Facing the Darkness

by lindahoyland

Notes

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Deep Wounds

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Aragorn knew he had to talk to Faramir in case he never had another chance as the Host was due to set out to Mordor at first light tomorrow.

Faramir deserved to know of his brother's last moments and how bravely he had fought to defend the Hobbits but Aragorn hated to have to tell him now, while he was still lying recovering, but still very weak in the Houses of Healing.

This was the last thing Aragorn would usually do, cause emotional distress to one as weak as Faramir still was. Yet if he were to fall before the Black Gate of Mordor, Faramir would never have the chance to hear of his beloved brother's death from the one who was with him at the time and thereby maybe he would gain some peace of mind from knowing the truth.

Aragorn was exhausted after the battle, tending those under the shadow of the black breath and debating with the other leaders about how best they could give Frodo a chance to destroy the Dark Lord's power, but he would not rest until he had fulfilled the duty he felt he owed both to Boromir and Faramir.

Clad simply with his grey cloak concealing the green gem he wore, he made his way to the young captain's room, hoping that he was stronger now.

The struggle to save Faramir's life had been the hardest Aragorn had ever experienced.

So deeply had Faramir fallen into shadow and despair, and never before had he needed to reach so deeply into the mind of another to lead them back into the world of the living.

Aragorn had sensed such darkness and despair, a gentle soul driven to the very limits and yet underneath the shadow, he sensed a kindred spirit, which had made him all the more determined to save Faramir's life, whatever the cost to his own strength.

And indeed the cost was high as his companions had all feared for his own well being before Bergil had brought some athelas, which served to revive both Faramir and himself.

When he entered Faramir's room, the healers were tending his wounds and he was propped up in bed with his nightshirt pulled down to his waist. For the first time it struck Aragorn how painfully thin the young man was and the many old or partially healed wounds on his body showed evidence of long hardship and neglect.

Faramir blushed scarlet as the King entered the room and tried to rise and pull up his nightshirt. His expression suggested the mixture of the love and respect, which Aragorn had noticed two
nights before but now that was overshadowed by a look of overwhelming fear.

Faramir fell back against the pillows caught by the healers' restraining hands.

"My apologies, my Lord," Faramir gasped." I fear I am not properly clad to receive your Grace and I cannot rise."

Aragorn smiled attempting to reassure him." There is nothing to apologise for Faramir," he said gently." I only wished to speak to you." He wondered, not for the first time, how he could approach the subject of Boromir's death.

He then turned to the healers.

"I will tend his wound myself." The King said.

"As you wish, my Lord." The healers bowed and left, grateful to have one less to tend as many were waiting for their help in these dark days.

Aragorn felt Faramir's flushed brow and once reassured he was not feverish but merely ill at ease, took the bowl of warm water the healers had left and started to bathe the wound on Faramir's shoulder.

It was healing well and Aragorn felt relieved, although he feared the muscle was damaged, which could cause Faramir much future pain if neglected.

"It is not fitting that my King should be tending me." Faramir protested.

"I have been a healer far longer than I have been a King, if indeed I am ever crowned as such, should I return from Mordor. Tell me if this wound continues to pain you as I think I will need to give you more treatments." Aragorn replied, gently dabbing the injured shoulder dry with a towel and applying a salve the sons of Elrond had provided, not only to the arrow wound, but also to the other half healed hurts across the younger man's chest and shoulders.

Faramir flinched at each touch, despite the slow gentle movements of the King's fingertips and hissed as the ointment stung the raw flesh even though he was far gentler than the healers of Gondor, who had attended him.

Strange warmth emanated from the King's hands, which felt both soothing and frightening to Faramir, as he had never encountered anything quite like it before.

He stared mutely at his hands lying limply on the coverlet as if lost in thought.

The King wondered whether it was the wounds or something else that caused Faramir so much pain.

He placed a soft pad of cloth over the shoulder wound and started to wind a bandage across Faramir's chest and round his back to keep it in place.

He moved round the bed and gasped when he saw the old scars of many lash wounds, too many to count across the exposed back.

Even worse, these were overlaid with fresh welts that could not have been inflicted more than a few days ago.

What horrors had this man endured? He wondered. Granted that most young men felt the lash at some time during unruly youth but very seldom sufficiently to leave such scars, especially in the
noble houses.

Fortunately, Faramir seemed too nervous at being in the presence of his King to even notice the look of horror on the other's face.
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A very big thank you to everyone who reviewed chapter one. Welcome back to my reviewers, who reviewed my last story and a warm welcome to anyone reviewing for the first time.

"Shall you turn on your side? I would like to tend your back." Aragorn said.

Faramir nodded reluctantly, his dark eyes haunted with a mixture of shame and fear.

Aragorn helped him roll on to his uninjured side, pulled the cover down as far as his hips and began very gently bathing the ugly looking and painful welts that disfigured Faramir's flesh.

They had been inflicted with such force that even the gentle cleansing caused them to bleed afresh.

Faramir flinched at each touch as if expecting further blows. Aragorn was baffled as to why he had been lashed.

He knew from his years of service there that the Gondorians would flog a disobedient soldier but only for a most heinous offence, which it seemed unthinkable that a highly respected captain such as Faramir would ever commit.

