More Than Gold

by Megpie71

Summary

Chance friendships have a value all their own.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

It had been a foolish action from Pippin, as usual, which had begun it all. Of course, walking blindly into a bee-swarm while gathering firewood will harm anyone, especially a young hobbit. In the course of the following hour, while Strider worked to remove all the stings and reduce the swelling, the question came up: "Where did you learn your herbcraft, Strider?"

The memory brought a brief smile to the lips of a man who usually appeared serious and grim. "I learned it of a woman of Bree, many years ago", he replied. The smile faded, to be replaced by a faint look of pain and he would speak no more of the matter. But he remembered...

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It had been shortly after Gandalf had first set him to watching the borders of the Shire that he had heard of the herbwoman of Bree and thought it prudent to learn some of her craft. After all, if he were known to be gifted with herblore, he could hide his own innate abilities beneath the shield of herbcraft. So he had made his way to The Prancing Pony and enquired of Barliman Butterbur the direction and name of the herbwoman. Armed with this information, he went in search of her cottage.

The cottage stood a short way outside the village walls, almost under the outskirts of the wood. Old and slightly tumbledown, it bore the marks of recent repairs. The garden was small but tidy, and there he saw many of the healing plants he knew from his childhood in Rivendell and his journeys elsewhere, including a few plants of athelas. He walked the path to the door and knocked, but the knock was not answered. He knocked again and as he did so heard a sound from the forest behind the house. He knocked a third time, hoping for answer, but received none. It appeared that the herbwoman was not at home to visitors.
He turned to leave and as he did so heard again the faint noise from the forest behind the house. A quick smile - so, she thought she could evade her visitors by hiding in the woods, did she? Well, not this one! He walked down the path and left the environs of her cottage, making sure that he was seen to be heading in the direction of the town for as long as the cottage was in view. However, as soon as the path to her door rounded a corner, he had stepped off the path and made his way silently and carefully through the wood, heading for the back of her house. He trod carefully, making not the slightest noise and was rewarded for his care by his first glimpse of the herbwoman. Short for a human, stocky, and with curling red hair, she was bending down, playing with a large yellow dog which circled her legs, barking and yelping. This stopped when the dog suddenly growled and stiffened, likely scenting him hiding in the trees.

Quickly she stood, pushing her hair away from her face. A pair of large brown eyes and a snub nose were visible, as she scanned the woods, searching for the intruder.

"Come out!" she called. "I know you're out there. Come out and show yourself, or I'll set the dog to looking for you!".

He knew he could not hide from the dog - it would scent him in no time. Slowly, holding his hands up and away from his weapons, he stepped forward into the clearing.

"I mean no harm. I merely wish to meet with the herbwoman Breelindir".

She looked him over, calculating and calm. "You've the look of a ranger. You wish to meet with Breelindir, eh? Well, you've found her. State your business."

He smiled, trying to assess which words to use to win her confidence. "Aye, a Ranger of the North. I would learn herbcraft, if you would teach it."

"Would you, then? And, being a Ranger of the North, you've nobody better to learn it of than a village herbwoman of Bree? You're jesting, or you're wasting my time for some other reason. Why should I teach you?"

He looked at her. She stared back at him, stolidly, appraising, from under black brows. Apparently she agreed with what she saw, for then she turned to the dog, looking down at it.

"Well, and what do you think?" she asked it.

The dog stepped forward, cautiously, eyeing him. He put forth his hand, that the dog might scent him better, and get to know him, while looking away from the animal, so as not to challenge it. He noted that as he did this, her eyes followed him approvingly. The dog came forward, and cautiously sniffed at his hand, then licked his fingertips. He reached down, and stroked the dog along the back, carefully, then reached up to scratch behind the ears of the animal as the dog wagged its tail, and panted, enjoying the scratch. The herbwoman watched, smiling, as he did this.

"It's decided then", she said abruptly. "Anyone who can charm that dog deserves a part of my time, at least. Come inside, I'll give you some tea, and we can talk."

He followed her into the cottage, where she gestured to him to sit down at the broad table which occupied the centre of the kitchen. After a brief time fussing with the kettle and getting the teapot ready, she poured two cups of tea. She then took a seat opposite him.

"Right then, ranger, we'll start at the beginning then. What's your name?"

He hesitated. "I prefer to keep my true name hidden, but I have many names."
She gave him a shrewd look. "One with many names, eh? Well, I suppose a long, lanky fellow like you needs a few to keep him warm of nights. I'll use the name Barliman gave me for you - Strider. Now, suppose we come to the truth here - what is it you want of me?"

