

# SHIP OF DREAMS

by Mary Jean Holmes

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It was the most beautiful ship he had ever built.

As Círdan the Shipwright watched its newly-finished sails being fitted into their proper places, he was astonished less by the achievement of what his mind had imagined and his hands had wrought, and more by the simple fact that he had managed to finish her in time to serve the purpose for which she had been built: to carry the last of the Ringbearers into the West, across the Straight Road and the Sundering Sea to Valinor. Now it stood tethered to its berth along the quay of the harbor of Mithlond, but though the place was named the Grey Havens in the Common Tongue, the ship before him was neither grey, nor common. Pure white she was, graceful and a marvel to behold. Even at anchor the lines of her shapely hull and other artfully crafted appointments made it seem as if she was in motion, always in motion as the sea itself, as the winds high above the land. In the noonday sun, the ship glowed like a star come down to grace the earth with its presence, yet only for a moment, for she ever appeared ready to fly again, across the sea, upon the winds, into the very heavens that separated the mortals lands from those Undying in the West.

It had taken Círdan much longer to complete this vessel than any other he had crafted — nearly a thousand years from his first glimmer of a notion for its design to completion. He had been more than typically painstaking in his labors because he wanted this vessel to be perfect — or, at least, as near to perfect as he, a mere Elf, was capable of producing — but some part of his slowness had not been the result of that quest. He begun to fade during this third age of the world; he had suspected it for nearly three thousand years.

The shipwright had often consoled himself with the thought that it was only to be expected, both because of his age and because of the circumstances of his past life. Three times had he seen an opportunity to travel into the bliss of the West slip through his fingers like sand in rushing water. First had come the time of the Great Journey. His Telerin kinsman Elwë had returned from a far-off place to tell his kin of all the marvels he had seen. There in the starlit world beside the mere of Cuiviénen, Círdan had listened to him weave tales of wonder about a place so full of glorious light, it clung to Elwë still as dust clings to a weary traveler. Young and eager and impressionable, as many of the Eldar had been in those days, Círdan's heart had been filled with a longing to see all these things of which Elwë spoke, to stand in such wondrous radiance, it might cling to him as well. He had been among the first to agree to make this journey, and he would have rushed ahead with Ingwë's people, had he not been so loyal and caring for his own. He had not wanted a one of his folk to be lost along the way, and so he had joined others in the task of keeping watch for those who strayed, guiding back the ones who had simply lost their way, trying to persuade those who had tired of the journey and no longer wished to go, sadly leaving those who decided to go back. That some might be lost was probably inevitable, he had thought, for the Lindar were many, more than the people of Ingwë and Finwë together, and their very numbers seemed to make them different from others of the Eldar. With the help of the mighty one who had come to invite them to his land of marvels, those who stayed would be safe from the strange creeping darkness in this world. In his naive youth, Círdan had truly believed this.

Then, Elwë had disappeared. Though some took this as a sign that they should not complete the journey, others considered it a reason to hasten onward, for if the darkness could snatch even Elwë unawares, then none of them were safe. Círdan did not believe such a fate had ensnared his kinsman, but he also felt that it would be terribly wrong if the one who had taught them of the Land of Light was left behind by his own people. He joined with those who went to search for Elwë, and thus it was that he came too late to the shores of the Great Sea and was himself left behind, forsaken by his own kin as he watched the last gleam of light on the ferry island fade beyond sight, into the West.

Angry and hurt, he had vowed to build a ship to follow them, until another mighty one spoke to his heart and warned him against such foolishness. He was young, his skills at ship crafting still feeble; he would surely die if he made such a rash attempt to cross the perils of the Great Sea. Grief had threatened to overwhelm him, until the mighty one — Ulmo, the lord of the all waters — told him that he wished Círdan to stay on these lonely shores, for if he did, and spent his days in learning all the sea lord and his servants would teach him, there would come a time when he and his skills would be sorely needed. Ever after, his people would remember his faithfulness, and how he had helped to save them from a terrible fate. He beheld a vision then, of a beautiful white ship that sailed both sea and sky, and with that, Círdan promised to stay, wanting very much to learn how to make a thing of such magnificence and grace.

