

# The Awakening

by Mary Jean Holmes  
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*"...I fell asleep waiting for you, Sam, you sleepyhead. I was awake early this morning..."*

*Frodo, in "The Field of Cormallen"  
The Return of the King, Chapter IV*

For what seemed in his mind to be countless ages, Frodo wandered on unending paths of shadow, at one moment black and searing hot with acrid smoke and the Impenetrable Darkness, the next an enveloping cloud of icy mist and murmuring silence. In the fogs, he imagined he could see shifting shapes, mysterious yet compelling, beckoning him to the Sleep that never ends with eerie songs that numbed both flesh and heart with bitter cold: sharp-tipped fingers that moved as blades of living ice clutched at him, seeking to catch hold and draw him into their grasp. In the smokes, he saw forms of blackness and tongues of fire, bellowing in voices of awful ruin which summoned him to meet his just reward in their flaming embrace. They shook the world all around in a thunder of everlasting doom. He swayed upon this brink for age upon age, pulled first in one direction then the other, himself but the smallest of shadows, a pawn unable to choose the better oblivion: the raging fire or the frigid sleep.

Yet when he was about to surrender himself to whichever Fate would have him -- no longer caring what particular end would be his, so long as it was at last an end -- he heard a voice: a single voice, soft, yet clear as the chime of pure water flowing through flawless crystal. It spoke his name only once -- but once was enough. He resisted the sirens and blaring trumpets of death, and listened.

"The Shadow has passed, my friend," said The Voice, gently, itself both a caress and a smile without physical form, yet having more substance than objects one could touch and feel. "Fear nothing! You have done what you set out to do, and I promise no harm will ever again touch you. Sleep, now, and dream of fairer days yet to be!"

And as he attended to The Voice, it appeared to Frodo that a great Wind came from the West. On his one hand, it drove away the sulphurous fumes and quenched the hellfires, while on the other, it stirred the bone-chilling mists and dispelled them, until he could see a light shining faintly but surely through the lingering vapors, the gleam of the waxing dawn that would soon burn away the fog and bring a pleasant morning. And it also seemed to him, only for a splintered instant, that The Voice belonged to the Sun.

"How absurd!" he thought, even as he remembered the old hobbit tune about the Man in the Moon which he had sung eons ago in Bree. The memory began to drift into unpleasantness, but it was only the vaguest shadow of disturbance, quickly wafted away before the Western Wind. He smiled to himself, let the breeze extinguish the fire's wrath and erase all distress, while the warmth of the growing sunshine wrapped itself about him and drove away the cold mist. Feeling utterly safe and protected in the sun's embrace, he slept in true peace for the first time in many months.

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Frodo still dreamed in his long slumber, but now of happier things: the Shire, his home under the Hill, good meals, the sound of laughter, the smell of flowers in the Spring, music heard on a fine summer evening, refreshing rains on a hot afternoon, the colours of autumn leaves, pleasant hours spent with dear friends. On occasion, the images would take a more sombre turn: sunshine clouded with raging thunderstorms, laughter turned untimely to tears, beautiful things ruined by hands of hatred, the sorrow of loved ones lost forever. But before the dreams could darken to terror, The Voice, always near, would return, speak a soft word or two, and peace would again embrace him.

At last, the dreams ended, and things less ethereal came to Frodo's awakening mind and senses: the mild warmth of the early morning sun on his face; the stroke of a light wind against his cheek and in his hair, like the gentle touch of his mother, barely remembered from childhood; the scent of growing things gladly awakening in the flush of springtime; the sound of rustling young leaves, birdsong, distant voices, far-off flowing water; and the flicker of light and shadow upon his closed eyes.

For a long while, it was all Frodo could have wished just to stay as he was and enjoy it. He could let his fancy believe that he was at home, back in the Shire on a fine April morning, napping in his own bower after a good breakfast, while down the Row, the Gaffer and old Rory puffed on their pipes and chattered about unimportant matters. He could smell the scent of pipeweed smoke on the air mingled with the fragrance of apple blossoms, and could almost allow himself to believe that he had never heard of the Ring, and had not suffered a long and hard quest only to stumble and fall at its end.

