Where no Birds Sing Chapter 1

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Summary

When Roheryn goes lame, Aragorn and Faramir are stranded in a storm and forced to seek shelter. A story for Halloween.
Chapter 1

Where no Birds Sing

Summary: When Roheryn goes lame, Aragorn and Faramir are stranded in a storm

Rating: PG13

With grateful thanks to Raksha and Virtuella.

Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done. -Keats

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"He cannot go much further tonight," Aragorn pronounced after carefully examining Roheryn's hoof. "Alas, that he should go lame now when a storm is brewing!"

Roheryn whinnied. He had cast a front shoe earlier that day and had developed a bruised hoof as result of the stony track they were travelling along.

Aragorn looked up to where the dark clouds were blowing from the West. The wind was rising, sending the fallen leaves scurrying round in circles, while those that still remained on the trees turned their leaves over as if eager to catch the approaching rain.

"We should seek shelter for the night, but I know not where," said Faramir. "I do not know this area very well."

"Someone is coming," Aragorn observed. "We can ask them."

An old man approached from behind on an equally ancient nag.

"Greetings, good sir!" cried Aragorn. "Could you tell us where me might spend the night and find a blacksmith to tend my horse?"

"The village be about eight leagues hence," said the greybeard. "There be a smith there."

Faramir looked at the leaden clouds hovering overhead. "Is there not an inn closer?" he asked. "Or maybe a hunting lodge?"

"There's a hunting lodge, but a league hither," said the ancient. "The place has been abandoned for years, though and is no fit place to stay. Now let me be on my way ere the storm breaks." With that, he urged the ancient nag into a canter and disappeared around a bend in the road in the direction of the village as the first heavy drops of rain began to fall.

"We should make for the lodge," said Faramir. "A deserted house might offer little in the way of
hospitality, but it does offer shelter, at least if the roof is still sound."

"You speak wisely, my friend," said Aragorn. He took hold of Roheryn's reins and coaxed the stallion along the track. "We cannot go much further tonight as I fear Roheyn will develop a painful abscess in his foot."

They trudged along the road and when they rounded the next bend, a large house was visible in the distance.

By the time the King and Steward reached the building, the rain was coming down in sheets, which a driving wind whipped against their exposed faces. Dusk was approaching. Darkness would fall early this night. The hunting lodge appeared far from inviting; the building looked dilapidated and neglected. Even the horses seemed unwilling to approach it and needed to be carefully coaxed. The men led their protesting mounts to the stables, which mercifully still had a roof and some dusty straw. They were glad the animals had grazed earlier as there was no food for them. At least the rain had freshly filled the water trough.

Aragorn pushed the door of the building, which was not locked. It opened, creaking loudly. He made his way inside, his hand on his sword hilt. Faramir followed close behind.

"An unwelcoming shelter," said Aragorn, sniffing the damp air, "but it will have to suffice."

"We have not had the luckiest of hunting trips," Faramir lamented as he peeled off his dripping cloak. "We caught nothing and now our wives will be far from pleased that we will be late returning home."

"At least your horse did not go lame," said Aragorn, shedding his own sodden cloak. "You would never hear the last of it from Éowyn!"

"I will be thankful for small mercies then," said the Steward. "At least it was pleasant to be able to escape together from our duties in the City and avoid being followed by guards for a few days." He shook himself like a dog to remove water from his hair, and then rummaged in his pack.

"Every time I go on a hunting trip I have to remind my guards that I fared very well by myself in the wilds for more years than they have lived!" said Aragorn. "I need to return to my Ranger days occasionally or I feel as if I am living in a cage."

"So do I," said Faramir. "Shall we have some supper? We have some bread left over and there is water in our bottles."

"A feast fit for a king!" Aragorn said dryly as he chewed at the unappetising fare.

"We should try to light a fire," said Faramir after finishing his meagre supper. He looked around the room. Faded and dusty hangings were visible in the gloom as well as old furniture scattered around the room. A knocked over candle lay on a table as if the last occupants of the house had left in a hurry. "We could use one of these chairs for kindling. I doubt the owner would mind. They apparently abandoned the place long ago." He righted the candle and lit it.

"The air in here feels oppressive," said Aragorn. "A living fire should lighten it. We could burn this more easily." He picked up a broken harp and threw the pieces into the grate, then set fire to the kindling with his tinderbox. The wood smouldered rather than burned, providing little warmth or comfort.

"I wonder who played on it?" Faramir mused. "What kind of music did they like?" He shook out their cloaks and laid them at the side of the fire to dry. "I can just imagine a hunting party returned from the chase eating a hearty supper here while a minstrel entertained them."

"I am surprised that no one lives here and the place has been allowed to fall to ruin," said Aragorn. "Maybe the owner was killed during the war, but one would expect his heirs to have laid claim to the house." He stirred the reluctant fire, trying to coax it to burn brighter.

"Maybe he died without direct heirs?" said Faramir.

"It in that case it would become Crown property," said Aragorn. "Like Duilin of Morthond’s hunting must have been left to someone who chose not to make use of it."

"Strange then that no one left homeless by the war should have moved in here then," said Aragorn. "Hard as we try to help those in need, there are still folk lacking homes of their own."