It also seemed that the lashes had been inflicted before he rode out to Osgiliath and what commander would show such madness as to weaken a worthy captain in such a fashion before sending him into the thick of battle? Small wonder Faramir had been grievously ill and close to death when he had first set eyes on him.

Aragorn started to spread ointment across the painful injuries disfiguring the woefully thin back.

Beneath his hands, Faramir trembled and recoiled with embarrassment that his King should see these dishonourable lashes. He had always imagined he would meet his King, riding out dressed in his finest velvets, not sprawled across a sickbed with the shameful marks of his father's displeasure revealed.

The healers had told him that Aragorn had laboured for hours to save his life and it puzzled him why the King should so concern himself for one such as he, Faramir, the constant disappointment to his father.
"How did you come by these hurts?" Aragorn asked him gently. "Try to be still while I tend them, so I may ease you. If I am able to, in the future I can give you an elven treatment to fade the scars."

"It was a punishment, my Liege. I allowed the Perian to go and then Osgiliath fell whilst under my command."

Aragorn paused briefly from his ministrations, shocked by the words. Only one man could have ordered Faramir to be flogged and that man was his father.

Aragorn remembered Denethor from forty years or so before, as a cold hard man and yet a loving father to young Boromir.

However how could any man order his already ailing son to be flogged and then send him out to almost certain death he wondered?

Ever since Boromir had died, he had felt the duty had fallen on him to protect his younger brother. If only I had come sooner, he thought as he bandaged soft pads of cloth against the wheals, his heart brimming with pity.

He swore a silent oath that should he become king, none should ever harm Faramir in this fashion again.

"Are you feeling any stronger today?" Aragorn asked as he gently pulled the nightshirt up over Faramir's shoulders and fastened the laces round the neck. He then seated himself on a chair by the bed.

"I am much better, Sire and thank you for saving my life. I apologise for not having thanked you before"

Faramir sank back against the pillows but the tension failed to leave him. He sat staring at his King like a frightened rabbit caught by a fox.

Aragorn took his patient's hand and frowned at the racing pulse, as he felt his wrist. If Faramir would not be calm, the fever could return in his weakened condition.

Aragorn gently laid his hands on the other's head, stroking his hair and massaging the back of his neck with a healing touch.

Initially Faramir flinched again as if expecting a blow but gradually the tension left his hunched body as he felt the King's power.

Aragorn removed his hand, wishing he could ease his Steward more but feeling too weary to do so.

He noticed the other's hair was still covered in oil and picked up the towel to wipe it from his hands.

"It was thanks enough to see you recovering. You do not need to keep apologising, my Lord Steward. I would not have you fear me," he said with a smile. Fixing Faramir with a gentle but penetrating gaze Aragorn asked: "Tell me how you knew who I was?"

"I have dreams that foretell the future." Faramir replied "I saw you in one coming to save Gondor. You wield the sword that was broken. My brother had the same dream and my father sent him to seek counsel even though I begged for the errand."
He shuddered as he spoke unable to mention the dream he had awoken from that morning, a
vision so hideous that he forced himself to stifle the initial warmth he had felt towards his King
and saviour, as he could endure no more losses of those he loved.

The touch of the man's hands had only made the hideous vision clearer as he saw the King, his
body bruised and broken, lying in some field, surrounded by a small group of weeping
companions.

Aragorn was thinking the conversation was leading where he hoped it would, when Faramir
noticed him wiping his hands.

"Why is my hair covered in oil? " Faramir asked with increasing confidence, as the elfish
relaxation technique Aragorn had used, started to work." I know the healers have been too busy to
help me wash it but when I ask why no one will even tell me that or how my father died!"

Aragorn wet the towel in the basin and rubbed Faramir's head with it while desperately wondering
how to answer him. This was the one subject he wished to avoid above all others.

"Thank you, that feels better." Faramir said rubbing his hands through his damp but now much
cleaner hair.

Aragorn held his breath wondering what would come next.

"Do you know how my father died?"

TBC
Merry and Pippin

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Chapter Three

Faramir had asked the one question, Aragorn had no wish to answer, at least not until the man was fully recovered.

"I was not there. I only heard tidings of his death when I reached the city gates." Aragorn said evasively.

"But surely they told you how he died?" Faramir insisted.

Aragorn sighed deeply. It seemed his attempts to calm Faramir to his presence had worked all too well.

"It is not a pleasant story." Aragorn said." Are you certain you wish to know, especially as you have not yet recovered from your wounds?"

"Nothing could be worst than what I imagine, while I am lying here!" Faramir replied.

Aragorn rose to his feet", One who was there is in the next room." He said" I will fetch him to you."

Merry and Pippin were sitting on Merry's bed, a large tray laden with food between them.

They looked up as Aragorn entered and smiled with delight to see their visitor.

"Strider, how good to see you!" Merry exclaimed.

"Do have a cake, they taste good!" Pippin said, proffering a heaped plate in greeting.

Aragorn accepted despite the urgency of his errand, hoping the sweet cake might make him feel a little less weary.

He noticed with a flash of amusement that the hobbits had somehow managed to procure some of the tea, they were so fond of drinking in the Shire.