But the daydream persisted only briefly; muscles and limbs too long kept still demanded movement. Frodo stretched and, unthinking, flexed his fingers against the soft blanket under which he lay. He felt the horrible stiffness in his right hand, and knew its cause. He grimaced in shame at the memory of the wound, and how it had come to be.

He came perilously close to leaping out of his skin when The Voice, quite nearby and falling on plain ears rather than whispering in his thoughts, asked quietly, "Are you still in pain, Frodo? I can summon the healers, if you are."

He knew that Voice, beyond doubt and beyond hope. The hobbit's eyes flew open; he sat up. He had been completely unaware that anyone was with him, or even that he was actually alive and not still walking in some strange dream-world of the dead. That possibility remained foremost in his thoughts as he sat up and saw who was seated cross-legged on the ground bedside his camp-bed, watching him intently with bright dark eyes under bushy brows: Gandalf, clothed all in white garments that glowed in the twinkling dance of leaf-filtered sunlight, his pipe just now set aside as Frodo wakened. His long beard and hair stirred in the spring-scented breezes like fine streams of drifting snow glittering in the sun.

Frodo's lips formed the wizard's name, but no sound fell from them; he could scarcely catch a breath, so great was his surprise. It took long moments for the startled hobbit to find his voice, and longer still for him

to make what he saw reckon with what he had known, or thought he had known. The memory of Moria and the Bridge and the Balrog remained all too vivid in his mind and heart, along with the piercing grief that had never quite left him through the long, hard days since the remaining Company had fled the darkness of Khazad-dûm.

He reached out one hand toward the wizard, tentatively, afraid to discover that this was an illusion which would vanish beneath his touch like a reflection in a still pool. But his fingers made contact with solid flesh under real cloth; the flesh was warm, and the stuff of Gandalf's white robe as soft as the first sigh of spring.

"Am I alive, or dead?" he asked at length in the barest whisper, too astonished to say more, or more loudly. He trembled in anticipation of what would prove to be either great joy or great sadness: joy in finding his friend and mentor alive, or sadness in knowing that he had joined him in death, and left all his other friends behind.

But the intensity of the wizard's concern turned swiftly to a smile, and kindled Frodo's joy in return. "Quite alive, I assure you, my friend," Gandalf replied merrily, laughter threading his long-missed voice like strands of shining silver. "And before you ask, I am alive, too, and so is Sam." He gestured to a second camp bed set in the grove, only several feet distant from Frodo's pallet. On it, Sam sprawled contentedly beneath a tangle of sleep-twisted covers. "You were saved from Orodruin's anger by Gwaihir and his people, but barely in the nick of time, as they say. The heat and smoke and ash had almost overwhelmed you both. For days, even after the worst of your hurts were tended, we feared we might yet lose you, Frodo -- for when the Ring perished, it not only drew Sauron into oblivion, it threatened to draw you down as well. Perhaps because you were the one who had brought it to its destruction, perhaps because you were so close, and felt the Dark Lord's dying rage, attempting to pull all he could with him into the abyss -- who can say? But you resisted, and have rested, and are indeed very much alive."

"Resisted," Frodo acknowledged, suddenly aware of many things, "but not without help. A voice in my mind kept calling me back, and wouldn't let me go. For a while, I thought it was the sun speaking to me, though I knew it wasn't possible. Still, it made me feel very safe and protected -- something I've not felt for almost as long as I can remember. It was you, Gandalf, wasn't it?"

The wizard nodded. "After the King had called you back from the brink of death, it became clear that something more than bodily healing would be required to prevent you from slipping away from us. His power is great, and all the more so now that the Shadow has been dispelled; yet for all his ability, he cannot heal a wounded heart, or mend a torn soul. Even I could not have helped you had you not maintained your stubborn resolve to survive. As I have so often said, hobbits are made of some of the sternest fibre in all the universe, and you have indeed showed yourself to be hardier than any other of the Wise would have believed. I admit I had fears that unforeseen betrayal or the uninterpretable turns of Fate might expose you too soon to the Enemy, I never truly doubted your ability to persevere and carry out the Quest, given the chance."