"I meant what I said before. I would learn herblore of you, if you would teach it to me."

Her eyes grew suspicious and dark. "And I meant what I said before: if you're looking for someone to teach you herbs, why are you looking to a woman of Bree to do it? Are there no herbalists in the North any more?"

The dog at the fireside started to growl, possibly alerted by the stiffening of her body. He thought quickly. While he was in no danger from her dog and could easily defend himself from attack, he did not wish to draw attention to himself by causing a ruckus here.

"Nay, there are herbalists aplenty in the North. I am assigned to the lands near Bree, to watch and guard. I would learn what herbs are useful in this land."

Infinitesimally she relaxed, as did the dog, mimicking her. A suitable answer then. But would she agree to teach? She looked at him appraisingly, over the rim of her cup.

"I suspect there's more to your story than you're telling, but 'let every man keep his secrets' my ma used to say." She paused, considering the matter, then apparently came to a decision.

"I'll teach you - and what's more, should anyone question why you're here, let them know that you've been sent to learn local herbs from me. I'll back you up in that one, and it'll stop those as shouldn't know from wondering why there's a Ranger of the North down in a place like Bree. Otherwise, the gossips will have a field day, and news of your coming will get where it shouldn't, no doubt."

He nodded, smiling, surprised at the suddenness of her acceptance and at the shrewdness and generosity of her response. "Thank you."

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The weeks passed, and a partnership of teacher and student ripened to a friendship of surprising closeness. He learned much of her history, starting with the fact that she was love-begot and that though she knew who her father was, she had never met him.

"He's related to one of the hobbit families hereabouts, through a great-grandfather on his father's side. Apparently great-great-grandad had a real fancy for the bigger women, which was something of a scandal at the time. Anyway, da and ma were courting while they were younger, right up until the point where da's father told him that he'd arranged a marriage with the innkeeper's daughter at Upper Ditchling. Well, off he scarpered, to become the innkeeper's son-in-law there, being rather fond of his ale, and never thought of ma. That changed soon enough, when they realised that her belly was swollen and that he was the one responsible. To do him justice, when he learned he told ma that he'd send her something each month to help care for me and to do him truth, he did. 'Tis how I got the money together to buy the cottage here.

"Ma raised me, until she died one year of a fever. Then I got mostly looked after by old Missus Butterbur, who took me in and taught me my letters. I worked for a while as the chambermaid at the Pony and I got a living of sorts. Missus Butterbur taught me a lot about herbs and when she realised I was interested in learning the herblore, well, she asked all the guests at the inn each day whether they could teach me any of it. As time rolled by, I learned bits and pieces and slowly I gained enough knowledge to learn how to heal minor ills.

"When that happened, I knew I could make a living out of this. I scraped together all my coin, and
bought this little cottage. It was cheap, because it's outside the town walls, and on the edge of the woods, but I like it for just those reasons. Far enough from the sneers of those as think that it's my fault who my parents were, for one thing. Missus Butterbur, well, she gave me the dog, because she said I'd need protection, living in a place like this on my own and she got one of her boys to go as far as Tharbad, to buy a book on herbal lore for me. Since then, whenever I've enough coin, I see what the peddlers have available."

She fell silent, staring into the fire, apparently lost in thought and memory. He sat silent, reflecting, letting her be with her memories. Much of what she had told him brought forth echoes of his own childhood and the loneliness he had sometimes felt then. A child in a world of adults (for such even the youngest of the elves had appeared to him) is often lonely and seeking company. Something in his heart reached out to her, to her need of company. But, eventually, she seemed to shake herself, coming back to the present as she always did. The past had its grasp on her, but the here-and-now had a stronger grip. She turned back to the herbal she had open, and the small plant on the table, and the next lesson in herblore began.

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So the months passed, around the regular interruptions caused by his patrols of the Shire. He thought she guessed his destination, though she never spoke of it. He soon realised that she was in close contact with Barliman Butterbur and, through him and her patients, with the town rumour mill; also that she was shrewd enough to cull out the grains of truth from any rumour. He grew into the habit of visiting her house before entering Bree, to become acquainted with the latest gossip. Of course, it was also good to come to the house of a friend, to find that welcoming light in the window and be sure of a meal and even an occasional bed for the night, if there were no patients in the sickroom. Normally a laconic and solitary man, he discovered within himself a hunger for talk and company. It was good to know that there was a friend within reach, who could share both the talk, and the silence.

