

I Entulesse

(The Return)

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Part Three

IX

“So, Ványalos, what is your opinion?”

“My opinion, Lord Irmo, is that I should not have agreed when you asked if I would perform this little ‘service’ for you.” The Maia was at the dream master’s home near the shores of Lake Lórellin, a shady and peaceful place built amid the golden groves and flowering gardens where the Vala took care of his own business during the days while Estë his wife rested in her island haven in the midst of the great lake. The sounds of many fountains and the song of small birds provided a constant, soothing music for those who came to visit the lord, and to those of his household servants who remained there to tend the waters and the lands and other living things of his modest mansion home. Ványalos, usually happily at ease here, was abnormally restless, not because he was uncomfortable with his surroundings, but because he was ill-at-ease with himself. “I have done many tasks for you and the Lady Estë, and I begrudge you none of them — save perhaps this one. I find that I do not enjoy spying upon others, not even in a good cause — especially not when the subject is anyone I have even the slightest reason to call my friend.”

Irmo, who was seated in a comfortable chair of silver and blue-gray near a quiet fountain that was one of his most favored, regarded his servant with a small smile of regret. “I understand your disquiet, but I would not have asked had I not felt it to be of utmost importance. So I will ask again: what is your opinion? Is the situation as serious as I had first perceived?”

Ványalos, aware that he would not be able to avoid tendering an answer, sighed as he paced along one side of the rectangular pool. Sometimes, when the waters were stilled by the command of the dream master, one could see visions reflected in its surface; now, it seemed as ill-at-ease as the visiting Maia. “More than I had thought, when you asked this of me. His strength is not what it should be, and I fear that not even a year of rest and healing here in Lórien will restore it. Too much was lost, and it may not be possible to regain it, not even if he cooperates fully with whatever cures you and the Ladies deem necessary. There is a shadow within his heart; I doubt if even the full light of Aman can cast it away.”

“Yet we must try. You may not be the most skilled of my servants in the gifts of healing, but you are able to perceive certain things others would not. Knowing what you now do, would you have any advice to offer concerning the situation?”

The Maia snorted gently, watching ripples swell up in the bottommost pool of the fountain as water from a higher level spilled into it with a soft whisper of sound. "The only advice I could think to offer, my lord, would be quite useless. This was a burden he should not have been made to carry, not for so long. When the final critical moment of decision came, he should have been allowed to return home — indeed, he should have been ordered to return home. Why he was allowed the choice to continue I will never understand, not after all he had already suffered. Could someone else not have completed the task?"

Irmo made a vague gesture. "Apparently not, since this was not of our choosing. We did what we could to guide matters from afar, but some of the most important moments of personal choice have ever been left in the hands of Lord Eru, and those to whom the choices are given. We Valar would, I fear, have influenced these decisions based primarily on our desires to avoid error, and in so doing would have caused it yet again. We did *try* to present such an option, but the One preferred otherwise. Regretting what was not within our power to alter or direct is surely useless, as you say. So there is no advice you can offer to enlighten us."

Sighing this time, Ványalos took a seat on the low white marble kerb surrounding the pool. Several small birds from the nearby groves and gardens swooped low to drink from the waters; one settled on the Maia's shoulder for a moment, chirruped sweetly, then moved on to join the others of its flock. "I am not your counselor, my lord, only your messenger. I sense, somehow, that there might be a more lasting way to help him recover, but I cannot see it clearly. It seemed to me that his strength was greater when I first saw him yesterday than it was later in the evening, but whether this came about because of natural weariness or for some other reason I do not know. If you wish, I will continue to keep him under my watch, for I am also concerned, but I cannot promise that I will be able to see the answers for which you are searching."

"Perhaps not, but mayhap in seeing what *you* have seen, we will understand it better. Will you be able to continue without being noticed?"

"I believe so. Young Frodo has agreed to teach me what he can of how his people took what was a necessity to sustain life and turned it into a pleasurable art, which, from what I have been told, will give me more than ample opportunities for observation, since it is not a lesson which can be taught in a single day. Some Eldar of the hill country tell me I have taken on a course of study I may never be able to finish, but the longer it takes, the better it will suit the purpose with which you have charged me. For I have certain suspicions, and would prefer to have seen solid proof of them ere I speak of it aloud."

The Vala indicated his acquiescence with a graceful inclination of his head. "A wise course, so long as you do not take overlong before speaking. For I believe I know that which you suspect, and should it be true, we will not have the luxury of time to spend in long study of the problem ere we act upon it, if action is indeed possible. Lord Eru has granted us great powers of help and healing, but there are ills in Eä that not even all the might of the Valar can fully cure. Go now, and find whatever you can find, as swiftly as you are able."

Ványalos rose as gracefully as he had seated himself, and bowed to his master. "As you wish, my lord."

While Ványalos was in conference with Irmo, Frodo woke and began his day. It was well after sunrise, he noted, and it was with some pleasure that he realized he was not only free from any pain or discomfort, but the dreadful anniversary of his wounding at Weathertop was now passed, and with it any need for others to suffer for his well-being. He had just sat up in bed when that fact occurred to him; a moment later, he noticed something more: the things he had brought with him from the Shire were now with him, the few small trunks that had been sent ahead to the Havens settled in a corner between the window and the larger furnishings that had been provided for more permanent storage. He was startled to see them, for they had not been here when he had gone to bed, and he had heard nothing while he slept. He was certain Olórin had some hand in this, though precisely how and to what extent, he did not know. He had mentioned his desire to obtain some of his belongings, especially his clothes, but though his host had said it would be done, he had not said how or when. Frodo was grateful, however, and intended to ask how this had been managed so quickly.

But an opportunity to do so did not immediately present itself. The day before, he had noticed that Olórin seemed to share a habit of his own, that of closing the door to his sleeping room when it was in use and leaving it ajar or fully open when it was not. When he emerged from his own room, the hobbit saw that the door in question was shut, and thus could only presume the Maia was either asleep, meditating, or for some other reason wished to have privacy. He made no attempt to interrupt him, not even to look in and see if he was asleep, for he had taken to heart the claims both Ványalos and Olórin himself had made concerning his own need for rest and healing, even though he had begun to understand that Maia notions of what constituted rest were nearer to those of the Elves than the mortals. Besides, he was rather looking forward to the thought of preparing breakfast on his own, as he had had little opportunity since Sam and Rose had moved into Bag End. If he was going to make good on his promise to instruct Ványalos in hobbit culinary arts, he felt he should at least make certain he hadn't grown too rusty to be an adequate teacher.

After he had bathed and finally changed into fresh clothing — reminding himself to ask after local laundering methods, since he was certain the number of days he would be staying here were likely to far exceed the changes of clothing he had brought — he searched the pantries to decide what he wanted for breakfast. His choices made, he set about preparing it, humming to himself one of the many new tunes he had heard the night before. He smiled at the memories it awakened.

When he had gone out to the porch to greet the gathering neighbors — who were, to him, a remarkable mixture of Elves and Maiar, some very strikingly different in appearance and form, others astonishingly similar — he had found them in the midst of preparing for the meal. It had reminded Frodo of his first meeting with Gildor and the Elves in the woods of the Shire: thick carpets of beautiful craft spread out over the grass for the participants to sit upon, containers of many lovely and unusual shapes and sizes and colors filled with food and drink of most delectable fragrance. Utensils were set

at hand along with other necessities, and when they were done, he had stepped down to join them just as the sun touched the far horizon and swiftly began to sink beneath the hills.

That was when he had first heard the song, a melody that though strange sounded yet familiar. The Elves were the ones singing it, and though the tune was unknown to him, very quickly, he began to recognize the words:

A Elbereth Gilthoniel, silivren penna míriel...

They sang it once using the words with which Frodo was familiar, but to a melody very unlike that which he had heard time and again in Middle-earth: not in a somber key, filled with the Elven longing for the West from which they had been sundered, but in one of reverent remembrance for times that were now in their past. They then sang a new verse, still with reverence but with greater joy, the words too complex for Frodo to quite grasp fully, though he perceived that they sang of their love for the home they had regained, and their honor of the Valar who had granted their return.

As the colors of the sunset painted the skies with a palette of brilliant artistry, new voices took up another song, in words Frodo had not been able to understand at all. It was the strange tongue he had heard used by the Valar in the Máhanaxar; the blend of its peculiar sounds with the beauty of the voices singing it was almost too unearthly to bear. Frodo supposed that one could grow accustomed to it, given time, but it was not, he suspected, a language meant to be often heard by the ears of lesser beings. It was beauty of a sort so powerful that it was painful to those not meant to bear it, and it had not lasted for long. After a single brief verse, the song had shifted into the language of the Elves, and though Frodo could not understand all of it, he grasped enough to know that it was a paean of thanks and praise offered to Eru Ilúvatar by His servants, the Maiar. At length, as the swift sunset faded and the stars began to kindle in the skies, the Elves took up their song again while the Maiar continued their own, and the blending of the melodies was so perfect, it brought tears to the hobbit's eyes.

It was only as the music was drawing to a close that Frodo noticed that Olórin had joined them, and was singing with his people. Frodo had not been able to keep himself from staring, for though he had heard Gandalf sing from time to time, the voice he had as Olórin was not that of a Man, but a Maia, still deep and resonant, but without the gruffness or breathiness of mortal singing. He'd realized he had been gawking only when Olórin looked down at him and smiled, the brightness in his eyes expressing the laughter his voice could not, for the moment. It was not meant to mock, however, and had the effect of stirring Frodo from his startled state soon enough to join the Elves in singing the last line of their song, which he had heard repeated often enough to render accurately.

The sudden silence that followed was almost more stunning than the music; it lasted until the last glimmer of sunset was gone, and the skies were bright with stars. All the visitors had seemed to stir at once, then, talking, laughing, and kindling lamps to provide extra light for the clearing. Throughout the remainder of the evening, the others came and introduced themselves to Frodo, offering him many words of welcome as well as praise. The hobbit might have found it quite embarrassingly intolerable,

had he been alone in receiving such attention, but Olórin had been made to share in it as well, as his friends and neighbors were equally eager to welcome him home after his long absence.

Somewhere during the course of things, Frodo had noticed that his old friend had chosen attire scarcely more elaborate than his sleep tunic, a robe of simple silver-gray linen belted with a plain blue cord; he had left the crystal circlet behind, and had chosen no other adornments. It did not seem at all out of place to Frodo, since the others who had gathered for the meal were by and large no more ostentatious in their dress, save for some who favored brighter colors. Even they did not feel wrong, for they were bright after the fashion of flowers in the fields and hues of the rainbow, not garish or in poor taste. What had actually surprised the hobbit were the many modes of dress these folk had chosen, some very Elven, some very Mannish, several almost Dwarvish, others in styles he could not place, even a few that appeared almost Hobbitish. He wondered at that for a little while, but at length decided it was nothing more than a reflection of Aman itself, a place that held in its vast length and breadth something of all the world, but unspoiled, unmarred. He gave it no further thought, and enjoyed as much as he could of the remaining evening, until weariness finally caught up with him and sent him off to sleep.