There was such a great weight of trust in the wizard's voice, Frodo suddenly found himself turning away, unable to meet the old man's eyes, or to even look upon his face. His own gaze fell upon his hands -- especially upon the right, which bore a light bandage where his third finger should have been.

"Oh, Gandalf," he sighed at length, a tremor of remorse in his subdued voice as he fully recalled the moment in which that wound had been inflicted, "I *did* try my best, for as long as I could, but I'm afraid that in the end, I failed your trust, after all."

There followed silence, during which Frodo became certain Gandalf would ask him to explain, and he would be constrained to tell the awful truth. Then, quite to the hobbit's amazement, the wizard began to laugh brightly, a gay sound which carried not the least hint of mockery.

"My dearest Frodo!" he exclaimed as he reined his mirth. "Would that even half the people in whom I have placed my trust would fail me so splendidly! Did you think that simply because you could not cast away the Ring yourself, and needed the help of Gollum's greed to complete the Quest, meant that you had failed it? Yes," he said when Frodo's mouth opened in surprise, "I know what happened, every moment of it, from the very instant you fled the dangers in Moria. Your injury alone was enough from which to draw many accurate conclusions, and I haven't accompanied you in the paths of your mind these past ten days without seeing the grim memories which have haunted you.

"Did I not say from the very start that Gollum might yet have some part to play in the fate of the Ring? Simply because you were meant to carry it to the brink of destruction -- with Sam's help, to be sure -- never meant that you were also destined to be the one who would finally bring about its end. None of us ever achieve anything of true worth without help, my most worthy hobbit -- not Sauron, nor I, nor any of the Powers greater than I, save One." The smile which danced across his sharp features was wistfully amused, as one who looks back upon what had seemed at the time a great tragedy, but which, in the clearer vision of hindsight, can now be seen as a most unusually disguised blessing. "One might say, in a peculiar fashion, that my greatest help in opposing Sauron came in the form of the Balrog, since had I not parted from the Company at the time I did, the events which followed might never have occurred, to all our great loss."

Frodo sighed gratefully. "Then that horrible creature didn't kill you, after all."

"Quite the contrary," said Gandalf, ruefully. "The struggle was indeed the end of me, although I am relieved to say the Balrog met his end first. But if I had not died at that moment and been returned as I was when I was, I might not have had the strength to stop the threat of Saruman, much less that of Sauron and his minions. No, even death can be a timely help -- although I do confess I never expected to return once the Balrog took me with him into the abyss. But there are designs in the universe far greater than mine, or Sauron's, and by those designs, I am here once again. So do not worry that you have failed me or yourself, Frodo. You have succeeded more admirably than many had dared to hope, and the Shadow has departed."

Reassured, Frodo looked up again. "I'm very glad to hear it. In my dreams, I was becoming convinced we had failed after all, and Gollum had somehow managed to survive. But I'm relieved to find that he did indeed fall to his death, while you managed to escape it -- or come back from it, though I can't imagine how. I don't believe, Gandalf, that any of us truly understood how much you meant to the Quest, and to us, until we lost you."

The wizard smiled back, eyes twinkling beneath his snowy brows; Frodo just then realized how deeply he had missed that expression. "And I think you, my friend, never realized how much you were capable of accomplishing, until I lost you. Not for a moment have you been away from my thoughts during these past months. At first I feared for you, because I was not able to accompany you to Mordor, but it took only a short time for me to understand that you were far better off without me. Sooner or later, my presence would have drawn Sauron's attention, and thus would have presented a grave danger to the Quest, much more so than Gollum's treachery. And as matters turned out, I was desperately needed elsewhere. You had Sam's staunch support to help you, and that was perhaps better than any aid I could have given you without endangering the end we both hoped to achieve."

