Culture



Robert Aramayo as Elrond, who fears that as long as the rings of power exist at large, they remain within grasp of the evil Sauron (Prime Video/Ross Ferguson)



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Early in the second season of "The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power," we find a distraught Elrond (Robert Aramayo) seeking wisdom from the ancient elf Círdan the Shipwright (Ben Daniels). Though the two speak in a serene location along the edge of the water amid the pleasant sounds of chirping birds and lapping waves, their topic is grave: Rings of power have been let loose upon Middle Earth, and with them, the potential for great evil.

These rings, the Elves explain, exert power over every form of life. The stakes couldn't be higher—and the choices our heroes make in subsequent episodes will be determinative of the future of all Middle Earth.

"In Sauron's hands, [the rings] could work evil beyond reckoning," Elrond insists. His worries may seem premature; the rings presently rest in the hands of Elves — one of them Elrond's own dear friend Galadriel (Morfydd Clark). And yet, Elrond knows that so long as the rings remain at large, they remain within Sauron's grasp.

But Círdan appears content and tries to focus Elrond's attention on what is yet possible.

"You are wise to fear this power," he says. "But do not let that fear blind you to the ways it could be used for good. For it is not your enemy that bears these rings, but your most trusted friend. If you believe they have strayed, do not abandon them but rather open your eyes and guide them before the darkness spreads across Middle Earth and blinds us all."

For those of us familiar with J.R.R. Tolkien's seminal work, who know how this story necessarily ends, Círdan's words seem at best naive. The rings of power — and *one* ring in particular — will wreak havoc across Middle Earth.

And yet, I'm enchanted by this exchange of dialogue. The scene encapsulates the spiritual struggle of the second season of "Rings of Power": How can raw power and possibility be bent toward the good? Is such a feat even possible when evil is so rampant in the world — and so seductive?

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Elsewhere in Middle Earth wanders an unlikely duo: the tall, bearded, some might even say wizardly, man known simply as the Stranger and the decidedly not tall, not magical Harfoot — what this era in Lord of the Rings storytelling might call a Hobbit — known as Nori Brandyfoot.

The Season One finale saw the Stranger wield a considerable amount of magic, banishing forces of darkness to realms unknown. But the burgeoning power in the tall, bearded man came with no instructions, and so the Stranger and the Harfoot have set out looking for answers.

At first glance, this plot point may seem far removed from the more pressing ring-shaped matters plaguing Elrond, but in truth, the Stranger and the rings are two of a kind. Both contain power and potential; both can work great feats of good or evil. And both, importantly, are at this point in the story malleable.

The Stranger is a newcomer to Middle Earth — to life itself, it seems — and is being formed by the humble Harfoots in the same way Sauron wishes to pour his wicked intents into the newly minted rings.

And so, Círdan's advice to Elrond could as well have been given to Nori. Daniel Weyman, tasked with bringing the Stranger to life, knows it.

"Playing the Stranger has been to thread that tightrope of what we think of as a human reality: the learning of friendship, of important relationships, of teachings and experiences to become better versions of ourselves," Weyman told NCR.

This posture, says Weyman, stands "against the other side, which is the seduction of power, the seduction of the possibility of control, and doing things that might make us feel good, but without any kind of real conception of how it's making other people feel."

Markella Kavenagh, who plays Nori, adds: "The rings also grant these characters a feeling of control and power over a certain outcome, a certain destiny, a certain purpose."

In an interview with NCR, Kavenagh expressed that, for her, it's about *how* characters respond to the inevitable hardships they face — and they face many, particularly at the outset of this second season. "Nori is someone who is so curious and inquisitive about the unknown and just really wants to be there for those who

are struggling."



Markella Kavenagh, left, and Daniel Weyman speak on a panel for "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power" during Comic-Con International on July 22, 2022, in San Diego. (AP/Invision/Richard Shotwell)

Being present to someone who is struggling, Kavenagh notes, was how Nori's relationship with the Stranger began. "The Harfoots," Weyman explains, "are actually [the Stranger's] touchstone as to what is real."

Again and again they pull him back to the light, to his truest self, simply by being in relationship, by being his constant companions. As a result, the Stranger weighs his decisions — many of which will ultimately impact the fate of all Middle Earth — through the lens of these vulnerable yet resilient Harfoots.

Two distinct quests, yet one singular story — and an essential question for all of us on our spiritual journeys: How do we walk our own tightropes, ushering goodness out of a world so often clouded in shadow?

The dual potential for good and for evil are bound up within all things. It is our task to nurture the flame of one while being ever mindful of the seductive powers of the other. But also — and importantly — not to allow the possibility of both to paralyze us in our life's journey, a journey we necessarily make in the company of others, others who call out of us our best selves.

The rings are "beautiful to look at," Weyman reminds us. "They're expertly crafted in that somebody has poured a huge amount of their personal creative time and effort into these things. And yet, they also have power that can seduce and turn us."

Elrond asks Círdan, "What is beauty when it is born in part of evil?"

"No less beautiful," is Círdan's reply. "Judge the work and leave judgment concerning those who wrought it to the judge who sees all things." He goes on: "It is called humility."

I wonder if humility, together with relationship, is not the key to unraveling the spiritual struggle in this season of "Rings of Power." It's certainly a method that would take Sauron by surprise.

Viewers who enjoyed the first season of "Rings of Power" will be pleased to find that the second only builds in excitement, depth of character and immersion in the world of Tolkien's many works. It's a testament to the writers, actors, showrunners and crew members that after each episode, I ran straight to my copies of *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* to refresh and deepen my own experience of the story.

Good storytelling makes a believable world out of nothing but words and wonder. It points that so-called fiction straight at our own weary souls, reminding us to hope. There has always been great spiritual resonance in *The Lord of the Rings*. Season Two of "Rings of Power" continues that legacy.

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