He remembered lying in his bed listening to the voices in the clearing, still talking and singing softly; he had no notion how long they continued, for he had fallen asleep to that pleasant murmur of beautiful voices, soothed rather than disturbed by it. Olórin had remained behind to see to the departure of his guests, and Frodo presumed that he had retired after they had gone. He had no notion of precisely when that might have been, but given how Ványalos and several of the other Maiar had treated the Istar during the evening, the hobbit was reasonably certain they would not have stayed much longer. They were all apparently of the opinion that a two-thousand year sojourn in a mortal body was not something from which one recovered in only a day, and had been quite diligent in making certain Olórin had no opportunity to tax himself and in reminding him that Frodo was not the only resident of this house in need of recuperative rest. They had all been ever so polite about it, but their behavior had elicited more than a few half-hidden laughs from the halfling, who remembered quite clearly how insistent and fussy a certain old wizard had been in seeing to the well-being of injured or exhausted friends.

He smiled again at the memories, both new and old, as he finished preparing his breakfast, still humming to himself. He had just arranged it on the table and was about to settle down to eat when the sound of a soft but merry chuckle interrupted. "I have heard it said by some of my people that the Elves wrote that particular tune with the express intent of designing a melody one simply cannot get out of one's mind. Legend has it that the composer was quite dismayed when he found that my people have no trouble at all dismissing it, and only his own folk were bothered in that fashion — so much so that they supposedly forbade him to write any new tunes for at least another Age. I have no notion if the tale is at all true, but it would seem that the song had its reputed effect on you. And good morning, Frodo, I trust you slept well."

"Yes, very well, thank you," the hobbit answered politely after recovering from his initial moment of surprise. Olórin was standing in the open arch between the kitchen and the central hall, hands busily plaiting a portion of his damp pale hair above and behind his right ear, as he had already done to the other side, to keep it back and out of his face. His garb was much like that of the previous

evening, a plain robe of unadorned white homespun that fell half a foot short of his ankles, with a narrow gray belt and light shoes of matching hue. "And good morning to you, too. I must have been more distracted than I thought. I didn't hear any sound of water in the bathroom, and when I've used it, it seemed to echo rather noticeably."

"You heard no noise from the room because I did not use it," the Maia admitted. "You were already there when I woke, and the fall of the stream in the back is adequate for such things, if somewhat cool. A benefit this morning, to be truthful, since I was up somewhat longer than I had initially planned."

As he took his seat at the table, Frodo glanced back at Olórin to study him more closely, and frowned at what he saw. Though weariness did not show on the Ainur in the same ways as it did on mortals, an odd translucence to his skin and a strange dullness to his ordinarily bright eyes betrayed him. "You said that you would rest after the guests had gone," he reminded the wizard. "Surely you didn't deliberately delay them to avoid keeping your promise. I heard you admit more than once that you still need rest to recover from all you endured during these last two thousand years."

"I did, and I still do admit it. I did not delay them, though a few seemed inclined to tarry for a bit. And I did intend to rest, but once I was alone, I found that I couldn't. I did not want to take any risk that you would suddenly waken to pain and terrible nightmares, so...." He shrugged, clearly chagrined.

Frodo was appalled. "You stayed awake until dawn? Olórin...!"

The Maia waved his hands to ward off the protest, finished dealing with his hair. "I know, I know, I did make a promise — and I also did mean to keep it, but I simply couldn't. I tried, but rest of any kind refused to come until I was absolutely certain any danger to you was passed. I was not wounded as you were, Frodo; my need for recovery is truly no more serious than you might require if you had had a great deal of very hard work to do with little or no chance to sleep and regain your strength. I did not consider one night of delaying my own healing too great a price to pay to make certain yours could progress and not be set back by the lingering poisons from the Enemy's blade. I am sorry if you feel I have violated your trust in me, but once the dawn had broken, I assure you I went straight into the deepest sleep possible. I do not enjoy renegeing on any promise I make, however casual, but I would have felt far more guilty of betrayal had I fallen asleep and you suffered unpleasant consequences because of it."

The hobbit considered what he had been told, weighing it against the honesty he could hear in Olórin's voice and see in his face; he relented with a nod. "I do understand, I would likely have done the same, in your position. When one is worried and cannot sleep, there isn't much to be done for it but wait until the worry passes and sleep comes. Will you at least try to rest later? Ványalos plans to visit.103 this afternoon to learn about hobbit customs of food and drink, and I daresay you can't be very interested in hearing or watching something you've seen and heard uncounted times before."

Olórin laughed gently, fetching a second cup to share a bit of the tea Frodo had brewed, though he politely refused the offered meal. "Quite true," he confessed as he settled into the chair opposite

Frodo's. "My plans for the day are not overly strenuous, I assure you. I intend to check on Shadowfax to see how he is faring. He has spent his time since our arrival in the Great Meadow west of this part of the hill country, where other horses make their homes. The grass and water are sweet there, and there is plenty of open country for them to roam without straying too far from the homes of the friends who are their riders. Ványalos and some of the other messengers for the Valar have steeds there, and I'm sure Shadowfax will enjoy their company more than loitering about here in the woodland. But I would like him to know that I have not forgotten him! It is not far, and the walk will not tire me. After that, I plan to speak with Bilbo at Elrond's house in Tirion, to make arrangements for his visit, if he is willing to come. And from what Ványalos said before departing last night, there is a possibility Lord Irmo and Lady Estë may come to confer with you this evening."

Frodo swallowed the piece of bread in his mouth before speaking, though his eyes widened before he could. "You plan to ride all the way to Tirion and back before this evening? Or were you intending to leave me to my own devices when the Lord and Lady visit?"

Olórin smiled over the rim of his cup. "They may indeed prefer that I do, but no, I had not. Riding from here to Tirion and back would take a full day, even at Shadowfax's best speed. There are ways in which I can speak with Bilbo without traveling so far on horseback. If my strength in general were greater, I would simply go there as my people do, but that, I fear, is not really wise for me, at the moment. One loses some strength each time one changes or sheds or adopts a fana, and for a time, I think I should remain as I am."

The halfling suddenly made a connection he had failed to see before. "That's why the Valar did it for you the day we arrived, isn't it? Because they already knew you shouldn't?"

Olórin nodded. "I have little doubt. At times, they will do things for us out of kindness rather than order us or forbid us because they are aware of more than we ourselves are. I suspect that they deliberately chose to deal with me last of all our company because they were using skills of their own to assess my condition and determine what, if anything, needed to be done or not done in relinquishing the body I had been given and restoring me to my more typical form. And I am certain that is why Lord Manwë was so in favor of your desire to visit my home and stay here in Lórien for a time. After what we have been through together in recent years, he must have felt that you might be better able to persuade me to do things for my own good than my friends and neighbors of old." He sighed, rather expansively. "I do fear that he was right."

Frodo sniffed. "Not if last night is any indication. Sitting up until dawn...." He clicked his tongue and shook his head like a sententious old gaffer.

The Maia laughed. "And I accept your well-deserved rebuke, my dear hobbit! Ványalos told me he had chosen to continue to keep watch over you even after I had told him it was no longer necessary, to spare me the effort so I could rest more easily, but all the logic and common sense to the contrary could not stop me from worrying. Fortunately, unless you have been concealing your discomforts much more than you should, such a day should not come round again for several months, in which time the

Lord and the Lady of Lórien will have undoubtedly found ways to at least begin more permanent healing for us both. And I *will* take the time to rest this afternoon, I give you my solemn word." He grimaced. "I do *not* enjoy such feelings of weariness, especially now that I have been released from a kind of life that seemed unendingly wearisome."

Frodo sighed. "I wish that my troubles could be so easily cured, but at least here, I have lost most of the sense of being weighted down and haunted by shadows that was forever troubling me in Middle-earth. Those feelings are still there, but sufficiently diminished so that I feel I can lead a reasonably normal life without *too* great an effort. Although I *will* be glad to eventually be rid of them, as much as is possible."

"Completely, it is to be hoped. And should it turn out to be otherwise, you will ever have friends who will help you endure."

"As you did yesterday," the hobbit said quietly. "You and your friends. It astonishes me to think of how readily they accepted me."

Olórin cocked one pale eyebrow, his smile wry. "And is that any less astonishing than how quickly you appear to have become accustomed to how I have changed?"

Frodo dismissed the difficulty of that effort with a gesture. "That was quite simple, actually, since you haven't really changed at all. You may look different and have a different name, but you're still the same friend I always knew, in all the ways that matter. Just as Aragorn was still the same friend I had come to trust after he was no longer Strider and was the king of Gondor. But your friends here had never before met me, and still they welcomed me and treated me as if I was just like you, a neighbor come home again."

"Which they very much wanted you to be. So little that is new comes to these lands, the people are ready to greet it whenever it does, with generosity and open arms. If they offer friendship or food or help or anything at all, it is because they truly wish to. You have already begun to make good friends here, and Ványalos not the least of them. He agreed to help you yesterday out of friendship for me and curiosity about you, but it was for his your sake only that he continued to offer his aid. He can learn much about another person very quickly, and what he learned about you during your first conversation told him that he wished to number you among his friends. So have others decided; thus, you need not worry about confining yourself to this house if I am not able to guide you."

"I *had* wondered if it would be better if I didn't wander about alone. This place is so much like the Shire, I feel as if I couldn't get lost if I tried, but I'm sure I would find out only too quickly how wrong that assumption is if I attempted to off alone. And I do want to have a chance to explore more of this place, without being a bother to you all the time."

The Maia set down his empty cup. "You are never a bother, dear Frodo, of that you may rest assured. If you would like to begin your explorations sooner rather than later, you may come with me to the Meadow, if you wish."

As the hobbit considered the offer, he glanced out the window to find the sun and estimate the time. It was clearly late morning, for the shadows were short and the light brilliant. He shook his head. "No, I'd better not. Ványalos said he'd be along after his appointment with Lord Irmo this morning, and he didn't expect to be long about it. After what he did for me yesterday, the least I can do is be here when he arrives. You won't mind if I don't come?"

"Not at all," Olórin said, rising. "There will be time enough later, and while it might be entertaining for you to watch me attempt to chase after Shadowfax if he's in a playful mood, I would rather spare myself the public embarrassment!"

"I really don't understand what difference this would make," Bilbo told Olórin some time later, after the Maia had seen to Shadowfax — who had, predictably, been doing quite well, and, also predictably, had been in a mood to play after his own fashion, being glad to see his master again. The Great Meadow was a peaceful place, and in a shady glen beside a stream that ran through a copse of rowans, Olórin had settled down to enjoy the quiet, the cool breeze, and take care of his business with Bilbo. Being unfamiliar with the house Celebrian had prepared for her husband and the rest of their household, he had gone to Elrond first, not physically, but in a kind of phantom state that his people were able to send to a place where they wished to be, without the need to physically cross the distance, in any way. Saruman had done such a thing the night before Gandalf had rejoined Aragorn and the others in Fangorn Forest; the three companions had spotted the fallen wizard's ghostly self furtively moving through the battlefield where his orcs had been defeated by the Riders. Such a projection was capable of speech, though Saruman's had not spoken, and Olórin had felt this would be the best and most expedient way to communicate with Bilbo.

