

I Entulesse

(The Return)

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Part Two

V

As Shadowfax flew across the open plains, away from Valmar and the mountains in the east, it occurred to Frodo that this was a unique occasion for him, in more ways than one. Aside from the fact that he was traveling across a beautiful new land with the most pleasant scented wind in his face, it was the very first time he had ever ridden astride the great gray horse and was also the first time he had ever ridden with the wizard, on this or any other beast. The only other time he had ever been on horseback rather than on a pony was when he had been placed on Glorfindel's Asfaloth, between Weathertop and Rivendell. The memories of that time were still dark, and he recalled very little of that portion of their journey, aside from the terrible feelings of fear and pain.

Now, the circumstances were quite different. He was not racing from a dreadful enemy, hoping against hope to reach aid before he succumbed to the will of the Dark Lord. He was riding with one of the dearest friends he had ever known, the person who had, perhaps, given more of himself to help defeat that Dark Lord than any other. The wind of their passage was refreshing, the country around them was lovely; when the memory of Weathertop and his wound caused his shoulder to ache and a shadow of cold evil to darken his mind again, he felt Olórin touch his arm, ever so lightly, and both the pain and the shadow completely disappeared. He smiled. He did not know if it was merely a coincidence, but since this was the second time since his arrival that such a thing had happened, he could not help but feel that it was not. Unencumbered by the restrictions he had known in Middle-earth, the Maia seemed more perceptive of all around him, including the suffering and dark memories of his halfling companion, and his ability to help was also greater. Perhaps he would ask about it later, Frodo reflected, but for now, he was content. He had never thought he could be at ease in any land but the Shire, without the familiarity of other hobbits around him, but with Olórin, he felt comfortable, at peace. Smiling to himself, he leaned back against his old friend in wordless gratitude, and watched the world fly by beneath Shadowfax's hoofs.

After a time, drowsiness washed over him, and he dozed without realizing it until the horse slowed his pace and the rhythm of movement changed. He had been dreaming of the Shire, of the green fields, singing streams, grassy hills, wooded glens, the scent of flowers and sunshine on fresh earth, the song of birds, the warmth of home. He opened his eyes, and thought he was still dreaming.

From the position of the sun in the sky, it was now mid to late morning. Shadowfax had come to a halt atop a rise that looked out over a wide valley, and as he beheld the land spread out before them, Frodo saw not an unfamiliar new place, but the Shire. He would have thought that all the events of the days before he had wakened were the dream and he was back in Middle-earth, but for the lack of hobbit holes and tilled fields. But the resemblance to his native land was so uncanny, he could not restrain a soft gasp at the remarkable sight.

He both felt and heard Olórin's gentle chuckle. "Yes, I suppose you can see now why I was so fond of the Shire, even with its absurd collection of hobbits digging their homes into the sides of the hills. What the Elves were thinking of when they called this the Garden of Valinor was something rather different from what you would call a garden, less groomed for farming and more the natural world allowed to grow in its own way, with its own beauty merely lovingly tended, not ordered for the purpose of growing crops or formally arranged plantings. That is why I was drawn to this place as my home, even though I am a servant of Lord Manwë. Its simplicity spoke to me on a level that touched my very heart. When I first saw the Shire, it stirred dim memories of my home, and whenever I was in need of peace and rest, I could find no better place for it."

"Is this the land they call Lórien?" the hobbit asked when he could speak again. "Why, it looks nothing at all like Lothlórien...!"

"Not here," the Maia agreed, "but it is a large country, and there are other parts which resemble the Golden Wood — or rather, I should say there are parts of this land which the Golden Wood was designed to resemble. See the woodland surrounding the great lake?" He gestured to a place that Frodo might have mistaken for the Bywater Pool east of Hobbiton, save that he now realized it was more distant than it had at first appeared, was wrapped in a haze of silver and gold, and held an island in its midst. "That is the lake of Lórellin, where the Lady Estë dwells, and the wooded lands around it are more akin to Lothlórien than anything in the Shire. If you were to reckon the lake as being the equivalent of the Bywater Pool, then my home is some miles away to the west and south of it, about where Tuckborough would be. But please, never mention this to any Took! I'm afraid it would have quite gone to young Pippin's head, had he ever known such a thing."

Frodo laughed, understanding, and though he felt sadness, hearing the name of a friend he would likely never see again, it passed quickly. He may have given up his own Shire and the people in it whom he loved, but now, he had a new version of it to explore, and new people to meet. Back in Middle-earth, he would have soon become a burden to his friends, not in terms of finances or other such worldly matters, but emotionally, as with each passing year, they would watch him suffer from pains and shadows they could do nothing to heal or dispel. His guilt would also have grown proportionately, so in the end, he had done the only thing he could do. When Gandalf had come to visit this past Midsummer's Eve and had told him that he would be welcomed in the West, Frodo had felt less torn than he might have only a few months before. The West offered him a chance to find healing and peace, something he had at long last concluded would never be his in Middle-earth. And every time he saw Sam or Rose or Merry or Pippin watching him with ever-growing concern, he grew more firmly convinced that he could not continue to be a part of their lives if it meant causing them pain. So he had

made the decision, the only one possible to a person who genuinely loved his friends, and had gone over the Sea. He had expected that at the very least, he would be no worse off here, for Bilbo would be with him, as well as other friends — perhaps less close than those in the Shire, but friends nonetheless. At least he would not be anyone's burden, and those he had left behind could get on with their lives as they were meant to live them, in happiness.

He certainly had not expected Olórin to take him under his wing as he had, not so quickly. Perhaps he should have anticipated it; it was certainly in keeping with the general personality of the wizard he had known. The gruffness Gandalf had occasionally displayed was, Frodo now perceived, very much a feint, designed for both his own protection and that of those for whom he cared. Knowing him too well inevitably meant becoming involved in the dangerous business that was his reason for being in Middle-earth, and for him to become too close to any of its mortal inhabitants inevitably would mean heartbreak, for they could not live forever and he must eventually leave when his task was done. That he risked as much personal pain as he had in loving the peoples of Endor was quite probably the greatest reason he was beloved by all who knew him as more than just a wandering old man, meddling in affairs not his own. That he would now have a chance to know the real person and not simply that aspect of him manifested in Gandalf the Wizard delighted Frodo, for he could already tell that there was much about him to love, and even more that he would return in friendship. He no longer felt any worry that he would continue to linger here as he had in the Shire, in recurring, horrible, wasting pain. If no one else in Aman would help him, Olórin would, in whatever ways he needed and for however long was required. No, Frodo could not feel sorry for himself over what he had left behind, not anymore. He still missed his friends, it was true, but he knew even now that he had gained much more than he could have possibly anticipated.

Happy, both with himself and the world around him, he smiled as Shadowfax set off again at a more gentle pace, down the rise and across the open hill country toward a wooded region that did indeed resemble Tookland, from a distance.

As they went, he began to notice that the countryside was not empty of inhabitants, as it first had seemed. There were all manner of familiar creatures living here, as well as people. From what Frodo could tell, some were Elves, but others were not. He could only assume that they were other temporarily incarnate Maiar, as they had about them a certain indescribable beauty and inner radiance that he had seen in many at the celebration. At length, he became aware that there were dwellings in the areas they passed, some simple and others quite magnificent, though all seemed a part of the countryside and blended in with the trees and shrubs and waters and grasses, as if they had grown from the land itself and had not been artificially constructed. They were even more a part of the hills and glens than the hobbit homes, and it warmed Frodo to know that the people of this "Shire" respected it and loved it as much as the inhabitants of his own. Some waved or called greetings as they went by, as if they were all old and familiar friends in these parts, and no attempt was made to stop them.

At length, they came to a place that so reminded Frodo of the land where the Stock Road entered the wooded hills to the east of Tuckborough, he found it difficult to imagine that the resemblance was more than coincidental. The path they were following was not as well-traveled as the road through

Tookland, but it wound its ways through gentle hillocks and shady groves that seemed precisely the same as those Frodo had last seen when visiting that area. There were no hobbit holes in the hillsides, but there were other dwellings here and there, places that Frodo could almost believe were homes to a different strain of halfling families. They slowed to a trot as they passed through a denser area of trees, then came to a stream which they then followed around the curve of a larger hill. In a glen between the stream and the hill, there was another copse of what looked like beeches and lindens and what might have been mallorns. At the edge of the grove, Shadowfax halted, following some unspoken request from his master.

Frodo looked around as Olórin dismounted. The place was quite lovely, but he could see no sign of any habitations. "I was only joking when I said something about your home just being a quiet place in the woods," he said, glancing about again to see if there was something he might have missed. "That isn't the truth, is it?"

The Maia laughed brightly as he lifted the halfling from Shadowfax's back and settled him on his feet. "No, not at all, but you've seen how many of the dwellings hereabouts seem to almost disappear into the grass and the woods. Mine is much the same, and rather less impressive. It's not far. Come." As Shadowfax trotted off into the meadow, Olórin led Frodo onto a path that the hobbit would have sworn had not been there moments before. It led through the trees and the underbrush to a broad clearing with a gentle upward slope. Frodo stopped when they entered the open space, first because his companion did so, then because of what he saw before them.

On the other side of the clearing stood a structure the hobbit would have hesitated to call a house, and certainly would not have called unimpressive. It was not huge, but it was rather more than many of the dwellings they had passed on the way. Like them, it blended wonderfully with their surroundings, but it stood out more than the others, in a very unusual way. The place seemed to have grown where it stood, fashioned of many living branches beautifully intertwined to create walls and windows and a roof rather than trees and brush. Delicate vine-like latticework covered several large windows to either side of a pair of doors clearly of the same craftsmanship; the doors themselves opened onto a broad porch three steps above the woodland floor. Shrubs and vines in full fragrant flower hugged the base of the structure and crept up its sides and over its roof. To the right of the structure, a stream wound its way into the grove, but only after spilling down a stony hillside, falling against the smooth stones with gentle music rather than a noisy roar; rays of sunlight sifted through the trembling leaves on the surrounding trees and sparkled upon the moving water. The path they had taken ended at the bottom of the stone and wood steps, but from the look on his face, this was not at all what the Maia had expected to find here.

Frodo thought he understood. "I suppose a great deal would have changed during all the years you were gone," he speculated. Growing things, after all, had a way of shooting up and developing in ways one did not expect, altering the appearance of a place in only a few scant years. After the passage of several thousand, quite a lot might no longer be the same.

Olórin snorted softly. “I suppose they would, but *not* like this! This is not my home. I was there when I returned briefly, after Moria, and I am quite certain this wasn’t here...!”

“But it *is* your home,” a pleasantly musical voice said from behind them, almost laughing. Frodo looked up and felt his eyes widen as he beheld a stunningly beautiful woman, pale skinned, raven haired, with eyes the color of a verdant meadow and soft raiment the hue of a butterfly’s wing. He did not know her, but she looked very familiar, so familiar that he felt sure he should have known her name. She smiled at him, seeing his reaction to her presence. “You must be Olórin’s friend, the halfling Frodo,” she said in those same wonderfully musical tones. “I am honored to meet you, as I was not able to attend the feast in your honor. Welcome to Lórien, and to the house of Olórin, though he apparently knows it not.”

“Very true, I do *not* know it,” the Istar agreed, seeming faintly bewildered and annoyed. “Which I am sure you know quite well, Melian, and indeed intended. Was this change your idea?”

The other Maia shook her head, still smiling. Hearing her name, Frodo understood why she seemed so very familiar. She was Melian, once the Queen of Doriath, the mother of Lúthien Tinúviel, and the ancestor of Arwen Undómiel, who walked in her likeness. “No, indeed, I should not have dared to be so bold, knowing how discomfited you are by displays of honor and recognition, even when they are well earned. The idea was suggested by several of your friends and followers among the Eldar, and was supported by Eönwë after your brief return to us less than two years ago. The Valar themselves approved, but it was Yavanna and Aulë who brought it about. After you were sent back to complete the work of the Istari, I believe they felt especially responsible for the fact that you would need to do this task alone, as their emissaries who should have been your greatest support proved to be the greatest disappointment. It is no palace, my old friend, but it is indeed more suitable to one who has earned the favor of the One, and who may, from time to time, have need to see to the comfort of more than just himself.”

She turned her smile to Frodo, who blushed faintly, realizing that she was referring to him. She was indeed more beautiful than any of the Elf ladies he had ever seen, and there was a sadness in her eyes that was also very Elven. Frodo recalled, then, that Melian’s husband, the Elf king Elwë Singollo, Thingol of Doriath, had been slain many years ago, much to her heartbreak. And while most Elves could be reborn in new bodies and rejoin their people, those who had committed great crimes or were unrepentant of evil things done in their lives were doomed to remain in the Halls of Mandos. Frodo could not recall that Thingol had done any such terrible thing, but then, so much pain and suffering had come about because of his demand that Beren bring him a Silmaril as the bride-price for his daughter Lúthien, it was possible the Elf lord simply did not have the heart to return, and face the shame of what he had done. That would certainly explain the unquenchable sadness in Melian’s eyes, for she had lost everything — her husband and daughter and all they had ever wrought in the world — to Fëanor’s curse upon the Silmarils.

And yet, for all that, she still managed to smile graciously upon the hobbit. “The Elves did the work of crafting the furnishings inside,” she continued, “for they are more familiar with the needs and

comforts of those who must walk in true flesh, but Vána and I helped attend the gardens without. She felt no place could truly be a home without the beauty of flowers, and I feel much the same about the song of birds. It was meant to be a surprise, and I see that it was indeed — but one, I hope, that has not offended you in its presumptuousness, Olórin. All this was done out of love, of your friends and your followers and the Valar, and Lord Eru. It was well meant.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” the Istar admitted, letting go of any irritation he had felt. “To be truthful, I had given no thought to the matter of bringing any guest into my house.”

Melian laughed, a silvery sound of mirth. “I’m sure you had many more pressing matters to concern you in Endor, and even had you considered this, there was nothing you could have done from afar. So those of us who love you did it for you, and we beg your pardon if we have erred in our choice.”

