Strange Meetings

by Lise

Summary

Aragorn the Ranger runs into a stranger in the wilds of the North. Three guesses which one. The first two don’t count.

Notes

I started this fic ages and ages ago at the behest of zaataronpita, and promptly took just about forever to finish it. I should really make a series of "Maglor talks to everyone ever not from his own era" fics, cause I like writing them so much. Maglor's angst really is its own character.

He heard singing.

He had wandered far into the wild, and hearing another voice at all was surprising enough to draw him toward it, though he kept his wariness. There were many things with a gift for mimicry. If few with so fair a voice.

Because it was fair. The kind of voice that seeped into his bones and made his heart ache with emotion that echoed that of the singing, which was dreadfully sad.

Aragorn, called Estel by some, followed the sound to a small clearing and through the trees glimpsed a figure, man-like but back to him. He paused, considering in silence.

The singing stopped. “Please,” said a quiet voice a moment later; quiet, but shivering with a latent
power that Aragorn could almost recognize. “I would sooner have company than a watcher, though I admit that I make a poor companion.” His head turned, and Aragorn caught now a noble profile, the features sharp but handsome.

“Seldom am I heard when I wish not to be seen,” Aragorn said, after a moment, stepping out of his cover, though he kept his wariness close.

“I listen well and closely. Few can slip by me unnoticed, if I do not wish them to.” Aragorn frowned, and considered the stranger.

“Not many wander in these wilds,” he said, finally.

“Yes,” said the stranger. “Not many.”

“I and my kinsmen watch these woods. I might ask what your business is.” Aragorn thought he saw the stranger’s mouth quirk, but it was gone so quickly that he was sure he must have imagined it. It did not seem as though it would have fit on that face, so well suited to melancholy.

“You might.” Silence followed, and no explanation. Aragorn frowned and let his hand drift to the hilt of his sword, though he felt no real sense of danger. A prickling awareness, perhaps, such as he might have around a trained warrior, though this man bore no weapon save a small belt knife. That in itself was curious. This was not safe country.

”You have the look of an Elf,” Aragorn said, “But you are far from any haven that I know of, and few of your people wander readily in these days, and even fewer alone.”

“And I,” the stranger murmured, “Had not thought to encounter one of the Dúnedain. For so you are, is that not so?”

“I am,” Aragorn said carefully, after a moment. “And I notice that you did not answer my question.”

“I notice that you did not ask a question. But if you wished to know where I am from, the answer is that I am a traveler, and at this point from nowhere in particular. Originally, someplace very far from here.”

“Have you no companions?”

The stranger made a soft sound that was like a laugh, quickly cut off and far from mirthful. “No,” he said, after a moment. “No, only my own mind, for the moment,” and fell into silence. He remained sitting, cross-legged, unmoved, and Aragorn circled around to better see his face.

“I heard your song, but it was not one I recognized,” Aragorn said, and the stranger half smiled, a curious, slightly twisted expression.

“No,” he said, “I would think not. It is seldom played. With every year that passes more seldom.”

“What is it a song of?”

“An old sorrow,” said the stranger, after a moment’s pause. “An older pain. Things that most would leave to the past, seeking to let the grief fade.”

“But not you?”

The stranger’s mouth twisted in something that was too bitter to be a true smile. It was not an expression he would have expected to see on an Elven face, but it seemed to fit this one’s features
too well. “I have a long memory.” A moment later his eyes flicked away from Aragorn, back to the trees. The sun was sinking.

“You bear little weapons, for one traveling alone in the wild.”

The stranger twitched. “I bore weapons once. I made a promise to myself that I would not again. I do not intend to be forsworn on that oath.”

Something about the emphasis suggested a thought to Aragorn, or a memory, but it was gone before he could grasp it. He almost asked – with what oath were you forsworn? – but it did not seem a question to which he would likely receive the answer.

“The dark things in these lands will have no thought for your lack of arms,” Aragorn said, though he knew his strange companion was already aware.