He had not, however, reckoned with the old hobbit's surprising reactions. Elrond had led him to Bilbo's rooms, which were very much like the quarters he had used in Rivendell. Celebrian had terribly missed her home in Middle-earth, and in her certainty that her husband would someday join her, coming to Aman in bittersweet victory, she had built a house on the eastern edge of Tirion as like to the mansion of Imladris as could be managed. Many of its windows faced the sea, as she looked out across it in hope to see each new dawn and wait patiently for Elrond's arrival. After escorting Olórin to Bilbo's chambers, Elrond had stayed to hear the Maia's explanation of what Lord Irmo had said about Frodo's condition, how it could best be examined and his healing begun if he remained in Lórien for a time, how the dream master felt Frodo would improve more quickly with his kinsman closer by, and how such a stay would also help Bilbo himself. Bilbo had listened politely, as had Elrond; the Elf had offered his opinion of the plan's merit, which he felt was good, then looked to Bilbo for his response.

The hobbit had cleared his throat, hedged for a minute, cleared his throat again, and then gave his startlingly negative reply. "If being around family or other hobbits or such is good for him, what difference does it make, here or there? I'm sure Elrond would be happy to find rooms for the lad...."

"I'm sure he would, too, but that is not the issue," Olórin answered, puzzled by his old friend's apparent resistance to the notion. "Doubtless you have heard more than enough about what is actually troubling Frodo, and what caused it. Elrond certainly has told you that it is far beyond his skill to heal; those of my people who have such gifts live in the part of Aman called Lórien, where my home is. If you were back in the Shire and Frodo was sick, would you refuse to allow him to be taken to a healer and spend time there if that was the best place for him to be?"

"Of course I wouldn't! But in the Shire, the healers are *not* miles upon miles away, and more often than not, the healers recommend the sick person stay in their own home and sleep in their own bed. They come to their patients, not the other way around!"

Bilbo's agitation was as unexpected as it was obvious. Olórin and Elrond exchanged puzzled glances; the Elf shrugged, the Maia sighed. "Then would you have preferred if Frodo had not gone with me, after all?" the latter asked in as neutral a tone as any living creature could muster.

"No!" Bilbo insisted; one could fairly hear the air whistling through his hair, so vigorously did he shake his head. "I'm saying that I just don't... that is, I can't see... or rather, I don't think..."

His voice trailed away as he seemed to shrink under the two patient gazes fixed on him. He sighed, considerably more heavily than had Olórin. "Oh, I don't know what I'm saying, Gandalf, there's just been too much for an old hobbit like me to soak up properly, if you take my meaning. Like... why do you have to look so different, now? I'd long since gotten used to the way you always were back home, and I know things aren't the same for your people, you can choose whatever way you want to look — so why did you have to choose this?"

The Maia smiled faintly, amused by his friend's quandary, which he knew quite well to be a feint to hide what was actually causing his current ill temper. He prudently did not laugh when he answered. "Perhaps you don't recall, but I did *not* choose this fana. That was done by the Valar, and what they chose is the form in which *they* knew me best, for it has changed very little over the many thousands of years of our residence in Arda. But if it will make you more comfortable, at least for the moment..." In the blink of an eye, his already illusory appearance shifted to that which he had worn for many years before their recent arrival in Aman. It was all but instantaneous, and the suddenness of it made both the hobbit and the Elf start.

Bilbo nearly jumped out of his chair. "You might have given me a bit more warning than that!" he scolded. "Bless me, but my heart nearly stopped!"

Olórin acknowledged his reprimand. "I beg your pardon, I hadn't intended to give you a fright. But I cannot believe you would not wish to come to Lórien simply because I no longer look as you think I ought. I have never known you to be so concerned over something as meaningless as mere appearance."

Bilbo looked away, uncomfortable under the piercing gaze so intently watching him, searching for some clue to explain this inexplicable behavior. "That isn't it at all," the hobbit admitted, turning back to address the Maia more politely. "It's just — I know you've already refused any refreshment, but can't you at least sit down and stop towering over me? You used to be more polite about such things, you know."

Olórin was not deceived by the abrupt change of topic, though he did his best to comply with the request. "You're deliberately trying to put me off, Bilbo," the wizard said as he affected a semblance of sitting. "I've already explained that what you are seeing of me cannot eat or drink or touch anything physical, because it is only an illusion. I know perfectly well that you understand what that means, even if you haven't ever dealt with anyone in this fashion before. I can understand how you might be unsettled by it, and by the fact that my fana does not look very much at all as you have known me all

your life. But you are making far too much of what both of us know are trivial matters, only to avoid giving me a direct and honest answer. I am not asking this of you due to some frivolous whim. It is the belief of the Valar who are most skilled and most powerful in all the arts of healing that Frodo should remain in Lórien until his recovery is well underway. The land itself has restorative virtue to it; simply being there for a time can renew and revive the strength of both body and spirit, even for the Ainur. Thus, your presence there would not only help Frodo, but would be of benefit to yourself as well. I would be happy to have you as my guests, as would any of the Elves and Maiar who make their homes there. Why do you not wish to come? Did Frodo offend you by asking to accompany me to Lórien rather than come here, with you? Have *I* somehow offended you?"

From his tone of voice, Olórin was genuinely perplexed by the hobbit's behavior; Bilbo turned away again to hide a sudden welling of shame. For some long moments, he looked out the window over the desk at which he was sitting in the very comfortable and beautifully appointed study that had been put at his disposal. Beyond it, he had a lovely view of the part of the city that spread out east of the watchtower, and beyond that the green country and white shores that led to the sea. "No," he finally said very quietly, turning back to his guests. "You haven't offended me, nor has Frodo. I... well, if you must know the truth, I'm afraid. It's that simple."

Even Elrond was taken aback by that admission. "Afraid?" he echoed, incredulous. "What is there to be afraid of here in Aman, Bilbo? You have faced ravenous trolls, terrible giants, the terrors and hideous spiders of darkest Mirkwood, blood-thirsty orcs, angry Dwarves, and even a dragon! What could possibly be left for you to fear?"

The hobbit's voice was small. "Death," he said.

Both Elrond and Olórin were silent for a time; the Maia spoke first, gently. "While it is true that the Undying Lands cannot take the Gift of Ilúvatar from a mortal, you will not die until you are ready to surrender life, Bilbo. Have you not already felt the power of this land giving you strength to sustain you? I have not seen you this awake and alive in many a year...."

"Yes, that's true, I do feel much better, and I am aware that just being here can't prevent us mortals from dying. I know that. But..."

He was quiet again for several moments, then made a remarkably frustrated sound. "I read and learned a great deal about ancient history while I was in Rivendell, and there were two things that seemed quite perfectly clear: when the Noldor rebels were allowed to come back to Aman after their exile in Middle-earth, they were only allowed to come as far as Tol Eressëa, not back to Valinor itself. And mortals were forbidden to set foot in the lands of the immortals; if they did, they would be struck dead where they stood. They made an exception for Eärendil because his coming fulfilled his destiny, but why should they make an exception for me? Oh, I'm willing to allow that I've been permitted to live here in Tirion because I've been living in Elrond's house for years and he isn't a Noldorin Elf, and this is a part of Eldamar, Elven Home. And I can understand why they would make an exception for Frodo

after all he did to help destroy the Ring and end that terrible war. But why should the Valar be willing to make an exception for me?"

As he listened to Bilbo rattle on, clearly agitated, Olórin tried to restrain himself from smiling, but could not. When the halfling asked his question, the Maia answered with bright laughter, which won him the blackest scowl he had ever seen on his old friend's face. "I was *not* making a jest, Gandalf," he grumbled testily. "I meant every word I said!"

"I know you did," Olórin said, doing his best to rein his amusement. "And I know you were quite serious. But answer me this, Bilbo: Why should they *not* make an exception for you?"

"Because I didn't *do* anything to earn it!" came the exasperated reply, accompanied by a broad gesture that sent several papers skittering from the desk like leaves in autumn. "You know precisely what I contributed to that beastly War, which was all but nothing! Oh, yes, I know the Valar said what I did was important — important enough to warrant allowing me to come here and live in my little rooms in Elrond's house, but important enough to be given the freedom to roam the whole countryside when even some of the greatest of the Elves haven't been permitted that? You will have to forgive me if I find it difficult to believe that's so!"

Both Olórin and Elrond saw his error in the same moment. This time, Elrond spoke first. "You believe the Noldor are still confined to Tol Eressëa?"

The hobbit snorted. "Well, aren't they? I haven't heard anything to the contrary...."

"And apparently you haven't *seen* it, either," Olórin remarked, still smiling. "Celebrian, who is of the Noldor through her mother, lives here in Tirion, and has since she arrived in Aman. Galadriel's father's kin live here in as well, while her mother's reside in Alqualondë, farther up the coast. Glorfindel also has high standing among the Noldor, and he lives perhaps a mile or so, as you measure it, from my own home in Lórien, along with a group of Elves from all the Kindreds here in the Blessed Realm. He and the parcels he was asked to carry arrived safely early this morning, shortly before dawn," the Maia added as an aside to Elrond, who had received a message concerning Frodo's belongings before Glorfindel had departed for Lórien to rejoin the friends and family with whom he had lived of old.

Elrond nodded sagely, having hidden his own amusement at Bilbo's quandary. "Ah, good, I was wondering if he had yet arrived. The horses that were put at his disposal looked to be fine beasts, but not of Shadowfax's ability. He thought he might arrive by morning, and it would seem he is a better judge of how long it takes to travel between one place and another in this land."

From the way Bilbo's face was reddening, he was being sorely torn between anger at what appeared to be teasing and chagrin. The wizard relented. "It was the Valar who placed these restrictions upon both the Noldor and mortals, Bilbo," he explained gently, "not a decree from Eru Ilúvatar. This is their land, their home; they are its governors, and they the have the right to forbid or permit entry to whomsoever they choose. When they called upon Lord Eru to intervene after Sauron.110 convinced the

last king of Númenor that by conquering the Undying Lands, he could gain immortality for himself and his people, Ar-Pharazôn and his army perished because they had broken many laws in making that attempt, and had rejected not just the authority of the Valar, but that of Lord Eru Himself. What happened was terrible, but they earned the punishment they received, as did, to a lesser extent, the Noldor who defied the Valar and slew their own kin.

“But all of those things happened long, long ago, and in that much time, even the minds of the most obstinate people can change. The Valar could feel the sadness and sorrow of the exiled Noldor who were not permitted beyond the Lonely Isle, and eventually, they were moved by it to compassion. They lifted the ban completely, so that those who had been sundered from kin who had not participated in the rebellion or who had been forgiven their crimes could be reunited in the lands they had all once known so well. And as for the injunction against mortals setting foot on Valinor, that became a moot point after Aman was removed beyond the reach of any who might think to assail it. No ship can come here without the knowledge and approval of the Valar, and all who come are welcome — in full, Bilbo, not just to a few rooms in one house in a single city. If you truly fear to travel farther into the lands of Aman, then you need not do so, but I promise you, you will *not* be struck dead if you go. I have not exaggerated when I said that it would be best for Frodo if he remains in Lórien for a time, and he very much would like to share with you all that he has already found there. If that is not enough to persuade you to come, the others who dwell there would also be delighted to have you, for they have been hearing tales of you and your exploits ever since the first ship sailed West after the Battle of the Five Armies. They would like to know in person the brave little adventurer of whom they have only heard in song.”

Bilbo perked up visibly at those words. “They’ve written songs about me? Here? What kind of songs?”

“Oh, many kinds,” the wizard said distractedly, having counted on Bilbo’s curiosity about such things to pique his interest. “I cannot repeat them for you; I was not here when they were written, and I have not had time enough to hear and learn them all. If you want to know more, you should ask those who wrote them.”