“No need, there is never a mistake in a gift so generously and thoughtfully offered. Thank you, Melian, and extend my thanks to the others who contributed to this, since you know who they are and I do not! You have all helped to make my return home far more joyful than I had ever anticipated.”

When Melian had departed, to allow Olórin to discover all of this gift for himself, Frodo watched her go, then turned back to the wizard. “That was very thoughtful of your friends and all the others,” he remarked, marveling anew at the lovely house. “But you seem... I don’t know, *upset* isn’t precisely the word I want, but not entirely comfortable with this. *Did* they offend you, and you simply didn’t mention it to spare her feelings?”

Olórin shook his head. “No, not at all. I wouldn’t lie about such a thing to an old friend, even if there were any point in so doing, since Melian is quite perceptive in her own right. I was merely... surprised, and perhaps yes, a little uncomfortable. I have never really owned much of anything neither here nor in Middle-earth. What few things I had were given to me by others, or things I found and made use of for a time, like Glamdring. My own creativity has always been in imagination, not in craft, and though I greatly appreciate the artistry of those who pursue such trades, I have never attempted to fashion anything of my own. What little I have made has been for others, not for myself. To be the recipient of so much unstinting generosity in one day makes me feel almost like a thief. But I know in my heart all of this has been done with the best of intentions, and I fancy I shall appreciate it more when I come to know it better.”

“Well, if the inside is as lovely as the outside, then I think you may have just been given the most wonderful home in existence, at least from a humble hobbit’s point of view. Can we go in? Even if you are not curious to see it, I am.”

The Maia laughed merrily, understanding very well the hobbitish fondness for home and hearth, and led the way across the clearing to the sun drenched steps and porch. Closer inspection showed just how lovingly they and everything else had been designed and crafted, not only to meld with the world around them but to delight all the physical senses with their artistry. The same could be said for all they found within. Inside, the house was roomier than it seemed from without, though it lost none of its

comfort and coziness. A large central chamber reached from the porch at the front to another veranda at the back, with an open central hearth that, though currently unlit, would provide light and warmth and cheer without the annoyance of bitter smoke. The ceiling that arched above it twisted into a tall and cunning chimney of sorts, the draughtthrough which any smoke and fumes would be quickly and easily guided away. The floor nearest the hearth was of silver-flecked white stone, the rest of polished ash wood with decorative rugs of Elvish craft and colors. Other furnishings of similar workmanship provided seating, surfaces, storage, and whatever else one could want. There were several rooms on either side of the central hall, chambers for study or sleep on the right, simple kitchen and dining and bathing facilities on the left. Frodo noted the latter with interest.

“Do you normally need such things?” he wondered, thinking that immortal spirits who took on substance as a convenience for others would not be troubled by needs to wash and eat and sleep.

“After a fashion,” Olórin admitted while the hobbit made a thorough examination of the kitchen. “The forms we assume may be but temporary, as we so wish, but they are nonetheless real. If we do not attend them as what they are in their appearance, we do not appreciate them properly, which is a sure path to arrogance, something most of my people honestly wish to avoid. Before my departure to help the resistance against Sauron, I often had Elvish guests, friends and students who had more need of such things than I, though my old home was not as well equipped to accommodate them. I cannot help but think that when this place was made, someone had it in mind that I might be entertaining hobbits in the future.”

Frodo chuckled. “Perhaps they did. This is almost as familiar to me as my own kitchen at Bag End. Though when I asked to see your home, it wasn’t with the expectation that I would be invited to stay for more than the day.”

The Maia sighed softly as he settled into a chair near the cupboard into which the halfling had been peering. “You may stay for as long as you like, my dear Frodo, for as long as you are happy here,” he said, better able to address his friend directly, now that they were on a more comfortable level to look eye to eye. “I will be glad to have you, and there truly is no place in Aman that can offer greater healing for the body and spirit than Lórien. You have suffered so very much, and offering to share my home is the least I can do to help you find peace and happiness again.”

“You’ve already helped me in that way, more than I think you know, but if your offer is in earnest, I would be delighted to accept, for a little while, at least.”

“Of course I spoke in earnest. I have many friends here in Aman, but of a different kind. Those of my own people are more like cousins I have known all my life; we did not choose to become acquainted with one another, we were simply thrown together by the circumstance of our creation. Many I know of the Eldar are followers more than friends, pupils I have taught down the years. You and I began our acquaintance on a similar path, as I did with Bilbo, but we ended our time in Middle-earth on a different one. You learned from me and I from you, and our experiences have been both alike and quite different. We understand one another, for we each fought the same struggle in our own ways, and

that is something I have shared with no one else in quite the same fashion. Our labors have ended well, and now, I will do all I can to make certain you know at least as much happiness as I in the time left before you."

Frodo understood what he was saying, in both greater and lesser ways. His face dimmed as he considered the last of his friend's words. "Thank you," he said quietly. "I suppose I never really gave any great thought to such a thing when I agreed to come here. I know that some of the Elves I've spoken with have said that living with mortals is painful for them, because when they finally have grown accustomed to having us about, we die and leave them forever. I shouldn't want to cause that kind of pain for you."

There was undeniable warmth in Olórin's face as he settled one hand on the hobbit's shoulder. "Do not worry on my account. To my people, even the Elves seem as children. You cannot live here forever, it is true, not without going quite mad; the Second-born, of which your people are a part, were meant to move on to a life beyond the circles of the world. This fate cannot be altered, save by Eru Ilúvatar, and to my knowledge, only thrice has He done such a thing, in decreeing the fates of Tuor and Elwing and Eärendil."

"I am *not* asking for any such privilege...!" the hobbit began.

The Maia's smile deepened. "Of course not. Still, things do not decay here in Aman, and your life will end by your own choice, when you grow weary of the world and wish to pass on. That may be in the normal span of years for a hobbit, it may be much longer, or even shorter if you find you cannot bear living in so strange a world. The choice will be yours. But that does not mean that we shall never meet again. Because I came into Eä to help with the making of it, I am bound by the pact we made with Lord Eru at the beginning. I must remain here until its end, but when that time comes, all of Lord Eru's children will come together again to make the final Great Music. What will happen after that... I do not know, and I would rather not know until the time comes. Some things should be left as a surprise, and being what I am, I have had few enough of those in my life. For as long as you choose to remain here in Aman, and even after, I will be your friend, Frodo. Though I will miss you greatly when the parting comes, I have every intention of enjoying the time before, and if there is aught I can do so that you might also enjoy it to its fullest, you have but to ask."

The halfling considered all the Istar had said, and was deeply touched. "You have already done more than enough for me. From things Elrond told me during the voyage, I realized that long before I understood that I could not find healing and peace in Middle-earth, you had already considered the situation, weighed the possibilities, and were prepared to make the offer to allow me to come here, to the West, should what you feared indeed come to pass. Everything you have told me since our arrival makes me see that you would live your life for my sake, on behalf of our friendship. I shouldn't think anyone deserves such loyalty, but I cannot refuse it. I had thought I might be lonely, but now, I know I never will be. So I thank you again, and hope that the time I am allowed to spend here will be as pleasant for you as I'm sure it will be for me."

“Of that I have no doubt. Well, then, since you asked to come here to see my home, perhaps we should finish that task, since it would seem it is as new and unfamiliar to me as it is to you!” Frodo laughed, and happily agreed.

The remainder of the house was intriguing, both because of its elegant artistry and because it indeed appeared to have taken into consideration the potential presence of guests much smaller than Elves or Men. The only thing Frodo found at all curious was a harp, fairly hidden in a dim corner of the central hall. It was a tall and beautiful thing, taller than the hobbit himself, strung with wires of silver and gold, fashioned of rich warm wood carved with flowing figures and designs and gilding that captured the image of golden leaves being swept along on an autumn wind. In Minas Tirith, Frodo had seen a few such instruments being used by the most accomplished harpers in the city, who could draw music both soft and gentle and powerful as thunder from the strings. This was an even lovelier thing than the Gondorian musicians had used, and it looked older than most everything else he had seen in the house. That uniqueness piqued his curiosity.

“It was something I had before I first left for Middle-earth,” Olórin explained when the hobbit asked about it. “The Ainur tend to be a rather musical people, but I have always had a habit of listening rather than participating. Long ago, one of the Elves, Lindarinë, was extremely fond of music, and he often visited Lórien. There are many here, like Melian, who are especially gifted in those arts, and the days both begin and end with song. On nights when people would gather to make music in the meadows under the stars, he noticed that though I often came to listen, I never took part. When he asked why, I foolishly attempted to evade him by saying I considered myself a poor singer and had no other instrument, so he promptly went to work to remedy the situation by having this made for me. After that, I was obliged to either participate or be elsewhere during the singing, lest I offend him.” There was such a note of exasperation in his voice, Frodo could not help but chuckle.

“I suppose it would have been embarrassing, to be given a gift like this, if you could not play it,” he speculated.

But the Maia shook his head. “No, that was never the problem. Music is very much a part of all my people, even those of us who choose not to use the gift very often. The problem was that I have always felt uncomfortable being an object of attention, which was why I preferred to listen. The Elves have their own gifts of music, but they have been fascinated by those of the Ainur since the first time they heard a one of us sing. I suppose that in a way, this was my punishment for being less than honest with him, implying that I could not sing. Absurd, really, for any Ainu to claim that. Even Melkor could sing. It was his subject and not his skill that marred the Music.”

“Did you decide to participate or be elsewhere, then?”

“Some of both,” Olórin admitted. “It was probably good for me, since at the time, I had a bad tendency to always listen and seldom interact, and often went on journeys alone. One can acquire great wisdom from such behavior, both by observing others and embracing the quiet of solitude, but one can also develop a terrible inner coldness by forever remaining aloof. I had not felt such a frost creeping

upon me, but I believe Lindarinë did. I had gone through some unpleasant times before he came to Lórien, and I suspect he was able to see the shadow chilling my heart more clearly than those who had known me far longer. Lindarinë's gift pushed me into the company of others more often than had been my wont, and in time, it made me realize that I had been moving down a dangerous path that might have ended very badly for me. I was very grateful for what he did. I only wish that I could have helped him as well."

The sadness in that statement puzzled the hobbit. "What happened to him?"

There was a long hesitant pause before he was answered. "He was killed in the Kinslaying. His family tended the harbors of Alqualondë, and he was with them on the day Fëanor led the revolt of the Noldor. He did not take up arms against them, but such was the madness upon Fëanor and his followers that they struck down any who offered even passive resistance. Lindarinë was permitted to return to life, of course, having died in innocence, but the grief of what happened saddened him so greatly, he never sang or made music again. He still dwells on Eressëa, but he is not the person he was before that awful day. Before I was sent with the Istari, I visited him as often as I could, but the joy has gone out of his life. If I knew a way to give it back to him, I would, but this is his own choice, and I cannot change it."

"How very sad," Frodo said softly, studying the harp with new respect. "I don't suppose I would ever have the heart to touch it again, after that."

"I felt the same, for a while, until I realized that it would do more good for others to hear the gift of Lindarinë than for it to remain forever silent. Perhaps in time, the music will reach his ears, and reawaken what has gone dead in his heart. It has been silent for many years now only because I was gone. Eventually, it will sing again — very likely sooner rather than later. I suspect that by tonight, we will have more visitors. There are many I expected to see in Valmar who were not there, even though it was a time of festival, and I have a feeling that my friends were being kind, attempting to avoid being an overwhelming nuisance by showing themselves all at the once. Doubtless I am being given time to settle in again, but I have no delusion that they will wait for long. I fully expect some will show their faces by nightfall."

The hobbit glanced out the window, and saw that the sun was near the noon. "Well," he sighed, "since I would like to stay for at least a few days, if I may, is there anything I can do to help prepare for them?"

Olórin turned his eyes from the harp and smiled. "Yes, you would do well to rest for a time, I think. You may not have been paying attention to such trivial things, but I can see your eyes growing heavier with each passing moment. You've been awake for well more than a full day now, and the journey before that was a time of great excitement and stress. Your brief nap during our ride here has helped, but doubtless a longer and more comfortable rest would help even more. In time, you may find that you will not need to sleep as often or as long as you did in Middle-earth, but for now, rest is

something your body and spirit will desire greatly. Let yourself be healed, Frodo. It is the best thing for you, at the moment."

The hobbit did not argue, but even as he headed for the smallest of the sleeping chambers, another matter occurred to him. "I won't be forced to wear the same clothes forever, will I?" he wondered, thinking that nothing of his own had been brought from the ship, and he had no notion of where it had been taken.

The Maia chuckled. "No, not even my people do that, and for us, clothes are simply a matter of appearance, not a necessity. If no one has thought to send your things here, I will see to it that the matter is taken care of. In the meantime, it shouldn't be too difficult to make do with what is at hand."

"I suppose," Frodo said with a sigh as he turned down the coverlet on the low bed which, he could not help but suspect, had been designed with the express possibility of accommodating a hobbit-sized guest. "I must confess, I grew rather weary of forever sleeping and living in the same clothes during my journey to Mordor. I had hoped never to endure that again."

"And so you shall not," he was assured. Puzzled by the remark, Frodo glanced at his friend, who had opened a chest beneath the window to the left of the bed and from it had drawn out a plain sheet of white silken cloth. Holding it in his hands, Olórin closed his eyes, whispered something that may or may not have been actual words — and suddenly, the cloth changed, not in hue or texture, but in shape. What a moment before had been a piece of bedding was now a simple night-shirt of the kind hobbits preferred, in a perfect hobbit size.

When Frodo gasped, the Maia opened his eyes and chuckled. "Well, I once told you I needed something to work upon in order to do what mortals call 'magic,' and this is no different. Simple enough, actually, since it was just a matter of altering the shape of it and nothing more, and much easier than it would have been back in Middle-earth. I created nothing, merely refashioned what was here, as a seamstress or blacksmith or woodcrafter takes their materials and makes something new of them. This was how we did our work here in Arda to help shape the world after we first entered it. Are you truly that surprised to find I can do this? If it disturbs you, I shan't do it again in your presence."