Agreement softened Frodo's features as he glanced toward the camp bed not far from his own where Sam lay, still asleep. His sonorous and blithe snores -- which were likely the source of the thunder which had echoed in Frodo's dreams -- brought a smile to his master's lips. "Yes, I could never have done it, without Sam. He is as good and true a companion as anyone could hope to have, and I bless my good fortune in counting him my friend. You're certain he's all right?"

Gandalf nodded. "He was exhausted, of course, as were you, his resources of spirit and body all but spent; and he had a rather nasty bump on his head -- courtesy of Gollum, no doubt -- but that and his other injuries have healed well, with the King's tending. He had you to worry about all through your perilous journey, and that appears to have been more than enough to armor him against the worst effects of the Darkness that touches all who dare to travel within the fences of Mordor. Nor did he have the unimaginable weight of the Ring to bear against the onslaught of Sauron's malice, as you did."

He touched the hobbit's wounded right arm with deepest compassion for what he knew Frodo had suffered while they were apart. "I truly wish *you* need not have been so maimed for this end to be achieved," he said gently, "but all in all, I think we must agree that both our sacrifices were a small price to pay."

"Very small," Frodo concurred, "since in our struggle, Gollum could as easily have pulled me with him into the Cracks of Doom. But--"

He paused, his smile fading as something distracted him. At first, he did not know what it was tickling at the corners of his mind, but it danced on the edges of his awareness like the sunlight peeping in and out as the light wind stirred the leaves on the beech-branches above. For the length of several breaths, he thought that perhaps it was nothing but some play of light and shadow fluttering on the periphery of his sight that had distracted him with some shadow-play able to be seen only through the very corners of his eyes. Then, recalling his last sight of Gollum, he glanced down at his missing finger, at the wizard's own right hand resting lightly on his forearm, and understanding broke upon him like dawn in a clear sky.

"Gandalf," said Frodo in a puzzled voice, Gollum completely forgotten, "what happened to your ring?"

Never in his life had Frodo seen his old friend's snowy brows arch so high with surprise. "I beg your pardon?" said Gandalf calmly, but the hobbit knew quite well that the wizard's reaction had nothing to do with a failure to understand the question, and that the calm was feigned.

"Your ring," Frodo repeated, like a hobbit elder speaking to a child who was trying to avoid something by answering a question with another question. "The one with the fiery red stone you used to wear on your right hand. What happened to it? I hope you didn't lose it, or were forced to give it up because of this dreadful war. It was beautiful, or so I always thought."

For a while, the wizard studied the hobbit, searching for something Frodo could not define. Then, suddenly and merrily, he laughed. "I deserve the scolding, I suppose," said he, "if for no other reason than for presuming that my own humble efforts at secrecy would confound even the eyes of the Ringbearer. You have always been more perceptive than any other of your folk, especially in these quite unhobbitish matters, and the long burden of the Ring as well as the wound of the Morgul-knife sharpened your vision and understanding of the world invisible. It is a gift, I think, that you will never wholly lose, and perhaps one of the few good things ever to come to one as the result of bearing that evil Thing, and suffering the cruel hurts of the Enemy."

"And you, my dearest friend," replied Frodo, smiling in spite of himself, "will never lose *your* unique gift for giving long and disarming answers that have nothing whatsoever to do with the question at hand. Is this a confession, or another of your masterful evasions? I'm sure I didn't imagine the ring."

"You certainly did not," the wizard confirmed, still laughing. "But before I say more, tell me, please, how long ago did you first notice it?"

The hobbit had to think for a short while before he could answer. "A long time ago," he finally said, examining his thoughts to be sure of it. "A few years after Bilbo left, when you visited me in the Shire quite regularly, and long before you told me about my Ring. I presumed you had acquired the ring somewhere in your travels -- perhaps as a gift from the Dwarves, I thought, since Bilbo said they crafted exquisite jewelry, and often gave it as parting gifts. But in Rivendell, after our flight from Weathertop, was when I think I first realized it was more than I had initially presumed. It *is* one of the Three Elven Rings, isn't it?"