“Which means traveling all the way to Lórien.” The hobbit sighed, his spirits deflating. He toyed with a reed pen on his desktop, rolling it back and forth for a bit while he considered all he had been told. “It’s not that I don’t want to go, Gandalf,” he said at last, honestly, “especially if it would do Frodo good, and me as well. But I’m still not as spry as I once was, and the journey from Middle-earth was long. I’ve only had a day or so to start settling in here, and if I’m to stay in Lórien for more than a week or two, it’s going to take a lot of fuss and bother and more tiring travel to get there. Are you sure there is no other way?”

Olórin sighed sympathetically. “For you, I am afraid not. You cannot shed your physical reality and cross great distances with a thought, as my people can. But Lord Irmo did not say that you must come as quickly as possible, and Frodo certainly would understand if you wished to make the journey at whatever pace is comfortable for you.”

“And I have not heard that you must make that journey alone,” Elrond added. An idea had grown in his thoughts as he listened to the others talk. Bilbo looked to him, his expression one of mingled hope and puzzlement. The Elf explained. “When Celebrian first came to Aman seeking relief and healing from the harm she had taken at the hands of the orcs, she was given the best of care, and that can be found with the Lord and Lady of Lórien. She spent a very long time there, and she came to love that land dearly. I would like to see this place and its people with my own eyes, to offer my thanks to any who helped my wife in her time of need, and Celebrian has mentioned that she would very much like to go with me, to visit old friends and places she has long come to love. If you wish, Bilbo, we could travel together, in whatever way you please. There is but one pass through the great mountains, so we cannot avail ourselves of sail by ship or boat, but there are other ways that would be less tiring for all of us, if not as swift. If you do not object to my wife and I as traveling companions, that is.”

“Object!” the hobbit exclaimed, his face brightening. “Gracious, no, Elrond! I could hope for no better company, but I hadn’t dared to think it possible! Are you certain Lady Celebrian will agree to this?”

Elrond chuckled, his gray eyes glinting with his humor. “Quite certain. When she introduced me to the Lord and Lady at the welcoming feast, she mentioned how she hoped we could visit Lórien soon. I am as eager to see it as she is to show it to me, and if our journey can be fortunately combined with your own, so much the better. I know she does not intend for us to remain there indefinitely, and if you should find the place not to your liking, you can return here with us. So in no case must you choose to stay there permanently.”

“An excellent plan,” Olórin approved. “Well, Bilbo, now the decision rests with you. Shall I tell Frodo that you will be paying him a visit soon, or must I find a way to break the news that his uncle does not wish to see him?”

Bilbo wrinkled his nose at the wizard. “That has never been the case, and you know it well, Gandalf. But I take the point. It’s bad enough that the poor lad has had to suffer at all just because he tried to help Middle-earth avoid disaster. If he can brave the fires of Mount Doom and all those leagues between the Shire and the Land of Shadow, I can brave venturing a little farther into the Blessed Realm. Never let it be said that a Baggins refused to face up to a challenge! It might do me some good after all.”

“It might indeed.” As Olórin’s illusory self rose from the chair, it changed back to the appearance of his current fana.

Bilbo stifled a small sound of surprise under a cough. “If you insist on doing things like that, you might at least have the decency to give me a moment’s warning!” he chided.

The Maia’s half-smile was faint. “I shall try in the future,” Olórin said placidly, “so long as you try to become accustomed with the fact that even though I care little about my appearance, *this* is how people here have grown used to seeing me, for far more years than I lived in Middle-earth.”

“Oh, very well, I shan’t insist on having everything my own way,” Bilbo replied affably. “You can go tell Frodo and anyone else who enquired that I shall be along in a few days, or however long it takes Elrond and Lady Celebrian to escort a doddering old hobbit across however many miles lie between here and Lórien. And tell Frodo not to make a fuss!”

“I most certainly will not!” the wizard said with a gentle laugh. “I and others are counting on the anticipation of your visit to provide Frodo with enough distractions so that for once in far too long a time, he can take the proper hobbitish joy in preparing to receive and entertain friends and family. He had little opportunity to do so once he returned to the Shire, with all that needed to be done to put things in order again, and then knowing that Sam and his other friends were forever worrying about him and fretting over their inability to provide the help Frodo truly needed. I and others in Lórien are concerned for his well-being, but we *are* able to help him find some relief while he is being healed. That will speed his recovery greatly, I should think, as will your visit, however long that might be.” Mischief glittered through the blue eyes like dappled sunlight over the ripples of a clear stream. “I suspect you’ll find Lórien more to your liking than you may be anticipating, Bilbo. Has anyone told you of it?”

The hobbit shrugged. “Lady Celebrian and Lady Galadriel said some things about it when we were traveling back to Tirion, after you and Frodo had left the feast in Valimar. They said the Golden Wood that used to be their home in Middle-earth was similar to it, though not nearly as large and beautiful. Having never seen Lothlórien, I’m not certain I have a very good notion of what that might be like. The largest forest I ever knew was Mirkwood, and *beautiful* is the *last* word I would ever use to describe it!”

“Yet even Mirkwood was once a place of beauty, before Sauron and his creatures darkened it. Lórien is not like that at all, I assure you, but I think it would be best to allow you to make your own judgements of it after you have seen it, and not spoil the anticipation with an inadequate attempt to describe it.”

Elrond spoke, thoughtfully. “Before he left, Glorfindel told me that given ordinary horses and no need for haste, the journey between Tirion and Lórien takes two days, with pauses for rest. Given Bilbo’s desire for comfort, we will doubtless move more gently and pause more often. And it will take time to prepare before departure.”

“Then I will tell Frodo not to expect you for at least five days, possibly a week, depending on how much Bilbo dawdles in making ready,” Olórin said with a sly glance at the old hobbit, remembering the first time he had set out on a journey beyond the bounds of the Shire.

Bilbo was thinking of it, too, and laughed. “If dawdling means being visited by you in this ghostly manner to nag at me, I promise I will make ready in all haste! But I suppose you’re right, Gandalf, this *will* be good for me. Forgive an old hobbit for being so stubborn. I set out on an adventure once when I knew there would be a dragon at its end; even the worst of fears should not have made me think even for a moment of anything but Frodo’s welfare. Tell him I’ll come, of course, and please don’t mention I said anything to the contrary.”

“Since it would only upset him and the whole purpose of bringing the two of you to Aman was to help you find peace and healing, I won’t breathe a word of it.” And with that promise and a gracious word of farewell, the Maia departed.

Back in the shady glen where he had been sitting while he sent out his illusory self to converse with those in Tirion, Olórin remained seated on the thick grasses, his eyes closed while he concentrated on refocusing himself fully within his fana. It was much more difficult than he remembered it should be, yet another manifestation of his current weakened state. He had not anticipated Bilbo’s initial unfavorable reactions, and such emotional stress always took its own toll in the energy expended to resolve the situation. Perhaps he should have made things easier on himself by mentioning the hill country’s coincidental similarity to the Shire; but Frodo had wanted to surprise the old hobbit, so he had chosen to hold his peace on the matter unless there had been no other way to persuade Bilbo to come. He was glad that Bilbo had agreed and would help look after Frodo as much as he was able, but he was even more relieved that Ványalos had taken such an immediate liking to the younger hobbit, and was more than willing to offer what assistance he could. The Istar was beginning to doubt whether or not he himself would be able to contribute as much to Frodo’s recovery as Lord Irmo had planned, for he did not know if he yet had the strength to do it. Yesterday’s efforts had clearly depleted him far more than anticipated; speaking with Bilbo and Elrond had drained still more.

Worst of all, he did not understand why. Although he had not spent as much time in Middle-earth during the years of the struggle against Melkor, Olórin knew for a fact that what he had done then had required far more energy and strength than the two millennia in which he had lived there as a human. Yet now, he found himself noticeably weakened from the effort of doing something that should not have troubled him at all. Even regaining his focus was not as simple a task as it would have been only yesterday, and this apparent deterioration disturbed him. A cold fear was gathering deep inside him, a possibility he was afraid to acknowledge but unable to deny:

What if the Valar had fashioned his fana for him not merely to spare him the effort, but because they already had known that he would not be able to do so himself?

He had only been here two days, and already he could see distressing evidence to support this notion. The little things he had done in expending power had caused him noticeable, if not yet severe, weariness. Lord Irmo had insisted on coming to visit Olórin to discuss Frodo’s condition when in the past, he had relied on the Maia’s memories and powers of observation to bring him such information. Ványalos, one of Irmo’s more trusted servants, had been exceptionally helpful and attentive — perhaps no more so than might be attributed to someone glad to see a long-absent friend, but perhaps for more profound reasons as well. During both the festival in Valmar and the welcoming meal last night, none of his people had allowed Olórin to expend even the slightest bit of real effort. Their repeated remarks that he was in need of rest had seemed to be light-hearted banter and teasing, but in reflection, he could not help but wonder if there was much more to it than that. Even the beautiful house with which he had been gifted was no longer so seemingly innocent. It had been provided with facilities for guests who

lived their lives bound to flesh, who needed food and rest beyond restorative meditation — yet a part of those things had clearly been designed and meant for him. Certainly, he had long since come to understand and appreciate the unique properties and benefits of sleep, as Estë did, but was this an acknowledgment of his appreciation or an understanding that he would *require* it as the Eruhíni did, once he returned home?

His darkening thoughts were interrupted by a gentle nudge on his right shoulder. Olórin looked up at Shadowfax, marveling anew at the great creature's intelligence, then chuckled wanly as he sighed. "You have a perfect fool for a master, Shadowfax," he said as he reached up to stroke the smooth soft nose that had so effectively garnered his attention. "I brought Frodo across unchartable seas because I was worried for his welfare and wanted to see him whole again, and here I sit, fretting about myself instead! Given all the talk I've heard down the years about the uniqueness of my imagination, I should know well enough that applying too much of it to the wrong subjects will create phantom dangers where none exist. If I would only listen to what all my friends have been saying and stop attempting to read between their words, I would be far better off. Perhaps Ványalos was right after all, and all those years in Middle-earth *have* made me overly suspicious. I should just go home, rest, and let the power of this land restore me as well as it is plainly restoring Frodo. What do you think?"

The horse tossed his head in what was clearly a nod of agreement. The Maia laughed. "See, even you have more sense than I! Very well, then, I shall go back to my house, let Frodo and Ványalos fuss over how much longer I was gone than I had said I would be, and start trying to follow all the advice I have been given about my own need to heal." Gracefully, he rose to his feet...

...and just as gracefully sagged back against the gray horse, suddenly overcome with weariness. It was not a strange feeling to Olórin — he had felt it often during the last two thousand years — but it was one he had expected he would never feel again, now that he was shed of his mortal body. He attempted to remain on his feet, but the exhaustion would not allow it. Instead, he sank back onto the thick grass, struggling to push down a rising fear. Shadowfax nuzzled his neck, concerned. "I'll be all right, my friend," the wizard said with as much assurance as he could muster. "But I think perhaps it would be best if I rested here for a little while before returning home."

So saying, he lay back on the grass and at once fell so deeply asleep, Shadowfax had to bend close to tell if he was still alive, if such could be discerned with the assumed forms of the Ainur. As near as could be told, he was not dead, but he remained utterly still.