"Let us try to rest," Faramir suggested. He yawned. "Maybe the house is too remote to attract attention from those seeking a home."

The two friends huddled together in front of the meagre fire and tried to make themselves comfortable. The air still felt heavy, though the storm had broken, but also exceedingly damp and cold. Both men longed for the warmth and comfort of their beds at home in the Citadel.

Faramir suddenly sat bolt upright. "I thought I heard screams and cries just then," he said.

"It must be the wind howling round the rooftops," said Aragorn. "It can sound like someone crying. Lie down again and try to sleep. We should leave at first light for the village."

Faramir did as he was bidden only for Aragorn to startle him by leaping to his feet a few moments later. "Whatever is the matter?" he asked.

"I can hear a harp playing!" said Aragorn.

"It is only the wind in the trees," said Faramir. "There are some poplars outside and the wind sings in them. I love the sound during the day, but it can be eerie at night."

Aragorn laughed uneasily, ashamed at his foolishness. He settled down again beside his Steward. Eventually they drifted into an uneasy sleep lulled by the sound of the pouring rain and the wind in the trees.

A few hours later the King awoke with a start. The candle was flickering wildly and he could hear footsteps approaching. He shook Faramir awake. "Be on your guard!" he warned the Steward. "Someone is in the house."

TBC

A/N This was written for the Teitho challenge "Five Ingredients – One Recipe" Challenge where it was placed second.

Wishing all my readers a Happy Halloween and All Saint's Day.
And no birds sing

Chapter Notes

Where No Birds Sing

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing. – Keats

With grateful thanks to Virtuella and Raksha

Disclaimer:
The characters are the property of the Tolkien Estate. This story is written purely for entertainment and not to make money.

Both men gripped their swords. The footsteps grew nearer. Much to their surprise a little girl entered the room. She looked to be about seven years of age with straggly dark hair, and a pale face with huge red-rimmed eyes. "I have lost my dolly!" she cried. "Where have you put my dolly?"

"I do not know where your doll is," said Aragorn, relaxing his grip on his sword. "What are you doing here? Where are your mother and father?"

"I live here with mummy and daddy," said the child. "I've lost my dolly."

Before either man could say anything else, more footsteps could be heard and a tapping sound. A woman entered, dressed in a cloak as if ready for travelling, together with a man who had only one leg and supported himself with a crutch.

"Mirwen, there you are!" said the woman, ignoring the King and Steward. "We must hurry!"

"I've lost my dolly!" Mirwen repeated.

"We must hurry," said the man. "My leg is paining me already."

"I am a healer," said Aragorn. "Maybe I could ease your pain?"

"No one touches me!" the man said fiercely. "Come, Mirwen, we must leave now!"

"Surely you do not want to leave in the middle of the night in the pouring rain?" said Faramir. "We regret if we have frightened you. We thought the house was deserted when we took shelter..."
from the storm."

"Maybe we do not have to go tonight?" said the man.

"I want my dolly!" cried Mirwen again.

"We will look for her, child," said her father. With that, the three turned and left the room.

"It seems that someone is living here after all," said Faramir. "No doubt some poor folk who lost their home during the war. How strange they are, though. They hardly seemed to notice us. And how did they get here? There is no other horse in the stable." He glanced at the candle, which gradually ceased its frenzied flickering. The room seemed colder than ever.

"Maybe they were afraid we would turn them out or hurt them" said Aragorn. "They were indeed strange folk." He yawned. "Let us try to sleep again for what remains of the night. We leave at first light, rain or no rain."

The two friends lay down again, moving nearer to the fire in a futile attempt to get warm. Faramir's teeth were chattering and Aragorn shivered.

"I cannot understand why it is so cold," said Aragorn. "The North is far colder than Gondor, but I was rarely as cold as this!"

"It is this house," said Faramir. "However do that family manage to live here?"

"I do not know," said Aragorn. "Huddle close and maybe we will eventually get warm." He draped his arm around Faramir's shoulders, unsure whether it was to comfort himself or his friend.

Weariness eventually overcame both King and Steward and they slept. When they next opened their eyes it was daylight. The rain had cleared and sunlight streamed into the room. In the daylight it looked even dustier and shabbier than they had imagined.

Aragorn and Faramir picked up their still damp cloaks and packs and prepared to leave.

"We are leaving now," Faramir called out to the other occupants of the house, but received no reply. "They must have left already," he said to Aragorn.

"Or be hiding," said the King. He placed a handful of coins on the table. "This should help them find better lodgings if they return," he said. As he straightened up from the table, something caught his eye beneath it. He bent to retrieve the item. It was a battered rag doll. "That must be the little girl's lost doll," he said, placing it on the table.

Faramir picked up the toy and scrutinised it. "No, it cannot be," he said. "It is thick with dust. No one can have touched this for years." He started to sneeze.

"I suppose there are plenty of lost and forgotten toys in old houses," said Aragorn. "Now let us see how Roheryn is faring."