He helped himself to a cup, knowing it was famed for its invigorating properties.
"How is your, arm, Merry?" he asked, noticing that Merry held his teacup in his left hand.

"Much better, thank you," Merry replied, hastily changing the cup to the other hand where it wobbled alarmingly.

"I will look at it later." Aragorn replied, unconvinced, "But first I must ask Pippin to come with me to see the Lord Faramir."

Pippin looked alarmed.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Has his fever come back?"

Aragorn shook his head. "No, he is recovering from his injuries but he wants to know how his father died and begged me to fetch someone who was there, loathe though I am to do so."

Pippin stared at the King in horror.

"But I can't tell him that his father tried to burn him alive!" He gasped.

"I fear you must as Gandalf is occupied with preparations for tomorrow's departure."

"But I don't know what to say!" Pippin blanched at the prospect. Aragorn laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Just keep to the facts and do not go into details but emphasise how his father had lost his mind. I will be with you when you speak to him."

"I'm glad I wasn't there. I'm sorry you had to see all that, Pip!" Merry said as he started eating yet another cake.

"Faramir would have died had Pippin not been there, so Gandalf tells me." Aragorn said gravely, swallowing the last of his tea.

He replaced the cup on the tray and led Pippin towards the door.

"I will be back later to tend to your arm." he told Merry as they left.

Instead of hastening to Faramir's room, Aragorn lingered with Pippin in the hallway.

"Do you know why none of Denethor's guards attempted to stop him making a pyre?" Aragorn asked the Hobbit.

"They were too afraid." Pippin said simply. "I'd not been there long enough to learn that in recent times if you didn't do as the Lord Steward said, you would be flogged. If I'd known, I'd have been too scared to do anything either. I helped the healers with the wounded and so many had been flogged, the healers had to ignore those injuries to have time to tend to the wounds they received in battle. Bergerond told me later about how scared of Lord Denethor everyone was. He won't get into trouble will he for helping Faramir?" Pippin asked anxiously.

Aragorn stood lost in thought for a moment. Pippin's words had explained much that had puzzled him. As for Bergerond, he had shed another's blood in the Hallows, a serious offence, but one that could wait until the fate of Middle Earth was decided.

"I would not punish a man unjustly and there will be no more beatings." The King said at last. "But until Sauron is overthrown all talk of the future is futile."
Pippin shuddered but collected himself as they reached Faramir's room and went within.

Faramir had not moved since Aragorn had left him and he now lay back against the pillows looking anxious.

"Here is one who was present when your father died." Aragorn said quietly to the young steward.
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Faramir and Eowyn's relationship is unlikely to feature in this story, but if there is sufficient interest, I may feature them if I write any more LOTR Stories.

"How are you my Lord?" asked Pippin with genuine concern as he had come to care deeply for Faramir in the short time he had known him.

"I am much better, Master Peregrin. I thank you for your concern. Now, I beg of you, tell me how my father died as my Lord King says you were there."

Pippin took a deep breath and stared at the floor, unable to look Faramir in the eye. Then the words came tumbling out without pause for breath.

"Your father, Lord Faramir, lost his mind and I believe he thought you dead or almost so and the enemy was at the gates. So he had his servants take you to the tombs and build a funeral pyre for you both. I ran to fetch Gandalf and we pulled you from the pyre but we could not save your father. The poor Lord had quite lost his wits."

Pippin finally stopped for breath and ventured a quick glance at Faramir.

To his surprise, the young man showed little emotion apart from a sharp intake of breath.

"It seems, I owe you my life, Master Peregrin. You have my thanks." He said gravely.

Pippin blushed and shifted his feet uneasily. Aragorn took pity on him.

"You can return to Merry now, if you wish." He said, smiling at the Hobbit.

Pippin inclined his head to Faramir and left, very thankful the ordeal was over.

Aragorn sat down by Faramir's bedside and studied the young man's impassive features.

Faramir's eyes were closed and it was impossible to know what he was thinking.

"My father had little time for me in life, strange he should wish for my company in death, is it not?" he remarked with a bitter smile.
"The Dark Lord poisoned his mind." Aragorn replied. "He believed the city would fall to him ere nightfall and all would slaughtered without mercy."

"He was angry that I still lived while Boromir had fallen." Faramir said without any trace of rancour. "Yet, even my brother, the noblest of our people, fell under the evil spell of the one ring, so the Perian told me. Who then could resist the Dark Lord, if Boromir could not?"

Relieved that Faramir had mentioned his brother first, Aragorn said quietly.

"Your brother repented of his evil. He died with honour."

Faramir gazed at him with sad, dark eyes.

"How do you know of these things?"

"I was with your brother, when he breathed his last. Alas, I came too late to save his life!"

Aragorn took Faramir's hand and noted it was trembling slightly. "Do you wish to know more?"

Faramir nodded.

"Boromir repented of his folly in coveting the ring and did not pursue Frodo when he fled from him, but instead went to the defence of the Hobbits, Meriadoc and Peregrin when a band of Urak Hai sent by Saruman attacked them." Aragorn began, watching Faramir's reaction carefully, as the other looked at him expectantly, he continued.

"He fought with great valour but fell eventually, pierced with many arrows, beyond my skills to heal. I ran to his side and he was able to tell me what had happened before he passed beyond the circles of this world."