An age of the world and more had gone by before he felt that the time of fruition had come. With Eärendil his pupil he had crafted a marvelous white ship, the best of any he had ever fashioned. Eärendil had sailed into the West, and from there into the very skies above the world, gleaming Vingilot lit by the light of the Silmaril shining down upon the world at dusk and dawn, giving hope. Círdan had felt that hope, as had all but the servants of the Enemy, and the host of Valinor had come in answer. Morgoth had been overthrown, the evil vanquished or scattered, the Ban of the Noldor lifted, the path West opened again. Círdan thought then that surely he had done all that was needed, all that Ulmo had asked of him, for the white ship of his vision could be naught but Vingilot, the flower of the foam.

But again, Ulmo had bid him stay. Círdan had known, of course, that to obey was his duty, for he had given Ulmo his word that he would remain in Middle-earth until his destiny was fulfilled, his service faithfully discharged. The shipwright had always considered it an honor to serve the Vala, and in return, Ulmo had been kind to Círdan's people, as much as he could be without directly opposing the decrees of Manwë, his king. Ulmo had taught the sea-elves many things; some they had learned through his servant Ossë; they and the Lady Uinen had done what they could to protect and nurture the Falathrim, warning them of coming danger, helping them in times of need, directing them to safe havens when the world around them seemed to be crumbling in blood and flame.

Many Elves had traveled West after the Great Battle, forsaking the blood-soaked and broken lands of the mortal world to find new homes in a blessed place where war and pain and death were not a part of everyday life. Círdan had yearned to go with them; his heart had ached to see his sundered kin and those who had passed on through Mandos' halls, to behold the land, if not the light, of the Trees — but no, not yet, Ulmo had said, even though Morgoth had been defeated. The shipwright would yet be needed in days to come. Thus it was at the end of the First Age, and when the new age began, it found Círdan once again left behind while others departed, his second chance to see the West lost.

Though he had mourned to watch the ships sail westward, never to return, Círdan had been able to understand and accept the wisdom of Ulmo's request. The Noldorin High King, Ereinion Gil-galad, had chosen to stay when many of his people departed for Valinor. In his efforts to salvage something of the Elven realms in Middle-earth, to bring together their scattered peoples, he would need support and advice aplenty, which the shipwright was full willing to give. This was more than his king and friend who needed him, after all; it was his foster son, quite likely the only child of his heart Círdan would ever know, and where he went, Círdan would follow to offer whatever he could, whatever Ereinion needed.

More than three thousand years passed; another age ended in a terrible battle with yet another Dark Lord, right hand of the first. Gil-galad fell, and the shipwright's heart fell with his foster son, burned to ash on the plains of Mordor. He had thought to sail West then, but his grief had been so intense, he had not been able to imagine fleeing to the Blessed Realm, knowing that if Ereinion were ever to see it with living eyes, it would only be when he was finally granted release from Mandos. When Ulmo had bid him stay a while longer, he did not think to refuse. He had not the strength to do otherwise. And yet, there were so few left, the Elves now scattered to different corners of the world. His third opportunity slipped away while he wondered how he could possibly be needed by anyone.

For more than ten centuries of this third age, he pondered that question, until he saw ships from the West land upon the shores near the Havens. They were curious beings, these wise ones who came into his land, stayed but briefly, then vanished into the wide world. They were not mighty ones like Ulmo, but in his wisdom and keen perception of the truth, Círdan sensed that they were akin to the Valar, as were Ulmo's servants Ossë and Uinen. They stirred many questions in the shipwright's mind, but they stayed in the Havens very briefly, long enough to rest from their journey, take sustenance, gather a few supplies, then move on. All seemed in great haste, unwilling to answer an old Elda's questions. He thought them quite strange, less gracious than the servants of Ulmo, but he did not try to detain them. They would not have come unless they were sorely needed, somewhere, and it was not his business to meddle in their affairs.

