The Hardest Battle

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The Hardest Battle – Linda Hoyland

Rating- PG13 (for gore)

Summary – Aragorn has returned to his people, but they are slow to accept their young chieftain.

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Aragorn shifted uneasily, trying vainly to get comfortable on the thin bedroll. A few weeks ago, living as a Ranger had seemed exciting. All too soon, he had realised that nothing could be further from the truth. Short fierce battles were punctuated by endless hours spent finding food and a dry place to sleep, or simply waiting.

Halbarad, who was sleeping beside him in the cave in which they had found shelter for the night, opened one eye and glared at him balefully. "Are you missing your soft feather bed, my lord?" his kinsman hissed. "Some of us are trying to sleep!"

Aragorn indeed missed Rivendell and the comfortable bed that had been his there, he missed the excellent food and daily baths too, and most of all he missed the loving family and friends he had left behind. In the lonely watches of the night, he thought longingly of his mother, who was always so eager to hear of his adventures, of Master Elrond and his sons, and of the fair Arwen. He wondered jealously just who might be paying her court while he was out here in the wilds.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He turned away from Halbarad and stared fixedly at the meagre campfire that burned in the cave. He thought wistfully of the blazing fire in the hall at Rivendell and the companionship he had enjoyed there. He had never felt so alone in his life as he did now. Either the men resented him, believing him to be soft and mollycoddled, though he had tried his best not to appear so, or they treated him so deferentially that friendship seemed impossible.
Aragorn considered himself a skilled tracker and well accomplished with sword and bow, but so too were these men whom he was supposed to lead. Halbarad, who had been acting leader until recently, seemed to know so much more than the young chieftain did, though only his senior by a few years. Aragorn was acutely aware that he only led these men by virtue of his birth. That was why Halbarad had been chosen to lead the Rangers in his absence, as he too was a descendant of Aranarth, though through the female line only.

The young chieftain found the evenings around the campfire the hardest to endure. The men would ask one another to sing songs and tell stories to entertain their fellows, but never once did they ask him, he who had been raised in Master Elrond's house and knew more lore than any of them!

Aragorn shifted again, ignoring a sharp elbow dig from Halbarad and tried to get comfortable. They would be up at dawn to meet up with another small group of men who had been tracking Orcs in the Fells.

Aragorn must have slept a little as he was awoken with a start to the sound of raised voices.

"We should attempt to remove the arrow," said one voice.

"He will die of blood loss if we do," said another voice. "It is near a major blood vessel and none of us has the skill to extract it."

"He will surely die if we leave it in," said the first voice. "Orc arrows are filthy. We should take him to Rivendell."

"He'd be dead long before we got there," said the second speaker. "Master Elrond is too far away."

Aragorn threw off his blanket and scrambled to his feet. "What has happened?" he asked.

"Nothing for you to concern yourself over, sir," said Vardamir, the oldest of the group. "Tarcil has been wounded on patrol, but there is no danger. His fellows killed the Orcs."

"What has been done for him?" asked Aragorn.

"We can do very little save try to keep him comfortable," Vardamir replied. "He needs the skills of Master Elrond, but we are many leagues from Rivendell."

"I was trained by Master Elrond," said Aragorn. "I will tend Tarcil's wound as best I may." He rummaged in his pack for the well-stocked kit of healing implements and herbs that Master Elrond had given him as a parting gift.

"Better to let the poor fellow die in peace than be butchered further!" Halbarad said acidly.

"I do not butcher my patients," Aragorn said coldly. "Master Elrond trained me well." He pushed his way through the small group of men to where Tarcil lay close to the fire on a bedroll. A black fletched arrow protruded from high in his shoulder, just below his neck. Aragorn regarded it with dismay; it was indeed in a difficult position to remove, but he had seen Master Elrond treat similar injuries and assisted him. It would be a difficult procedure, but he believed he could do it. He knelt beside Tarcil and took his hand, noting that his pulse, although rapid, was still strong. "Be easy," he told the injured man. "I will give you something for the pain then tend to your wound."

