When Aragorn meets the Ring Bearer, he is far from impressed.

Notes

Ranger, Ring-Bearer, and Resolution by Linda Hoyland

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Rating PG

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Dedicated to Larner on the occasion of her birthday

With grateful thanks to Raksha and Virtuella.

I stretched out my legs and took a sip of Barliman Butterbur's excellent ale to soothe my increasing frustration. Why had that fool of an innkeeper not allowed me a word in private with the Hobbits? And why, oh why, had Gandalf allowed one so unsuitable to be wandering around carrying the thing that could destroy us all? For granted, Gandalf usually knew what he was doing, but this time I was starting to wonder if he might for once be mistaken. I would have expected someone more sensible than this Frodo to be Bilbo Baggins' beloved heir.

I sighed at the memory of overhearing the party of Hobbits discussing their dangerous mission. I had decided the best I could do was to follow them into Bree. They had acted as if they were going on an
agreeable adventure. How could the most dangerous thing on Arda have been entrusted to one who seemed to have no more sense of danger than a young child?

Even this crowded room was full of danger; Bill Ferny was rarely up to any good and one of the Southron travellers looked like a troublemaker.

Ah, my feet ached tonight, as did my heart. I had lost good friends at Sarn Ford, men who had given their lives for these Hobbits. And where was Gandalf?

I realised that the one the others had addressed as Frodo was looking at me. I returned the gaze and saw that the Hobbit was asking Butterbur something. As soon as the innkeeper bustled away, I beckoned Frodo over. The Hobbit came reluctantly. I threw back my hood before addressing him, making it clear that I knew exactly who Frodo was, and warning him that his companions were saying far too much where unfriendly ears might overhear them.

Frodo looked uncomfortable, but met my gaze, something which seasoned warriors were often loth to do, which earned my grudging respect. It seemed though, his young companions were too intoxicated by either the attentive audience or Butterbur's strong ale to exercise any caution and one of them started recounting the story of Bilbo's farewell speech.

I leaned over and whispered in Frodo's ear "You had better do something quick!"

I had expected he would either buy his young friends more drinks to distract them, or tell them it was time to retire for the night, but no, the foolish Hobbit leapt on a table and began to sing. I could have groaned aloud. Could he not understand that it was vital not to draw attention to himself? Frodo had a pleasant singing voice and his audience clapped and cheered and demanded more. The Hobbit obliged and gave an even more spirited rendering of the song. He leapt and danced and sang and tripped over a tray of mugs after an especially vigorous leap. Then he vanished!

I struggled to remain outwardly unmoved. The fool! How could he be so stupid? To use the Ring of Power in the crowded common room of an inn? I noticed two unsavoury looking characters slip quietly from the room. No doubt they were spies. A Dúnedain child would have had more sense than this Hobbit! Something needed to be done and quickly!

Frodo reappeared crawling under the chairs towards where I was sitting in the dark corner.

"Why did you do that?" I scolded "You have put your foot in it! Or should I say your finger?"

Frodo flushed and denied he knew what I was talking about, even when I addressed him by his real name and demanded a quiet word with him as soon as the uproar had died down. The Hobbit reluctantly agreed.

Barliman Butter entered and everyone began talking at once. I slipped away and took a seat in the private parlour by the door and inwardly debated what to do next. It was essential that I talk some sense into him and make him aware of the danger he was facing. I would need to accompany Frodo to Rivendell; that was surely what Gandalf would have wanted. Where was Gandalf anyway? It was strange that he was not here. I felt a stab of anxiety concerning my old friend. Maybe I should suggest to Frodo that I took care of the Ring on the journey? After all, I was far bigger and stronger than the Hobbit and much wiser.

A few minutes later Frodo and his companions entered. It was not until they had built up the fire that they saw me. The youngest, whom I'd heard the others call "Pippin," addressed me in a friendly and inquisitive manner, seemingly unperturbed by my presence.
I introduced myself and Frodo immediately demanded to know what I wanted. I decided to frighten him a little, he still was not wary enough given the danger that he faced. "I will tell you what I know, and give you some good advice - but I shall want a reward," I told him.

'And what will that be, pray?' said Frodo warily.

He took me for a scoundrel – good. At least he was starting to learn some caution. I smiled as I replied "Just this: you must take me along with you, until I wish to leave you."

Frodo looked far from pleased at the prospect of my company. Did he truly think that he and his companions would have any hope of reaching Rivendell without help?

"I should not agree to any such thing, until I knew a good deal more about you, and your business," the Hobbit replied.