Then the last of these ships landed, bringing but a single passenger. And seeing him, an old grey Man whose bright eyes and keen wits belied his ancient appearance, something within the shipwright awoke. The others had stirred his curiosity; this seemingly insignificant last-comer stirred his respect — nay, his reverence, as Ulmo and Ossë did. He did not know the grey one's name, but Círdan knew what he was, no matter his outer appearance. The Elf's foresight awakened; he saw the long and terrible path before this grey pilgrim, and felt moved to do what he could to aid him, for he knew somehow that in him lay the hope of all Middle-earth. It had taken little effort for Círdan to make the decision to give him Narya, for this newcomer had not fled the Havens as quickly as the others, but had stayed for a while, to begin to learn of Middle-earth from those who would come under his care. In retrospect, Círdan supposed that this was the help he had been intended to give in this age, surrendering Narya, but no word came to him from Ulmo or Ossë to confirm that his task had been completed, and so, he waited.

The age wore on; evil reared its head once more, in many places. Círdan did what he could to aid his people in that struggle, but following the end of the long wars with Angmar, his heart and strength seemed spent — with age or grief or weariness of the world, he did not know. But after that time, he had had little desire to leave the western shores of Middle-earth. Emissaries went in his place when summons came, taking his letters and words of counsel to the others, if they needed them.

Círdan had come to suspect that on the whole, they did not. The pleas of Elrond and Galadriel and others he called friend and ally had persuaded him to help deal with the Witch King of Angmar, but after seeing Sauron's lieutenant flee, defeated but still alive when so many others lay dead, he had lost the stomach for war. It had been too similar to the end of the Last Alliance, too much a victory tainted with the sour taste of loss and defeat. He no longer had the heart to endure it. Thus he had returned to the Havens to work on the ship that would be his masterpiece, and sent others who were willing to aid the scattered Elven peoples when they were asked for help. He no longer felt as if he was truly a part of Elven-kind in Middle-earth.

Perhaps, he reflected, that was something he had surrendered when he had given Narya into the hands of one who was not an Elf. He had kept the ring largely because Ereinion had begged it of him, but he had never consciously used it. Still, it had become a part of him in the support it had provided during the dismal years following his fosterling's death, and he had not realized how much it had succored him until he had given it up. Certainly, age had begun to creep upon him after Ereinion's passing, but not as it did after he surrendered Narya. In a matter of years, the wear of his long years in Arda Marred began to show upon his *hröa*, creasing his skin, slowing his step, sprouting a beard upon his chin. Only the most ancient of Elves were said to have such things, and Círdan supposed that this was a title he had earned, since to the best of his knowledge, he was the most ancient Elf still lingering on the Hither Shore. He sometimes wondered if that tale concerning Elven beards was true, since he had never seen another Elf with facial hair; other times, he suspected that it was a sign of how thoroughly he had become shackled to Middle-earth, the land that was fated to become the realm of the Atani, whose men commonly wore them.

He had stayed in Endor to carry out his duties to Ulmo and the Valar, denying his heart's desire to see the lands of the West. When had he given up hope that his wish would ever be fulfilled?

He did not know, but as the new sails — fine white Elven silk to replace the stained canvas that had been used when he took the ship beyond the gulf to test her seaworthiness — were raised to test the rigging, the cloth billowed as it caught the wind. Círdan felt the same gust tug at his silver beard and hair, and knew that somehow, he had. He had done his best to trust in those whom he served, and he believed he had done all he could to carry out their wishes to the best of his ability. But where he had once been deep in the counsels of Ulmo and Ossë, now, he seldom felt their presence in the waters; he had heard nothing from them in what felt a very long time, even to him. In these silences, he realized that no word had ever been spoken to him of when his duty would end, when his promises would be held fulfilled. By now, with Sauron gone more than two years — at last truly gone and defeated, not merely driven into hiding or crippled as he had been before — he felt certain something would have been said to him, if not by Ulmo then by Ossë or Uinen or some servant of the Valar who was empowered to speak for them. Yet they remained mute, even when his work on the ship had been completed, and he knew it to at last be the white ship of his ancient vision. In the echoing silence, Círdan could not help but feel that once again, he had given all his skill and love to crafting a vessel he would never sail beyond the Hither Shore, to a land he had dreamed of for more than ten millennia, but now feared he would never see. If he was ever to see the Blessed Realm, it would be as the very last of the Eldar to leave Middle-earth, or perhaps even as Ereinion might, by way of Mandos. Whenever he chanced to see his reflection of late, he saw a person old and grey, his body worn, the light in his eyes that had once shone bright as stars dulled and dimmed with the fog of burgeoning despair.