It took a moment before the hobbit was able to find the wit to shake his head. "Oh, no, no, no, I mean, yes, I'm surprised, but not frightened. You never did anything like this back home, and certainly not so casually. But I suppose there were a great many things you couldn't do at all when you were living in Middle-earth that you can do quite easily, now. It was startling, but not unpleasant. Thank you," he said as he took the proffered gown. "I think I'll sleep much more comfortably, now."

"Then sleep well, my friend, and dream pleasant dreams. Here, you will never have any cause to know fear."

VI

When he had closed the door behind him, Olórin stood for some long moments, leaning against it, his eyes closed as he felt Frodo drift off into sleep. Carefully, gently, he reached out with his own abilities, probing the old wound in the halfling's shoulder and the darkness that still lingered in it like bitter poison. He knew what day it was back in Middle-earth, and had been wary ever since the sunrise; all through the day, he had felt the growing presence of pain and darkness emanating from it. He could not simply take it away, but he could at least provide some temporary protection to shield Frodo against the memories that awakened every time the pain burned anew. He did not have the healing skills of Estë, but at least he could offer a temporary palliative to the hobbit's suffering. When he was as certain as he could be that Frodo would indeed sleep peacefully for a time, free of fear, the Maia opened his eyes and stepped away from the door.

"Lord Irmo?" he said softly, calling to the Lord of Lórien.

The Vala answered at once. "I hear you, Olórin," he said, also quietly, a moment before his tall fana, clad in silver and dusky blue, appeared near the center of the hall. "And I have seen what you saw. Darkness and evil have left dreadful marks on this young halfling, more terrible than I had thought when first I heard of it. Mine are not the skills to heal his body, though Estë will be able to do much for him, given time. His mind and his spirit, however, can be strengthened and healed, and this, I deem, will make Estë's tasks easier, if he is strengthened in his resistance and can break such holds as the shadow has over him."

The Maia was both relieved and reassured by the Vala's confidence. "Then you will help him?"

The master of dreams smiled. "I will, but through you."

Olórin's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, perplexed. "And let him suffer longer than is necessary? My skills are not as great as yours, my lord...."

"Perhaps," was the reply, and the word was not one of doubt. "In many matters, my power is greater than yours, but not in all. Would I value your advice and wisdom as a counselor if all you had to offer was mere validation for what I already knew? The Maiar do not have the breadth of ability with which we of the Valar were gifted, but in some things, your skills exceed our own. Only Lord Eru is omnipotent, and He bestowed His gifts upon all of us in His own ways for His own reasons. That you are the wisest of our people seems fitting to me, for in the humility of your station, you are able to speak such wisdom and be heard and heeded *because* you neither have nor crave any great position of power among our people. What you offer comes not from any desire for mastery or lordship, but from humble honesty. Who better, then, to offer counsel, who has no greater purpose than the good of all and obedience to the will of Lord Eru? Yes, you made errors of judgement in Endor, but that was by cause of the diminishment you suffered, not the fault of any weakness you possessed when you were unfettered by flesh, as you are now again.

“And this, Olórin, is why any help I might have to offer Frodo will be best passed on to him through you. Although my skills in such healing are greater, you have an intimate understanding of the frailties and peculiarities of life in true flesh, which no other AINU in Aman possesses. You know through long and difficult experience things of which I have no knowledge, of how existence within such a body visits pains and fears and limitations upon the spirit that dwells within. You can aid me in comprehending the suffering of your small friend, and I in turn will instruct you in how to help him be healed. I have no doubt that your knowledge of a fully incarnate life will also prove invaluable to Estë. But it will all take time, I fear. He was wounded by a monstrous evil, and only patience and persistence will cleanse it from him.”

The Maia did not argue with Irmo, but he sighed at his last words, and nodded. “I am afraid you are right. The healing of such injuries will not come swiftly, much as we might wish it to be otherwise. But will it help Frodo to tell him he *must* remain here in Lórien? His uncle’s heart lies with the Elves, and I suspect Bilbo will want to remain with them, in Tirion or on Eressëa, or wherever those he calls friends have chosen to settle. Frodo will not want to be separated from him for as long as his healing might require.”

“It will not be an easy decision for him,” Irmo agreed. “And whatever choice he makes, in the end, it will be difficult for you.”

When the Istar looked away, the Vala also sighed, gently. “*I am* sorry, Olórin, truly. We did not consider well enough all of what might come to pass when we sent you and the others to Middle-earth, tied to bodies as of Men. We knew what it would do to your abilities, but we could not anticipate what we did not know ourselves, what such a life might do to your hearts. We were aware, of course, that mortals live in Arda for what seems to us but a few seasons before passing on beyond the circles of the world, but never had any of us lived among them *as* one of them, growing to love them as friends and kindred, only to lose them forever, far too soon. We thought only that they needed help and guidance to stand against the evil of Sauron, and that through the embassy of the Istari, it might be done in a way that would redress wrongs we had made of old. We did not imagine until it was too late, until you had long since departed, what it might do to those we sent when they returned to Aman.”

“Perhaps not,” Olórin answered quietly, looking back at the dream master with an expression of sad resignation. “But *I* knew, even before I was sent. This was not my first journey to Endor. Even though most of my work in the First Age was among the Eldar, I came to know the Atani as well. I saw the pain mortals suffer at the separation of death; I have felt it myself, time and again. I know what it means to grow fond of someone, only to watch them die and be lost until the End. I had no doubt that living as one of them in truth and not as an AINU would be even more difficult, which is part of why I resisted taking on such a burden when Lord Manwë first asked it of me.”

He stepped away from the door to the room in which Frodo was sleeping and moved to one of the windows that overlooked the veranda and the garden beyond. The sun filtering down through the leaves was warm and bright, but there were shadows even it could not dispel. “*It is* difficult now,” the Maia admitted, “to have brought with me two of the dearest friends I have known among the Eruhíni,

well aware that no matter the power and blessing of this land and those who dwell in it, it will never be enough to take from them the Gift of Men and spare me the grief of that inevitable parting. I do not look forward to it, but I will not allow my own fears of what will *someday* come to pass to diminish what is precious *now*. They are still my friends. They have both earned this healing, and I will do whatever I can to help them find it so that they at least will know some time of peace and joy before they must give up life and move on to whatever fate is theirs by Lord Eru's design."

He looked back at Irmo and smiled, very sadly. "I am grateful for your sympathy, my lord, but do not regret this overmuch. I did what I felt was right when I finally agreed to accept Lord Manwë's charge, and I accept this fate as well. I have loved all the Children of Ilúvatar too well for my own good. I blame no one for what happened, not even Sauron. This was my choice. If immortals will take the risk of meddling in the affairs of mortals, they must be willing to endure the consequences. I am. My concern now is for Frodo, not for myself. Bilbo did not suffer under the weight of the Ring as did he, nor was he ever wounded so deeply by the minions of evil. Since the dawn this morning, I have done what I can to protect Frodo from the pain of the wound he suffered three years ago near Amon Sul, but I can only stand between him and it and suffer it myself so that he will not. It is a terrible pain, but not beyond my ability to endure — and to keep silent so that he will not know what I have done, for he would surely protest if he knew. Yet I cannot take it from him forever, and I would see him healed in a more lasting way than this."

Irmo agreed. "And so we shall do all we can to see it come about. Nienna will also help in this, for your sake as well as Frodo's. He is not the only one to have suffered in the cause of destroying Sauron and his Ring. There are many griefs we cannot avoid because they come without warning, and even those we see approaching cannot all be diverted, only weathered. Manwë's choice in sending you was not precisely in error, for there are none of our people who share your depth of love and compassion for all the Eruhíni, but perhaps it would have been better to send someone who cared less deeply and thus would not be hurt as bitterly by such partings."

"And if this had been done, where would Middle-earth now be, my lord? Reunited and flourishing once more under a king who will rule wisely and with great thought for its future benefit, or under the heel of Sauron — or worse, subject to a tyrant of their own kind with dreams of glory and power and conquest?"

The Vala acknowledged the point with a slight nod. "All too likely, I fear. Once he fell to the lure of power, Curumo would have deposed Sauron only to replace him, and without such wisdom as you knew even diminished, there would ever have been the danger that the guidance of the Istari might turn to that of puppet-masters, allowing the Eruhíni to rule but forever standing behind the throne and directing those upon it. Still, knowing how you will give your all for the sake of others, I would have spared you this pain. I will do what is within my power to make certain the time left to the halflings will not be visited ever and anon by suffering."

He turned his own silver eyes toward the room where Frodo slept, his thoughts searching the hobbit's slumbering mind and weighing what he found in those dreams. Presently, he took a deep

breath, then loosed it quietly. "I see he holds his own share of conflict, wishing to be with his uncle, yet desiring to stay here in this land that is so much like his own, to ease the loss he felt in forever being parted from it. You know them better than I, Olórin. Do you think it possible his uncle might be persuaded to come here, too, at least for a while? It would do both of them good to know the healing of Lórien, and once that work is well begun, they need not tarry here if they wish to reside elsewhere in Aman."

Olórin considered the matter for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I see your plan, and I am certain it could be done. Bilbo has been very happy living in Elrond's house in Rivendell, but he has also missed the Shire. He would come to Lórien, I have no doubt, and having seen this part of it, would stay as long as is needed, especially if he knew it would help Frodo. And there are Elves nearby as well, at least one with whom he is already well acquainted, Glorfindel. He might be quite pleased by the notion of spending time in a land so like the Shire that also has inhabitants he perhaps would like to know better."

"And residing here for a while would help restore to him a greater measure of the strength and vigor he has lost to mortal age. Even Estë cannot mend it permanently, but it would be enough to help the old one enjoy his time in Aman as fully as he may."

The Vala's eyes narrowed slightly as he concentrated again upon Frodo and his condition, and what Olórin had already done to shield him from it, at least for the day. At length, he turned away from the door to face the Maia. "You have done as much for Frodo as any could, but I sense that he would not be so pleased with it if he knew the full truth, that his pain and suffering cannot be erased yet, only diverted to another, as you have taken it upon yourself."

"Which is why I have said nothing of it to him," the Istar admitted. "Frodo lost track of the days during the crossing; he does not know that today is the sixth of October back in the Shire. He would indeed object if he knew that to spare him the pain, I must take it upon myself, but I could do no less. It was even more painful, knowing that I might have been able to help him thus back in Middle-earth, had I not been bound and restricted and hampered by the diminishment of mortal flesh. Now, free of it, I have the means to deal with such suffering that he does not, nor is this to me the reminder of a terrible moment of weakness that it is to him. But the physical pain is less to me than the emotional suffering, and I will be glad when the day is over, for it is difficult at times to hide this from him. My hope is that before this day comes round once more, he will be sufficiently healed so that there will be no need for him to bear *any* pain, ever again."

Irmo's bright eyes studied the Maia carefully, on more than a physical level. Olórin did not forbid his curiosity, since he knew well that Irmo was seeking out all he could find about every aspect of Frodo's condition, and any information the dream master might learn from such a study would ultimately be for the hobbit's benefit. When he was finished, a trace of a smile touched the Vala's face, though his eyes were filled with pity. "It does you great credit to be so willing to do this in his behalf. It is an act of true friendship, but it will only make the time of final parting more difficult for you."

Olórin's own expression remained studiously neutral. "As I have said, it is but another of the consequences I accept. As his friend, I can do no less. I have had my heart broken before, Lord Irmo, many times, and at least once far more grievously. I shall endure this not only because I must, but because I know that when it comes, it will be but a part of Lord Eru's greater Music, and not a cruel rejection. For today, it was forgivable to act surreptitiously, so that Frodo's first full day in the Blessed Lands would not be marred by darkness, but he must soon know all of what is planned to help him in his healing."

"Estë and Nienna and I will take counsel for this tonight, and we will discuss it with both of you as soon as we may. The evil that was done to this poor mortal was terrible, and it would be cruel and unjust to devise in haste a cure that will be even more painful than the wounds."

Olórin concurred. "Once this day is past, the shadow of darkness and pain will pass with it for a while. Unless you ponder the matter until the spring, there should be ways enough to lighten his heart and help him find at least some rest and healing until a permanent solution is found."

"We will find an answer sooner than that," the Vala assured him, though at the moment, he felt more concern for the Maia than for the hobbit. "I suggest you also find rest, while you may. Two thousand years of unceasing labor is difficult even for one of our kind, and a single day free from the burden of flesh but weighted instead with suffering borne for another is not lightly brushed aside. I cannot command you as your liege lord, Olórin, for you are my counselor, not my servant. But as one who values both your wisdom and your friendship, I ask you to keep in mind your own welfare. You cannot help Frodo or any other if you give away so much of your strength, you can no longer stand. I see in your thoughts the responsibility you feel for having been the one who presented Frodo with the choice to bear the Ring to its destruction, but remember that you were also but an instrument of a greater will at work. The task fell to you because only you held true to your mission, but in no fashion were you to blame for the existence of such a need. You have told Bilbo that starting is too great a claim for any, and that only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero. It was wise counsel, and applies to you as well. You did not choose Frodo to carry the Ring any more than you yourself forged it. Had you borne some responsibility for its making, then you might well feel guilt in what was necessary to achieve its unmaking, but you did not. I know, it is easier to say than to do, especially when the well-being of those we love is involved, but recrimination will not heal what was done. You must not punish yourself for that which was not your fault."

The Istar had looked away when Irmo had begun to offer his advice, again staring out the window at the dappled sunshine that knew nothing of the cares of the world on which it fell. Presently, he sighed, his blue eyes turning back to the Vala's. "I am not punishing myself, my lord, though I can well imagine it would seem so. Yes, I do feel responsible for Frodo, because *I am* responsible for my own mistakes, and one of them allowed me to be taken prisoner at a time when my help was desperately needed elsewhere. Curumo's lust for power had begun to trouble me over a hundred years before Frodo was even born, and if I had but listened to my own heart rather than his sweetly deceptive assurances, I would never have been so easily lured into his trap. For that, Frodo suffered this very wound which is troubling him now, and for my part in it, I owe him greatly. I could do little for him in Middle-earth,

and I have not the power to heal him fully even here, but I will do whatever I can, whatever I must to make certain he suffers as little as possible. I erred terribly during my mission to Endor, but I have not lost all wisdom. I know that I cannot help him at all if I grow too weak and weary in struggling with this darkness. If needs be, I shall call upon others to help, should I be unable to bear it until the day is over. I am not so proud to think that I must do this alone, at any cost, when it is not necessary. I would have gladly accepted help in facing the Balrog, had any of our company been able to challenge it and survive. Circumstances worked against me then, but they are quite different now."