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs, settling myself more comfortably. "Excellent!" I said.

"What do you know?" asked Frodo.

I got up and looked out to make certain we were not being overhead and then closed the door tightly. I told him how I had overheard him saying he would use the name Underhill and that I knew of his secret and all about the Black Riders. I chided him too for using the Ring to disappear.

"I was a sheer accident!" Frodo protested.

How naive he was! There are no accidents where Rings of Power are concerned. No doubt the presence of agents of the Enemy in the room had caused it to manifest itself. Frodo decided to play the innocent and not to understand my meaning, to my increasing exasperation. Did he not understand the Black Riders would stop at nothing to gain their Master's Ring?

I recalled my own dealings with them. I hope I am no coward, but the very thought of them freezes my blood. They drain all hope and life from a man by their very presence, leaving him helpless and easy prey. The first time I encountered them I was frozen to the spot and only survived thanks to Halbarad who dragged me to my horse. An ordinary enemy can kill you, but these creatures destroy not only the body, but can turn their victims into wraiths like themselves. I thought of the devastation they had so recently wrought at Sarn Ford.

"They will come on you in the wild, in some dark place where there is no help. Do you wish them to find you? They are terrible!" I told the Hobbits. I found I was clenching my hands and gripping the arms of my chair. If those creatures were to take the Ring it would be the death of all that was good in Middle-earth. My people would be hunted to extinction and there was small hope that any Hobbit would be spared either, unless perhaps as a slave to do the Dark Lord's will.

I drew my hand across his brow, tortured by these dark thoughts. "Perhaps I know more about these pursuers than you do. You fear them, but you do not fear them enough, yet. Tomorrow you will have to escape, if you can. Strider can take you by paths that are seldom trodden. Will you have him?" I was almost begging Frodo now. I could not let him wander off into the wilds with the Ring. I could feel its power even as we spoke.

For the first time, Frodo's servant, who was addressed as "Sam", spoke up, imploring his Master to beware of me. Frodo announced that he did not trust me at all. Only Pippin seemed to be warming to me. I sighed. It seemed I would have to trust them with my true identity, something I was loth to do as they all seemed incapable of caution and keeping their mouths shut. There was nothing else for it unless I ..
Just then Butterbur entered with candles and a letter from Gandalf. The fat innkeeper then warned
the Hobbits not to take up with a Ranger when he saw me with them! The impertinence of the
fellow! If he but knew what horrors the despised Rangers keep away from his doorstep! If he were
told, though, the knowledge would take away the very peace we strive to grant these simple people.
At least he had the honesty to say he could not protect his guests from the Black Riders.

Butterbur bustled away looking alarmed and Frodo read the letter aloud. Gandalf's tidings only
increased my concern for my old friend. He did, though, tell the Hobbits my true name and
counselled them to trust me. Frodo then chided me for not having told them sooner that I knew the
Wizard, while Pippin made foolish remarks that he would resemble me after a few days in the wild.
As for Sam he still stubbornly suspected me of being a spy or an impostor.

My patience finally snapped. Here was I, the last heir of the great house of Elendil forced to live
alone and friendless like a beggar in the wild, never thanked and never trusted, begging for the right
to escort a gaggle of foolish suspicious Hobbits!

My hand went to my sword and I threw back my cloak to make myself look even more imposing. I
could take the Ring now. Was I not heir to Isildur, who rightfully took it as wergild for his father?
There was no need to harm the Hobbits; a mere threat would suffice. If I had the Ring, I could keep
it from Sauron's clutches far better than these hapless, dithering Hobbits. I could swiftly depart Bree
with it and leave the Black Riders far behind. I would be the most powerful man on Arda and could
reclaim the throne of my ancestors. Most important of all, my impossible dream of marrying Arwen
would come true! I could give her the life of luxury and comfort she deserved, we would have
children together and I would restore the fortunes of my people. I would..

I gazed at the frightened faces yet defiant faces of the Hobbits. They clung together, forming a
protective ring around Frodo. What courage it must have taken for these small folk to leave the
shelter of the Shire! What madness had seized me? The Ring was trying to work its evil upon me. It
had betrayed and destroyed Isildur. It would not take his heir. The Ring was not mine, nor any
man's, but it was in Frodo's keeping and I must do everything within my power to protect him. I was
resolved. I smiled, my heart melting within me. "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life or
death I can save you, I will," I said.

A/n. This story was written originally for the Teitho contest "Resolutions". Some dialogue is taken
directly from Tolkien.

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