And yet, he refused to surrender to it. It would be undignified for one of his great antiquity and supposedly vast wisdom to weep over such a thing, as unbecoming as his feelings of abandonment, so the shipwright mercilessly suppressed the sorrow that gnawed at him, and tried his best not to feel as if his unwavering loyalty had been overlooked. He had selected the most skilled

of his mariners to take the helm when the white ship set course for the West, and thus he could assure the passengers that they would arrive safely with a clear conscience, his duty once more discharged with faithful, if seemingly unacknowledged, honor.

When this last test was complete, the sails furled and secured once again, he went aboard to make a final inspection. The guests would arrive near sunset tomorrow, and he wanted to be completely certain all was in order. He had dismissed the crew to see to their own preparations for the coming voyage, and thus Círdan felt sure he could make his tour in uninterrupted peace. If a tear happened to slip free of his iron control... well, none would be there to see, and none would be the wiser.

"Not quite true, old friend," a familiar voice corrected his unspoken thought as he had been about to head below decks. "I am here to see, but I would not hold a tear or two against you. She is a beautiful ship, and worthy of tears of gladness. What have you named her?"

Startled, Círdan spun about and saw that one of his anticipated guests had arrived early. "Greetings, Mithrandir," he said, bowing politely after he had a moment to collect his wits. He had almost failed to recognize the Istar, for he was no longer grey and weary, but now shining white, his brightness dimmed by a magnificent blue and silver cloak clearly of Gondorian origin — a gift of the new king or queen, no doubt. "I was not aware that I had been thinking out loud. Do you often go about prying into other's thoughts?"

The wizard laughed away the accusation. "Only when they are thinking so loudly, I can read the thoughts on their faces. It is good to see you again, Círdan. Too many years have passed since we last met."

"Aye," the sea-elf agreed. "And much has changed. I have heard so many fantastic tales of what transpired during the past few years, I did not think I could credit them. But I see that some stories, at least, were true." He sniffed both critically and appreciatively. "White suits you, better than ever it did Curunír. I presume, from these tales I have heard, that he will not be taking ship with you."

"No," Mithrandir confirmed sadly. "He will not, nor any other of my order. And you have not answered my question. Have you named this glorious vessel? It would be most unlike you to neglect that particular detail, since I know you think of them as your children."

Círdan nodded. "Ólimeth. Not a grand name, but fitting."

Mithrandir studied the elf for some moments, then shook his head in firm disagreement. "No, it is not. This is not the end of the dream, my friend, but the fulfillment. For ten thousand years and more, you have remained here in Middle-earth, faithful to the will of the Valar and the needs of your people. Your duty is now at its end, your charge honorably completed. Under the stars of the sunless years, you dreamed of building a ship to follow your people into the West to see the light of the Trees. You have seen their light in that of their last flowers, the Sun and the Moon, and now, you will see the land from which they sprang when you guide this ship into the West."

"That is not why I built it," Círdan pointed out, idly running his fingers over the gracefully carved handle of the cabin door, which, like every part of this ship, he had fashioned with his own hands. "I told you I would have a ship prepared for you when the time came for you to leave these shores, and that I have done, nothing more. I have been given no word from Ulmo or any other servant of the Valar to indicate that my obligations here are at an end."