"He needs a skilled healer like my mother!" Halbarad protested.
"She is not here and we do not have one," said Vardamir.

Tarcil's eyes flickered open. "I want to live to see my children grow up," he murmured.

"I cannot promise to save you, but I will try my utmost," said Aragorn.

"Thank you," said Tarcil.

Aragorn got to his feet. "I need as much light as possible," he said. "And plenty of hot water. I also will need someone to help me. At least one man to hold him down and another to pass me my instruments." His tone was confident and commanding. For the first time since he had re-joined his people, he sounded like the leader he was born to be.

For a moment no one moved then Vardamir said, "You heard the Chieftain, make haste!"

Aragorn rummaged in his pack and took out a vial of precious poppy syrup. He mixed a few drops in water and gave them to the wounded man, then busied himself cutting away his clothing from around the arrow while he waited for the pain-relieving potion to work.

One Ranger threw more wood on the fire while another lit torches and positioned them around the wounded man. Aragorn selected a sharp knife and a special implement for removing arrows and placed it in the flames to cleanse it. Halbarad brought him a bowl of hot water and Aragorn thoroughly washed his hands. He gently felt the flesh around the arrow. To his relief, as yet there was no sign of serious infection, but he would have to work quickly before any could set in.

Aragorn removed the instruments from the fire and set them aside to cool. He then cleaned the skin around the arrow. He looked around for some clean cloths to staunch the wound. There were none. He realised he would have to sacrifice one of his shirts. At least his mother had ensured he left Rivendell with a plentiful supply of linens. Doubtless, she would have sewed more for him when he next returned to visit her.

"I need someone to hold Tarcil steady," he said. "It is vital that he does not move while I extract the arrow."

Two of the Rangers stepped forward.

"Have you done this before?" Halbarad asked.

"Many times," said Aragorn with more confidence than he felt. He had indeed removed a good number of arrows, but he had only assisted Master Elrond when the arrowhead was in such a dangerous position. "I am ready," he said to Tarcil.

The wounded man gritted his teeth. "Do it quickly, please."

Aragorn's helpers pinioned their comrade down. The young healer began the gruesome task. First, he sawed off the shaft, and then after cleansing the skin around the arrow, he cut deeply.

Tarcil gave a cry then mercifully fainted. Aragorn worked swiftly, all the while all too well aware that one wrong move could sever a major blood vessel and kill his patient. As soon as the cut was wide enough, he carefully eased the arrow free and cast it to one side. He swiftly staunched the bleeding with his spare shirt."

"Are you going to stitch it?" asked Halbarad.

Aragorn shook his head. "The poisons need to drain from it first," he said. "I need more hot water to make a poultice, then afterwards, it needs treating with honey. Now will someone keep this
cloth pressed over the wound for me?"

Vardamir took Aragorn's place beside the wounded man while Aragorn mixed the ingredients that he needed.

By the time the poultice was ready, the bleeding had slowed. Aragorn applied it and was just bandaging it in place when Tarcil's eyes flickered open. "All over now," Aragorn said reassuringly. "The arrow has gone."

"Thank you," Tarcil murmured.

"Fetch blankets and water for him to drink!" Aragorn commanded. He washed the gore from his hands and set about making Tarcil as comfortable as possible.

"You did well, Lord Aragorn," said Vardamir approvingly.

"Only time will tell how he fares," Aragorn replied.

"You should rest, lord, one of us will watch by him," said the older man.

"He is my responsibility," Aragorn said simply. "I will stay by his side."