"Yet how much will you take upon yourself before you ask for aid? I do not doubt your sincerity," Irmo hastened to add when a frown darkened Olórin's face. "You would not lie, and I know it well. But it is plain to me that you *do* hold yourself to blame for *all* this halfling suffered after he took up the burden of the Ring, not only the matter of your delay caused by Curumo's betrayal. Your vision in this matter is not as clear as might be, not because of pride, but because of pity. You care, perhaps too much, what will become of him."

"And what would you have me do otherwise?" the wizard answered, exasperation and frustration finally evident in his manner. He moved away from the window and strode across the room toward the hearth, unable to stand still. "When I was sent to Endor, I was not told to leave behind my heart; indeed, if I had done so, all would have come to ruin! I have *always* cared deeply what will become of the Eruhíni; that was no secret when I was made a part of this embassy. I was, in fact, under the impression that it was *because* of my love for them that I was chosen to go. So I went, and I did what was required of me, and now, I cannot go back and undo any part of it. I was asked to give whatever I could to help save Middle-earth and her peoples, and so I have done. If you wish me to cease caring for those of Endor who came with me and allow others to assume the full task of their healing, then you must send me away and give me other work to do, for I cannot leave this unfinished!"

"Not even if it will drain you of all strength and break your heart yet again?" the Vala asked softly, able to remain calm in spite of the agitation he was witnessing.

The look with which Olórin favored him was not defiant, but it was most definitely unyielding. "I have been asked to suffer such things before, for less worthy causes. I will do it again, if needs be. I was made a steward of people who looked to me for guidance and protection. Should I abandon my charge before my task is fully completed?"

Irmo wanted to say yes, but he understood that such an answer would not be well received, even though he would have meant only that it should be given into the hands of others so that Olórin could finally rest. But he knew this Maia very well indeed, and was aware that he could not leave his appointed tasks for others to finish before he had given his all, no more than he could willingly turn to evil. His sense of responsibility and commitment ran too deep. Instead, the dream master sighed. "No. I know you far too well to even ask such a thing of you. But as you are Frodo's friend, so have I been yours. I ask only that you allow others to help so that you will not be hurt. You have said that Frodo would object if he knew what you are doing for him in silence, and rightly so, if you do thus to your own

detriment. He would no more wish to see you come to harm than I, especially not for his sake. Is suggesting that you permit others who care for you to assist in this task truly too much to ask?"

The Maia's frown remained firmly in place for a minute or so, then at last began to fade. "No, my lord," he said quietly, his irritation melting in the face of Irmo's placid reason. "I try very hard not to allow myself to be burdened with regrets, because I know well that the past cannot be changed. Yet of all the errors I made during my life, none have been so bitter to me as this one. Curumo insisted that the Ring was lost forever, that it would not trouble us again — and I should have known better than to let such reasoning persuade me to do what he wanted: nothing. So long as the Ring endured, even lost, Sauron would endure, and thus what purpose would be served by standing idle and waiting? All it did was allow the Enemy to gather greater strength, to renew himself and rebuild his machinery of war so that few could stand against him, whether or not he possessed the Ring. I was not the only one duped in this way, but I was supposedly Curumo's peer, one who had known him long. I should have also known him *better*, and that folly I regret deeply. Many suffered for it, and though I cannot help them all, I will at least try to make amends to the one who suffered most. I would not have anyone else share responsibility for my mistakes, even willingly, yet I know I cannot do this alone. I have reason to believe that some who live nearby will wish to visit this evening, and if it will ease your concerns, I shall ask those who have the skill to assist me, if they are willing. Will that suffice, or need I make a formal promise?"

The Vala shook his head and smiled. "No. You may be quite impossibly stubborn at times, but your wisdom has always been much greater than your obstinacy. It has never been necessary for you to make any kind of vow to bind you to your word, for what you say you do, unless some disaster prevents it, and thus it has always been. I understand why you need to do this. I would not press the issue if I could not see how badly you also need rest and healing, my friend. It was plain when you returned briefly two years ago, and it is all the more evident now. My servant Ványalos is your nearest neighbor, is he not?"

Olórin confirmed it. "Yes, and he is the first I expect to come visiting, since I saw him only briefly yesterday, serving in the Máhanaxar during the receiving ceremony, but not at all through the remainder of the celebration. He and I were good friends, though we were not in the same service, and I had expected to meet him at the festival."

"Which you did not, undoubtedly, because he took it upon himself to make certain all was in order here before you arrived. If it will not offend you, I shall speak to him of this matter before I return to consult with Estë and Nienna. For all his seemingly impetuous nature, Ványalos has a good heart, and has ever been among my people one of those most skilled in discerning the emotions of those around him, and offering what help is most needed. Let him take on your task for a few hours so that you might rest for a while. It would do both of you good, since it is plain that you are weary, and Ványalos could benefit from learning more about the Second-born, as he has never visited Endor."

The Maia's first impulse was to refuse the idea, but it took no more than an instant for him to acknowledge the wisdom of it. "It will not offend me," he said truthfully, "but let me ask the favor

myself. He and the others did a splendid job of preparing this new home for me, but they neglected to provide it with food, and if I am to have even one hobbit as a guest for a time, it will be necessary to correct that oversight as soon as possible. Unless many things changed while I was gone, Ványalos knows how to acquire what is needed, and I will be able to attend to both matters at once."

Had almost anyone else made such a suggestion, Irmo might have been suspicious of a deliberate attempt to manipulate circumstances to avoid following the Vala's advice as much as possible, but the dream master did indeed trust his counselor to do whatever he said both honestly and to the best of his ability. "An excellent idea," he approved, smiling. "Ványalos could do with some exercise of all his abilities, even those more mundane."

His smile dimmed. "Please understand, Olórin, that I do not ask these things because I do not trust you, or believe that you are not sufficient to the tasks at hand. My only concern is for your well-being. I need not worry about Frodo's, since you are clearly doing more than enough to make certain none of us fail in our attempts to aid him. But I cannot stand by and watch you come to harm for his sake or any other's, if it is within my power to prevent it. We have asked so much of you already — far more, I now see, than perhaps we should have. There was little we could do to help you in Endor without violating the rules we ourselves had made. Let us make amends for our mistakes now, and do what we can, for both of you. For we also have bitter regrets."

For a moment, Olórin said nothing; then he conceded. "I understand, my lord," he said, "and I do appreciate your concern. If you would know the full truth, my obstinacy is not only due to guilt. I have been fond of the halflings ever since I first became aware of their existence, and the more I knew of them, the more I loved them, with all their faults and failings and unusual ways. They were dear to me long before I knew for certain that Lord Eru had fashioned in them a part of my song. I am grateful He did not confirm that suspicion to me before I entangled Frodo with the matter of the Ring, or I could not have done it. I would have looked for other ways, other people, some other method to take the Ring to Mordor and destroy it. I might have even been foolish enough to attempt it myself, and I know that would have ended in utter disaster, for myself and all of Arda. It was very difficult to leave Middle-earth because of my fondness for the Little Folk; being permitted to bring two of my friends made the separation more bearable. I know that inevitably, I will lose them, as well as all direct contact with their people still in Endor, but I cannot begin grieving it now, or the time I do have will be wasted. I am greedy of every moment I will be given, and because of that, you may be assured that I *will* accept your help, and that of any other who can give Frodo relief from his suffering, be it temporary or lasting. They are as family to me, in ways I could not have understood before living an incarnate life among them. I want only what is best for them, as any parent does for their children. Can you not understand that?"

"Not quite in the same fashion as do you," Irmo admitted, "for matters of parents and children are a gift Lord Eru gave to the Eruhíni, not to those of us who sprang from His thought. But I understand how *you* feel, and that is enough. I will not press the issue further. Ványalos will provide any assistance you need for now, and I am certain you know that you may call upon me or any of my servants at any time, should you require aid. In the meantime, I will do all I can to find the means of

Frodo's healing as swiftly as possible." He inclined his head graciously in a gesture of farewell, then vanished.

Olórin studied the place where Irmo had been for several moments, reflecting upon their conversation. He knew that he was behaving in the way that generally earned him the description of impossible, but more than on any other occasion, he felt that this time, he was justified in his behavior. He doubted that Frodo's welfare meant quite as much to any of the other Ainur, because none of them understood what it was like to actually live as one of the Eruhíni in the ways he now grasped it. He did not blame them for the lack, but so long as he knew it existed, he was determined to make up for it by whatever means were necessary.

But he also admitted that the dream master was right about not pushing himself so far, he could not help Frodo effectively, if at all. After taking a moment to assure himself that the hobbit was still serenely asleep and would remain so for a while, he went off to make good on his promise to find and enlist other aid.

The dwellings in the hill country of Lórien were neither too near together nor absurdly far apart. The wooded glen and hillside where Olórin's home had been built were spacious, but the walk to the next nearest habitation was not long, taking perhaps ten minutes at most at an unhurried pace. Around a bend of the hill to the west, the woodland thinned and ended, and it was there in an open grassy sward bright with flowers where the home of Irmo's servant, Ványalos, was situated. Though the structure was not opulent or intrusive to the countryside, it was much larger than Olórin's home had been before others had taken it upon themselves to rebuild it for him.

Ványalos had no spouse or friends who lived with him, but he was an extremely social person, and often entertained many guests. He was, by everyone's admission, some reflection of the essence of merriment, but one that delighted in mild mischief from time to time, though his heart and spirit were true to the will of Eru and deeply compassionate when compassion was needed. He had an excellent sense for determining such occasions, but the timing of his humors was not quite as keen; thus, he spent his time in Aman, helping the whole of Arda by acting as a messenger and servant to Irmo and Estë among people who knew him well and would not be puzzled by his sometimes inappropriately mercurial behavior. To those who met them for the first time, Olórin and Ványalos appeared to be complete opposites, as the former generally seemed quiet and thoughtful while the latter appeared whimsical and quite unable to keep silent for more than a few moments, but those who came to know them better understood that they were more alike at heart. Olórin himself knew that he owed much to his neighbor, for long ago, in what had then felt like the very blackest part of his own life, it had been Ványalos who had helped him learn to laugh again.

As he walked to his neighbor's home, Olórin noted that the path between them, which he had thought would have been well overgrown during the years of his absence, was still quite well-trodden. That confused him for a bit, since the trail led nowhere but to his own home, until he remembered what

Irmo had said about Ványalos taking it upon himself to see that the new house was in order. Doubtless there had been considerable coming and going, enough to keep the path open, at least in recent weeks, though he would not have been surprised to discover that Ványalos had been keeping an eye on his home for the past two thousand years, simply to prevent it from being overrun with woodland growth and turned into an oversized refuge for birds and other small creatures.

A pair of ancient elms shaded the path before the entrance to Ványalos' house; to Olórin's eye, very little about the place had changed during his many years of absence. The greatest difference, in fact, was how quiet it seemed, as deserted as his own home before he had returned. For the gregarious Ványalos, that was quite unusual, unless he was off on a journey for the Lord and Lady of Lórien. Briefly, he wondered if that were indeed the case, and he had chosen a poor time to visit, but he quickly realized that Irmo would not have suggested Olórin ask his servant for aid if he would be gone for any length of time. Perhaps—

“Olórin!”

The wizard's reflections were interrupted when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, he was lifted up from behind and swung about, almost like a child caught up unawares by an adult appearing out of nowhere. That was not entirely impossible, he thought as he endured the surprise welcome, given the person he was coming to visit. He heard bright laughter accompany the startling embrace, and when he was set down again, he could not help but smile.

“After two thousand years, I might have expected to see some evidence of greater maturity,” Olórin said with mock sternness as he turned to face his neighbor. “But if you have changed at all, Ványalos, you have only grown more impertinent.”

The culprit laughed again, well aware that he was being teased. The Maia Olórin had come to visit was significantly taller than he, no matter what fana either of them chose to adopt. He had the height and typical build of an Elf, slender and graceful. His clothing was of deep blues and silver grays, the colors of the forest at midnight, but his hair was bright red-gold, caught up in a single long braid that fell down his back nearly to his waist. He had an almost impish look to his ruddy and sharply handsome features that was vaguely reminiscent of Pippin, as was the gleam in his gray eyes. Like many servants of the Valar, he was quite fair to look upon, and it took much to wipe the pleasant smile from his face. It was firmly in place at the moment as he gave his friend a second and more proper welcoming embrace. “I would say you are quite wrong, *pityandil*,” he answered merrily, “if I did not know it to be a lie. I'm afraid you may be right, but I hope it will not mean the end of our friendship.”

“Certainly not!” he was assured as the hug was returned. “After so many years of dealing with dark and evil matters, I am very grateful to return to a home even more joyful than the one I left. I hear that you put considerable effort into preparing it for me, so much so that you willingly gave up a time of festival to make certain all was in order.”

"I did my best," Ványalos said with what, for him, was considerable humility. His eyes twinkled as he added, "Although I did not give it up entirely. I was there for a time yesterday — or did you not see me serving in the Máhanaxar?"

"I did indeed, and if you had allowed Frodo to slip or fall in helping him dismount, I assure you, you would have borne the wrath of all his friends, his uncle not the least!"

The tall Maia chuckled. "Yes, for all his apparent infirmity, the old one seemed to have considerable fire yet within him. But truly, he was half your size, my little friend, and thus no burden at all. Yet they are quite a remarkable people, from what I have seen and heard. I hope to be allowed to make their acquaintance better, soon, if I may."

"You may — sooner than you may suspect." Olórin then explained his primary reason for coming. As he spoke, his neighbor's manner grew less frivolous. Ványalos looked off in the direction of the Istar's house, and was silent for some moments after Olórin had finished speaking.