The great silver horse stood watch as the sun crossed high overhead; when it began to sink into the West and still his master did not stir, he nudged Olórin gently. When he received no response, he nudged him again, more firmly, and repeated the motion with increasing urgency until the Maia answered with an incoherent mumble and the slightest of movements. Shadowfax waited a few minutes more to see if he would waken fully. He did not, and seemed, in fact, to fall back into a sleep even deeper than before. The horse then did the only thing he could under the circumstances: he left the glen and sped off across the meadow more swiftly than the ~~the~~ wind, in search of help.

Ványalos had arrived just as Olórin was leaving to head for the Great Meadow. He had seen Shadowfax in the Máhanaxar and knew that he was now with the local horses who made their homes in the open grassland. Since the Istar was not planning any journeys that day, Ványalos bid him a pleasant walk to the meadow, and settled down to his business with Frodo.

Much of what they did was talk, about hobbits in general and of their various customs and practices and habits and preferences, which were many and remarkably varied, to the red-haired Maia's point of view. He in turn answered some of Frodo's questions about other local customs, not merely about food, its preparation and its acquisition, but other mundane matters, such as the cleaning of clothing and how they managed the remarkable miracle of bringing water — heated water in particular — directly into the house. Frodo was fascinated by the explanation of how certain springs naturally produced hot water rather than cold, and how Aulë and some of his more clever people had long ago devised methods to deliver it wherever they wished, largely for the convenience of the Elves, but also to build some of the magnificent fountains Frodo had seen not only in Lórien, but also in Valmar and Tirion. And Ványalos for his part was equally astonished by Frodo's descriptions of such things as hobbit birthday traditions, and particularly the complex schedule of meals that was a part of everyday hobbit life, seemingly vastly out of proportion to their diminutive size. In matters of actual preferences, there were a remarkable number of similarities between the tastes of residents of Aman and Endor, although Frodo had already noted that meat was not a staple of the diet here.

The Maia explained that difference while they cleaned up the mess they had made of the kitchen so that Frodo could show his guest how the Bagginses made one of his favorite simple teabreads, using dried fruits and honey, a variety he had not seen thus far among local victuals. "When one can communicate with the lesser creatures," Ványalos told him as he brushed the crumbs of their snack off the table at which they had eaten and the sideboard where they had made preparations, "one finds it quite difficult to take their lives for food. Not all our people are as skilled in such speech as others, but since we eat for pleasure and not out of necessity, we have generally avoided such things."

Frodo considered that notion as he washed out the bowls and utensils that had been used in the cooking. He shivered. "No, I suppose it would be like killing a friend to eat them. I never could do such things for myself, and every now and again, I'd think about it while eating and lose my appetite. Bilbo said it was because I had too vivid an imagination, and I suppose he was right. But I don't think I'll miss it terribly; I certainly haven't thus far. But if what you say is true, I'm a bit confused. I certainly recall seeing Olórin eat meat from time to time when he was living as Gandalf in Middle-earth, although I don't believe he ever ate very much of it. If he feels the way you do — and I would imagine he does, given how I know for a fact that he understands quite a bit about the speech of many different animals, and did even when he lived among us — why would he do that?"

Ványalos shrugged. "Most likely because he was sent in the body of a living Man of flesh and blood, and though the notion may seem somewhat repugnant to us who do not need such things to sustain us, Lord Eru fashioned Men to require certain things to live. I am not sure, as I am not familiar with that portion of His thought, but I have suspected, at times, that He did not necessarily mean for them to be most easily obtained through the consumption of meat, but that it was a manifestation of

Melkor's taint upon Arda that distorted and perverted the *olvar* and *kelvar* of Middle-earth so that it would become necessary for the Second-born to kill in order to live and thrive properly. The Eldar awoke during a time when Melkor's poisons had not spread so widely, so they were spared much of this. But it was decided that since the coming Age was to begin the ascendancy of Men, the Istari should be sent in that form, not as Elves, for the results of their work would most profoundly influence the world of mortals, not immortals. Their bodies were real, and thus so were their needs."

He chuckled wryly as he tossed the crumbs out a nearby window for the birds to feast upon. "I can well imagine the quandary this must have caused for some of them, especially Aiwendil and Alatar! Of the Istari, they were ever the closest to the lesser creatures of the world, and discovering such a craving in their new forms, however mild it might be, must have come as a dreadful shock to them. Olórin doubtless was also disturbed by these conflicting urges, the needs of the mortal shell at odds with feelings that have so long been in his heart, he could not have entirely forgotten them, no matter how dimmed and confused his memories may have been."

"That would explain a great deal," Frodo said after reflecting on what the Maia had said and upon his own memories. "I suppose then that he simply accepted what food was offered to him out of politeness, or because he was hungry and had no other choice. He did tell me that unlike here, eating was not a choice for him and the other wizards in Middle-earth; it was as much a necessity for them as it was for us."

Ványalos confirmed it. "And if your people took such great delight in the necessity that you devised as many different ways of fulfilling it as you've described to me, I believe I can understand why he would have sought out your land, above and beyond its resemblance to this part of fair Lórien." He picked up the remains of the slice of bread he had been eating earlier, and held it up to study it as one might a work of fine art. "It's remarkable how you can take simple ingredients such as flour and milk and fruit and honey, and make something quite delectable of it. The Elves have wonderful foods of their own, and they are delicious and satisfying in their own ways, but I think there is a greater... earthiness, if you will, to those of your folk, if this is any sample."

"Is that good or bad?" Frodo wondered.

"Oh, good, most definitely," he was assured. "If naught else, it offers whole new areas of edible wonders to be explored and enjoyed. Even here in Aman, variety is appreciated — *especially* here, where change is very slow and all too infrequent."

"It doesn't seem at all that way to me," Frodo said as he removed the cleaned dishes from the sink and watched the small ripples on the surface of the remarkably warm water still inside the basin. "I feel as if so many things have changed in little more than the blink of an eye. Not just the way Olórin changed, but other things. Bilbo, for one. The last time I saw him in Rivendell, he spent most of his time sleeping, and he was much the same on the ride from the Shire to the Havens. It was the same for the first few days aboard the ship, then he suddenly seemed to wake up, as if he'd done enough sleeping

and was ready to start doing things again. And after we arrived, he was much more the way I'd known him before he left the Shire."

He looked up at the Maia, who had taken up the task of drying the just-washed items. "I wasn't really quite sure what to expect when we finally reached Aman. I knew that the others felt I would be able to find healing and rest that I couldn't in Middle-earth, but I hadn't thought I would begin to find it so quickly! Is it just the power of this place, or is there more to it, as you and Olórin deliberately helped me yesterday so I would not feel the horrible pain of my old wounds?"

"Some of both," Ványalos said quite honestly. "The aid you need is more abundantly found here in Lórien, because of the presence of its Lord and Lady, and they are lending you support to help you prepare for your healing, much as Olórin and I did. Do not worry that they are suffering for your sake; such succor is a part of what they are and a portion of their purpose in this world. Olórin will doubtless continue to watch after you because of his affection for you, though I intend to make certain he does not neglect his own needs for recovery. And your own desire to be healed is helping you as well." The hobbit's dark eyes widened. "Really? I hadn't thought that possible, not after the last two years. I wanted to recover very badly, but nothing seemed to help."

Ványalos smiled, sadly. "Another manifestation of Melkor's taint upon Endor, I fear. All life there decays and fades, and even the strongest of spirits can be wounded too deeply for any cure to avail it. Aman is the only remnant of Arda unmarred by his evil, and here, the power and vigor of our hearts and our minds can work seeming miracles. Lord Irmo and Lady Estë are not familiar with the unique ways and frailties of mortal bodies and spirits, which is why they wish to speak with you before deciding upon which course of healing to take, and it is hoped that Olórin will be able to help them reach a better understanding more quickly, for of all our people who remain here in Aman, only he has actually lived as a mortal. Even Melian has no knowledge of this, for she took the form of an Elf to wed Elwë, and it was of her own choosing and making, not given to her by Lord Eru, as were the Istaris'."

"But Olórin was never mortal," Frodo felt constrained to point out as he stepped back to the table to collect the plates and cups and other things they had used in sharing their snack. "No mortal has ever lived for two thousand years, and not changed appreciably in all that time."

"Perhaps not, but still, it was a very different life than any of our kind have ever lived. We comprehend the ways in which your bodies function, and why they require certain things, such as food and sleep, but knowing it and actually experiencing it as you do, as the necessities of life, are wholly separate things. I know that you must eat things which provide you with sustenance, that you must drink water, breathe air, sleep, give work to your limbs and muscles to keep them fit — but I truly have not the slightest idea of how doing these things would make my life any different than if I did not do them. We do not grow sick, our fanar are not easily brought to any harm, we do not hunger or thirst or feel pain and exhaustion as you do, yet we desire very much to help you be healed of the hurts that were done to you. Who better to help us understand what you need to recover, and to help you understand what you yourself must do than someone who understands both our kind of life, and yours?"

“That’s true. But I hardly feel as if I need healing, anymore. I suppose it’s just the relief of knowing I didn’t have to live through another horrible sixth of October, and finally being in a place where I don’t have to worry about ruining other people’s lives with my troubles. Although it does seem as if a good many people are putting themselves out for my sake....”

Ványalos laughed merrily. “Nonsense. If you listen to Lord Irmo and half of Lórien, I could do with being put out for the sake of others a bit more often, and in any case, it is why we came to Arda: to help it be shaped and grow and become the world of which we — and Lord Eru — sang. All of us, even the Valar, are here to serve, not only the will of Eru, but His children for whom the world was made. You are not a bother to any of us, Frodo. Your coming here has given us a purpose, and one, perhaps, that we can fulfill without making mistakes in our haste to do good.”

Frodo rinsed the last of the dishes just as Ványalos finished his task with the others; he paused to give the Maia a puzzled glance. “What do you mean?”

Ványalos began to explain, but was interrupted by noises from the clearing outside, the pounding of horse hoofs approaching at a dauntless pace. As that rolling thunder slowed, it was followed by a neigh that fairly shook the rafters of the kitchen. Ványalos smiled crookedly. “It sounds as if Olórin has finally returned, and that his desire for haste was not entirely appreciated.”

“Or perhaps the need to stop so soon,” Frodo speculated, amused. “I have only ridden on Shadowfax once, but it seems to me that he was born to run far and fast, and is a little disappointed when the journey is over.”

“I should like to meet this fine creature,” Ványalos said, putting away the last of the dishes as he finished drying it. “As I was serving in the Máhanaxar during the festival, I did not have the opportunity to more than glimpse him before other duties called me away, then and for the remainder of the day. Perhaps if we move swiftly, we may have a chance to do so before Olórin dismisses him and he goes off running again.”

Shadowfax, however, had not departed by the time they joined him in the clearing before the house; both hobbit and Maia were surprised to see that he was alone. Frodo was perplexed, Ványalos amused. “So, did you challenge your master to a race and arrive as the victor?” he asked the great gray horse, half-laughing. Shadowfax was restless, and when he answered with what could only be a shake of his great head, the smile faded from the Maia’s face.

Frodo saw the motion as well, and knew it for the reply it was. “He understands what you say,” the halfling explained, “much more than any other horse or pony I have ever known. I was told this is one of the things that set the Mearas apart from others of their kind. Did Olórin send you, Shadowfax?” he asked politely, trying to find the answer to this riddle.