All that night and the following days, the young Chieftain sat beside his patient, changing the dressings and applying honey and fresh poultices, giving Tarcil water and herbal potions, gripping his hand and mopping his brow when the inevitable fever came upon him. At times, Aragorn despaired of Tarcil's life, but the older Ranger was strong. On the third day, the fever broke. When Aragorn checked the wound in Tarcil's shoulder, it was healing cleanly. It seemed that his patient would live. Whether he would ever use his arm again properly, was another matter, the arrow had torn through muscle, bone and sinew. With rest and nourishment, he should be able to return to his family, though, work on their small farm, and see his children grow up. Aragorn detected a slightly different attitude towards him once it seemed that Tarcil might survive. The men followed his orders far more willingly and tried to make his vigil more comfortable by making up the fire and bringing him food unasked. Halbarad, though, remained aloof, treating his kinsman with a thinly veiled hostility.

"Tarcil needs nourishing broth," Aragorn told Vardamir, who acted as their cook. The other Rangers had left to patrol the area and only four remained in the camp that day.

"We used the last of the fresh meat yesterday," said the older Ranger.

"Halbarad and I will go out hunting," said Aragorn. "Watch over Tarcil while we are gone."

"You have had little rest, sir," said Vardamir. "Maybe I should go in your stead?"

"It is better that I go," said Aragorn. "I am younger and my eyes keener to spot the tracks of the prey. Come, Halbarad!"

Halbarad scowled but refrained from making any of his usual sarcastic comments. The two tracked and killed a brace of rabbits, but it was growing dark by the time they had sufficient food. They were returning to the cave through a dense patch of forest when Aragorn heard a sound. He swiftly drew his sword just before a group of Orcs emerged from behind the trees. The two Rangers were greatly outnumbered by the foul creatures, but far superior in strength and fighting skills. They hacked and slashed until a dozen or so of the creatures lay dead at their feet. The others fled into the undergrowth. It seemed that the battle was over. Aragorn wiped his sword on the grass and leaning on it, took several deep breaths and ran his sleeve across his brow. Young and strong though he was, three nights without proper rest had taken their toll.
One of the surviving Orcs, bolder than its fellows, suddenly re-emerged from the forest and rushed towards Aragorn with drawn sword. Halbarad cried out a warning and swung his blade, cleaving the creature almost in twain just before it reached Aragorn.

"You saved my life!" Aragorn whispered. Never before had he been so close to death.

"Keep your guard up in future!" Halbarad replied gruffly.

"Thank you." Aragorn grasped Halbarad's hand. "I know you do not greatly like me, and it cannot be easy for you giving up your rank to me, but I will be forever in your debt."

"You could be a lot worse, sir," Halbarad replied.

"Please, Halbarad, you are my kinsman. Call me by my name, at least when no others are present. I know I still have much to learn and would welcome your advice."

"As you wish, Aragorn." Halbarad clapped his cousin awkwardly on the shoulder. "Now come on, let us return to camp with these rabbits ere any more Orcs appear."

The two returned to camp talking to one another as they walked. It was awkward conversation concerning inconsequential matters, but after the last few weeks, it seemed like water from a barren rock to Aragorn.

When they returned to their camp, the other men had returned. The hunters were greeted joyfully. There would be enough rabbit stew for all that night.

A few hours later, the Rangers were seated around their campfire after a hearty meal and Halbarad was regaling his comrades with a tale of his grandfather's exploits. When the tale was concluded, he turned to Aragorn and said, "You must know all the old tales better than any man here, since you were raised by Master Elrond, a master of lore. Will you entertain us with one?"

"Of course. I will tell you the tale of fair Lúthien and bold Beren," said Aragorn. He began the much-loved tale, a favourite of the Rangers', but this was a version they had not heard before. The fire blazed merrily, illuminating the faces of the listeners, including Tarcil, who felt well enough tonight to leave his sickbed for a little while. Aragorn found himself studying their faces; weathered faces with grim features, but the faces of brave and honourable men, his men, his people. At last, he was accepted as truly one of them.

A/n. This story was written for the Teitho "Fireside" challenge, but was unplaced.

A very Happy Thanksgiving to all my friends in the USA.

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