Gandalf smiled as he nodded. "Yes, and your perception continues to amaze me, as well as your prudence. Had I known you were aware of it so long ago, I would have warned you to keep the information in strictest confidence, lest the servants of Sauron become aware of something else they should not have known -- and I would have done you an injustice, not trusting you to keep your own counsel. But then, you have always been wise for a hobbit, even if your wisdom, like mine, failed you on occasion."

He moved his hand slightly, and what had been beyond sight suddenly became visible; the veil of obscurity rippled away like the last drops of dew on a windowpane. On the wizard's third finger was a ring of twined and shapely strands of finely-wrought gold, clearly a product of Elven-craft. Like a hand holding aloft a torch, they came together to bear a flawless ruby which caught even the tiniest flicker of light as a small tongue of flame caught and frozen in perfect crystal. "This is Narya, the Ring of Fire, that Celebrimbor wrought before Sauron forged The One, and was entrusted to Círdan long ages ago, for safekeeping. Círdan chose to surrender it to me when I first came to Middle-earth, so that it would not remain idle, and I have guarded it, and made use of it when I could, quietly, ever since."

Frodo's puzzlement settled into fine lines between his eyes; after studying the glittering Ring, he looked up into the wizard's face. "It's even more beautiful than I remembered -- and if its name is more than just a description of its colour, I understand now why you make such magnificent fireworks! But you're not an Elf, Gandalf, and surely, not all your wizardry comes from this Ring alone. Besides, you once told me that any mortal who possesses a Ring of Power will eventually fade -- which you certainly haven't done."

"Quite true, on all accounts. But I think you know I am not a mortal."

For some long moments, Frodo pondered this. "Yes, I suppose I do, and always have," he said at last. "From what we knew of you in the Shire, and things I was told by Aragorn and learned in Rivendell, I knew you were much older than I could even dare imagine -- even older than the Elves, I sometimes thought. But if you aren't an Elf, what are you? And how can you resist fading? Even Bilbo and I have felt it, and we haven't actually worn a Ring for days and years without count."

The old man's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Not without count, I assure you! I remember each and every one of those days, for each one was yet another in the struggle against Sauron. But as to what I am...!"

He shook his head and glanced skyward, the streams of intermittent sunlight gleaming on his hair and face and in his eyes. Frodo noticed then that his friend appeared younger than he had remembered, perhaps because so many of the lines of care etched into his features had, with the downfall of his Enemy, been

replaced by finer and more subtle lines of joy. He could not recall having ever seen the wizard in such merry spirits, completely without a shadow of worry or burden, and he found it infectious, as refreshing as the first welcome day of spring warmth after a long and bitter winter.

At length, Gandalf spoke. "I do not know if I could explain it to you without first giving you several weary days of instructions in matters and histories that hobbits, I'm afraid, have never truly known. It would be sufficient, I think, for me to say that I am probably the only one of my kind you have ever met -- certainly one of the few you might ever have had a chance to see -- and what we are is something that has not resided in Middle-earth for a very long time. Some of us serve the Light, others the Dark -- creatures like Sauron and the Balrogs."

Frodo shuddered in revulsion at the merest thought of such a comparison. "It's hard for me to believe you could possibly have any relation to such evil beings," he said. "I can see no similarity between you."

"You might," said Gandalf, "if you knew us better. But we all have unsavory relations, no matter who or what we are, as the Valar had Morgoth and you hobbits had Sméagol. Five of my people were sent to help in the struggle against the Dark Lord, but we are not of any kindred you know."

For a short while, Frodo studied both the wizard and his words. The sun, creeping ever toward its zenith, fell more brightly upon them as its rays slanted through the tree-limbs at a more favourable angle. Again, the sunlight fell upon Gandalf's white clothing and hair and made them brilliant -- but the light, Frodo perceived, came not entirely from the reflection of the sunshine. There was a glow in the wizard's countenance that had nothing to do with worldly illumination, and Frodo's sharpened sight for things beyond the ordinary saw it as easily as a beacon fire on a moonless night.