Again, the horse shook his head, then, carefully, lowered it to Frodo’s arm and ever so gently caught a bit of the fabric of his sleeve in his teeth and tugged.

Ványalos saw what the horse was attempting to communicate. "I am not as skilled in understanding the speech of beasts as he is in understanding ours, but I believe he wishes for you to come with him — or both of us," he amended when the Meara made motions with his head to both indicate the Maia's correct interpretation, and to include him in the request.

"Then we should go," Frodo said when Shadowfax bent to indicate that he would carry them. "Olórin must have asked if he would be willing to do this for us, for I have never seen him bear anyone unless they were riding with his master."

Concern furrowed Ványalos' brow for moment, disappearing quickly before Frodo could notice it. "Then we will go, of course. Such a rare opportunity should not be denied!"

Shadowfax stood still while the tall Maia lifted Frodo onto his back, then nimbly leapt into position behind him, showing no concern for the lack of saddle or bridle. No command needed to be given once they were settled; Shadowfax knew when they were securely in place, and started off, keeping a gentle pace until they cleared the woodland and were in the open fields beyond. He then made a sound that was a warning to those he carried, and now free to move more quickly, he sprang forward with the speed of a storm gale. The wind of his passage carried away any words Frodo or Ványalos might have exchanged, but both marveled at his swiftness, the Maia because he had never before ridden such a steed, and the hobbit because he had never seen the great horse in such apparent need of haste.

He did not have much time to wonder at the cause of it, for they soon reached the Meadow and had crossed it, at last slowing when they approached a copse of trees through which a fast and clear stream wound its way, softly singing. Amid the deepening shadows under the trees and the green of the lush grasses along the banks of the water, Olórin's pale garments and hair gleamed like a pool of light spilled into darkness. But to Frodo's eyes, that light was dimmer than it should have been, and he lay perfectly still, unmoving even as Shadowfax came to halt nearby to let those he carried climb down.

A thousand thoughts flashed through Frodo's mind like the wings of many panicked birds struggling to break free of a cage. One hopeful notion, that Olórin had chosen to rest here rather than at home, bubbled up amid the chaos, but its rise was quickly suppressed when he saw the expression on Ványalos' face as the Maia helped him down. "What happened?" he asked simply, taking what small relief he could find in the fact that no blood appeared to stain his old friend's white clothing.

Ványalos sighed. "If I better understood the speech of horses, I might be able to tell you for certain, for I suspect only Shadowfax was witness to it, and came to us as the only help he knew how to find in a strange new land. But we shall find out soon enough."

Once Frodo was firmly on his feet, the tall Maia turned quickly, the tail of his braided copper hair whipping about him with the sudden motion. Quickly, he moved to his neighbor's side and knelt beside him. He laid one long-fingered hand across the too-pale brow, studied him intently for some moments with all the senses he possessed; at length, he sighed. "Oh, *pityandil*, what have you done?"

Something in the tenor of his words sent a chill through Frodo's blood. "Is he hurt or sick?" he asked, his worry deepening into fear for his unconscious friend.

"Not as you would think of such things," Ványalos replied after another moment of study. "But you have heard many of us tell him that he also is in need of rest and healing, and I fear he may have ignored our warnings, or did not understand how seriously we meant them to be taken, and thus pushed himself beyond the limits of his endurance."

The halfling swallowed nervously. Over the years of his acquaintance with Gandalf, he had seen him exhausted and occasionally injured, but never so gravely. It disturbed him to see him like this now, after he had been freed of his bonds to a mortal existence. "Is there anything we can do?"

Ványalos considered the question before answering. "I can help him, for now," he said at last, "but I suspect he needs more than I can give."

Still watching the unresponsive Istar with concern, Ványalos leaned over him, took his head in his hands, and gently raised it from the bed of grass. Closing his own eyes, he bent forward until their foreheads touched. He said nothing, but held very still for at least a full minute. Neither of the Maiar moved, but as he watched them, Frodo could feel something moving around and between them, a heaviness in the air that felt and tasted like the approach of a summer storm — almost like the crackling skies over Mount Doom, but of a far more wholesome kind. The hobbit could not tell how many minutes had passed before at last, Olórin stirred, inhaling so deeply, his back arched and a gasp escaped his lips. When he released the breath again, his eyes blinked open as he struggled to focus on the world around him.

"Ványalos," he said faintly as the tall Maia released him and sat straight again, settling back on his heels. "How long have I been here?"

The redhead smiled impishly. "Long enough for Shadowfax to come looking for us to bring you home. A fine beast, Olórin, with far more sense than you seem to have, at the moment."

"So I have already noticed," the wizard admitted, still softly. He glanced about and noticed both the horse and Frodo standing nearby, each showing concern in his own way. He frowned. "I must have been asleep much longer than I anticipated, for all of you to be so worried."

"Not quite long enough for us to have noticed you were overdue," the hobbit admitted, relieved to see his friend awake again, but still concerned. "What happened?"

Olórin attempted to sit up, an effort that required a bit of assistance to be successfully achieved. "Foolishness on my part, I suspect. I spoke with Elrond and Bilbo in Tirion, and it took considerably longer than I had expected."

Ványalos favored him with a stern glance. "I trust you did not attempt to actually go to Tirion."

The fairer head shook. "No," came the reply as Olórin rubbed his eyes. "I had considered it, but I know I would not have the strength to do so quite yet. I had no notion even this would be so exhausting." He let his hand fall to his lap; Frodo, shocked, saw that it was trembling. The wizard looked up at Ványalos, his expression saying clearly that he would brook no dissembling. "There is something more wrong with me than the weariness of many years' labor in Middle-earth, Ványalos, and do not deny it. I was not suspicious of it the day we arrived, but as time passes, I can feel it more and more strongly. And I have begun to realize that your eager helpfulness is something more than neighborly concern for an old friend. You have been asked to watch me, haven't you?"

"Yes," Ványalos confirmed, then hastily added, "but I am no more certain of what is troubling you than you are, *pityandil*. Lord Irmo asked me to watch over both of you—" His gesture included Frodo. "—but he was not forthcoming with his reasons for wanting such observations. I have my own suspicions, but I would prefer not to speak of them until I have seen proof to support them. I think it would be best if you discussed this with Lord Irmo himself, and not here. Do you feel strong enough to stay on the back of your horse if I help you mount, and Frodo rides with you to help you remain steady? I would come, but I would prefer to go on ahead and summon Lord Irmo."

Olórin's smile was as pale as the rest of his face. "Shadowfax will not let me fall, whether I ride alone or not. But I will welcome any company. This weariness is troubling me more with each passing moment, and I fear what might happen if I am left alone."

Ványalos answered honestly, his normally merry face dark with worry. "So do I. Come now, let me assist you."

Frodo wondered if the taller Maia would simply pick up his friend and place him on Shadowfax's back, but he had the grace to allow Olórin some semblance of dignity, assisting him first to his feet and then helping him mount the horse, who had moved as close as possible to make the process less difficult for his master. The Istar was quite pale by the time he was settled, and when Ványalos placed Frodo in front of him, the hobbit could feel Olórin trembling from fatigue. He began to mention his concerns, but decided against it before he had more than taken the breath to speak. He could sense somehow that his condition was troubling Olórin far more than he was willing to admit, and he would not add to his friend's discomfort by voicing his own worries. He had relied upon the wizard for support often enough in the past, and he was determined to repay the debt by providing any help Olórin might need now, even if it was merely to give him something to cling to on their way back to the house. When they were both settled, Shadowfax took them out of the glen and across the wide Meadow with such smooth speed, Frodo felt as if they were flying.

XII

Frodo did not look back to see what had happened to Ványalos, but by the time Shadowfax delivered them to the porch of the house in the wood, he was waiting for them, in the company of three others, a man and two women. In his concern, Frodo merely noted their presence and not their identities until both he and Olórin had been aided in dismounting. One of the two women stepped forward to help the Istar into his house; the touch of her hand on his arm was enough to steady him more than whatever Ványalos had done to waken him.

Relieved to see his friend able to move normally again, Frodo took a moment to look more closely at the three guests. He recognized them as three of the Valar he had met on the day of their arrival, Irmo, Estë, and Nienna. He was surprised by the presence of the two women, as it was yet daylight and he had been told Estë typically slept by day, and that Nienna left her home in the far west of Aman only on occasions of great importance. That they had come so quickly in answer to whatever summons Ványalos had made told the hobbit a great deal about their feelings for this Maia who had been their counselor, pupil, and friend. Quietly, he followed, careful to stay out of the way, but also needing to know whatever they determined about this unexpected situation.

"I have told you all that happened, all that I did," Olórin said somewhat testily a short time later, after he had been settled in a comfortable seat in the central hall and had recounted recent events for their visitors. Estë had asked Frodo to bring a cup, and had filled it with a clear fragrant liquid much like a beverage that had been served at the festival in Valmar, yet even more appealing and wholesome; she had then given it to Olórin to drink, and would not allow him to speak until he had drained the glass. He soon appeared less pallid than he had before, and the tremors were gone, though to Frodo's eyes, he still seemed somehow dimmed in ways the hobbit could not describe. "I am quite certain I did nothing so extraordinary as to cause this degree of exhaustion, yet I have no other explanation for it. When I woke, I was suspicious that something more unusual was at fault; now, seeing all three of you here on a moment's notice, I know it must be so. You will forgive my peevish temper, my ladies and my lord, but the last time I can recall being treated so... gingerly was many thousands of years ago, after the incident with Aránayel. You were not so solicitous when I returned after the conflicts with Melkor, nor when Lord Eru returned me here after I was slain by the Balrog. I cannot believe you came now simply because I fainted from weariness!"

"And then slept for much of the afternoon, so deeply you could not waken on your own," Nienna said gently, her voice as ever full of compassion. "Your Shadowfax is as attentive as he is loyal; I learned enough from him to understand his concern, as well as that of your friends."

The Istar snorted softly. "For which I am indeed grateful, my lady — yet none of this answers my question, which is: why is this happening to me? I have spent many years in Middle-earth before, if never so many at once, and the work I did then was as difficult as any I have done more recently. Yet on all those occasions, when I returned home, my strength was restored with the passage of time; it did not diminish, as would seem to be the case now. Something is amiss, and if you have any better a notion

of what that might be, please do not continue to hide it from me, for I am the one being thus affected, and I would know the truth of what is wrong with me.”

Irmo glanced at Ványalos, who responded with an ambiguous gesture; after several long moments, his silver eyes slipped to his wife and sister. Some unspoken communication passed between all four of them, Frodo suspected, and at length, the Lady of Lórien sighed, her voice as soft as the breath of the night wind. “We would tell you that truth, Olórin, if we ourselves knew it for certain. Since the time when you were sent to us by Lord Eru after the death of your body in Endor, Irmo has had misgivings about the mission of the Istari and your part in it. He has spoken of them to us, as he has to you, but it was not possible to gain a full measure of understanding until your tasks were completed and you returned to us, freed from the restrictions of that embassy. As you have kept watch over your small friend, so we have kept watch over both of you. Frodo and his kinsman have begun to find healing in the power of Aman, yet you who have long been a part of it have not. With each new use of your Maia abilities, you seem to slip farther into an abyss of weakness, from which rest can only partially restore you. This should not be so, and we are at a loss to understand what must be done to cure it.”