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Then there came the day when he was approaching her home, after one of his patrols of the Shire. His thoughts were elsewhere, thus he was almost unaware of the situation until he had nearly walked into it. It was the yelping of the dog which brought his attention back to the present, followed shortly afterwards by the sound of her voice, shrieking curses and imprecations. Once again, he approached the rear of the house silently. This time, instead of the woman and the dog playing together in the clearing, there were a pair of ill-featured and ragged men holding the woman by her arms, sniggering as a third kicked the dog hard. After a final kick at the dog, the third man turned to the woman, roughly fondling her breasts. She struggled, and kicked, and finally spat in the man's face, which prompted the man to slap her across the face, leaving a large mark in the shape of a palm on her cheek.

This was enough for Strider. As the two men holding her arms tightened their grip and the third man loosened his belt, the ranger drew an arrow from his quiver and launched it at the third man. The man fell, an arrow in his throat and the pair holding Breelindir's arms let her go, reaching for their knives. A second arrow and another was down. The final one of the thieves grabbed hold of the woman, putting his knife to her throat, using her as a shield.

"Come out! Come out!, or the woman dies!"

In the arms of the thief, the woman struggled, but the thief tightened his grip and pushed the blade closer to her throat. The point drew a thin trickle of blood. In the shadows, the ranger saw her throat work, saw her eyes widen with fear, pain and shock.

One last shot would do it. But could he make the shot and kill the thief without putting her life at risk? He hesitated, waiting to see whether he could get a clearer shot.
Too long. The woman, struggling to get free, stamped hard on the toe of the thief. Hard enough, indeed, that a cracking sound could be heard from beneath her heel. The thief screamed in pain and drew his knife hard across the woman's throat. The blood gushed over his hand, as her body collapsed forward and the ranger erupted out of the trees, sword in hand, at the same time. The thief barely had time to turn his head before it was separated from his body.

Strider rushed to the body of the woman. Blood was still gushing and he could see that life would not last long. He could not endure that she should die at the hands of a ruffian and a thief, not when he had the wit and skill to save her. Summoning forth his greatest ability, he gently laid his hands on the wound. Slowly the blood flow stopped and the edges of the wound drew together. As the bloodflow ceased, he gathered her up and carried her within the cottage and gently laid her down upon her bed. There he waited, as the darkness fell and the night rolled in.

When he was satisfied that it was dark enough that none would see him, he crept out to the herb garden and carefully harvested a few leaves of athelas. Then, going around to the back of the house, he let in the dog, who was still whimpering with pain. The dog waited quiet under his hands, as he ascertained that the animal had only a broken rib, probably from the kicking. He gave it a draught of some willow bark in water to ease its pain. Then he led the dog up to her room and brought with him the athelas leaves and a bowl of hot water. The familiar scent of athelas filled the room with its memories of springtime. As the dog licked at one of her hands, he held the other in both of his own and called her back. After a few minutes, her eyes fluttered, and opened.

"Oh, it is you. I thought it was another of those bastards, come to take me instead." Her voice quickened and tightened with fear. The fear could be seen clearly in her eyes. "Don't let them near me, please don't let them near me!"

He sat down beside her on the bed and took her hands in his.

"They are gone, and they shall not be returning. Rest now, you lost much blood."

She sighed and turned toward him, cuddling up to him.

"Yes, I think I shall rest. I'll rest easier, knowing you're here, anyway. Thank you."

Her breathing slowed and deepened into the rhythms of sleep. Throughout the night he watched by her side, for she grew restless if he moved from it and the dark dreams of fear, dread and loneliness seemed to seize her. His hand on hers seemed to chase the dreams away and she slept easier. As the dawn broke through the small window of her bedchamber, his own weariness overtook him and he dozed.

He awoke at mid-morning to find her gone from the bed and standing before the glass, staring at the scabbed line of her wound. She seemed to notice him awakening and turned to face him, her eyes holding a combination of wonder and suspicion.

"Don't tell me you healed this with herbcraft, for I know what herbcraft can do and healing a death-wound is not part of it. What are you, and who are you, Strider, that you can call me back from the very gates of death itself?"

He bowed his head. Conflicting fears raged within him. On the one hand, he knew her to be trustworthy. On the other, he knew the value of a secret and knew also that the more who knew his true lineage and birth, the less safe he would be. Trust warred with fear and he hesitated.