The wizard blinked, momentarily dumbstruck; then he laughed, quite merrily. "Indeed you *have* been given word, you old salt! Did I not just tell you that your duty is at an end? And have you forgotten that I came to these shores out of the West? Do you truly think I am another Elven oddity such as yourself, who has aged like a mortal from cares and sorrow, and even grown a beard? If you recall, I arrived with one, unlike you. Círdan, my dear old friend, you knew I was a Maia many years ago, before I left these Havens to begin my mission on behalf of the Valar. I did not tell you, but I know there was no need. Your counsels with Ulmo and Ossë have given you clearer awareness of such things than others have, even Galadriel, who was born in Valinor and was tutored by Melian. How have you managed to forget this?"

Mithrandir's voice and manner suddenly gentled as he looked upon the ancient Elf's downcast face, and realization struck him like a chill wind from the north in high summer. "Or did you forget because you have come to believe that *you* have been forgotten — again?"

The shipwright turned away, shifting his gaze to ostensibly study how well the carved lintel and frame of the door fit into the planks of the meticulously whitewashed walls. "Does it show that clearly?" he whispered. "I had thought I learned how to disguise such unbecoming feelings, ages ago."

He heard Mithrandir's soft step as he came to stand beside him; a compassionate hand settled on his shoulder, and in the touch, Círdan could feel the fading warmth of Narya, and an even greater warmth from the one who bore her. "You have, but this is something I do not think even Lord Námo in his greatest dispassion could conceal. You have put off fulfilling your own dreams and desires for more years than any one person should have been asked to bear, especially after being forsaken by your own kin. It is true that in their fear of causing greater harm to Endor, the Valar have drawn back, so far that it is all too easy for one to presume that they have abandoned the Hither Shore altogether. Yet they have not, nor have they abandoned *you*. I am the messenger of Lord Manwë, but I also speak for others of the Valar whose servants have gone astray, or have withdrawn from these lands as the time of their dominion draws to an end. Lord Ulmo wishes to see the Elda who has remained most faithful to all the Valar, through trials and losses and sorrows not even the greatest of the Powers have borne without grief and pain. He wants to see you in the light of Aman, my friend, not upon these grey shores, where the light of old is failing as the power of the Elves wanes. This is the last ship, as you foretold — not the last ship that will sail from these shores, but the last and greatest you will ever build in Middle-earth. Others of Elven-kind may follow the Straight Path in days yet to come, bearing them to their home in the West, but take comfort in knowing that those who will craft the ships and steer them have learned well from your tutelage, and all the hard-won knowledge you will leave behind. In Aman, you will find rest enough to regain the strength and spirit you have lost during your great tasks here in Middle-earth. And when you are restored, there will be new ships waiting to be built, ones fit to sail the vast uncharted seas of the other-world, where new and more wonderful discoveries await. No, Nöwë Círdan, you are not forgotten."

Círdan looked to the wizard in extreme surprise, startled by the sound of the name he had been given at Cuiviénen, but which had not been spoken since before the first dawn. "I have not heard that name in more years than I care to count," the shipwright admitted. "Where did you learn it?"

A strange, distant smile flickered across the wizard's face and danced in his eyes. "Why, from you, in a time long ago," he said. "But not on an occasion that you would recall having seen me. When I arrived here two thousand years ago as Manwë's messenger, it was not the first time I had been in Middle-earth, though my former guise was quite different. I walked through all the cities and kingdoms of the Eldar during the First Age, unseen or in a more fleeting shape as one of you. I saw Eglarest and Brithombar in their days of glory and peace, and walked with the Falathrim along the strands of all Beleriand. I was there when your beautiful cities fell to the minions of Morgoth, and when you fled to Balar. I tried to give hope to the hearts of the refugees from Doriath and Nargothrond and Gondolin, and offered what help I could to those who survived the attack upon the Havens of Sirion. I helped any I could, from the smallest child to the greatest leader, for those were times when the horror in the world was such that no heart was strong enough to bear it without quaking."

The reflective, almost dream-like note in his voice faded as his eyes focused sharply on Círdan. "I did not often need to help you, but I worried about you a great deal. I knew that Ulmo had chosen you for a great purpose, and after watching you for but a little time, it was not difficult to understand why he had made that choice. You were vital to the future of Middle-earth, and I did what I could to watch over you when Ulmo and his servants could not. It was during the Mereth Aderthad when I heard you mention the name you first were given, as you were speaking of yourself to Finrod and his kin, and I have not forgotten it, though others have. A person should be known for who they are in their heart, not merely for the work they do, or the clothes they wear, or the color of their hair."