Faramir swallowed hard but otherwise remained impassive.

"I blessed him as he breathed his last." Aragorn said quietly. "Then my companions and I laid him to rest in a fair elven boat and gave his body to the river."

Faramir smiled faintly.

"That part, I know my Lord, I saw it in a dream. It eases my heart to know that he died with honour and not alone."

Aragorn was rather taken aback by Faramir's calmness and lack of tears, belied by the racing pulse he could feel as he clasped his wrist.

Faramir took a deep breath.

"Thank you for telling me this, my liege." He said. "Now if I may, I would rest as my wounds are much less painful since you tended them."

Aragorn looked at him doubtfully.

"Would you not like someone to stay with you, your uncle maybe?"

"When my uncle is less burdened with cares of state. I should like to see him." He closed his eyes as if in dismissal.

Aragorn had little choice but to leave, though he felt that Faramir's emotions were stretched taunt as a bowstring that could snap any moment plunging him into the same dark madness that claimed
his father. He despatched a messenger in search of Imrahil.

Swaying slightly now with weariness and grief, Aragorn went to speak to the chief of the women who tended Lady Eowyn and asked how the Lady of Rohan was faring.

"Her body heals but her mind is deeply troubled, sir." The woman said." She keeps demanding to be allowed out of bed despite her broken arm and other hurts."

Aragorn monetarily closed his eyes and sighed. It was as he had feared and although he had never encouraged the lady to see him in a romantic light, he still felt responsible for her plight.

"She must remain here for many days, yet." He said." If need be, hide her clothing, so she will have to remain in her room."

"Yes, my Lord." The woman replied." If you will excuse me, I must return to Lady Eowyn."

"Care for her well throughout the coming days!" Aragorn said and let her leave.

He then went to Merry's room. The Hobbit had now returned to his bed and looked tired.

Pippin was sitting beside him and they were talking nostalgically of the Shire.

Aragorn felt a sudden stab of sorrow for their lost innocence as they were so changed from the carefree young Hobbits he had first met at Bree.
Hobbit Resolve

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Aragorn forced himself to smile at them, as he knew they looked to him for reassurance.

"I've come to see how your injured arm is faring, Merry." he said." I noticed you are still favouring the other one.

"It is much better." Merry said, a little too hastily." Just a trifle stiff."

"Let me see!"

Merry sighed but obediently rolled up his sleeve.

Aragorn gently felt it up to the shoulder joint and noted Merry's arm still felt slightly cold although no marks were visible.

He grasped the Hobbit's arm with his left hand and held the right poised about two inches above the cold flesh and closed his eyes, hoping he had the strength needed.

Merry was puzzled." What's wrong, Strider?" he asked." I told you, it doesn't hurt or anything."

He tried to pull his arm away from Aragorn's grasp.

"Hold it still, Merry!" Aragorn ordered." I want to make sure you have the full use of it."

"Won't it do later, if it's still stiff?" Merry asked." After all, it is only two days since I injured it."

"I do not know if, when." I will return and would leave you whole." Aragorn said.

He had been too weary to give Merry as much healing as he would have wished, when he saved his life, having already spent much of his strength on healing Faramir and the Lady Eowyn, while
she was unconscious as he did not dare return to her later in case she mistook his attention for romantic feelings again.

Merry shuddered at the sorrow in his voice and made no further protest.

He could feel a powerful heat emanating from Aragorn's outstretched hand, which seemed to permeate deep into his flesh and melt the coldness.

He glanced at Aragorn's face and it appeared to him that the man was far away as if in some sort of trance. Slightly afraid, he sat still, hardly daring to breathe.

Aragorn opened his eyes and smiled at him. His face looked grey with exhaustion.

"Does that feel better?" he asked.

Merry flexed the arm and found he could now move it easily.

"Yes, it feels normal now, thank you, Strider!" he cried in amazement. "Can I ride out with you and Pippin tomorrow now?"

Aragorn shook his head.

"No, Merry, you suffered the Black Breath. It takes time to recover from that."

"But I want to go with Pippin!"

"We have hardly ever been parted." Pippin added pleadingly.

Aragorn's face was grave.

"If you wish to stay here with Merry, I count it no disgrace, Pippin. You were freed from your oath to Gondor, when Lord Denethor released you." He said quietly." The land of Mordor is no place for a Hobbit!"

"Frodo and Sam are there, I want to help them. Don't leave me behind! I want to fight for the Shire as much as for Gondor!" Pippin pleaded.

"You are so young." Aragorn said sadly." You will be risking your life. I do not know if I can protect you."

"I wish to come." Pippin said steadfastly.

"If that is your choice, I shall not prevent you." Aragorn said." I know how much you want to help your cousin and represent the Shire and that is noble, however if you wish to change your mind before morning, you still can."

"I won't." Pippin said steadfastly doing his best to ignore the sorrow in Merry's eyes.

Aragorn took out a jar of salve from his pack and started massaging Merry's arm and shoulder with the contents.

Merry grimaced." So much fuss! I said my arm felt better and this stuff smells vile!"

Despite his sorrowful mood, Aragorn was unable to repress a smile.