"There have been tales from the north of a race of men, of the blood of the kings of old. Men whose spans were long, men whose hands held much power", she commented. "I've long suspected that the rangers of the North were those who were spoken of in those tales. Now there
are other rumours, tales from the south and east, which tell of the king being able to heal with his hands alone... Am I on the right path, Strider?"

He looked at her sharply. She gave a small huff of laughter.

"One of the things that the peddlers bargain for round here is knowledge and rumour. Often there are questions coming from the peddlers. Tales of wealth that could be earned by reporting the whereabouts of the heir of the last King. Tales of the signs by which he could be told. I could've been a wealthy woman and far away long since, had I the desire to be."

His eyes widened with surprise. She smiled at him.

"Friendship to me is worth more than gold. It's rarer and harder to find. Gold is a mere trinket, beside the life of a friend."

He hung his head, ashamed that he had doubted her. She came over to him and knelt before him, taking his hands in hers.

"What I've done is very little. I've merely kept my silence on matters that don't concern me, which has always been my practice. What you've done is very great, and I thank you for it. Those bandits would have had their way with me and gone, had you not been there to stop them. I would have died alone and friendless, with none to mourn me. Your actions saved me from pain, rape and even death."

She stood and kissed him upon the forehead, then walked to the window and stood by it, looking out.

"I've suspected for a while now, although I wasn't certain until just now. Barliman Butterbur has a favourite customer, a tall man named Gandalf. On first hearing of the fact that you were studying with me, this Gandalf came to visit one day. It suited his purpose to answer my questions and to confirm some of my suspicions, although he bade me be silent on this matter to all others, including yourself. But it was he who gave me some of the books you learned from. He has been a regular visitor also, when you are off a-patrolling.

She turned to face him and he could see on her face the faint signs of loneliness and isolation that had already made their mark there. He realised he had never noticed them before.

"Strider, before you came to my house my only real friend was my dog. Few of the people of Bree will have anything to do with me, except when they are hurt or sick. They fear the forest. Because I live near it, they fear me also. Now, I have two more friends, whose visits brighten my days and make me feel alive again, rather than merely existing. For that also I thank you."

He rose, went to stand beside her and embraced her, holding her close. She returned his embrace and held him for a moment, then broke away.

Nothing was said of that moment at any other time in their friendship, but he remained by her side for the next few days, until she had the strength again to pursue her daily round of chores.

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He learned all she had to teach and then learned with her from the books that Gandalf supplied. There were now occasional meetings of the three of them at her small cottage, sharing talk and conversation. She had a hunger for knowledge of the outside world, for the doings of folk outside Bree, and she would generally listen rather than talk. At times he would glance across at her and he believed he could almost see her sharp mind putting together bits and pieces of information. Sometimes, she would catch him watching and would pull faces, making him laugh. This became something of a joke between the two of them, much to Gandalf's amusement.
Many seasons of friendship later, there came the day when he returned to the town of Bree to find her cottage empty and no sign of her presence. He searched for her, but found no trace. On going to The Prancing Pony, he was greeted by Butterbur and by Gandalf, who between them told him that she had been killed by a wild boar in the wood while gathering herbs there. It had happened shortly after his last visit. Her books they gave to him, saying that she would have wished him to have them.

Later, in the privacy of his room, he wept for her and for a friendship lost, that was worth more than gold.

End Notes

1) Breelindir's name should be pronounced with the stress on the first syllable, and the second half of the name with the soft burr of the Shirefolk. The name should sound almost like "Bree-lander", which is, of course, what she is.
2) The characters of Pippin, Strider, Gandalf, and Barliman Butterbur are all the work of J R R Tolkien. Breelindir is my own invention, as is the Missus Butterbur, although both are extrapolations of the world of the three books which comprise Lord of the Rings.
3) This started off intending to be Yet Another piece of Aragorn fanfic, with the two main protagonists getting involved in something hot & heavy as a matter of course. However, it turned out that Breelindir wasn't interested in sex, but rather in friendship. In deference to her wishes, that's how it turned out.
4) This winds up with the story being set after Aragorn has become betrothed to Arwen, and prior to Bilbo's birthday feast - or in other words, between 2980 and 3001. The initial incident occurs either on the initial quest to Rivendell, or the further journeying of the fellowship, after Moria.
5) I envision the dog as being either a labrador-like, or labrador-cross type of dog. However, it would have been trained as a guard dog, and would probably be ferocious. It's probably the same breed as Farmer Maggot's dogs Grip, Fang and Wolf.
6) I have Aragorn using arrows. This is probably more from the movie-verse than from the book-verse, although I have no doubt that a Ranger is probably skilled with either.

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