loving father, loyal friend and great King. He was well worth giving up the life of the Eldar for. These past months had been very difficult for them all. Yet they had shown her more of her husband's true worth, for it took a great man to admit to his mistakes and not rest until they were put right.

As result, her friendship with Eowyn was now stronger than ever as was Estel's friendship with Faramir and their love for each other and their son had deepened too.

Aragorn stirred and murmured," Did I tell you how much I love you, my Evenstar?"

"I love you more each day, my husband and King." she replied, kissing the top of his head. Already he was snoring again, causing her to smile indulgently.

She rose and replaced Eldarion in his cradle before lying down to sleep, ignoring the increasingly loud snores beside her. No Elf would snore thus, but then could even an Elf be as noble, as loving and as loyal? She would not change this wonderful and unique man for all the world. Gondor was blessed to have him, as were his family and friends.

The star of Earendil shone brightly illuminating the frosty winter night bathing Gondor in its gentle light. Tonight all were at peace beneath its beauty.

To be concluded

A/N

A grateful thank you to everyone who is still reading and reviewing this epic.

I am always equally pleased to receive comments for my old stories as for my new ones. They all arrive in my mailbox together!

I know this story has contained a lot of healing scenes but many of my readers enjoy them. Faramir is recovering faster than he would in the real world thanks to Aragorn.

Faramir will be strong in the sequel; the babies will make an appearance and watch out for the Lords!
The Greatest of these is Love

The End

Chapter Notes

These Characters are the property of the Estate of J. R. R Tolkien and New Line Cinema. This story has been written for pleasure and no profit has or will be made from it.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

The next morning Faramir went to the King's study shortly after breakfast. He hummed quietly to himself, happy to once again in the familiar routine of working with Aragorn.

He found his duties highly satisfying, for what could be more fulfilling than working for a man he loved and respected, and for the good of his beloved Gondor?

The study was far more homely than it had been in Denethor's time. Aragorn had finally replaced the furniture with some of a graceful Elven design, while the walls were now covered in bright tapestries and a cheerful log fire burned in the grate.

It was the first day of December and a storm was raging outside the cosy room. The country folk were saying that it would be a hard winter, for the berries were especially abundant, while geese had been seen flying north.

Aragorn was seated behind his desk frowning over a document he had just received from the Warden of the Houses of Healing.

When Faramir entered, he rose and greeted him warmly. "Did you sleep well after the feast?" he enquired.

"Quite well, thank you, the nightmares are less frequent now," Faramir replied, "The banquet was a wonderful idea of yours and Eowyn and I are overwhelmed by Eomer's priceless gift to our daughter! It is so good to be in amity with him again. We will miss him when he returns home tomorrow. Is he taking Alis with him? I am certain my cousin would welcome her!"

Aragorn shook his head sadly. "I far not, for I have just received a message to say that she has been stricken with a fever, as have several other people who travelled from the outlying villages to the execution. It is thought she will recover but she will not be well enough to travel for some time."

"Poor woman, she suffered enough at that monster's hands!" Faramir exclaimed, "Do you want me to work on the trade negotiations with the Harad this morning?"

"That will do later," Aragorn replied, "I should like to massage your arm again this morning, if I may? Can you use it more easily now?"

Faramir nodded and settled himself comfortably on the couch. He pulled off his shirt and tunic and
flexed his arm. "It is still a little stiff but every day it feels easier," he told Aragorn.

"Already the muscle looks less wasted," Aragorn said, noting with approval that Faramir was gaining weight again and no longer resembled a walking skeleton.

Faramir closed his eyes and sighed contentedly while the long sensitive fingers began to work their magic on his arm. He had shed all his former self-consciousness and appeared as relaxed as a snoozing cat even when Aragorn felt his ribs and checked his heartbeat, which was strong and steady.

It seemed to Aragorn that Faramir's bodily hurts were finally healed. He began to massage his Steward's neck and shoulders, not that it was strictly necessary, yet he knew he enjoyed it and after all the trauma of the past few weeks, both the bonding and healing conferred by the Elven treatment would benefit him. "You will not need any more hawthorn berries now, your heart has regained its former strength," the King said.

Sadly, he noted that the once raven hair was now streaked with silver as a direct consequence of his recent ordeal.

"Good!" Faramir replied vehemently, "They tasted vile, however much you tried to disguise the taste with honey!" He finally opened his eyes and looked at his friend.

"Why do you look so sad, Aragorn?" he asked. "You tell me that I am healing well and as you know how much I enjoy this Elven treatment!"

"I broke my vow that none should ever harm you again by ordering your arrest and never once have you even chided me! I almost lost you through my folly! I fear the mental scars that you and I bear will take a longer while to heal than even the terrible hurts you bore!" Aragorn's grey eyes were moist. "I should have thrown myself in front of you when Eomer attacked. He would never have harmed me!"

"But his men would most likely have killed you!" Faramir replied, "No, Aragorn, If you had not arrested me, Eomer's men would have cut us both down where we stood. You thought only to keep me safe. That I am not yet beyond the circles of the world is because of you. We still have each other and the love we share will heal us both. The nightmares grow less by the day. I shall never forget your loyalty and friendship to me; you never gave up even when I pushed you away. Then you gave me the wonderful gift of the Thought Bond!"