Presently, he sighed. "I see now why you value these friends so highly," Ványalos said, completely in earnest. "I had not realized the full depth of what Sauron had done in Endor, 'til now. This little one has been burdened and wounded by an evil few of our own people have dared to face. It is a marvel to me that he survived this quest at all, far less having taken such comparatively little hurt from it! But I also see that his injuries run deep, terribly deep. I will do whatever I can to help you protect him from it, of course, until Lord Irmo and the others have found ways to heal him more thoroughly. Indeed, I will be glad to do so, for I have often regretted my lack of direct experience with the Second-born, and felt I should be able to find some way to do more on their behalf, and this may be my last opportunity."

The wizard breathed a soft sigh of relief, even though he had expected nothing less from his old friend. "Then there *is* another way in which you can be of assistance. I have noticed that this house was uniquely prepared to accommodate visitors much smaller than we are wont to see in this part of Lórien, but while those who built and furnished it took into account hobbit size, they failed to account for hobbit appetites. I have never quite determined whether it was by Lord Eru's design or merely a quirk of their own choosing, but though others call them halflings, their hunger is astonishingly out of proportion to their size. Frodo is not gluttonous, even by ordinary standards among mortals, but he does need to eat, and there are no provisions in the house. Unless your fondness for food and drink has diminished over the years, I had hoped you would be able to find at least a few such things before Frodo wakes."

Ványalos' bright smile returned. "It has not, and I easily can find whatever you or he might wish, so long as his people — hobbits, did you call them? — eat the same foods as the Eldar, and us."

"For the most part, though they have tastes of their own that you might find interesting, should you be brave enough to discuss matters of food and cooking with any hobbit. Thank you, old friend, for all your help. If there is aught I can do in return...."

The tall Maia chuckled. “Yes, indeed there is! You can hie yourself back to your new house straightaway and spend some time becoming acquainted with the comforts of the bed that the Elvish craftsmen made for you. Lord Irmo was right when he said you need rest, at least as much as your small friend. I did not spend the night in revelry or the morning traveling across the wide country from Valmar, and I can attend to both of your requests at once with no trouble at all.”

A shadow of doubt touched Olórin’s expression like thin clouds drifting over the noon sun, dimming it. “I do not want to risk Frodo’s well-being....”

“And you will do so far less if you leave the matter to me for now than continue to take it upon yourself. I may not be as gifted in wisdom as you, *pityandil*, but what gifts were given me, I have not failed to learn to use as well as I am able. We knew each other well ere you accepted the final mission of the Istari. Humble you may have ever been, but never were you weak or frail. Yet I look upon you now, and though I see my friend of old, he seems to my eyes to be fragile, as if he were made anew from thin glass that though filled with light may yet shatter if too much weight is placed upon it. You are grown pale with exhaustion; you need time to regain your strength, and not even the power of Lórien can give you rest and healing if you will not avail yourself of it properly. I promise you, I will not let Frodo suffer, nor allow him to know what is being done to guard him until you deem the time appropriate. I am not familiar with the minds and hearts of the Second-born, but I am able to perceive that in their truest essence, they differ little from those of the Eldar — or even our folk. We are all Eru Ilúvatar’s children, in our own fashions. If I feel myself unable to continue the task properly, I will be less hesitant to ask for help than you have been, for I have none of your feelings of personal responsibility for the hobbit’s condition. Nusíriilo and his spouse would gladly assist, as would Úrambo and Túrante, and if need be, I would not hesitate to call upon Lord Irmo himself. Since acquiring the provender your guest will need is a simple matter of asking the persons who can provide it, I will not be so distracted that I cannot keep watch over him at the same time, even at a distance.”

His fair face darkened with wistful sadness. “You used to trust my judgement in such matters, Olórin. Has your time in Endor changed you so greatly that you cannot accept the word of an old friend without suspicion?”

The wizard looked away for a moment to hide a faint wince of remorse, then looked back again, apology in his expression. “I would prefer to believe it has not,” he confessed, “but perhaps the years I have spent in Middle-earth have left more of a mark upon me than I had thought. It was difficult, sometimes, struggling to achieve a goal that seemed forever beyond reach, hampered both by foes and by some I had thought were friends.”

Ványalos nodded soberly. “I have heard what became of Curumo. I never knew him well, since my tasks here in Aman seldom took me to the places where he worked and dwelt. I knew he was proud, but never would I have guessed that it would lead him to such incredible folly, to betray not only those whom he was charged to protect and serve, but to turn against his own brethren! Such treachery would make anyone suspicious for a time, especially when matters concern the safety of those one holds dear.

I am not offended, and I promise I will do all I am able to ensure that Frodo comes to not a moment's harm or discomfort while he is in my care."

"Then that is insurance enough, and I will be able to rest well. Thank you, Ványalos, and please extend my gratitude to anyone you choose to enlist in this effort. I know it is little compensation to offer, but I would be more than honored if you and my other friends who made this splendid new home for me joined me there this evening."

The tall Maia's merry smile returned in full. "It is more than enough, especially since it includes an opportunity to meet and become better acquainted with your unusual young guest. Rest well, *pityandil*. All will be well."

For once, Olórin did not doubt it. Thus, after genially enduring another exuberant farewell embrace, he returned home, to sleep for a time as he had not slept in almost two thousand years.

VII

The sun was falling to the west, sending a stream of brilliance through the window in Frodo's room when the hobbit finally awoke. He was surprised to find that so much time had passed — it appeared to be late afternoon, at the very least, possibly six hours since he had retired — but his sleep had been sound and peaceful, more refreshing than any rest he had taken for a very long time. He wondered if Olórin had intended to wake him or had planned to let him sleep himself out. The house was quiet, the only sounds that of birdsong out in the trees, the distant babble and rush of falling water cascading over stones, and a soft, musical chiming from the back of the house. The latter was erratic, rising and falling with the rustling of the breeze, so Frodo could only suppose it was some sort of wind-bells that he had not noticed before.

A gentle answering rumble in his stomach told him that he would need to find some nourishment soon, but not immediately. He did not recall seeing any food in the kitchen, however, and he had no idea how one went about obtaining such things here. The Elves needed to eat, he knew, but though the Ainur did from time to time, it was not required for them. Well, if he wanted the question answered, he supposed he would have to find Olórin to ask it. He slipped from the bed and was about to dress in his dusty traveling clothes when he decided that for the moment, there would be no harm in moving about the house in the white silk nightshirt. Its style was not unlike many garments he had seen on others here, and if he was going to stay here for a few days, he really wanted to ask if there was a way to fetch some of his own things before he put on the old clothes once again.

The central hall, he quickly saw, was empty, but as he entered it, he heard low, very soft humming coming from the kitchen. That caught his attention at once, and he headed in its direction. "Olórin?" he began as he stepped across the hall and through the open arch between the two rooms, expecting to find his friend. Instead, he found a startlingly tall stranger dressed in dusky blue, red-haired, bright-eyed, with a fair face filled with merriment. He was in the process of taking things from a number of baskets and putting them in their appropriate places in the pantry cupboards; he paused when Frodo arrived, looked up, and smiled.

"Olórin is asleep, at the moment," the fellow said, his tones respectful of that fact and clearly unwilling to cause a disturbance. "As he needs the rest very much and we who prepared the house neglected to provide it with food and drink, not knowing precisely when he would return to it, he asked if I might help in that matter. I am Ványalos, Olórin's nearest neighbor; my house is just outside the wood, in the meadow to the west. You would be Master Frodo, of course."

The hobbit nodded, surprised to find that he was not at all disturbed by the presence of this stranger. But then, he realized the fellow wasn't quite a stranger at all. "Yes, at your service," he answered with a proper bow of greeting. "I remember you! You were in the city yesterday, and helped me off the pony."

"Guilty on all counts," Ványalos said with a chuckle as he resumed setting the things he had brought where they belonged. "I am a servant of Lord Irmo and Lady Estë, and since they have never

been able to find appropriate tasks for me in the lands beyond Aman, I serve as well as I am able here in the Blessed Realm."

"Does that include going to market for other servants?"

The Maia laughed. "Sometimes, although this was no command, merely a favor for an old friend. Olórin and I are not of the same people. He is a servant of Lord Manwë."

Frodo blinked, feeling a bit confused. As he slipped into a chair at a table that was neither too high for him nor too low for taller folk, he tried to work things out. "Then why does he live here?" he wondered aloud. "This is rather far from Taniquetil."

"Very true," Ványalos agreed. Finished with the task of putting things away, he reached into one of the baskets and brought out a linen cloth, which he opened and offered to Frodo. In it were a number of small white biscuits, still warm from the oven with a delightfully sweet fragrance. "Olórin mentioned that your folk enjoyed the pleasures of food and drink as much as I," he explained as he set them on the table after Frodo had taken one, then fetched goblets and a bottle of some pale golden drink, the color of sunshine. "Which was why, I am sure, he asked me to take care of this for him, since I am well acquainted with every source for such things throughout the length and breadth of Aman. A minor benefit of serving as a messenger for so many years. There will be a more substantial meal later, of course, but from what I know of the Eruhíni, it is best not to eat too heavily immediately upon awakening. Have you enjoyed your stay here, thus far?"

"Yes, indeed," Frodo replied, politely waiting for Ványalos to finish pouring the beverage and join him at the table before sampling the biscuits. They tasted even better than they smelled, and indeed sat very nicely inside, quieting his rumbling belly. "Although I've spent most of my time here in Lórien sleeping. And I must admit, I'm still rather puzzled. Where I come from, servants usually live near the people they serve. Why does Olórin live here, and not closer to Lord Manwë's home?"

The tall Maia smiled at he settled into one of the other chairs and took one of the biscuits to nibble. "Distance is not so great an issue for our kind," he explained. "We can speak to each other when we are very far apart, through our minds, and if needs be, we can move from one place to another in the blink of an eye, if we are not within a fana or are willing to shed it. It is also possible for us to stay in one place and send a reflection of ourselves to another, to watch and listen. The messages I carry for my lord and lady are generally sent thus out of courtesy, or because some item needs to be sent with it. We may move ourselves about with ease, but we cannot do the same with things; they must be carried."

"Very interesting," the hobbit admitted. "I hadn't thought that you might move about that way, but considering some of the things Olórin's told me, it makes perfectly good sense. So I suppose it doesn't really matter much where you choose to live, if you can be called and go wherever you need to go at a literal moment's notice."

“Quite so, though most of us Maiar do tend to choose permanent dwellings near the Vala we serve, and visit other places from time to time, as we need or desire. Olórin’s situation is... unusual.”

Frodo looked up at Ványalos from over the rim of his glass as he took a sip of what tasted like refreshingly light wine. He was quiet for a moment after he set down the goblet. “I’m not sure if that sounds good or bad. He wasn’t... forced to live somewhere else, was he?” From what he had seen of the Vala king and his relationship with Olórin, the hobbit could not imagine what the wizard could possibly have done that would have warranted the punishment of exile.

Ványalos chuckled. “No, he chose to live here, and Lord Manwë gave his permission. Most of the Valar host servants of the others in their lands, to act as emissaries and messengers on their behalf. Olórin is Lord Irmo’s favorite counselor, and he often visits the Lady Nienna as well, but Lord Manwë did not appoint him as his emissary to Lórien; he asked to be allowed to dwell here, and it was granted.” He sighed softly when he perceived that his explanation did little to lighten Frodo’s puzzlement. “I see that I am not providing a sufficient answer. I have no doubt that you are Olórin’s friend, but it would seem that he has not told you much about himself and his past.”

“He hasn’t,” Frodo confirmed, “but mostly because he couldn’t, I think. Until yesterday, he found it very difficult to remember what his life had been like before he came to Middle-earth; there was much he was not allowed to remember, and things he could not recall because he was living like one of us, in a mortal body. After he was freed of it.... Well, there simply hasn’t been much time to talk about it. However, I don’t mean to pry....”

The Maia dismissed that worry with a casual wave of one hand. “If you were asking after secrets, I would consider it so, but curiosity over what is common knowledge is not prying. If you like, I will answer your questions, but with one condition.”

Frodo felt he understood. “That I not tell Olórin?”

To his surprise, Ványalos shook his head. “No, quite the opposite. I want you to tell him that you heard this from me. Should I have unintentionally made an error, then he will know who is to blame, and can correct me. But I hope you do not mind listening to rather lengthy tales, for this story is not a brief one.”

Frodo laughed. “You undoubtedly do not know hobbits very well, Master Ványalos. After food and drink, we love stories and songs nearly as well, and so long as we are provided with the first two, we will happily go on listening to the latter until we fall asleep from weariness. Which, if the teller or singer is good, seldom happens. I have wanted to know more about Gandalf — that is what my people called Olórin in Middle-earth — for a very long time, and if you think he will not object, I will be very happy to listen to the tale from you, and for once spare him my curiosity.”

Ványalos chuckled softly as he took another sip of wine, his eyes fixed on Frodo. Though they were bright with good humor, for a moment, the halfling sensed something deeper in the Maia’s gaze,

as he sometimes had after the war, when he caught Gandalf watching him. Usually, the wizard had been concerned for Frodo's well-being and was looking for signs that he was unwell, though he found it difficult to imagine the same worries were prompting this glance from Ványalos. He felt perfectly fit, without a care in the world, and if he was seeking some sign that the hobbit was ill, Frodo felt certain he would find none. The moment passed quickly, however, when the Maia smiled.

"Then I will start at the beginning," Ványalos said, "for you must know of that to understand the end. Do your people know of how the world began, of the Great Music sung before it was made?"

The hobbit nodded. "Yes — well, that is, I know, because Bilbo, my uncle, translated some of the great books of the Elves and encouraged me to read them when I was young. I know about the *Ainulindalë* and those who sang it, in the way the Elves recorded what they knew of it. And only yesterday, Olórin told me about the things he had sung as his part in it."