“Seldom,” the stranger said, with a curious note in his voice, “Do dark things care for whether their opponents are armed or not.” That silence fell again, curiously heavy. The kind of silence that made Aragorn feel as though he were yet but a stripling, and had wandered into a hall where greater folk fell suddenly silent so as not to speak knowledge too great for his young ears. After a long moment, however, he fidgeted. The wilds did seem quiet, and this…was a strange thing. Worthy of note.

“You will not light a fire?” Aragorn said, after a moment, as the light grew dimmer.

“The cold does not trouble me.”

“It does me. I would gather wood, make a fire. Would you object?”

“I would not.”

Aragorn rose, after a moment, and began to gather wood, though after a moment’s thought he left his pack. Perhaps that was folly, but he had learned to trust his instincts, and his instincts suggested that this stranger would not bring him to harm.

They sat on either side of the flickering flames. His companion sat quietly, nearly perfectly still, and Aragorn watched him closely, trying to discern something of this mysterious Elf. Everything he noticed was only more strange, though. There was no joy mingled with solemnity to be found in this Elf’s face. A powerful sense of regality, of nobility, seemed to radiate from him, and yet…

“Are you one of the High Elves?” Aragorn asked, finally, nearly blurted, and at the sharp look he suddenly received was almost ashamed of himself.

“You have a good eye,” the stranger said after a moment. “Yes. I am. You know your histories well, then?” He sounded…amused was not the right word. Wry, perhaps, with something of bitterness around its edges.

“I was taught my lore.” He had loved the old stories. Pestered Elrond for the telling, tagged at the heels of other Elf Princes hoping to witness some great feat of power. “And I have some familiarity with Elves.”

The Elf looked faintly surprised. “Have you? I had thought the Dúnedain had fallen out of dealings with the Eldar, by and large – or perhaps the Eldar out of dealings with the Dúnedain. It is not so?”

“I was raised as one of Elrond’s house,” Aragorn said, after a moment’s pause. “At Imladris,” and
thought he caught a flicker of something for a moment on those melancholy features, like pride or pain.

“Then no doubt you have been raised well.”

Aragorn sat up, slightly. “Do you call that haven your home?”

“No.” It was said almost flatly, with a tone that flatly cut off any further conversation on the subject. “I have never crossed the borders of Rivendell. Nor do I intend to.”

“Why not?” Aragorn was not able to stop himself from asking. “Elrond welcomes all free peoples to his house. I am sure he would be glad to give an exile rest, and whatever your reason for wandering surely it is not so dire as to insist that you—”

“No.” This time, he said the word quietly, gently, but still full of grim finality. Aragorn frowned but bit back the questions he wanted to ask, staring into the flames instead. He was tempted to wonder, to speculate, but all the thoughts he had only seemed wholly implausible. Perhaps some pilgrimage, he thought, or a self-imposed exile of grief, but he would have heard of such a thing, surely.

Unless perhaps whatever had happened had happened so long ago that even at Imladris, none remembered, or thought to tell a curious boy.

The silence between them stretched out. After a time, Aragorn opened his mouth, intending to apologize, but the strange Elf spoke first. “My apologies. It is only natural that you would be curious, have questions…as I said, I am not the best of company.”

“Nor the worst,” Aragorn said quickly, “and by far the best I have seen in these wilds yet.”

His mouth quirked, but again it lacked any real amusement. “That is fair enough.” He leaned back, away from the fire, casting his regal features in shadow. “It has been some time since last I spoke to another – though it is so for you as well, I suppose.” He seemed thoughtful, pausing for a moment. “It is…a great service you do your lands. To protect them, unseen and unthanked.”

“It is not a duty I resent,” Aragorn said, lifting his chin with some pride. “Gladly I would live unknown and die unmourned, if it kept them safe from what would prey on them.” The quiet laugh seemed at odds, and Aragorn did not quite bristle, even if it was his first instinct. “What amuses you?” he asked, not quite sharply. Pale grey eyes lifted and watched him, lit by the flames.