Círdan answered with a wryly amused, if apologetic, half-smile. "If that is so, then I beg your pardon for having burdened you with such a name even before you began your long labors in this age." His smile faded. "And yet, what does it matter? For ten thousand years, I have been graced by the concern of many such as you, and still I cannot see to what purpose, if my vigil is never to end or bear the fruit that was foretold. You will be leaving on the morrow, and those who remain will know only the names you carried here, while I will forever be naught but the Shipwright. I vowed that I would not depart until I was given leave to do so. It was the voice of the Sea that asked me to abide on the Hither Shore; I have not heard it speak to free me from that vow."

Mithrandir sighed. "Only because you are not listening. I cannot blame you for that; too long have you strained your ears, and heard nothing. But the Sea is not silent now. Listen to it, and the winds from the West. They have called to you all the long ages of your life, waking in you a longing for the wide waters and the Blessed Lands beyond. They are calling to you now as never before, and you will hear that they now long for *you*, if you will but open your heart to them."

The shipwright pondered all Mithrandir had said, then turned away from the cabin door and walked slowly to the prow of the ship. It faced west, toward the opening of the gulf of Lhûn. The wind, which was often wayward between the cliffs of Mithlond, was strong from the west, and carried with it the scents of the Great Sea. He closed his eyes, breathed in the fragrance of the vast waters, and listened, with all his senses and all his heart.

For a long time, only the rushing wind and the never-ceasing beat of the waves could be heard; the cries of the gulls sang a more distant descant, the siren call that awakened the sea-longing, but did not sate it. A pang of loneliness swept through him with their mournful song, and for a moment, he felt as if it would break his heart with the sadness of faded hopes and dreams denied.

But then, the voice of the sea grew stronger, like the pulse of the world itself, and the winds were the sound of the breath of all Arda, drawing in and out the sweet air that gives life. Faint at first, then more clearly as his senses became attuned to the sound, he heard voices, calling to him, their words few and simple, but more sweet than the grandest ballad of praise.

*Come, Ringbearer, they said. Come home.*

Círdan opened his eyes, aware that his face was wet with tears, but he did not know if they were ones of gladness or despair. "I am no Ringbearer," he said softly, remembering his sacrifice of Narya.

"You are," said the one to whom he had given it, his presence almost forgotten. "As much as Frodo and Bilbo, who have been welcomed on this journey, though they be mortals. They each held a Ring for but a handful of years, and they both gave it up. Bilbo had little notion of what he carried when he passed it to Frodo; Frodo knew, and paid dearly for both the knowledge and the loss. They each suffered the aging of the spirit and pains of the flesh that ultimately come to one who loses a Ring of Power, and for all these things, their trials and sacrifices and suffering, they have been granted passage to the West, to find healing and peace. If they can be granted such a boon, why should you not also be welcomed now in the West, which is the rightful home of all Elven-kind? You held Narya for many hundreds of years, and you surrendered it full knowing what you were giving up, and why. You also have paid for your sacrifice with weariness and suffering. This ship was built to carry the last of the Ringbearers into the bliss of the West, beyond the sea of this mortal world into the skies of the Straight Road, and beyond. That was your duty, and your promise. Yet if those of us to whom the task was given had failed in our efforts to defeat Sauron, we ourselves would have been defeated, and this beautiful thing you have wrought with so much love and patience would have burned in the ashes of all Middle-earth."