The words came to Frodo's lips unbidden, as if a will other than his own had placed them upon his tongue. "You're an AINU," he said, suddenly certain of it, though he did not know what had prompted the answer to well up within him at that precise instant. "A Maia, I should think, though I may be mistaken."

He had never before seen such a look of utter amazement touch his old friend's features, not even when he'd mentioned the wizard's ring; he knew that Gandalf had genuinely not expected his answer. "After all these years of cautioning people never to underestimate hobbits, I should know better than to believe I shall never again find them surprising! And twice in the same hour! My dear Frodo, wherever did you hear of such things? In all my studies of your people and their ways, I have never found anything to indicate they had more than a very dim and distant comprehension of matters outside the confines of Middle-earth. Except for Bilbo, of course, but he has spent many years among the Elves, and they do not hide their learning and wisdom from their friends."

Frodo beamed, pleased to have caught the wizard off-guard for the first time in their acquaintance. "And I have spent many years with Bilbo. Most of his translations from the Elvish were songs and poetry, but there were one or two more profound works he studied and translated. He said they were some of the greatest writings in all Elf-lore, about the making of the world and the beginnings of everything, and he wanted me to read them. I did, when I was young, but it all seemed very distant and remote to me, since the stories were difficult, and there was nothing like them in all of hobbit writing and singing. But I remembered some of what I had read, and as I came to know more of the Elves, I read the tales again, and understood them much better. I hadn't given them much thought over the years, until just now."

"And whatever prompted you to recall them at this particular moment?" asked Gandalf, once more astonished by Frodo's keen perception. "There could have been nothing so specific in the works Bilbo studied,

for the Elves of Middle-earth are no more certain of the origin of wizards than you are. They may speculate, and I believe some have made accurate guesses, but they do not know for a fact, nor do they often chronicle mere speculations in their great writings."

Frodo's smile gentled to one of simple satisfaction. "I'm not sure, but this isn't the first occasion I've had to wonder about you, and why you were here, bothering yourself with such insignificant things as hobbits. When I looked into Lady Galadriel's mirror, I saw a vision of you, alive, though I thought then that it had to be Saruman, since the figure was clothed in white, and I believed you were dead -- yet here you are, almost precisely as I envisioned you! Then later, Sam and I met a captain of Gondor named Faramir in Ithilien, and he told me something you had said to him concerning all your different names. One of them, he said, was your name 'in the West that is forgotten.' That puzzled me, right from the start, though I had neither the time nor strength to think on it, then, or all the while we were in Mordor. But when I saw your Ring, something in my head started to put together all the flotsam and jetsam, and up popped the only logical solution to the puzzle." He chuckled quietly. "Though if you haven't told the Elves they guessed rightly, I don't suppose you would tell me, either."

Gandalf shook his head in wonder, no longer surprised by Frodo's insight but rather respectful of it. "Perhaps I shouldn't, but after all you have done and suffered at my behest, you deserve an answer or two that not even the great will ever know for certain. You are right, of course -- though if you had asked me this same question only six months ago, I would not have been quite so certain of the answer. Much has changed since then, both for Middle-earth and for myself.

"As you surmised, I am a Maia, one of the lesser children of Iluvatar's thought. When I first came to these shores, I knew *what* I was, and from whence I had come, but the memories were clouded, and often elusive, as I'm sure was intended. The others and I were sent to aid the peoples of Middle-earth, not to command them, and to that end, the Valar decreed that we come clothed in true flesh, to better understand the peoples we were sent to guide and guard. That is how I was able to be killed by the Balrog, yet also able to be sent back to finish my task. Being clothed in flesh greatly diminished our powers and even our memories, yet there was wisdom in that decision. For had I known all of what I was too well and too soon, I might have fallen into Saruman's folly, not from a want of power, but from an impatience to do good, and a desire to end Sauron's threat as swiftly as possible."

Frodo frowned faintly, puzzled. "But surely, that would have been for the best, preventing all the pain and suffering and deaths that happened because of Sauron and his desire for power...."