“You only remind me of someone I once knew. He would be proud, I think, to see what came of his line.” He did not sound so amused, though, by the time he finished speaking, a weight touching his voice. Aragorn blinked.

“You knew one of my forefathers?”

“I did,” the strange Elf said. “Some time before yourself, I daresay.” His eyes cast downward again, and he fell silent. Aragorn had that strange sensation again, of youngness, more powerful than with Elrond. Glorfindel, perhaps, came near, but this was different, this sense that he was glimpsing something – not quite of Middle-Earth, perhaps.

Aragorn summoned the voice to speak with only a bit of effort. “Your music was exquisite. Even in Imladris…I do not know that I have heard the like.”

“It is my solace and my company.” The words were oddly matter-of-fact, though he followed them, almost wryly, with, “and I have had some time to practice.” Aragorn shifted, feeling suddenly uneasy. The strange Elf was still again, his eyes moving from Aragorn to stare into some
distance, and Aragorn was suddenly reluctant to break the silence.

To his gratitude, the Elf broke it first. “You are well mannered, to so tolerate my wandering mind. Of what would you speak?”

Aragorn hesitated for a moment. “I have many questions,” he said finally, carefully, “but I do not wish to pry, or seem impolite.”

“In such a place as this, what cause is there to hew to formality?” The Elf shrugged, a curious gesture he would not have expected to see from one so – regal seeming. “I am aware of the curiosity I must seem to you.”

All the questions he could think of boiled up in him; *who are you, what is your name, why are you in exile.* They all petered away, though, and finally he said simply, “Would you sing me a story?”

Slender eyebrows arched. “A story? Which?”

A notion struck him, and Aragorn burst out almost at once with, “The tale of Beren and Lúthien.” Something flashed across the stranger’s face, sudden and swift and startling, and Aragorn almost jerked back, half reaching for his sword – but then it was gone.

“Ah, yes,” he said, “you would ask for that one. Folk will tell you you are very like to him, you know. Beren come again. A great hero.” His gaze turned away. “No. I do not think I will tell that one.”

“Why?” Aragorn asked, and then felt horribly impertinent. His lips quirked, though, in a very slender (still mirthless) smile.

“Portions of that tale, the night is too dark to tell, and I would not sing it in half and leave it unfinished.” He shifted, slightly. “Your fire is dying. Let me-” He reached for a stick and prodded the fire, and the lowering flames leaped up again. The Elf, Aragorn thought, almost seemed to flinch, and cast the stick away. In the motion Aragorn caught a glimpse of his palms, just for a moment, hideously marred by ancient burn scars, and hissed a breath through his teeth. “Your hands-”

The stranger glanced at them as though surprised. “Ah, yes. An old injury.” A moment later they were hidden from sight again. “It no longer hurts me.”

Something was coming together in Aragorn’s thoughts. Slowly, though, tentatively. Impossibly.

“I think I must pass on,” his companion said, after a few moments of silence.

Aragorn startled, sitting up straighter. “-pass on? It is dark, you cannot think…” He trailed off at a look, not even scolding or chiding. Just a look, that made him feel almost absurd for objecting.

“I am not helpless, Dúnedain.” He said it almost gently, so any sting was removed from it. “I wish you well. May you journey safely, and live to fulfill your promise.” He wanted to ask. He wanted so sorely to ask and knew that he could not.

The Elf hefted his pack, standing in one graceful motion. “Wait,” Aragorn blurted out, and he paused.

*Are you…?*

“Have you…do you speak to the other Rangers?”
He looked faintly startled at the question. “No,” he said, after a moment. “I generally do not. They will not know me, should you ask them.”

*I know you,* Aragorn thought, *or perhaps* – but he didn’t dare. “Why speak to me, then?” he asked, instead.

A long silence. The Elf regarded him with pale eyes, bright and deep and full of sorrow. “You have the look of one I once knew,” said the Elf, finally, and then turned and vanished out of the circle of firelight, back into the wild.

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