He laid one hand on the tall Elf's shoulder to prompt him to turn so that he could catch and hold his eye. "That we succeeded was due to the labors of many, some of whom began their work in ages past. All you have done to aid and counsel the peoples of this world has not been in vain; indeed, it has borne fruit not once, but many times. No Eärendil would shine in the heavens but for you, and hope would have been lost long ago. No beloved Elwing would have lived to become the mother of two great peoples through her sons, had you not been there to offer sanctuary in her hour of need, when Doriath fell. What haven would have aided the remnants of fallen Númenor, had you not been here on the shores of Middle-earth to find Elendil and his people when they landed? No Gil-galad would have risen to guide your scattered peoples, nor brought together the remnants of Elves and Men to fight in concert against Sauron, but for the guidance and love you gave him when you succored him and became as a father to him in his youth. And the star of the Dúnedain would not rule now in Gondor and Arnor beside the Evenstar of Imladris had you not given your aid during the long war with the Witch King, for had he claimed victory, all the north would have burned, Imladris itself would have fallen, and with them, all that remained of the line of Lúthien herself would have been lost. My dear Círdan, with or without Narya upon your hand, you have done more to ensure the future of Middle-earth than many who think their deeds more memorable or their lineage more proud. I am well acquainted with the foibles of humility, and I say to you now, do not stop your ears against this call from the West out of misplaced pride, or a lack of it. A Ringbearer you are, and on this ship you belong. It is our reward for having fulfilled long and often bitter duties. And who better suited to helm the vessel for such a journey than one who himself bore a Great Ring, and gave it up freely for the good of all?"

As he pondered Mithrandir's words, Círdan turned his face to look out over the wide gulf, at the shimmering of the waters where the sunlight sparkled upon the dancing waves. It reminded him of the last glimmer of starlight he had seen on the distant peak of Tol Eressëa as it moved into the West, leaving him and his folk behind.

*"Abide now that time, for when it comes then your work will be of utmost worth, and it will be remembered in song for many ages after."*

The memory of Ulmo's words, spoken in his heart more than ten thousand years ago, stirred in his thoughts, then echoed even more clearly:

*Your work has been of utmost worth, your faithfulness unequalled in all the lore and legend and song of ages past and ages yet to be. Come home, hinanya. Your vow is fulfilled, and well done; the time of abidance is ended. The future and a vaster sea await you.*

Círdan's grey eyes closed again and his breath caught as he heard, faint at first, then growing ever more strong and clear, the Ulumúri, the horns of Ulmo that no living thing could forget. It had been so terribly long, Círdan had almost forgotten the beauty of their song, though he ever felt their memory in the beating of his own heart, resonating to the rhythms of the sea. This was no memory, then. He knew the words still echoing in his thoughts to be true, and not a phantom of his imagination. He listened, and felt young again, as he had not since the day he had seen the vision of the ship on which he now stood, which he had fashioned with his own two hands and the guiding love of his heart.

He breathed again, savoring the scent of the sea and the clean wind from the West, then stood tall against the wind and bowed his head, smiling. "I obey," he whispered, as he had when Ulmo had first spoken to him. He opened his eyes once more, and now beheld not a reflection of the past or an image of a ship, but a vision of the glimmering shores of Valinor, diamond-bright and as beautiful as the light that had enchanted his dreams so long ago. It kindled something in his heart, and with it, the light in his eyes returned, brightening them from the dull grey of despondency to the mithril-silver of hope..

"You will see it soon," a nearer voice promised, Mithrandir standing at the rail beside him. The shipwright did not bother to ask what he meant, or how he knew; it was enough to hear his words confirm that this had been real and not the dream of an aching soul. "For now, we must await the arrival of the others — and I think perhaps you have unfinished work to do."

When Círdan cast him a puzzled glance, the wizard smiled, eyes sparkling with mischief as he brushed aside a stray strand of his windblown white hair. "For ten thousand years and more, you have longed for this voyage, and yet I sense that you have done nothing to prepare yourself for it — unpacked and unready, on the very eve of departure! Come along, now, old friend, you can show me more of this beautiful ship of dreams later, after we have seen to it that you have your own things ready to be taken on board."

He laughed as he started toward the gangway, a wonderfully merry sound that was a balm to Círdan's weary spirit. The wizard clicked his tongue in good-humored chiding as they went. "Ten centuries of patience spent building this ship, and here you are, oldest and wisest of the Elves of Middle-earth, no more prepared for an adventure than Bilbo Baggins, running from his house with neither cloak nor stick nor pocket handkerchief! Disgraceful!"