The wizard half-nodded. "Yes, and no. To remove the threat is sometimes not enough, if it is done too swiftly and by the wrong persons. When you were a child, had you never been allowed to touch fire, you would never have learned its danger. You would only have seen its seductive beauty, and would have remained drawn to it with no fear of the harm it could do to you. And if throughout your life, someone else always came to light the hearth and set flame to the lamps, when the day at last arrived when you were called upon to deal with such tasks yourself, you would set fire to your house and perhaps even to yourself and all your neighbors, because you had not learned something you should have been taught long ago. The forces of evil are a sort of flame, Frodo, as I am sure you know well, now. They draw us with promises of strength and mastery and sometimes even beauty -- but the very things through which they attract us are inevitably our undoing. Had we wizards come to Middle-earth as we truly were, there would have come a time when our knowledge of our so-called superiority would be our undoing. We would have taken on the task of openly directing the war against Sauron, and when it was over, we would have left, returning to our own home in the West. The peoples of Middle-earth who had no such refuge would remain here, and when another evil inevitably rises to contest their freedom, they would still have no experience in how to deal with it themselves.

That is a thing all of Iluvatar's creations must learn, in their own ways. I could not teach you how to resist the forces of evil. I could only advise you by telling you what I had learned through my own experiences, and the choices I had made for myself. Evil shows different faces to different people, and I knew not what face it would show to you. When you saw it, how you chose to react to it was something you alone could decide. My hope was that what wisdom I could offer you would help you make the best decisions possible, for both yourself and all of Middle-earth. But as I told you so long ago, I could not compel you to do anything against your will, not without first breaking it -- and that is something I could *never* do."

The hobbit's frown became a warm smile. "I understand that, now, and I appreciate it in ways I never thought I would. I don't think anyone ever enjoys being told that a difficult task lies ahead of them, and that they cannot give the burden of it to someone else when they grow weary of it. All one can do is keep in mind what they hope to achieve through all this effort, and the good that will come of their pains. That's what you tried to tell me so many times in the past, when I wasn't quite ready to hear it. But I understand now. You may not have been charged with the task of carrying the Ring to its destruction, Gandalf, but the task you were given was certainly no easier, trying to help all the peoples of Middle-earth come together to do the right thing when they could barely get along with each other, sitting down to a banquet! I should not have wanted to be in your place. The Ring was certainly evil and treacherous and apt to betray a person at every opportunity, but there was only one of It, and what needed to be done with It was clear. Trying to cajole cooperation from all the different peoples of Middle-earth must have felt like dealing with thousands of Rings at once!"

Gandalf chuckled softly. "An excellent observation. At times, that was indeed how my task felt to me, and I often came near to despairing that it could ever be achieved, especially when my own allies began to abandon me or turn against me. But as with you, perseverance, and the help of other good people, brought me to the goal for which I was sent. So as you can see, my good hobbit, no matter who or what we are, we never stand truly alone. We were created not as many diverse and separate pieces scattered randomly across a board, but as parts of some greater whole, all of which were meant to support and complement each other. I am a Maia, yes, and you are a hobbit, and we both are what Eru Iluvatar wished us to be, in the places that were meant for us in His imagination of this world. But please, Frodo, do not press me to explain more of myself and my origins just now. There are many things still beyond the full reach of my waking mind and memory while I walk these lands, and my presence in Endor is a matter I am not entirely at liberty to discuss with whomever I wish. However, I believe you have a right to know the tale from beginning to end -- and I promise, someday, you will hear it. And I also trust you will keep your awareness of this, and of Narya, to yourself. There is no longer any danger that Sauron could use them against us, but his passing does not take with it all the ills of this world. There are still people who would covet Elven Rings, even ones whose power is fading, if they knew where they could be found. Until this moment, there have been only four people in all Middle-earth who have known for certain that I carry it."

Frodo considered his words for a moment, then inclined his head in agreement to the wizard's wishes. "Círdan, Galadriel, Elrond, and... Saruman?"