"Then you know he is not a prideful sort at heart. When Lord Eru told the Valar that those who wished might come into Arda to help shape it into the vision they had been given of the Song made manifest, He told them they could bring with them those of our Maia people who were also willing to come, to be their helpers and servants. Like many of us, Olórin wanted very much to be a part of this effort, but he did not think any of the greater Powers would be inclined to invite him to join them, since he had little to offer in their service, being gifted mostly in matters that deal with the small and seemingly insignificant. So it was that when the time came and all was made ready for the host to pass on into the physical world, Manwë saw that Olórin was not with them, that he had remained behind. 'Do you not wish to come and be a part of this great work?' the king asked him, and Olórin said yes, he did, but as none of the Powers had invited him, he could only think that he was not wanted, or welcome. Manwë laughed at that, but kindly. 'Little one,' he told him, 'we did not ask because we knew there was no need. We had no doubt you wished to come, and we could not decide which of us should have the honor of counting you among our people.' So Manwë asked him to be numbered among his servants, which Olórin accepted gladly, and came into Arda with the rest of us.

"But because of his very nature, though he looked to Manwë as his lord, he would offer his service to any who needed it, a generosity of which the king approved most highly. At some time or other, Olórin has done service for all of the Valar — save the Nameless One, whom he would not serve, no matter what power or wealth was offered him. Melkor hated him terribly, for there was in Olórin's gifts an ability to help others counter the fear and despair which were Melkor's chief weapons. Had the Nameless One known that Olórin went to Endor during the First Age to work against him thus in secret, he would have bent his will to find and destroy him. But as Olórin acted in silence, unmarked or unseen, Melkor supposed, as did others, that he did not have the courage to leave the safety of Aman. They were wrong, of course, but Olórin wished the mistaken notion to remain, so that if his help was needed again, he would be free to give it."

"But he told me that he was afraid to come to Middle-earth when the Valar sent him as one of the wizards," Frodo pointed out. "What you say makes it sound as if he should not have been."

Ványalos nodded as he added more liquid to their glasses. "Perhaps so, but though the Istari were to be sent in disguise, they could not be secret, not as he had been during the conflicts with Melkor. When Manwë proposed sending him on this errand, I think he feared that whatever guise he adopted, it would not be enough to hide his true identity from Sauron. Melkor never learned that Olórin was the one responsible for some of what had been done to thwart him during his reign of terror, but ere the end of it, Sauron knew. He became aware that another of his own folk was working against his master, and though he made the discovery too late for it to be of use to Melkor, he uncovered the identity of that opponent. But Olórin knew Sauron better than Sauron knew him, for he had had ample opportunity to watch Melkor's lieutenant openly at work, while Sauron and he never met face-to-face. When he was sent as one of the Istari, Olórin's fears were not unwarranted, for indeed, if Sauron *had* recognized him, he would have done his best to seek vengeance. One might have argued that this too could have worked in favor of their mission, giving the Dark Lord a target to seek other than the people of Middle-earth, but Olórin's premonitions were correct. Had he not been able to work quietly, for the most part beneath Sauron's notice, all would have come to ruin, in the end. At any rate, I suspect you know more of this part of the tale than I, and I am letting the story get far ahead of itself."

Frodo smiled sheepishly. "I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Again, the Maia dismissed the apology without a second thought. "Think nothing of it, since I interrupted myself, going off and discussing Melkor. To come back to where I left off: After we entered into Arda and saw all the work that lay ahead of us, giving shape to the vision Lord Eru had shown us, Olórin was one of the busiest of us, for though he had no notions of doing great deeds and making grand things, he was forever a help to all who needed it, in whatever small ways he was able to give it. He sought neither praise nor reward, and always said the joy of seeing a task well finished was more than reward enough for him. Thus he earned the respect of all the Valar, whether he craved it or no, and many of the Maiar as well. Strangely enough, it was among our own people that he encountered the most adversity, for though Lord Eru gifted us with many abilities and special skills, He did not make us free from emotional failings, such as jealousy. And this was what brings us to the part of the tale that will answer your original question.

"In the many thousands of years before the awakening of the Eldar, much needed to be done to shape the world into the vision we had beheld, and each of the Valar took upon themselves some portion of that task. They and their Maia servants worked long and hard to complete it; some had greater roles, some lesser, others labored more diligently while some were less eager, having been disappointed to discover that Æa was not fully formed when they first arrived. Lord Manwë's appointed work concerned matters of the air and the skies, of the breath that would sustain life in the physical world and the creatures who would live within the sky. Olórin had no specific larger role in his service to this project, but he helped all of Lord Manwë's servants as they needed or asked for it.

"There was one who used his assistance rather more often than the others: Aránayel, one of the lesser handmaidens of Lady Varda. She had a glorious voice, as beautiful as Melian's but more haunting. Upon hearing it, Lord Manwë chose her voice to be the sound of the wind, for he wished it to have music to it, as Ulmo had given music to the sounds of the sea. Aránayel was ever appointed to accomplish

what to her seemed great tasks, and she took considerable pride in this distinction. She chose for herself a fana of exquisite beauty, to rival her voice, and thus she won for herself the admiration of many. Olórin was no less affected by her charms than any other of our people, and he was glad that she would accept his help as often as she did. He became quite fond of her, and in time he fell in love with her, for to him it seemed that she took pleasure in his company, as she often accepted his aid to help with matters she might easily have accomplished on her own."

Frodo could not help but smile. "I would never have imagined that," he admitted, "not back in Middle-earth, at any rate. When we never know a person as anything but old, it's very hard for us mortals to think of them as ever having been young, much less capable of things that only young people are supposed to do. The wizard I knew always seemed much too practical and sensible."

Ványalos laughed softly. "Having seen him as you knew him until he was freed to be himself again, I can understand how you feel. I did not know Olórin when he fell in love, but from what I have been told, even those who were his friends then thought he was acting rashly, and making a grave mistake. Aránayel was beautiful, yes, and she had talents few others could hope to match, but she also loved herself above all else. She was vain and self-serving, and to others, it seemed that the attention she gave to Olórin came not from affection but from selfishness. He would do anything for her; she was well aware of it, and so she took advantage of it. They warned him against her, but he would not listen. He knew her better, he told them; he had worked with her too closely and for too long to be mistaken about this. Besides, he said, he did not expect her to love him in return; he knew only that he loved her, and wished for her to know it. His friends felt it unwise for him to speak of it, and for a time, they managed to persuade him to hold his peace. But being simple in his own heart and still young, as we all were, he did not fully understand their warnings; thus, he did not heed their advice forever. He felt certain of his love and even more certain that no harm could possibly come from revealing it, and so, though it took some time before he was able to find the courage to speak of it to her, at last he did."

He sighed. "One day, when they had both been summoned to Ilmarin to perform some service for the Lord and Lady, Olórin told Aránayel all that was in his heart, honestly and with no expectation that his love would be returned. She listened — and then laughed at him, not as one laughs when they are surprised, or when they hear a jest, but very cruelly, knowing full well he had spoken in earnest, and how her words would affect him. She demanded to know how he could be so presumptuous, since she was a handmaid of the queen, the very voice of the wind, and he nothing but a lowly worm that burrows through the soil so that her song could enter there. She had accepted his help because he was so pitifully eager to give it, and she saw no reason not to take advantage of it so that she could spend her own time and effort on worthier matters, not because she found him in any way desirable or worthy of her attention. She said many other things, much less kind, caring not who heard her or how their witness of it might further humiliate Olórin; quite likely, she wished for it, since she felt he had acted in unconscionable impudence. And after he had listened to her berate and belittle him without uttering a single word of protest — for there was nothing at all he could think of to say, so shocked was he — she called him the weakest of cowards, since he would not even try to defend himself. She did not understand him in the slightest, nor had she comprehended the value of the gift he had offered her, and her arrogant vanity utterly crushed Olórin's heart.

“He fled her then, and would have sought some place to hide in shame, had not Eönwë met him as he was about to leave Ilmarin. Lord Manwë was in need of a messenger to go to the house of Nienna and bring back some item she had for the king; he had asked Eönwë to find someone to make the journey, so the herald, not knowing that anything untoward had happened, asked if Olórin would be willing to go. He was indeed, for he knew Aránayel would not come there, as she disdained all places she considered dark and bleak, and there at least he would be able to avoid her for a time.

“Lady Nienna knew Olórin from those times when he had given his help to her and her people, as did all the Valar. When he arrived, she had but to look upon him to understand all that had happened, so plain was it writ upon his mind and his heart. She was greatly disturbed by it, and so she told Olórin that there would be a delay before she could send him back to Ilmarin, as another matter required attending first. He was glad of it, for he had no wish to return quickly, fearing that someone who had overheard Aránayel’s words might have told others of his terrible foolishness, taking delight in such unkind mockery. What he did not know was that Nienna went to bespeak Lord Manwë, asking him if Olórin had come to her house as the expected messenger or as one in need of her aid. When Manwë answered that he did not understand, she showed to him all that she had perceived in Olórin’s thoughts and feelings, his memories of what had happened to him not long before.”

Ványalos took a deep draught of his wine before continuing; his fair face hardened. “The king of the Valar is not easily moved to wrath; his anger is slow to kindle, but terrible to behold when at last it comes. It has been said that nothing, not even the betrayal of his own brother Melkor, has ever enraged Manwë so swiftly as the things Nienna showed him in that hour. It was not merely his fondness for Olórin that so moved him, but the outrage he felt in discovering that one of his own people could act so cruelly toward another, especially to one who had given so much to help her through the years. Manwë asked Nienna to tell Olórin that he wished for him to remain in her house for a time, to serve her on behalf of his people. Olórin accepted the assignment without hesitation, and Lord Manwë then turned to find and deal with Aránayel.

“She came before the king, completely unaware of his wrath, and was genuinely surprised by it. To her mind, she had done nothing wrong. She had never pretended to hold any love for Olórin, and she was under no obligation to accept it, or return it. If she had feigned to have sympathy for him, she would only have been coddling him with a lie, she deemed, because she felt nothing for him. When Manwë asked if she felt even the slightest bit of gratitude for all Olórin had done to help her in her work, she said no. She had first been required to work with him because such had been commanded by the king, and after, she allowed him to continue to assist her as he would because it was easier to let him have his way, and convenient for her to allow him to do such menial tasks for her. She had never told him aught but the truth, and if he could not bear to hear it spoken plainly, she was not to blame.

“Lord Manwë was wroth, for he had not realized how cold Aránayel could be, for all her beauty, how she so loved herself above all else, there was no room within her for even a bare trace of pity for another. She was punished, not because she had refused Olórin’s love, but because she had treated him with cruelty unbecoming one of her supposedly lofty station. That, it is said, is why there is often hollow

sorrow in the voice of the wind, a melancholy that weeps for itself but not for others, as Aránayel pitied her punishment but not what she had done to Olórin. "

"That's dreadful," Frodo said, feeling terrible sadness for what his friend had once endured, trying to imagine how anyone could reject another so callously, especially someone he knew to be very caring and generous of heart and spirit. Even hearing the story brought tears to his eyes. "How could she do such a thing?"

"She has a will of her own, as do all Lord Eru's children," Ványalos said simply. "Her heart was full of herself alone, her pride, her arrogance, her own self-interest. She was not evil, not as Melkor and Sauron and others were evil, but she was cold, like a sculpture of great beauty carved from ice that cannot melt. She could not begin to understand how another person could so freely give of himself yet ask nothing in return, and because Olórin could do so with apparent ease, she was certain that what he offered was worth nothing, not even a polite refusal. She was not wise, she never has been. Many of the Maiar have made foolish choices, and follow paths of self-destruction. Aránayel's has not been as bad as others', and she still serves in her own way, but she will never truly understand what she loses every time she rejects something out of pride or vanity. In that, she has been a good lesson to others, a warning not to follow a similar path, but I fear she will never change."

The hobbit's eyes widened. "You mean, she's still here? She wasn't sent back to wherever you came from?"

The Maia's smile was wistful. "If it could have been done, I suspect Lord Manwë would have exiled her, as you say. But we are confined to Arda until the End of the World; only Melkor has been cast out into the Void, and none are allowed to return to the Timeless Halls. She is seldom seen abroad, however, since she was cast from the service of the Lord and the Lady, and now serves Lord Námo and Lady Nienna in what ways she is able, in the hopes that she will learn something from witnessing the sorrow and pain of others. All of this happened very long ago. After passing judgement on Aránayel, Lord Manwë chose to have Olórin remain with Lady Nienna for a time because he knew that there he would find healing from the hurt he had suffered. He became a great pupil and friend of Nienna, and ever after would visit her from time to time, both to offer her his service and to learn from her. It was she who sent him here to Lórien to complete his healing, and he so learned to love this place, he had already begun to think of Lórien as home before Lord Irmo asked Manwë if Olórin might be permitted to dwell here, for Irmo had come to value him greatly as a counselor.

"And none of this might have come about, but for the cruelty of Aránayel. She begrudges the changes that came upon her life as the result of her actions, but Olórin is quite different. When she hurt him, he did not blame her; he blamed his own folly for speaking his heart when he had misjudged hers so badly. He might have chosen to be bitter or vengeful, but in finding relief from his sorrow, he learned instead to pity her and forgive her all she had done. In many ways, she did him a favor neither of them could have understood at the time. She pushed him away, and sent him stumbling down a road that would lead to greatness of a kind she would never comprehend, for in learning pity and forgiveness and patience in the house of Nienna, he learned how to love even his enemies more fully than he had before.

It gave him great wisdom, and he has continued to grow in all the ages since. Had he not lived through this, he would not be the friend you and I now know.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s quite true,” Frodo agreed after taking a moment to consider it. “Whenever I thought about where Gandalf might have come from, and what his life had been like when he was young — if I could even imagine him as young! — I never thought of things such as this, not even after he told me that he was really a Maia. I didn’t have much of a notion of what that meant, to be honest, but I thought only mortals were foolish enough to fall in love with the wrong people and have their hearts broken because of it.”

Ványalos’ smile became wry. “Such failings, I’m afraid, are common to all Ilúvatar’s children, both those of Aman and Endor and beyond. I first met Olórin when he came to Lórien to seek healing from Lord Irmo and Lady Estë, and though he seemed then to be quite wise and sad, I saw that the sadness was covering a great joy he had almost forgotten how to feel. I knew that with help, he could find it again, and since I lived so near to the place where he had chosen to settle, I took it upon myself to give him that help. At first, I was quite the nuisance to him, for I would not let him forget the importance of happiness, and I often enlisted the assistance of one of the visiting Elves, Lindarinë, in continuing the effort. Olórin was quite stubborn, but he was also wise enough to understand that we meant him only good, and in the end, it turned out well.”