His tone suddenly softened, becoming kindly. "But also understandable. You have been so busy fretting over matters of duty, you have no doubt forgotten that remaining so stubbornly bound by it is forcing others to wait upon your convenience. Or has it never occurred to you that there are those in Eldamar who have been waiting just as long for *you* to catch up with *them*?"

The sounds of the voices calling the shipwright home suddenly rang with greater familiarity; Círdan touched the wizard's arm to stop him for a moment. "I had thought they no longer remembered me, or were all lost in the tragedy at Alqualondë. I had forgotten how many years had passed, that they — and others — might no longer be held in Mandos' halls. Tell me, do you know...?" His voice faltered, unable to finish the question.

"Not for certain," Mithrandir said, understanding the question without the need to hear it fully voiced. "My memories of my life in the West are not as clear as I often would like, for the Valar felt it prudent to send us without the temptation of all we had known, and all we could do. But I am sure you are not forgotten, and I think it quite likely that many of your kin and beloved friends have returned from the Dark Halls. I should not be surprised to find your foster son awaiting our landing when we arrive."

The simple thought that another person believed such a thing possible warmed the mariner with relief so intense, he found himself smiling, a foolishly broad smile that troubled him not in the least. The wizard had just dispelled the last of his hesitance, quite effectively, allowing him to anticipate the morrow with more joy than he had thought possible. "Thank you," he said, the words fervent with gratitude.

Mithrandir's own smile returned, still rather impish. "You can do that when we arrive in the West and discover whether or not my guesses are correct, or merely the imaginings of an age-addled mind. And by the bye," he added as he nudged the Elf toward the gangplank and the other tasks at hand, "since you have apologized so graciously for a matter in which you had no knowledge, I see no harm in letting you know that my real name is Olórin. You will hear it from others soon enough, and I agree that it is sometimes pleasant to hear one's self called by an old, familiar name no one else has uttered in many years."

"Olórin," Círdan repeated softly, deciding at once that the name suited the wizard quite well.

As did the name he had casually given the white ship but a minute earlier. *Ólicairnîn*, the shipwright thought as he gave one last glance to the gleaming vessel before following his guest down the boarding plank. *My ship of dreams*. Yes, that was a much better name, much better indeed. Decided about a great many things, Círdan turned at last to face the shore and the future that lay beyond the Havens with an eager heart, the last straggler of the Great Journey finally ready to set his sail for home.

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#### Author's Afterword

This story was written after I had read a number of pieces of fan fiction using the premise that Círdan left Middle-earth much later in the Fourth Age, literally on the last boat to Eldamar. There was always a seeming contradiction in this notion to me based on Círdan's own words: "But for me, my heart is with the Sea, and I will dwell by the grey shores until the last ship sails. I will await you." That's the version that appears in LotR in the appendices; those same words in *The Silmarillion* are: "But as for me, my heart is with the Sea, and I will dwell by the grey shores, guarding the Havens until the last ship sails. Then I shall await thee." A small but significant difference, that word *then*. To me, it was evidence of what I had suspected from the first time I read LotR, that Círdan left at the dawn of the Fourth Age, taking ship with the other Ringbearers — which was only fitting, since he was as much a Ringbearer as either Frodo or Bilbo, and had a right to take passage into the West, being an Elf. It also seemed to fit with the mention of Legolas building his own ship to sail West (if Círdan literally waited for the last ship before going, why did Legolas need to build his own?), and that by the time Arwen went to Cerin Amroth to die, Lothlórien was deserted, Celeborn having apparently decided to pack up and leave sometime earlier. Tolkien himself didn't appear to be entirely decided on the matter of this timing (hence the contradictory versions of the same statement), and this is simply the way I prefer to interpret the situation. It's rather like the "Last Alliance" — why was it called "last," when there was at least one more major alliance between Elves and Men, of considerably greater length, during the Third Age? "Last" can mean many things, and Elves seem to delight in being cryptic. :)