"And you forgave me even after my folly caused you such pain. I fear my own Council have not forgiven me so easily, for what happened to their favourite son. It will take them a long time." Aragorn replied.

"They will forget in time and you must finally shed this burden of guilt, my friend," Faramir replied firmly, "Many have served the Ruling Stewards all their lives and will grumble at any excuse. They dislike change I fear, even if it is for the better! Many never expected the return of the King!"

"Especially not a wild ranger from the north!" Aragorn chuckled, "I will try, mellon nin and I will change the law to better protect my Stewards!"

Faramir shook his head. "That would not be a good idea for what if some future Steward was disloyal? May the Valar protect us against that day but I cannot foresee the conduct of my descendants!"

"You prize your House too little!" Aragorn chided, "I shall pass a law. I cannot conceive
Elestelle ever plotting a rebellion against me!

It was Faramir's turn to laugh. "I am certain she loves you already! I am so proud of my beautiful daughter."

He smiled and lapsed into silence broken only by the crackling of the blazing logs and the pattering of the rain outside.

"There, I have done all I can for today. I will treat your arm again tomorrow." Aragorn said at last.

Faramir sighed as he sat upright and donned his shirt and tunic. "What do you want me to do today?" he asked, "I suppose we had better start on the usual paperwork."

"First, I have something for you." Aragorn went over to the table, picked up a book, and handed it to Faramir. "This came from Elrond's library but it was originally brought by Elendil from Numenor. It is a history of the great families of the Kingdom, yours being one of them. I would like you to have it. And also this."

He placed a brooch in Faramir's hand. It was such as was used to fasten a cloak with, exquisitely crafted in mithril and set with precious gems featuring the intertwined crests of the Houses of the King and the Steward.

Faramir gazed at the King wide eyed, "These gifts are for me?" he gasped.

"You deserve them and none would treasure them more," Aragorn replied, "The brooch was specially designed to symbolise the friendship between us, which I hope will endure for our Houses throughout future generations."

Faramir placed the precious gifts on the table and turned to embrace the King. Their brows touched and they stood for a few moments in a silent communion of shared thoughts, affirming their mutual friendship, before exchanging the traditional kiss on the brow.

The rain ceased and a ray of sunlight suddenly broke through the clouds, illuminating their faces, both so alike with the dark hair and high cheekbones, which characterised those of Numenorean lineage.

Aragorn took a deep breath before impulsively making a suggestion. "I was wondering, now that you are so much recovered, if you would practise sword play with me for a short time?" he asked. "It would help strengthen your arm muscles, though you will need to be careful not to knock your ribs. We must be careful and use lightweight practice blades." He watched Faramir's expression intently awaiting his reaction.

The Steward had said he never wanted to wield a weapon again, yet if he failed to do so, how could he defend himself? These were still dangerous times still with the ever-present threat of rebellions in the South and East.

Faramir hesitated and stared at his boots for a long moment. Then he raised his head and smiled. "Yes, I think I will." he said, "I had better keep my skills honed or my own daughter might beat me one day!"

"Your daughter?"

"Do not forget she is Eowyn's child too, and though she is but two weeks old, Eowyn already calls her 'My little shield maiden'!"

"With two such woman in your family you need to be accomplished!" Aragorn exclaimed,
clapping Faramir on the shoulder.

Together King and Steward walked out to the practice yard. The sun shone down on the companions. After the storm, the earth smelt wonderfully fresh and a robin was chirping cheerfully in a nearby tree.

"Look!" said Faramir, "A rainbow!"

Aragorn looked up at the beautiful arc in the sky. Strange that a storm often produced something so beautiful, yet such it was with the storms of life too. It seemed that at last the burden of guilt had been lifted. Arwen was right; love had found a way.

Faramir caught his train of thought. "We have been though our own storm, mellon nin and yet we have emerged from it with our friendship stronger and deeper than before."

"True." Aragorn smiled, "But I still plan to beat you at sword practise!"

Laughing joyfully, they threw themselves into the bout.

The End

A/N

A very big thank you to everyone who has reviewed, especially to those loyal readers who have commented on each and every chapter. All your comments have been greatly appreciated, have helped, and encouraged me greatly, causing this story to grow from 69,000 words to around 110,000!

An especial thank you to Laerien, Lily, Raksha, Elenhin, Larner, Stoneage Woman, Patty, Lilian, Ithil-Valon, Quickbeam and Julia for your helpful suggestions and support.

My original draft was very different and it was due to you my readers that events like Eomer's meeting with his niece and Mahrod's execution were described

When I began this story, I was very doubtful that anyone would want to read a long epic about guilt and depression and have been amazed at the interest!

I should love to know what your favourite chapters were and any final thoughts on who was most guilty.

I would be to hear from anyone who has not yet commented but read this far.

The sequel, another long angst laden epic, will be posted soon and I hope you will all try it. Some of you have already guessed what it is about! Faramir will face the greatest challenge of his life when events take a dark and sinister turn for Aragorn.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!