“Not for Lindarinë,” the hobbit said softly, recalling the tale he had been told about the Elf. “Olórin told me what happened to him.”

The Maia’s expression softened with remembered sadness. “Yes, that was a turn of fate any of us who were Lindarinë’s friends would have changed or avoided, if we could. But do not grieve overmuch for this, young Frodo. Olórin may have told you that tale, but he likely forgot to mention how long it took for he himself to recover from the injury that turned his own life about. Each person heals in their own time, according to the depths of the wounds they suffered, and as Olórin’s time came, so too will Lindarinë’s. As will yours, if I might be so bold as to point out. The swiftness with which you will be healed will be directly connected to your desire to be cured, as well as the amount of effort you are willing to give to it. It may not be easy, but you will be given as much help and support as you may need or want. For now, do not trouble yourself about it. Rest from your journey and find whatever place suits you in Aman. The matter of your recovery from the Shadow is already in the hands of the Lord and Lady of Lórien, as well as very much in the thoughts of those who are your friends of old.”

A small smile crept back into Frodo’s eyes. “Yes, that much I know. When I spoke with Lord Irmo yesterday, I felt as if I was visiting an exceptionally clever healer who was collecting information about my condition, whether I intended to tell him about it or not. And I know Olórin cares for me a great deal. Before we arrived, I was worried that I might never find peace here, but now, I could not doubt it if I wanted.”

Again, a strange shadow flickered across Ványalos’ face, but it passed too quickly to be more than noticed. “I am glad to hear it,” he said simply, rising. “It is our custom for those who partake of such

things to share the evening meal at the hour of sunset. Olórin told me that your people are quite fond of food and drink, and also enjoy preparing it. Tomorrow, perhaps, I should very much like to learn the ways in which you have refined the arts that might be unknown to us foreign folk. But for today, others will do that work and bring the meal here, as this is also a part of our customs of welcome. It is now but two hours before the setting of the sun, and I should see how those who are making the preparations are faring. If you are uncomfortable being alone, I will stay, of course, but it will not be long, I think, ere Olórin wakes."

"Then go, by all means," the hobbit said, also rising to bow in farewell. "I shall be fine, and I must have taken up quite enough of your time already. But thank you for bringing the food, and answering my questions. I shan't forget to uphold my end of the bargain."

Ványalos grinned in return, and offered his own gesture of parting. "Then I will look forward to seeing you again this evening. If I have neglected to bring anything you might wish in the way of provisions, let me know then, and I will see to it that all is taken care of on the morrow."

"That's very kind and generous of you. Thank you, Master Ványalos."

"You're quite welcome. And since I suspect we may become friends ere you depart from Lórien, you may call me just Ványalos, if you please. I have never been certain what, if anything, I am a master of."

Frodo laughed at his self-effacing light-heartedness, but the Maia was gone before the hobbit could say another word.

VIII

When Ványalos had departed, Frodo spent a few moments tidying the kitchen before investigating what had been brought to stock it. He took the used glasses to the sink, and only then realized that had seen no sign of a well outside the house, and thus had no idea how water was to be obtained for cooking or cleaning or even drinking. There was, of course, the nearby stream, but it seemed to Frodo that it would not be terribly convenient as a water source, given where it was in relation to the outer doors. Moreover, he had seen no sign of a bucket or other carrying containers larger than a goblet anywhere in the house.

Perplexed, he looked more closely at the basin obviously meant for washing dishes and vegetables and such. The thing was shaped like a broad but deep shell and was quite lovely in design; on the wall above it was a curved handle, inlaid with pearl. There was no pitcher or bucket at hand for bringing the water to fill the basin, though there were towels and soap in a storage space beneath it. It was hard for him to imagine that whoever had built this place would miss providing something so necessary, so he began to wonder if here, there were other ways of obtaining water. In Minas Tirith, he remembered seeing places where it could be brought into a house without the need to haul it from stream or well. The pumps they had used were not wholly unfamiliar to Frodo, simply a bit surprising, seen inside a house. Perhaps, he reflected, the handle on this wall was a kind of pump handle. Noting that it was neither too high nor too far for him, he reached for it to see if it would move.

It did indeed, but not as a pump would. When he lifted it, water began to flow into the basin from unseen outlets concealed in the fluted curves of the inner shell. When he released it and let it fall back to its original position, the flow stopped, but the water remained. When he pressed down on it, equally hidden drains opened, and the water flowed away. If he turned the handle slightly in one direction while lifting it, the water that emerged was cool, but if he turned it the opposite way, it was quite comfortably heated, the perfect temperature for washing rather than drinking.

The hobbit chuckled his delight. "How very clever," he approved, thinking how many more wonders he had yet to discover in this new world. More than he could imagine, he was sure. Pleased by that thought, he filled the basin sufficient to clean the goblets, used one of the soft towels to dry them, then put them back in the cupboard from which Ványalos had fetched them. That brief task finished, he set about inspecting the formerly empty storage places to see what had been brought to fill them. When he had satisfied himself that nothing important had been neglected, he recalled what Ványalos had said about others bringing the evening meal in what was now less than two hours, and decided he should see to washing himself and changing back into his day clothes before they arrived.

In the bathing room, there was a large tub on one side of the room, set into the floor so that one did not need to climb in, only to step down and settle into the water. Opposite it was a shallow basin on a pedestal, low enough for him to use comfortably, and both were filled by the same method as the kitchen sink. After he was finished and had made sure the room was left as clean as he had found it, he went to get changed. He did not relish the thought of using the same outfit for what felt like the third day in a row, but it simply could not be helped. Fortunately, he had done nothing strenuous in the

clothes, and had managed not to soil them either at the feast or during the ride to Lórien. He wondered about such things as laundering facilities, but that was another matter for the future. At least he wasn't in the uncomfortable position of having nothing to wear but filthy rags, as had been the case on the day he had awakened after the end of his journey to Mordor.

When he was dressed, he estimated that an hour had passed since Ványalos had left. He felt reasonably certain Olórin would not want to be caught napping when the guests arrived, but neither did he wish to disturb him too soon. He decided to peek into the room where the wizard was resting and then make up his mind. The question was rendered academic when he opened the door just a crack, peered inside, and found his old friend already awake and seated on the edge of the bed. This room, Frodo noted, had clearly been arranged and furnished for the comfort of one of the Big Folk, and very nicely, from the look of things. A hobbit would have been quite lost on the Man-sized bed; the chairs and shelves and chests and drawers were all of a height suitable to one much taller than he. Olórin had removed the crystal circlet and set in on a small table near the bed, out of harm's way, and he had exchanged the white clothing made for him by the Valar for a long simple tunic of soft blue linen that fell halfway between his knees and his currently bare feet. He had been rubbing the remains of sleep from his eyes when Frodo opened the door; he looked up at the sound, and smiled.

The hobbit returned it. "I hope you rested well," he said, opening the door more fully. "It's about an hour before sunset, I believe, but if you'd like, there are a few sweet biscuits left in the kitchen, along with some very nice wine. Your neighbor Ványalos stopped by to deliver provisions while you were asleep. And before you ask, no, he didn't wake me, he was being very quiet."

Olórin laughed softly as he rose from the bed, stretching gracefully. "But not so quiet once he knew you were there, I'll wager. If I have ever known a person who loves to talk about anything and everything as much as a hobbit, it's Ványalos."

"Well, I certainly didn't discourage him," Frodo confessed with a small laugh of his own. "We had a very pleasant chat, and before he left, he told me that he and some others of your friends would be bringing the evening meal, around sunset. I think that should be in about an hour, so perhaps you won't wish to spoil your appetite."

"Perhaps not, but I wouldn't want you to spoil yours by not having a proper hobbit snack before dinner. Did Ványalos bring enough of the right things to provide for you?"

"Oh, yes," he was assured as they went back to the kitchen. "He said that tomorrow, he'd like to learn a bit about how hobbits cook, though I couldn't quite tell if he was serious or teasing."

"He was serious. Another trait he shares with the Little Folk: he enjoys food and drink greatly, even though he does not need it, which is why I asked him to see to acquiring whatever you might need. Tonight, my other friends and neighbors will bring what are traditional things for a welcoming meal, much like what was served yesterday in Valmar, but simpler, and possibly more Elven than Ainu. A

number of Teleri live in Lórien, and I was well acquainted with many of them before I was sent to Middle-earth.”

“So those who will be visiting tonight will be both Elves and other Maiar?” Frodo asked as he fetched the goblets he had just washed and set them back on the table, along with the remains of the wine and the biscuits.

The wizard nodded. “I suspect so. Some, like Ványalos, were unable to attend the full festival in Valmar because of other business, and others chose to spare me the shock of being greeted by everyone I know all in one evening. From what I heard last night, they are all quite eager to meet a halfling. At best, they have only heard tales about your people brought by Elves who sailed to the West, and none of the tales were long. Until Bilbo, your people had only occasional and very brief dealings with the Fair Folk. Were it not for your involvement in the matter of the Ring, they would likely have little more than polite interest in you. Given the role you played in the War, they are very curious indeed.”

“Then I hope they don’t find *me* disappointing.”

Olórin dismissed that concern with a gesture. “Not likely, given how you were received by the Valar. My people understand quite well the matter of playing smaller, supporting parts in a much greater drama. It was what we were born to do, after all. We are not the Powers who performed the greatest shaping of Arda, only their servants. That we occasionally are called upon to perform more significant tasks does not change what we are, though some, like Saruman, became enamored of what they perceived to be their own high station. I never had any such illusion about myself, nor do my friends here in Aman.”

Frodo pondered this for a few moments, then spoke what was on his mind. “You know, before I came here, I thought that the people in the West were all above such pettiness, but I should have known better. I knew enough about the history of the old days to know that people are people, whether or not they’re immortal. I suppose that given enough time, most folk would learn not to hurt or be cruel to one another, but not all do.”

He took a sip of his wine, then looked up at Olórin. “While you were asleep, Ványalos told me some things about you, and he wanted me to be sure that I let you know he had been the one who told me these things. I asked why you lived here in Lórien when you are actually one of Lord Manwë’s servants, so he told me. Part of the tale concerned what had happened a long time ago with one of your folk called Aránayel.”

The Maia stiffened almost imperceptibly, setting down the goblet he had been holding. He sighed. “Fair enough. I know nearly all there is to know about you, and if you are to be my guest, there are some things it would be best for you to know about me, since they are common knowledge here. What did Ványalos tell you?”

“That you loved her very much, and that she was very cruel to you when she rejected you. He seemed to think that what you are now was very much the result of what you lived through because of what she did to you.”

Olórin reflected upon this for a moment, then nodded. “He’s right. If I hadn’t been hurt so badly in that way at that time, I might never have done some of the things I did in attempting to recover from it. We may each have a greater destiny in the Music, but because we are free to choose, we can refuse it, and let someone else play the part intended for us. Some of our greatest lessons and deepest wisdom have their roots in the pains we suffer, and that was beyond doubt the greatest pain I had ever known. In some ways, not even the betrayal of Saruman or my death struggle with the Balrog hurt me as deeply. It was the strength I found in the healing I sought after Aránayel’s rejection that allowed me to endure much greater pains during my life in Endor.” He looked at Frodo, his glance curious. “Is there a reason you mentioned this just now?”

The hobbit shrugged. “I suppose I thought of it because of what you said about people who become proud, like Saruman. I never knew you as anything but an old man, so I never imagined you might’ve lived through the things your friend told me. I don’t think anyone in the Shire ever really thought about wizards as if they were real people. You were just another one of the Big Folk who came through from time to time, and if you were any different, to most hobbits’ way of thinking, it was just that you stirred up a different kind of trouble. I’m afraid hobbits really do tend to view the world in very narrow ways, never looking beyond the bounds of the Shire, or ever thinking that other kinds of people can be just the same as they, or better. Those few of us who knew you knew the truth, of course, but even that didn’t stop us from seeing only so far. Even when I knew you were more than just an old Man, I never quite made the connection and tried to imagine what you really were. And I certainly never stopped to think that you might have once been in love, like any other person. I’m rather ashamed to admit it, but I wasn’t much better than the people who thought you were nothing but a nuisance.”

“Nonsense. How could you imagine something you had never seen or experienced? An Elf or a Dwarf or a Man is like you in enough ways that you can draw an image in your mind of what they might be like from stories and descriptions alone. But to try to imagine a person who in truth has no body, whose existence is quite different from your own... well, you simply don’t have what is called a proper frame of reference. You may be able to imagine the Ainur as thoughts, because you know what it is to think, but to imagine us as living creatures without bodies would be quite difficult, since that is beyond your experience. To conceive of that *and* the fact that we can feel love and passion in some all-too-human ways...! No, you have nothing to be ashamed of. As I was in Middle-earth, there was no reason to wonder about such things, and some questions one avoids asking so as not to seem a busybody. I never asked you if *you* had ever been in love, after all.”

“No, you didn’t,” Frodo admitted, his cheeks coloring faintly. “I suppose it was rude of me to talk about a private matter like this. I should have kept what I was told in confidence.”

But the Maia shook his head. “It truly is in the past, Frodo, well over and done with. I feel only pity for Aránayel now, a wish that she might someday let go of her pride and learn to treat others more

kindly. I have no wish to be with her, since any love I once felt for her is gone, and will never return. But she did indeed help make me what I am, and it is good that you understand this, since the day may come when you will meet her."

The halfling grimaced as he swallowed his mouthful of biscuit. "I'm not sure I would enjoy that. I'm afraid I would tend to think only of what she once did to you, and wouldn't be at all fair to her."

"Possibly, but it may yet occur, and if it does, you would do well to remember how *I* feel toward her. Don't let the tales of a bitter injury that happened long ago distort your vision for what is now. As with Gollum, I suspect that if you ever chance to see her with your own eyes, you will understand why she is to be pitied, not despised."