"It is as well Lord Elrond can't hear you complaining about his millennia old and much coveted ointment!" he commented wryly, wishing he had someone to apply it to his own aching arms and
shoulders" Now stop wriggling, this treatment is meant to be relaxing!"

"I'm sorry, Strider." Said Merry." I know you are trying to help me and I do appreciate it. I don't know how we could have managed without your help! It is just so hard to keep still as your fingers tickle!"

Aragorn finished applying the salve and started to wash his hands. "There is something you can for me, if you will, Merry." He said, picking up the towel.

Merry rolled down his sleeve and leaned back on the pillows.

"Very gladly as I feel so useless being left behind!"

"I would have you help care for those left behind wounded, Lord Faramir and especially the Lady Eowyn while we are gone as she is sorrowful for the loss of her uncle, and her brother rides forth with the Host tomorrow."

Merry bowed his head and wiped away a tear. He had only known King Theoden a short time but had come to love him as a father."

"I promise you I will." he said sincerely." I share Lady Eowyn's grief and we will have much to talk about. We both know what it is like to face that thing!" He shuddered and felt a stab of pain in his arm at the mention of the Nazgul.

Aragorn noticed his reaction.

"Try not to think of it too much." he said gently." I promise you the memory will fade in time but few would have had your courage to face it as you and Lady Eowyn did."

Merry basked in the praise but tried in typical Hobbit fashion to make light of it.

"Who knows, maybe I will merit a mention in one of Bilbo's songs?" he said

"Now that would be an honour!" Pippin replied.

Watching them jesting together, Aragorn felt a keen pang of sorrow as he remembered the songs and stories after the feast at Rivendell and wondered if they would ever all be together again. He briefly closed his eyes and at once a vision of Arwen flashed into his mind as she had appeared on that evening, so beautiful that all eyes had lingered on her. He swayed slightly.

"Are you alright, Strider?"

Pippin's concerned voice roused him from his reverie.

"I am just weary. I will leave you now but will see you again before we leave." He assured the Hobbits.

Bidding them farewell for now he left their room .He was about to return to his tent outside the city and rest as he was so exhausted his head throbbed, but something made him return to see how Faramir was faring.

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Aragorn knocked on Faramir's door but on getting no reply entered, hoping the young man was sleeping.

Instead, he found him curled almost in a ball sobbing convulsively yet almost silently.

Only an occasional choked yet heartrending sob was audible. Faramir seemed unaware that anyone had entered the room, so consumed was he by his terrible grief.

Putting aside his own weariness, Aragorn impulsively sat on the edge of the bed and reaching out towards the distressed Steward, drew Faramir into his arms as one would a child, holding him cradled close against his shoulder, all the while taking care not to aggravate his wounds. He gently stroked the dark head.

Soothed by the comforting touch, Faramir's tears started to flow freely. Between sobs, Aragorn could make out the occasional word.

"I tried to please you, father, truly! My loyal men, all fallen! Boromir, my beloved brother, no!"

The words tore at the King’s tender heart, thinking just how much Faramir had endured.

He made no attempt to quieten him, apart from gently massaging his head and neck, hoping the tears would bring him healing that he could not.

He was somewhat puzzled that the Steward's son would accept his comfort after his earlier apprehension in his presence; yet glad he could be there with him, while he released his pent up anguish.

Aragorn sat there silently, knowing that words were powerless to assuage such grief and that all he could do was simply be there, holding the grief stricken young man, as a loving father would
hold his child.

Faramir's tears soaked through his cloak and tunic and the damp fabric clung uncomfortably to his flesh.

Eventually the sobs subsided and Faramir slowly drew away from Aragorn's aching arms.

"Uncle, I'm sorry!" he gasped and then turned and found himself looking into the compassionate eyes of his King, who himself was wiping away a tear as he remembered how Boromir had died in his arms, his noble body pierced with the arrows of many orcs.

"My Liege, I crave pardon!" he gasped." I thought you were my uncle!" Faramir flushed scarlet.

Aragorn smiled at him and gently took his Steward's trembling hand.

"There is no shame in weeping," he said gently." Your brother was a great man. I too wept for him. If I unwittingly deceived you into thinking I was your uncle, I am sorry but I could see you were in need of comforting."

Faramir bowed his head unable to look the King in the eye. He could hear his father's voice inside his head mocking him for showing weakness. How could he have wept in the arms of the King? He would have forfeited his Sovereign's respect forever now!

"I am not your father, Faramir." He started at the quiet yet commanding voice, wondering how he could read his thoughts thus.

"I will not show such weakness again." Faramir said, raising his head." What does my Lord command?"

"I would command you not to fear me," Aragorn said gently yet firmly." It is no weakness to mourn a beloved brother in the privacy of your chamber."

He raised Faramir's head forcing him to look at him at the same time, using a light healing touch to soothe the troubled young man. He wished he were not so tired as every bone in his body seemed to ache with weariness.

"I will try my Lord." Faramir managed a weak smile and he forced himself to look at Aragorn. The King much resembled his father in appearance, the same dark hair, though with much less grey in it, high cheekbones, and grey eyes. Yet, his eyes were very different, whereas Denethor's had been hard and cold as flint, Aragorn's were warm and compassionate.