“I cannot enlighten you,” Olórin said after pondering Estë’s words. “I know only that something is not right within me, and I cannot live as I lived before.” A shadow of fear darkened his face, though he did not let even a trace of it enter his voice. “Have I spent so many years tied to mortal flesh that I have indeed *become* mortal?”

“No,” Irmo said, his confidence in his answer absolute. “You know as well as any of us that only Lord Eru can cause such a change, altering the very nature of a being from one kind to another, and that He did not do when He agreed to fashion the bodies in which you and your brethren Istari were sent to Middle-earth, nor did He do so when he returned you after your fall. The bodies were those of Men, but your spirits remained Maia, and not even a hundred thousand years spent tied to them could change that. Yet such a union caused far-reaching results which none of us had anticipated. I fear we did a terrible wrong in how we chose to send you to Endor, a mistake that may not allow you to fully regain the strength you knew before you were sent on this mission. As binding themselves to a single fana for so many centuries depleted the strength of Melkor and his minions, so being bound to a mortal shell may have done the same for those of your order, even though we had attempted to make certain our methods would prevent all of you from being permanently harmed by it. You were sent in forms untouched by evil, but as a cloth laid too long upon blood takes up its color and can never be wholly cleansed of it, so too in time did the poisons of Melkor which mar Endor stain your mortal bodies and touch your spirits within them. You are still a Maia, but the ordinary means of healing available to us seemingly cannot correct the damage that such a life in flesh has done to you. Even freed of it, you no longer have the power you once knew, and as yet, we do not know how to restore it to you.”

“But why?” Frodo asked from the corner in which he had been sitting, unwilling to risk getting in the way of these great beings, but too horrified by what he was hearing to keep silent. “Why did you do this? If you knew that your people were weakened by living in the same body for too long, why did you send the wizards that way, in real ones? Didn’t you stop to think that they might be hurt by it?”

Olórin would have spoken in the Valar's defense, but Nienna, who was standing nearest him, laid a hand on his shoulder to still him. "We did consider that very question," she said gently, "especially those of us whose gifts lie in matters of hurt and healing, both of the body and the heart. We debated the matter among ourselves before we brought it to full council with our servants to seek volunteers, for they would be the ones who would go forth thus as our messengers. Manwë sought Lord Eru's counsel in this, for only He could fashion the bodies in which our emissaries were to be bound. He gave His sanction, and He told us such a method would imperil those we sent in this manner, but He did not warn us of *this* possibility, nor did we think of it until it was too late. Yet we should have foreseen it. Of all the peoples of Middle-earth, it is Men, who are bound most closely with its fate and yet have their own destiny beyond the world, who have borne the greatest burden of Melkor's taint in their flesh. They fall prey to illness and hunger and weariness much more quickly than the Eldar or even the Dwarves, and that poison touches their spirits even when their hearts are true and pure, bringing them great sorrow and frustration and even anger. As they are exposed to it throughout their lives, the evil settles within their flesh and their hearts like a shadow, either pulling them down into corruption, or weighing them heavily with the cares of the mortal world, until they can bear them no longer and thus take to themselves the blessing of the Gift of the One, to be freed of both the burden and the evils Melkor wrought in Arda.

"Do you not know this from your own experience, Frodo? Your people are not Men, yet you are indeed a part of the Second-born. It was those same poisons of the Enemy that lay upon the blade that pierced your shoulder, and now lingers in your body and spirit, causing you pain and grief far beyond the time when you were wounded. Our five servants who were sent to Middle-earth were among the most noble spirits of their kind, and their strength of will and mind and heart was great, as great as Sauron's, though they were forbidden to use all but the least of the powers that sprang of their Maia birth. We felt certain that their strength of spirit and their purity of purpose would be more than enough to protect them from the evils that haunt Men. But as the years passed and they remained bound to these human bodies, those same poisons crept into their flesh, for it was real and not feigned, and at length, evil reached into their very hearts."

Frodo was appalled by what she seemed to be saying. "Olórin is *not* evil...!"

Nienna's sigh was full of compassion and deep regret. "I did not say this was so; well do we know he is not, and never shall be. You yourself are not evil, yet you bear its mark, and it steals from you the joy of life that should be yours. Thus it is for Olórin. Evil touched him deeply, for he was bound by his mission to confront it often, and lived constantly in its presence, as it lies deep in all the lands Melkor marred. It did not injure his body as it did yours, but it scarred his spirit, for he was often called upon to contend with the Enemy in such ways. As years of hard labor wear down mortal flesh, so too can long work of this kind weary and wound a spirit, and we are creatures of spirit. When he was severed from life in Endor by the death of his body, Olórin came not to us, but went into the hands of Lord Eru, for he had given up his life as a sacrifice to save the only true hope remaining for Middle-earth. The One accepted him and blessed him, giving back to him his life and his strength, yet even so hallow and enhanced, the scar of evil — not evil itself — remained upon his spirit, and in time, even he wearied of life in the mortal world and yearned to be freed of its cares and burdens."

“So were all the Istari affected, Frodo,” Irmo said. “Some were not strong enough to resist, and fell utterly. Alatar and Pallando succumbed all too quickly, as they yearned for the power and reverence they had been forbidden to seek. It touched Aiwendil by corrupting his memory, causing his knowledge of his true origins to fade and decay until he strayed from his mission and any desire to return to his home and his former life. Curumo resisted at first, but then saw what had seduced Sauron and so many others long ago; he embraced the darkness and desired to become a Power within it. Only Olórin remained strong enough to keep true to his tasks and return to us. We knew the threats of evil and darkness that linger in Endor, and we had thought that when our servants returned and were shed of those mortal shells, with them they would shed all the shadows that had tried to cling to them.”

“But always, it seems, we underestimate evil’s reach,” said Estë. “As the Morgul knife left a mark upon you that will not heal, so too were our messengers wounded by many years of a life unceasingly exposed to the poisons of our Enemies. Such a scar upon their souls casts a shadow between them and the light of Eru, a harmful thing, for we Ainur are a part of His very thought, and our strength and power and life comes of Him. It is not without reason that those of our kind who defy Him eventually expend and weaken themselves until they are all but nothing; as they choose to remove themselves from His light, they remove themselves from the source of our very life. The shadow that now dims Olórin’s strength comes of many wounds wrought by evil, and of his long mortal life in Endor. As with your injury, his grows no worse, yet the shadow remains, and it hinders him from recovering fully, requiring him to expend himself without allowing him to regain in full measure what he loses each time he puts forth his strength. The diminishment has hastened now as it did not in Endor, for here, he is no longer restrained from the full use of his abilities, and has indeed made significant use of them since his return, more than he had in Middle-earth since his return from death. This we did not anticipate, and there are no words to tell how greatly we rue our shortsightedness in all this matter, for Olórin has long been beloved of all the Valar, and it grieves us to see him harmed in any fashion.”

The wizard listened to their explanations, still and silent, showing no sign of how those words might be affecting him, but Frodo’s horror was plain. “So you had no idea that this plan of yours would hurt them, but if you’d chosen some other way to send them — if you’d just trusted them to abide by your rules and restrictions and hadn’t insisted on tying them into real human bodies — none of this would’ve happened. They wouldn’t have had to deal with the weight of the tasks you set them *and* the problems all of us mortals face when we’re confronted by evil, and they might’ve all carried out their work and come home safe and sound. But you didn’t trust them enough to do it, and now Olórin is paying the price.”

Nienna closed her eyes, touched by the hobbit’s indignation and loyalty. Estë looked away in sorrow; Irmo regarded the halfling, his gaze steady but sad. “I fear you are right,” he admitted regretfully. “We gambled with our servants’ well-being in what amounted to an untested trial, and though the ultimate goal was achieved, the cost was too high. I can see your worry that Olórin will die, and though I can assure you he will not, I cannot tell you how or when or even if we will find a cure for what has happened to him. It is beyond our experience, and if no solution is found, he will very likely continue to fade and lose strength, to what end I do not know. None of our people whose spirits were scarred in this fashion ever returned to Valinor; they chose diminishment and exile over repentance. The

power of Aman can preserve and sustain, but it would seem now that some works of evil are too great even for the might of all the Ainur to heal.”

Estë turned her face back toward the hobbit. “But do not lose hope, Frodo. I do not yet know how these matters will end, but I believe that your fate and Olórin’s are bound together in this matter. It is the same evil that has touched and injured both of you, and if we can find healing for one, both of you will benefit from it.”

Frodo swallowed with some difficulty; his throat felt as dry as the ash of Mordor. “If?” he echoed. “Is this something else you aren’t sure about? Was the hope for healing I was offered nothing more than that, just a hope?”

“Hope can bring about more healing than you know, Frodo Baggins,” Nienna said, her voice soft but as unshakable as foundations of ancient stone. “It was naught but the thinnest thread of hope that carried you across all the miles between your home and the mountain of fire in Mordor, a thread that held only so long as neither you nor your companion surrendered your belief in the strength of pity. We can heal you of the physical injuries you have suffered, more thoroughly than any in Endor were able. Whether or not your heart and spirit are able to heal as well and drive out the shadows within you is your decision alone.”

The hobbit winced at the Lady’s tone, which reminded him of times when Gandalf had chided him over the same subjects. He suddenly could see very clearly from whom the wizard had learned such things. “I’m sorry if I sound ungrateful,” he said, hesitantly meeting Nienna’s gray eyes, then glancing to her companions. “I’m not, but I am worried — more for Olórin than for myself, I think. I knew I was not well when I came here to Aman. I had no idea he was unwell, too.”

“None of us did for certain, until you came to us in the Máhanaxar, and we were able to judge for ourselves,” Irmo replied, his manner graciously accepting of the apology. “When he was here briefly after his fall in Moria, he kept himself apart from us while he waited to be told whether or not he would be permitted to return. I did speak with him one day, and even then I could sense that something was amiss, but I was not able to find the reason for my feelings before he departed again. We did what we could to help him, then, as we have since he was freed of his mortal form, but we had hoped there would be more time to study the problem and search for answers before matters turned serious.”

He turned to the Istar, who had been listening, impassive and silent. “Perhaps if we had told you of this directly upon your arrival, the current situation would have been avoided, but as you wished for Frodo’s first days in Aman to be without care, so did we wish for you. Once again, it would seem we have erred gravely in our effort to do good.”

“No more so than I, my lord,” Olórin said with a faint sigh. “I heard all the warnings I have been given to rest and refrain from expending my energy more than is necessary. Every friend and neighbor who came to visit last evening made a point to remind me of it, as did the three of you and Lord Manwë on the day of the festival. If I had not been stubborn then, I might have found other help for Frodo and

not even risked exhausting myself when I already knew that I was weary. I cannot hold any of you to blame for this, not even in the fact that you chose the manner of our sending without knowing for certain how such a life would affect us, if too greatly prolonged. What needed to be done was done, as we must work to determine the best way to proceed now."

Estë smiled softly. "I am pleased to hear you say that, Olórin, for then I may now presume that you will offer no objections to any support given to you and Master Frodo in the time to come, by our peoples or the Eldar. And I expect that you will take to heart my advice that *work* is one thing that you should avoid as much as possible."

The wizard made an exquisitely disgruntled sound. "I cannot sit idle from dawn to dusk and in all the hours between, my lady...."