Frodo was quiet for a bit while he considered Olórin's words. At length, he sighed again. "You're right, of course," he finally allowed. "And I will do my best to remember what you've told me. I was, you know. In love once, that is," he added when the Maia regarded him with confusion. "When I was in my tweens and still quite a silly lad. Violet Bolger, the prettiest lass in Hobbiton — not that my cousin Angelica would have agreed, but I certainly thought so. I was terribly smitten with her, but was too shy to say anything. So I decided to take after Uncle Bilbo instead, and wrote her dozens of poems, none of them very good, I'm afraid. I'd hidden them away where I was quite sure no one would ever find them, but Bilbo came across them one day. I was mortified when he mentioned it to me, of course, but he was really very kind. He said that if I truly had such feelings for Violet, I should find a way to tell her, or I might wind up regretting it for the rest of my life."

"And what happened?"

This time, the hobbit's sigh was much deeper. "Not what happened to you — fortunately. I think I would have died, if she'd treated me like that. We had been friends for years, and she was always very good to me, so I decided that the next time I saw her, I would try to say something. I rehearsed my speech over and over, so I wouldn't embarrass myself, and after a week or so, I was ready to give it a try. I met her at the market a few days later, and walked her home to help carry what she'd bought. She seemed very cheerful and happy, and once we were away from the market, I found out why. While I was off writing poetry in hidden corners, Munco Greenbriar, one of the hired hands on her father's farm, had been speaking to her more directly, and she'd very much enjoyed his company. He'd come of age a few days earlier, and had asked her father for Violet's hand the day after. Violet invited me to the wedding, and was very excited about the whole thing, and though I tried very hard to feel happy for her, I was rather heartbroken, too. It was my own fault for never saying the truth, and I really couldn't expect her to wait for me when she didn't even know how I felt. After that..."

He shrugged. "Well, I cannot say that I lost interest in finding a wife, but I simply didn't have the heart to go looking. After Bilbo left and I inherited Bag End, there were plenty of young women interested in catching my eye because I was well-off, but that certainly wasn't what I wanted from such a relationship. I eventually decided it just wasn't meant to be, for me. There was something more I needed, and I didn't understand what that could be, until I was on my way to Mordor to destroy the

Ring. When I realized that *this* was what I was meant to do with my life, I was glad that there was no one I'd left behind who could be hurt if something went dreadfully wrong. It was bad enough, knowing that I had friends risking their lives to help me. If I'd come home to a wife and family, wounded and broken as I was, I would have felt that they were paying the most terrible price of all for what I'd had to do."

"I understand," the Maia said, briefly clasping his friend's nearer shoulder in sympathy. "If these were indeed the destinies fated for us from our beginnings, then it truly was best that those in our lives who would suffer if we were lost were not as close as our own kin. My folk do not have offspring — except for Melian, who took on physical life for a time to bear Elwë a daughter, Lúthien — but the emotional ties between those who take spouses are as deep as those between the Eruhíni and their mates and children. Had I completely failed of my task and returned in utter shame, I could not have borne the pain it would have caused to my wife, if I had had one. Lord Eru, I think, gave us those choices early in our lives so that we might have a chance to avoid even greater pain later on, for more than just ourselves. It is always easier to face what might be your end if you know there is no one who will feel abandoned or humiliated, should you lose."

The Maia sipped his wine for a minute, his eyes glittering as thoughts flitted behind them. He smiled mischievously. "Violet Bolger, hmm? I remember her. You're right, she was quite a pretty young lady, very charming. Her father was one of the few members of his family who hadn't lost his head to the self-importance of his family name and reputation, still believed in putting in an honest day's work. She was much like him, as I recall, bright and cheerful but not proud. You might have done well together, had things not gone otherwise. I'm afraid if they had been between Aránayel and myself, I would have regretted it greatly in the end."

"I should daresay. Didn't you have any idea she could be such a heartless person?"

Olórin sighed as he twirled the stem of the goblet between his fingers. "I should have, but love is blind, as they say, and at the time, I was too inexperienced and naive to know better. There were enough warnings — from several of my other friends, in fact — but I did not want to see or hear them. You might say I was bewitched, both by her and myself. I wanted to believe that what I felt for her was true and that she was as beautiful in heart as she was in other ways. And she wanted me to believe anything that would allow her to continue to make use of me without obliging her in any way, even with simple gratitude. I did not believe she would feel as I did, but not even in my darkest dreams had I imagined that when I offered her my heart, she would rip it from me, crush it beneath her heel, and spit upon it. I knew I was far from the greatest of our people, that I was indeed quite likely the least — but even the least, I thought, was worthy of some small kindness, the politeness, perhaps, not to mock love that was earnestly given. I expected to be rejected. I did not expect it to come with such cruel humiliation. I have long since put it behind me, even though the memories still ache, from time to time. But I do not regret it, not any longer. I have changed and grown and learned much since then, and I am content with my life. The love of a spouse is only one kind of many, after all, and since we cannot have everything, losing that was really a small price to pay for all I have now."

Frodo smiled back. "I agree — or I will more wholeheartedly, once I've grown accustomed to being here, and my homesickness has had more time to fade. I still feel echoes of the pain from my wounds from time to time, but ever since the ship landed, it never lasts for more than a moment. I certainly didn't expect that part of my troubles to heal so quickly. Is it part of the blessing of being here, do you think?"

"Not entirely," Olórin said quietly, unable to lie. He regarded Frodo for a short time, an odd light in his eyes. "Do you know what today is, back in the Shire?" he asked.

Frodo tried to count up the time that had passed since their departure, then shook his head. "No, I lost track of the days some time ago. It was difficult, once we were on the ship."

"Understandable. It's October the sixth."

It took a moment before the importance of those words truly sank in. When they did, the hobbit looked up at Olórin, his face full of disbelief, but there was no doubt in the Maia's nod. "It can't be," Frodo near-whispered. "Every time the anniversary of some terrible day comes round again, I felt equally terrible pain. Today I felt... nothing. Well, not quite nothing, only a twinge or two early this morning. I was thinking about the only other time I'd ridden on a horse, when Glorfindel sent me on ahead to cross the Ford and the Nazgûl were trying to catch me. My shoulder hurt for a moment, then you touched it and the pain disappeared. I wasn't sure if you'd done that on purpose, or if it was only a coincidence, but the same thing had happened when I was remembering Weathertop while we were watching the sunrise. It *was* your doing, wasn't it?"

"It was," the wizard said gently. "I was not invading your thoughts, but I could feel what you felt, nonetheless, and I saw no reason you should suffer needlessly. Has your shoulder troubled you at all, otherwise?"

"No, not in the slightest. I couldn't have slept so peacefully this afternoon if I'd been bothered by it. Whatever you did must have cured it."

But sad regret filled the Maia's eyes. "No. Estë's healing power fills this land and doubtless eased your discomforts, but to prevent you from suffering as you have before, someone had to divert it from you and take it upon themselves, so that you would not feel it. I did not want your first visit to my home to be a day filled with pain, so I did what I could to make certain that would not happen. Ványalos has helped me in this, since I did not yet have the strength to deal with it alone, and I did not wish for you to suffer a moment more than was necessary. Please forgive me if I have acted deceitfully. I meant only to do what was needed to make your first days in Aman joyful, not dark with shadow and grief."

Frodo stared at him, sorting out all the greater implications of what he had just said. "Does this mean that in order for me to know peace and be free from pain, even here, someone else must suffer instead?"

Olórin let loose the breath he had been half-holding in a wistful sigh. “For the moment, yes.”

The halfling was appalled. “Then why did you ask me to come here? If I can find no true healing anywhere, I would rather have borne it alone and not burdened anyone else with it! Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“Because until we arrived and today dawned, I did not know what would happen,” Olórin said plainly. “And please, Frodo, calm yourself, you are leaping to conclusions. I did not say you would *never* be properly healed; I said this was the only way to help you *for the moment*. Yes, I was responsible for diverting your pain today so you would not feel it — and so was Ványalos, who took on the task of protecting you willingly so that I could rest and regain some of my strength — but it is not as overwhelming to me as it has been to you. I am a Maia, not one born to a life in flesh. This shell in which I exist is fully under my command; if I so choose, there is no physical discomfort I ever need feel. That part of what I diverted from you has no effect on me. The suffering your wounds bring to your heart is far more grievous to me, but please believe me when I say I do not mind experiencing this to spare you. Because of what I am, I have abilities to deal with such things that mortals do not, and my long years of study with Lady Nienna and Lord Irmo have taught me how to cope with such bitter grief without being destroyed by it. To be honest, I have been grateful for this experience, because it has let me come to know you better, and all that you have endured these past three years. Since I was the one who nudged you onto this path, will you begrudge me the opportunity to know more fully all the results of my actions and suggestions?”

Frodo was quiet as he pondered what had been said; then he spoke, slowly. “No. But I had hoped to find more lasting healing. Will someone always need to do this so I need not suffer?”

The Istar shook his head emphatically, fair hair brushing his shoulders with each movement. “No. Lord Irmo is confident that a permanent solution can be found, and I believe he is right. It was my own choice to do this today, because of the unfortunate timing of the date and our arrival. I said nothing because I knew you would object, and I felt it wasn’t worth an argument. I was not exaggerating when I said I am able to deal with this, Frodo, and though I might have been foolish enough to do so without help, Lord Irmo persuaded me to seek the aid of others, such as Ványalos. For all he appears somewhat flighty and overly light-hearted, Ványalos is quite adept at understanding the feelings of others, and doing what is needed to help when help is needed. After two thousand years of incarnate life and difficult labor in Middle-earth, I am not as strong as I was before, and it will take time before I recover fully.” His laugh was soft and rueful. “I am also in need of healing, though not as seriously as you. Perhaps I should have spoken to you before doing what I did, and if I erred in my judgement, I am sorry. I only wanted to be certain your first days here would be happy ones, untainted by any bitter shadows.”

Again, Frodo was quiet for a time before he answered. “You needn’t be sorry,” he said at last, his eyes fixed on the liquid in his glass. “You did what you thought was best, and to be completely honest, I think you did the right thing, for the right reasons. If I’d had to endure another day of pain and darkness because of that old wound in my shoulder immediately after arriving here in Valinor, I would have thought the entire trip was in vain, and nothing would ever be able to give me relief. I probably

wouldn't have been inclined to listen to reason, no matter who told me this would not be a permanent situation, that I could be healed in time. What you did...."

He looked up, caught Olórin's gaze with his own and held it. He smiled. "Whether you intended it or not, you just proved to me that things are different here, that it *is* possible for me to be healed. You couldn't help me back in Middle-earth; no one could. But today you did, and I never even realized it. If you can do that with such apparent ease, how much more can those of the Valar who are skilled in healing arts do for me? Oh, no, Olórin, you have no reason to be sorry. I'm grateful, even if I'm still a bit surprised by everything that's happened. Thank you, for all you've done today, and for telling me of it. I have *real* hope now, more than I had thought I would. And I'm glad you listened to Lord Irmo and found someone else to help *you* rather than exhaust yourself for my sake when you're still weak after all those years of being trapped in Middle-earth."

He was quiet for another moment, thinking hard before speaking again. "You've told me what you and others have done. What will *I* need to do to help myself get better?"

The Maia returned his smile, grateful for his friend's understanding. "Lord Irmo and I discussed this, and we agreed that you will probably recover more quickly if you remain here in Lórien for a time, until your healing is well underway. You needn't stay here in my house; if you prefer, there are those who would happily assist you in acquiring a place of your own. But it did occur to me that you might feel uncomfortable spending so much time apart from Bilbo. Aside from being your uncle, he *is* the only other hobbit here in Aman. If we were to ask him to visit, and he saw how like to the Shire this region can be, how difficult do you think it would be to persuade him to live here, for a while? It would do him good as well, and that way, neither of you would need feel like some kind of strange curiosity in our midst."

Frodo laughed. "I suspect it wouldn't be difficult at all. Bilbo is used to being the only hobbit in a house full of Big Folk, but I know he missed the Shire while he lived in Rivendell. This would be all his wishes come true, I think. I will be glad to have him here, although I haven't felt nearly as out of place as I thought I would. After talking with people at the feast last night, and with Ványalos this afternoon, I'm beginning to see that the height of a person makes very little difference when it comes to the size of their heart. I cannot say what Bilbo might want to do, but for myself, I would like to stay here with you for a time, if you don't mind. I have always counted myself lucky to call you my friend, even when I didn't really know you well at all. I should like to have a chance to do that better."

"You will always be welcome here, for as long as you wish to stay. I have never before had kin, and you and Bilbo have become as dear to me as any family I have ever seen among the Eruhíni. My house is yours, as you always opened your home to me in years gone by. I have only begun to repay some of the many favors and kindnesses I have long owed to both of you."

Frodo did his best to keep from blushing at the words of praise. He was attempting to devise a way to politely shrug it off when the distant sound of voices singing drifted through the westward-facing windows of the kitchen. The sun, he noticed, was now very low in the sky, the shadows grown

long and purple as the day's end drew nigh. "Are those your friends coming?" he wondered, trying to make out the words of the song, without success.

Olórin listened to the music on the breeze, then smiled softly. "Quite likely. If they follow custom, they will arrange whatever they have brought in the clearing outside the house, to watch the sunset and offer thanks for the day before sharing the meal. If you'd like to be there to greet them, go on ahead and wait for them on the porch. I'll be along in just a moment. Generally, we do not stand on ceremony for such simple occasions, but I would prefer not to greet them still dressed in a sleeping gown."

The hobbit chuckled, thinking how visitors would have reacted to such an ill-mannered thing back in the Shire. "Of course, come when you're ready. I would have been nervous about doing this alone a few hours ago, but after meeting your friend Ványalos, I don't feel the least bit worried, anymore. In fact, I don't believe I'm going to mind living here at all, even if it's 'til the end of the world!"

The Maia watched him as he headed off to the front door, eager to greet their guests. The sigh that escaped Olórin was faint, but full of sadness. "If only it could be so," he whispered, echoes of his earlier conversation with Irmo suddenly murmuring through his thoughts. He shook his head as if to banish the unwanted specters, then went to exchange his night clothes for more suitable attire, and hopefully with it shed the feelings of a growing melancholy that had crept into his heart.

To Be Continued