The horses whinnied loudly when they saw their masters. Aragorn carefully examined Roheryn's injured hoof. "It needs the bruised part tending and a bran poultice for a few days," he said. "Alas, I do not have what is needed here so we will have to walk him to the smith in the village."

"We can take it in turns to ride my horse," Faramir suggested.

"Thank you, but I can walk well enough," said Aragorn. "I was not named Strider for nothing! We will let the horses graze a little and then will leave."
Aragorn and Faramir walked around the outside of the hunting lodge while the horses ate their breakfast. The place looked even more dilapidated in broad daylight while the grounds were overgrown, but oddly devoid of the birds and wildlife that usually frequented such places. Once the King and Steward had reached the road they glanced back at the deserted hunting lodge. Even in bright daylight it looked vaguely sinister and menacing.

"I would not care to spend another night under that roof!" said Faramir.

"Let us be on our way then," Aragorn replied.

Although their stomachs rumbled and they had to walk carefully for Roheryn's comfort, the two friends enjoyed their stroll along the country road in the early morning sunshine.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they reached the village. It was easy to find the smithy, which stood at the end of the main street. The smith, a burly man of middle years with a kindly face, impressed Aragorn by quickly spotting Roheryn's injury and setting to work at once to file the damaged hoof.

"I will give you coin to tend the horse until he is well enough to be ridden to Minas Tirith," Aragorn told the man. "Tend him well, for he is a steed beyond price."

"I can see that," said the smith. "He be a fine horse. A veteran of many a battle, I wager." He patted Roheryn's proud head. "If you gentlemen need a spare horse to get you home, I will lend you one. Not nearly as fine a mount as this one, but a sturdy beast."

"Thank you," said Aragorn. "I will be pleased to accept and promise you the horse will be tended well."

"Do you know anything about the hunting lodge a few leagues from here?" Faramir asked on impulse. "It seems strange that it should lie derelict, a large house like that."

The smith's genial features darkened. "I would not spend a night there if you gave me a herd of Meras to do so!" he said. "The place be haunted and small wonder after what happened there!"

"What happened?" asked Aragorn.

"I can see indeed that you be strangers here," the man replied. "It be during the war that the Easterlings came. The lord be away fighting and his family had fled to Lossarnach, but a couple stayed to be looking after the house. The man had lost a leg in the fighting and could find no other work to provide for his wife and little lass. No doubt they thought they would be safe in such a lonely spot, but the Easterlings found them and slew them most cruelly, even the lass. What be left of them was buried in the garden by our soldiers who found the bodies. The lord and his family returned after the war, but left only one night, swearing never to set foot in the place again. It be empty ever since."

For a moment Aragorn and Faramir stood speechless.

"You be well, masters?" enquired the smith looking concerned. "You be looking quite pale."

"We have not eaten since yesterday." Aragorn was the first to collect himself, though he turned his head away and stroked Roheryn's mane.

"There be an inn along the street." The smith smiled. "They serve right tasty pies and stews."

"Thank you, we will go and sample them," said Faramir.
"It must be a coincidence," said Faramir, as he bit into a crusty hunk of break and cheese. Neither he nor Aragorn had much appetite for anything more substantial.

"I do not know," said Aragorn. "I have walked the Paths of the Dead and seen the phantom oathbreakers with mine own eyes. That said, there must be many crippled soldiers and their families who seek shelter where they can. I try to help them, but some are too proud to accept charity. There was something very strange about that house, though. I have suffered many a bitter winter in the North, but never before have I felt so cold."

"I suppose we will never know the truth," said Faramir. "I am simply thankful that tonight I shall lie beside my wife in my own warm bed. I never want to set foot in that deserted house again."

"If we desire to reach our wives ere sunset, we had better be on way," said Aragorn. "They will send the guard after us if we do not return today. Then who knows when we might snatch some freedom again? Most likely, never!"

When they approached the deserted hunting lodge on their homeward journey, Faramir was unable to repress a shudder. Then, to his dismay, Aragorn guided his borrowed horse towards the dilapidated gates. "What are you doing?" he cried.

"Although we will never know for certain if we encountered ghosts last night, there is something I must do," said Aragorn. "I know not if I have the power, as these folk swore no oath to me nor to my longfathers, but if it lies within my power to help them I will." He dismounted as the borrowed horse was refusing to go further. Both men noticed that everywhere was oddly quiet. No birds sang in the treetops, neither did insects buzz around the overgrown gardens.

Aragorn drew Andúril and held it aloft. The blade glittered in the bright sunlight. "Depart and be at peace!" he cried in a loud voice. "Depart beyond the circles of the world and receive the Gift of Eru. I, Elendil's heir, and child of Lúthien bid you rest now."

He sheathed the sword then turned and walked back to the horse and where Faramir waited. A blackbird started to sing, followed by a thrush.

The King and Steward rode away without looking back. In the sunlit garden bees buzzed around a patch of clover, a queen wasp gorged herself on overripe windfalls and the blackbird sang sweetly in a gnarled apple tree.

A/n Wishing you all a Happy Halloween and All Soul's Day.

If you enjoyed this story you might also enjoy "The Spirit of Gondor", "The Shadow of the Past" and "Lingering Shadows" also on this site.

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