Aragorn released him and went to draw up a chair beside the bed. He plumped up Faramir's pillows and drew the covers up to his chin.

"I will stay with you a while." he said." Weep as you feel the need as it will heal your heart's grief then you can rest and restore your body."

He smoothed Faramir's hair back from his brow, gently stroking his head with his fingertips.

Faramir continued to cry quietly for a little while longer and Aragorn continued to soothe him until his healing touch sent the younger man into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Aragorn continued to sit by the bedside, still worried that he might be needed, though weariness overcame him and he fell into a light doze.

A sudden footstep behind him jolted him back to wakefulness. He realised that Prince Imrahil had
entered the room.

Aragorn beckoned him outside as not to awaken Faramir.

"I am sorry, I could not come before, My Lord." Imrahil apologised. "I was needed to supervise the setting in place of a defence strategy for while we are gone and it took the messenger some time to find me. How is my nephew?"

"He insisted upon learning of his father's death and I felt I should tell him about his brother before we left." Aragorn said sadly. "Naturally he is distraught, but I hope he will sleep now. I comforted him as best I could; yet I fear there is little comfort for sorrows such as his. Only time can bring true healing."

"These times are hard for us all, but he has had more to bear than most. He never measured up to his brother in his father's estimation and recently, Lord Denethor has driven him so hard, that a lesser man would have been broken long ago." Imrahil replied. "I will stay with him now as you look exhausted, My Lord. Thank you for caring for him."

"I will go to my tent and rest now." Aragorn said wearily and turned to go.

"One more thing," Imrahil halted him. "I hope you will forgive me for saying this, but although you have the undoubted bearing of a King, you do not exactly look like one and we, that is the leaders of the West, feel you should lead the Host out tomorrow looking like the King that you are!"

TBC
A bath for Aragorn

Chapter Notes

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"That is kindly offered but I have no wish to cause dissent by openly entering the city." Aragorn said.

Imrahil hastened to override his objections." If you come at first light, dressed as you are now, no one will notice your presence, My Lord. I have taken the liberty to order the servants to let you in and prepare a bath for you. Then Eomer of Rohan, Prince Legolas and myself will help dress you like a King .It will inspire the men and give them hope."

Aragorn was too weary to argue. He bade Imrahil goodnight and made his way to his tent to snatch what little sleep he could before dawn.

Faramir awoke remembering the sensation of comforting arms around him. How many times over the years had he longed for his father to hold him like that but such comfort was always denied, even when he was only five years old and his mother had just died.

He had turned to Boromir from that day onwards. Strange that he should receive more fatherly solicitude from a stranger who happened to be the King, than he ever had experienced from Denethor. He could like this man, even love him as he could never love his harsh father. Then the dark vision returned and he cried out.

Imrahil was at his side in an instant.

"Faramir are you in pain?"

He shook his head. "No it was just a dream."

"These dark times lend themselves to troubled dreams, I fear." Imrahil said sympathetically trying to stifle a yawn.

"You need to rest, Uncle, I will be well enough." Faramir reassured him before making a request
Nevertheless, Imrahil sat watching his nephew until he fell into what appeared to be a dreamless sleep.

He was sorely troubled about his nephew as his lot was perhaps the hardest of all, to wait while the fate of Middle Earth was decided and maybe defend the city in a last hopeless stand against the Dark Lord while already loaded with a heavy burden of grief.

Imrahil looked back sadly on his nephew's sleeping features as he left the room, thinking it could well be the last time he saw him in this life.

A servant unlocked the Steward's apartments as Aragorn approached at dawn the next day. It seemed that no sooner had he fallen asleep than he was roused again by Imahil's squire.

Still half asleep, he made his way to the highest level of the city, wondering why people set so much importance by appearance. Surely, the armour that Theoden had lent him would serve well enough?

Entering Denethor's apartments was like stepping back in time, as the furnishings were much like they had been in his father Ecthelion's lifetime, almost forty years before.

The same heavy carved furniture, the imposing desk littered with papers, the dark heavy tapestries and the slightly musty smell, The rooms had a claustrophobic feel despite their size, as if fresh air were never allowed to enter.

Several servants carrying buckets were either entering or leaving the bathing chamber.

"Here you are my Lord." Said the servant escorting Aragorn, gesturing towards a huge sunken bath, filled with steaming water." We have left soap and towels in the chamber for you. Do you require any other assistance?"

Aragorn shook his head.

"No, but thank you for all your help. I would be alone now. Please tell Prince Imrahil and his companions to wait here when they arrive"

The man bowed and exited followed by the others, one threw a curious glance at Aragorn, another looked resentful that any should use Denethor's bath while the third looked totally indifferent.

Once they had gone, Aragorn locked the door behind him and started to divest himself of his clothing, the grey cloak the elves had gifted him, the tunic and trousers he had worn since Rivendell and the fine linens worn beneath, the only clue that here was a man of rank and status.

Gondor was chilly on a grey dawn in March and he shivered at the cold air on his naked flesh and quickly climbed down into the bath.

The hot water felt blissful as it was so long since he had been able to bathe properly and the warmth eased the aches in his arms and shoulders.

Yet, there was little time to relax and enjoy the ease.