"Indeed not," Irmo agreed affably, "for Lórien already boasts one resident who seems to have made that his lifelong goal, and one Ványalos in all Aman is more than enough. Two thousand years of difficult labor have doubtless made the desire for activity a habit, but I think it should not be too hard to find ways to keep yourself occupied. From what you told us, you have guests due to arrive in several days, and unless you cannot restrain yourself from doing things you know will cause you harm, I see no reason why your plans should be altered. It will provide both you and Frodo with many diversions, and give us time to study this matter more closely and work upon a viable solution."

An odd expression twitched across Olórin's face. "So in other words, I am to conduct my life as a mortal, until I have been told I may do otherwise."

The three Valar nodded; Frodo's opinion of that verdict was not as accepting as his old friend's. "That certainly does not seem fair to me," he said, his tone stiff with irritation.

Olórin, however, was less disturbed. "Perhaps not, but it is at least convenient in its timing. I have not yet had a chance to forget how to do so; indeed, I have had moments since my return when I needed to consciously remind myself that I am a Maia and no longer bound to mortal flesh."

He looked to their guests. "Very well, I shall do as you suggest. I suppose I truly have no other choice, for if I do not cooperate, I will be the one to suffer for it."

Nienna spoke with a compassion beyond any Frodo had ever heard before. "It is hoped that suffering will no longer be a part of your life, Olórin, or of Frodo's. Both of you have given far more than could ever have been asked of you to complete work that should never have become your burdens. Yet there is always a time in any healing when the light that awaits at the end cannot be clearly seen, only the long dark journey ahead. We and those who are your friends among us will do whatever we can to ease that journey, and make it as brief as possible."

With that, they said their farewells and departed to begin the tasks ahead of them. When they had gone, Olórin sighed yet again, a note of genial exasperation in his voice. "I presume, then, that this means we will be put through the trial of suffering your presence more than usual, Ványalos."

The tall Maia grinned impudently. "I could not allow an old friend and neighbor to endure such restrictions without doing all I can to help, *pityandil*. It would be rude and selfish, not to mention in direct defiance of what my Lord and Lady have already asked me to do."

"I thought as much. Well, so long as you do not insist I remain housebound and idle, I will do my best to abide by the advice I was given, and keep my complaints to myself. I may not be pleased to find myself in this predicament, but I do understand that all of your intentions are good."

"Then you have my promise that I will not to attempt to keep you confined for my own convenience." Ványalos took his leave then, able to sense that his continued presence might be a cause for discomfort, for the time being.

Frodo watched him go, then turned his attention back to the wizard, who remained seated in the chair from which he had not moved since their return from the Meadow. "Would you like me to leave, too?" he asked, aware that his friend might need some time alone to come to terms with how his life had suddenly changed for the worse.

But Olórin shook his head. "No, not unless you feel ill at ease, loitering about when there is so much more of this new world for you to see."

The hobbit moved closer, taking a seat on a wooden bench beneath the window near the Maia. "I had rather hoped you would be the one to show it to me," he said.

"So had I," was the regretful reply, "but it seems that is not to be for now, if ever it shall be."

Frodo closed his eyes against the ache in those words. He suddenly felt as if he wanted to scream, against the injustice of the world, the accursed persistence of evil that reached even here into the most blessed of living lands to tear apart if not life then the happiness it should have had. He felt the burn of a growing rage toward that injustice, and at last could keep silent no longer. "Aren't you angry with them, Olórin?" he wanted to know, unable to comprehend how he could take this so calmly. "Don't you feel the least bit... *cheated*, that they sent you to do their work for them in a way they didn't even know would be safe? That they made a mistake and you now have to pay for it?"

The Istar did not answer immediately, but when he did, it was with the same calm. "No. How can I blame them for making a mistake, when I myself have made so many? They did not willfully cause me harm or force me to undertake a mission they knew beyond doubt would have negative personal repercussions; they acted upon the best of the knowledge they had at the time. I came to Arda as a servant of the Valar, Frodo, and though I have not always agreed with their decisions, they have done nothing to lose my loyalty. There is never any guarantee that what we do in the struggle against evil will

be safe; our personal security is not as important as the goals we work to achieve. We Maiar have been called the hands of the Valar, for they cannot be everywhere at once, and when they must be elsewhere or the task is one they dare not undertake themselves, we their servants must carry on for them. I knew this even before I first left the Timeless Halls, that I would be entering into a world where my life would be dedicated to work not always of my own choosing. Lord Manwë felt that I possessed unique abilities which would enable the mission of the Istari to succeed, and though I believed he was mistaken, time and events have proved that he was indeed right. There was never any doubt in my mind that this task would be a dangerous one, full of perils of all kinds. That I did not anticipate this particular one is ultimately unimportant. Even if I had known then what I know now, I would not have chosen differently."

Frodo's outrage cooled considerably before that placid explanation. He reflected upon it, then sighed. "Just as I would not have changed my mind about taking the Ring to Mordor, even had I known how things would end for me. But aren't you the least bit frightened by this? It's even worse than having to leave your home forever, as I did."

Olórin looked out the window, a reflection of light off the falling waters flickering across his face and for a moment making it appear as if he himself were trembling on the brink of light and dark, life and death. "Yes, of course I'm frightened," he said at length, the illusion dissipating as he turned back to Frodo. The hobbit could see in his eyes that his words were not empty; there was genuine disquiet and worry filling them. "I am neither so strong nor so foolish as to be beyond fear when what is at risk is my very existence. I shudder to think that in time, I could dwindle and be left adrift in the world, powerless and without shape or purpose. If this cannot be avoided, I would have been better off taking Aiwendil's path and remain in Middle-earth rather than follow the yearning of my heart to return home. And I cannot help but feel some guilt for bringing you here only so that you could witness this."

He leaned forward, setting his hands on the halfling's knees as he gazed directly into the dark eyes. "But I also have faith, Frodo, not only in the skills of the Valar but in Lord Eru as well. I cannot believe that He would have sent me back to Middle-earth, strengthened and revived, if I was doomed to end like this. I believe with all my heart that He has some other plan in mind, and though I cannot say what that might be, I am willing to face my fears and continue on as best I may, until I have found that destiny. And I will pray that I find the strength and the courage to endure until that time comes. But in my heart, I have no doubt that it will."

Frodo was so moved by both his friend's words and his clearly unwavering belief and trust in a power greater than himself, for a time, he could not speak. When he found his voice again, it came in little more than a whisper. "I wish I had your confidence. I think I found the courage to go to Mordor only because I was afraid of failing you, and proving myself to be unworthy of all the trust others had put in me. That would have been more difficult to bear than the Ring itself. But if you believe there is hope yet to be found for both of us, then I will try my best to believe with you, even though I have none of your experience with Lord Eru."

Olórin smiled wanly. "You have experience of a different sort, not direct interaction as I have had, but at times you have been guided by a greater will, and it was neither mine nor the Ring's nor that of the Valar. Manwë chose me to be his messenger in Middle-earth because of things he saw in me that I did not; perhaps Lord Eru chose you to bear the Ring for much the same reasons. Whatever the case, I cannot help but feel He was the one Who guided me to Bilbo, and you, for I could not have chosen so well on my own."

The hobbit returned the smile, somewhat sheepishly. "I think you could have, but I suspect you *are* right, and all of us were playing parts we didn't even know we'd been assigned. If I have a part to play now, and it can be of my own choosing, then I want to help you in any way I can, to repay the debt I owe you for all the years of guidance and support you gave to me. If a cure can be found, for both of us, I am not going to give up hope or give up trying until we find it. I can promise you that."

Olórin chuckled. "Then I shall rest more easily, knowing as I do that a hobbit is easily my match for stubbornness and tenacity!"

Frodo's smile became stern. "I meant what I said, Olórin, every word of it. I may not have had the strength to hold out against the burden and the pressures of the Ring, but this time, I am not going to give up. We hobbits *are* stubborn creatures, and if all the powers of the West cannot find a cure to the affliction of mortals and immortals meddling in each others' affairs, then perhaps a headstrong hobbit or two will be able to manage it. And if I can help, then I will feel better, knowing that my coming here served some purpose beyond granting me a privilege I still feel I have not fully earned." His frown faded back into a wry half-smile. "Perhaps that's also a part of Lord Eru's plans."

"Perhaps it is. In all the years since I was sent as one of the Istari, I did not feel this shadow creeping upon me, as they described to us. If this is how evil first works its way into the hearts of Men, then I have sorely misunderstood them, even as I pitied them."

"That's something I don't understand. If this happened to you because you'd been trapped in a mortal body for too long, why didn't it pass away when your body did? And why did Lord Eru not heal you completely when He sent you back?"

Olórin's eyes filled with distance as he pondered the question. When he focused again on Frodo's face, there was sadness in his small smile. "For we of the Ainur, changes that come upon our spirits remain with us even after we are separated from our incarnate forms, permanent or temporary. When I returned after Moria, I had not completed my mission; my test was yet unfinished. Lord Eru did a great deal for me, but that He did not heal me in this way convinces me all the more that there is some greater reason behind it, some purpose yet to be served by it."

Frodo half-sighed, half-grumbled. "It would seem so, but I still think it's dreadfully unfair. You've already done so much. Would it have been too much to ask to take that burden from you even before you realized you had it?"

The Maia's reply was completely in earnest. "Yes, it would have been. Were you given such an advantage after you were wounded by the Nazgûl, yet resisted their evil long enough to bring the Ring safely to Rivendell? When Shelob poisoned you, were you blessed with complete health and strength again so that you could complete the quest more easily? No, my dear Frodo, Lord Eru's decision was perfectly fair. If we expect Him to take away all our cares and burdens simply because we feel we have earned the respite, we would never learn many of our most important lessons. I would not be the person I am today but for the cruelty of Aránayel, the treachery of Saruman, and the evils of the Enemy. Nor would I have the heart to carry on if I had not experienced the joys of discovery, the love of friends, and the loyalty of those who stood beside me in a just cause. This is the root of all life, mortal and immortal, both the sweet and the bitter. I do not believe that Lord Eru means for me to fade and diminish to naught simply because I spent too long a time in a body of true mortal flesh to carry out a task for the good of all, but if even that should be my fate, I will accept it, so long as I know that it is somehow a part of the greater Music yet to come."

His unwavering faith both touched and shook the hobbit, who found himself without a single word to offer in response. Instead, he leaned forward and embraced his old friend, glad that they had been seated close together, so that the height of the bench made the motion simple, despite their differing heights. Olórin respected both his silence and his almost tangible emotions. Resisting the impulse to offer comfort in the non-physical way of his people, he instead did what he could after the fashion of mortals and returned the gesture of affection, thanking the One for having given him such a friend and allowing him to still be a part of his life at such a time. The road ahead did indeed look dark, all the more so because the other immortals of Aman could not truly grasp the mortal frailties they had never — and *could* never — experience. Yet in the darkness, there was one great consolation: the knowledge that they would not walk this long and bleak path alone.

But as he closed his eyes to look down that metaphorical road into the future, the only light he could see at its end was faint and red and flickering, like the fires of Orodruin awaiting the conclusion of the Quest. Olórin did not know what such an image might mean in this situation, and for the time being, he put it out of his thoughts and did not speak of it to Frodo, or to anyone else.

To Be Continued