Gandalf laughed, patting the hobbit's arm in merriment; as he withdrew his hand, Frodo's visual awareness of the Elven Ring faded. "Very astute, once again!" he declared, still laughing. "How you came by your knowledge of the other Keepers I can easily deduce, since you were aware of my Ring long before I was certain yours had been the One! Aragorn, I think, has suspected the truth for many years, but has wisely kept his own counsel on the matter. But not many would have thought to include Saruman in the same company!" He shook his head, sadly. "I have long believed that much of his dislike for me grew from his first realization of Círdan's gift, and his anger that he had not been the one so honored. But he could not understand that I had not asked for this privilege, nor even wanted it -- and he would have made very bad use of it, I'm afraid, to all

our great woe. We are fortunate indeed that his designs to become a Power did not have the ending Saruman wished!"

The hobbit blinked, his curiosity piqued by his abrupt realization that the whole world had not been standing still while he and Sam had toiled through Mordor. "There was an ending? How much have I missed while I was away? And what's become of the others? I know you said Sam is all right, and beyond my wildest hopes, I can see that you are, too. I know from his brother Faramir that Boromir fell at Parth Galen -- but where are Merry and Pippin? And Aragorn, and Gimli and Legolas...?"

Now there was a warmth to Gandalf's laughter, the delight of all the fine summer mornings and heartening birdsong and golden sunshine Frodo had ever known. It filled the bower and those in it with a healing joy that was the embrace of loving friendship made audible. "And you claim to have no special stamina! Here you are, just moments after having awakened fully for the first time in two weeks and after long months of struggle with injury and the Shadow, and you want nothing better than an account of what has happened in a time filled with many happenings! Many so-called greater persons would have wakened a mere reflection of their former selves, wasted by such hardships and so heavy a burden. Bless you, Frodo Baggins! You are a most remarkable hobbit -- indeed, quite the most remarkable person I have met in all my long years of wandering these lands." And from where he sat, he bowed to the hobbit, in gracious and earnest respect.

So touched was he by Gandalf's praise and his gesture of deference, Frodo impetuously embraced the wizard, in happiness as well as in gratitude for his compassion and his patience. And as he did so, he felt both tears and his own laughter well up within him, opening the spring of gladness and grief that had been sealed within his heart, unreachable, while he had borne the Ring through the domain of its Master. A flood of emotion rose to the surface of his thought, all the grim memories of the past months, as well as the joys and relief he had felt since the moment of the Ring's destruction. Beyond his control, the tears flowed freely, commingled with laughter, and he wept long and deeply, in bitter affliction and unforeseen delight.

Gandalf did not advise him to cease, for he knew full well that these tears were a part of healing, and would help restore balance to Frodo's Shadow-wearied heart and soul. He held him while he wept, as a father might to comfort a distraught child; and when at last the tears were spent, the darkness purged and joy returning to fill the emptiness left by the banished Shadow, he settled the hobbit back against the pillows of his camp bed. He covered him with the light blanket that had fallen aside when Frodo sat up, and gestured to someone outside the hobbit's sight. When whoever it was had responded as he wished, Gandalf picked up his pipe, re-lit it, then turned back to Frodo, smiling.

"Now," said the wizard as he sent a large ring of white smoke drifting skyward, to break apart into a flight of bird-shapes which took wing and, singing, vanished amid the beech-boughs over Frodo's bed. "I shall honour your first request, and have sent one of the guards to fulfill a second you have not made, but will, the moment you take time to heed the noises of your stomach (which I can hear quite plainly, even if you cannot). And while you have your breakfast, I shall tell you all you wish to hear of what has happened since we parted company -- or all you should hear for now, to be more precise -- but only if you promise you will let yourself sleep, if you begin to tire. You have proven yourself to be stronger than anyone in Middle-earth, my dearest and most distinguished Frodo, be they of the Big People or the Small -- but from my own recent experiences, I have found that there are times when a well-earned rest can be more welcome than all the news in creation, whether it be good or ill."

Finis