Sighing he picked up the soap and washcloth and began to rinse away the accumulated grime of travel and battle.
His chest and arms remained darkened, not with grime but the many bruises he had acquired over the last few weeks.

He washed away the dried blood from several partially healed gashes, which the enemy had inflicted on him at Helm's Deep.

He was relieved they had not become infected as there had been so little time to treat them properly and so many others needs to attend to.

The warm water soothed his many hurts and he allowed himself a few brief moments to enjoy it, wondering if this were the last time, he would enjoy a bath like this.

They were leaving on a fool's errand today, one, which would most likely result in all their deaths and yet there was no other choice but to try to distract Sauron as to give Frodo a chance to destroy the ring.

He thought sadly of all his hopes and dreams of marrying Arwen and becoming King of a reunited kingdom. Kingship would be a heavy burden and yet he had looked forward to trying to bring peace and prosperity to his kingdom.

These last few days had been the most arduous of a long and hard life. His first trial was confrontation in the palantir, which Pippin had picked up when Wormtongue threw it from the tower at Orthanc and looking in the stone had almost cost the young Hobbit his life, yet had steeled Aragorn to do what he knew he must and show himself to Sauron as the lost heir of Isildur.

The battle of wills had been waged throughout the night and Aragorn was utterly drained by it. Yet he emerged the victor as he bent the stone to his will.

TBC
Preparations

Chapter Notes

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There had been no time for rest though, for if the Captains of the West were to emerge victorious when Gondor was besieged and they were outnumbered, there was only one choice about which path he must take.

Although he had outwardly appeared calm and controlled, Aragorn had felt the same chill of fear as those with him, when he rode the paths of the dead to summon the oath breakers, warriors who were cursed by his ancestor Isildur, never to rest until summoned by his heir to defend Gondor.

Again, his will had prevailed, but he was wearied both in body and spirit. There was still no rest after the battle of Pelennor Fields as many were wounded and under the shadow of the Black Breath, a malady that only the hands of the King could heal.

Stretching out his long legs, he leaned back in the bath, allowing his natural optimism to resurface. Though it seemed likely, he would die in the coming battle he hoped it would not be in vain and he was determined to die bravely, his sword in his hand, fighting against the Dark Lord's minions. Faramir might yet rule Gondor in peace and prosperity.

He smiled at the thought, once he had recovered, he was certain Faramir would make a good steward, as he sensed in him a man of rare quality after his own heart, a man he would gladly choose as friend if only the time were given him.

The battle for Faramir's life had been the hardest and drained him utterly, but it was a battle he had rejoiced in winning once he saw the look of love and knowledge on Faramir's face when he awakened and looked into his eyes.

He washed his hair and reluctantly climbed out of the bath, wrapping a towel round himself as he did so.
Once dried he glanced down at his bruised body thinking he was scarcely in a fit condition to fight a battle, led alone lead one. But such was the lot of many in these evil times, be they common soldier or king.

He had requested that clean linen and a shirt and breeches be left here for him. He dressed in them quickly before Imrahil, Eomer, or Legolas could arrive, as he had no desire for them to see his injuries.

Eomer sneezed as he rooted through a heap of dusty armour, he cursed as he banged his knee against yet another ancient rusted breastplate.

Legolas continued to search diligently while Imrahil looked on, a worried frown creasing his usually serene features.

The vault was packed with armour, some of it very ancient and maybe even dating from when the Kings had reigned in Gondor, but most of it was rusted and corroded and that which was wearable was made for someone much broader than Aragorn.

"It seems the Gondorian Kings of old enjoyed their state banquets!" Remarked Eomer, kicking aside a breastplate, which looked as if it would have fitted both himself and Aragorn at the same time.

Eventually Legolas' keen eyes spotted some suitable items and servants were summoned to clean and polish them.

They entered the chamber where Aragorn was awaiting them and made obeisance both as was the custom and as a token of respect to this modest yet noble heir to the ancient throne of kings.

If they were surprised that Aragorn was already dressed, they made no sign thinking maybe such was the custom of the reclusive Rangers from the North.

Aragorn accepted their homage, looking somewhat embarrassed that his comrades should kneel to him.

As the representative of Gondor Imrahil first belted on a full skirt of mail about Aragorn's slender waist and a shirt of mail was put on that was tightened with leather points that laced through wide leather hems at the back, which were fastened by Eomer followed by a leather belt which Legolas buckled at the back of Aragorn's neck.

Fitted to this were Pauldrons of steel and leather edged in gold and etched with Gondorian motives and large steel and leather rerebraces fashioned to resemble the winged crown and seven stars of the king.

Boromir's vambraces completed the arm protection, those same vambraces, which Aragorn had sworn to carry in honour of his fallen comrade until the last battle was won or he died defending Gondor from her enemies.

They worked in silence, each all too aware that this could be Aragorn's and their last battle, one from which it was unlikely they would return.

Warriors all, they would gladly give their lifeblood for the hope of a better future that they would not live to see.

Then Imrahil brought forth a beautiful black velvet cloak, lined with scarlet silk.

"Faramir bade me request that you wear this." He said gravely. "It belonged to Boromir and was
made for the ceremony when he was promoted to Captain General of the Armies of Gondor. He wore it only once, but it is a garment fit for a king."

Aragorn smiled sadly. "It is beautiful." He said. "I will be honoured to wear it."

The King and Princes, who were serving as Aragorn's attendants stood back and surveyed the results of their handiwork.

"You look magnificent, my friend!" Eomer exclaimed. "A true King!"

Imrahil nodded agreement.

"Something is missing!" exclaimed Legolas. "Your hair should be braided in honour of Luthien, your elven ancestress! Will you permit me to do it?"

Aragorn nodded and the Elf set to work, while Eomer and Imrahil looked on bemused.

When it was done, Eomer girded Anduril at Aragorn's side and the King was almost ready to depart, but first he had farewells to make.

TBC
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A very big thank you to everyone who has reviewed. Your comments have been greatly appreciated and I have been very touched by them.

I would love to hear from any one who has been reading but not left a comment, as this is the last chapter.

The wording of the oaths is deliberately slightly altered from Tolkien's original wording.

He entered the now familiar Houses of Healing and went first, to Merry and Pippin, who were walking in the garden. They gasped when they saw him.

"Strider, you look splendid!" Pippin exclaimed. "You really look like the King now!"

Aragorn smiled, though fighting to control his emotions. He had fought and survived many battles, but never one in which the odds were as hopeless as they were now.

He hardly felt the pain in his arms and shoulders any longer, so great was the pain in his heart, a sorrow that must be concealed, as it was his duty to inspire his men and calm their fears in the face of almost certain death.

"It is time for you to join the company of the Men of the City which is ready to depart, Pippin." He said," We leave within the hour."

"I would take my oath to you now." Said Pippin impulsively. "Lord Denethor released me, yet I would swear again to you and to Gondor. "He knelt at Aragorn's feet.

Overcome by the Hobbit's loyalty and courage, Aragorn drew Anduril and offered him the hilt. Pippin placed his hand on it and said.

"Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor and to the King, in peace and war, in living and dying, from this day henceforth, until my King release me, or death take me, or the world end. Thus do I, Peregrin of the Shire solemnly swear."

Aragorn replied
"And thus do I hear, Aragorn son of Arathorn, heir to the thrones of Gondor and Arnor and will
not fail to reward what is given, valour with honour, oath breaking with vengeance and fealty with
love."

Pippin kissed his Liege Lord's hand and Aragorn raised him to his feet and embraced him, as
fought to keep the tears from his eyes.

Merry watched, wiping away his own tears with the back of his hand.

Aragorn turned to him." Now our ways must part and I know not for how long it shall be! "He
said sadly. " If we never meet again, I have been honoured to know you, Farewell!"

He held out his hand to Merry, who took it, and hesitated for a moment before they drew each
other into a close embrace.

Aragorn reluctantly released the tearful Hobbit and left him to say his goodbyes to Pippin.

Faramir was sitting propped up in bed when Aragorn entered.

When he saw the King, he slid out of bed and knelt on the stone floor before Aragorn could
prevent him.

"I would swear my oath to you, my King. "He said." I am sorry I do not have my sword with
me."

"You are not well enough to be out of bed!" The healer in Aragorn was horrified while the man
was deeply touched at the gesture.

"My Liege, I beg of you!"

Aragorn drew Anduril and held out the hilt to Faramir who grasped it and said solemnly.

"Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor and to my King, to speak and to be silent, to do and
to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace and war, in living and dying, from this day
henceforth, until my King release me, or death take me, or the world end. Thus do I, Faramir son
of Denethor of the House of Hurin solemnly swear."

Aragorn replied with equal gravity.

"And thus do I hear, Aragorn son of Arathorn, heir to the thrones of Gondor and Arnor and nor
will I forget it, nor will not fail to reward what is given, valour with honour, oath breaking with
vengeance and fealty with love."

Faramir noted how the King had changed the order of the words from his father's day. It was in
keeping with the man.

He bent forward to kiss Aragorn's hand and almost swooned .The King was beside him in an
instant, gently raising him to his feet and supporting him back to bed.

"Today the King has returned out of legend." Faramir whispered. "I am glad that I have lived to
see this day and would serve my Liege Lord as you command."

Aragorn looked at him with a mixture of pride and sadness." I command you to rest and take food
and regain your strength, to care for Gondor and her people and to especially care for the Hobbit,
Meriadoc, and the Lady of Eowyn of Rohan, who too lie within these houses.
"I will, I give you my oath." said Faramir gravely.

"Then I bid you farewell. I do not know if we will meet again, but may you be blessed by the Valar!"

He bent and kissed Faramir on the brow and then he was gone, striding out resplendent in black and scarlet as he rode out to face the Dark Lord.

Faramir stared after him, seeing only the scarlet lining of his brother's cloak, crimson as freshly spilled blood, a noble sacrifice for the greater good of Middle Earth.

He vowed to follow the King's commands while breath remained in him and then he wept for the future he longed to see but feared could never come to pass.

The End

You can read my version of what happens next in "The Hidden Days of Healing" on or in Tolkien's "The Return of the King".

As so many readers have told me they would like another story, I am currently working on one set two years in the future and further developing some of the relationships touched upon in this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!