

I Entulesse

(The Return)

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Part Four

XIII

Frodo held fast to his promise to do whatever he could to help find the answer for Olórin's predicament, as well as his own, but by the day Bilbo was due to arrive in the company of Elrond and Celebrian, he had not discovered anything particularly useful. Estë had given Olórin an injunction to sleep at night whether or not he felt the need of it, but it was an unnecessary order, for by the end of each day, the wizard admitted that he was more than ready to rest. To Frodo's eyes, he looked it, as if he himself were fading with the sunset, a little more with each passing day. Olórin did not even object when Frodo fairly tucked him in every night, lingering at the doorway to his sleeping chamber until he was certain his friend was indeed following the Healer's command. The hobbit generally woke first, not long after dawn, and though each morning Olórin appeared considerably refreshed and much stronger than the night before, very nearly his old self again, it seemed to Frodo no different than the vigor any human felt after a good night's sleep, and it diminished ever more quickly as each day progressed.

And though Olórin did not complain about his restrictions, nor over Ványalos' daily visits — which always came with fresh supplies of those provisions that did not easily store from day to day — there was no denying that the wizard did indeed feel confined by those strictures, like a falcon hooded and jessed to prevent it from taking wing. But Ványalos also held to Irmo's promise that Olórin would not be literally confined so long as his condition did not warrant it, so each morning after breakfast, he went out to the Meadow to visit Shadowfax and for a little while ride farther than he was allowed to go on his own. Frodo went with him most mornings, not as a keeper, but because he enjoyed the company and wanted to become acquainted with more of the country and its inhabitants. Lórien was much vaster than he had first thought, larger than the Golden Wood of Middle-earth, encompassing the hill country and meadowlands that were so reminiscent of the Shire, a beautiful forest where the Lord and Lady dwelt, and other regions that awakened memories of the fairer parts of Middle-earth Frodo had seen in his travels. And everywhere, the land was threaded by silver streams, cooled by still pools, refreshed by glittering fountains. Frodo was quite taken by it, and the people they met along the way.

No, it was not Olórin's complaints that were troubling Frodo on the morning of the day of his uncle's arrival; it was his silences, which were growing longer and more frequent. He had asked about them at first, but he gave up when he saw that he would always receive the same answer. Nothing was wrong, nothing was bothering the wizard, and Frodo finally had to conclude that whatever *was* on his mind was not something he was about to share. The hobbit had long since learned the futility of trying

to press his friend for answers when he had decided to be close about a subject, and he knew that this was yet another of those times. So he stopped asking, although he did tell Ványalos, who thanked him for his observations, but was unable to assuage Frodo's worries. Apparently, when Olórin chose to keep something to himself, he was usually able to prevent even his own people from prying. That, Frodo supposed, was doubtless a part of how he had earned himself a reputation for stubbornness here in Aman, one that seemed to be well-earned.

Since the last message they had received from Bilbo's party indicated that they would likely reach their destination at midday, Frodo decided to remain behind for the morning trip to the Meadow so that the noon meal would be ready for Bilbo when he arrived, his hobbit appetite having revived along with the rest of him. That Olórin did not gainsay his choice told Frodo that he had been correct in thinking the Maia might want some time alone before their guests arrived. The halfling was unsure if anything had been said to them about Olórin's situation; if not, he would doubtless want an opportunity to reflect upon the best way to give them the news, which was still unpleasant, as no progress had been made in the efforts to resolve it. And if they had been told, he quite likely needed that time to prepare himself for what might be an uncomfortably solicitous welcome.

Frodo kept himself busy in the kitchen and did his best not to fret. He was reasonably successful, until he finished his work, glanced out the window to see the position of the sun, and noticed it was nearing the time when Bilbo and the others were due to arrive. He was leaning on the sill, looking out to see if he might hear or spot anything to indicate the approach of either the guests or the owner of the house, and instead saw Ványalos coming across the grass, a basket in hand.

He smiled as he stepped up to the window. "Not yet, little one," he told the hobbit, lifting up the provender he had brought for the day so that Frodo might take it. "Your kinsman and his Elf friends are making good time, so I am told, but they have just reached the hill country, and it will be a while yet before they arrive, perhaps an hour or so. Possibly two; I must admit, I have never been very good at counting time this way. I tend to think more of dawn and dusk, and noon and midnight, which are the most notable events of each day, here in Aman. Alas, I have never been to Endor to learn how to mark the passing hours as do the Eruhíni."

"I can assure you, you have missed very little. My people are not all that different, since we mark the times of day mostly by the meals that come with them. But thank you for the news, and this," the hobbit said as he took the basket. "I didn't think it was quite time, and I was looking to see if Olórin was on his way back from the Meadow."

The Maia's gray eyes unfocused for a moment, as if he were looking at something far too distant for mortal eyes to discern. "Not quite yet," he said presently. "He and Shadowfax are coming through the southern woodland, returning from plains beyond the river country."

Frodo made a soft sound of worry as he set the basket onto the table nearest the window. He had ridden with the wizard to the river that flowed through the south of Lórien, and he had seen the vast plains that stretched beyond it, a beautiful grassland that lay between Lórien and the southern reaches

of Valinor where the forests of Oromë were located. The plains were not a part of Irmo's and Estë's realm, and thus lay beyond their influence. "Is it safe for him to leave Lórien, Ványalos?" he asked, not needing to mention the subject of his inquiry. "When I ride with him, we go a little farther every day, and when he rides alone, it always takes longer for him to return. Can he go too far, and hurt himself?"

Ványalos shook his head, hoisting himself up to sit on the sill while Frodo unpacked the basket. "So long as he keeps to his promise to behave as a mortal, no — and before you ask, yes, he has kept his promise, quite diligently. But the restriction chafes him, even though I think he tries very hard not to let you see his discomfort."

Frodo snorted. "Oh, yes, he tries so hard that I know that's exactly what he's doing. He doesn't want me to worry about him, and I think he's uncomfortable with the thought of lying constantly to spare my feelings, so he says nothing rather than tell me what's bothering him. The silences worry me more than anything I can imagine he could say."

"I know," the visiting Maia said, sympathetic. "He's frightened, with good reason, and he's searching for answers he does not know how to find. You have known him long enough to realize how poorly he would suffer such circumstances. He is not the sort to feel superior to others because of his knowledge, but he has long taken satisfaction from the quest for it, and his ability to find answers when he needs them. Now, he cannot, and it both disturbs him and makes him feel more keenly the bondage of the limits placed upon him."

"Like a prisoner," Frodo said softly. "Watching him, I think I must know how some of the Noldor like Galadriel felt, long ago, when they wanted to go to Middle-earth because they felt too restricted here. Even the most beautiful cage is still a cage."

"As we also are beginning to understand, now that our part in the Music is done, yet we cannot leave Arda to return to our true home in the Timeless Halls. Try not to worry, Frodo. My Lord and Lady are certain there is a remedy to this situation, and if you wish to do something to prevent Olórin from brooding so, employ some of your own stubbornness."

The sound the hobbit made was exquisitely frustrated. "How, when all I get from him other than polite everyday nonsense is silence?"

Ványalos' grin was impishly impudent. "Fill the silence with noise. You are his guest, and the custom of this land is for the host to provide whatever the guest needs, from food and drink to conversation. If he attempts to avoid you, remind him that this is his duty as your host. Require him to listen to you, and to answer you; the subject matters not, and do not relent. If he does as courtesy requires of him, sooner or later, he will either slip and speak of what he had meant to keep secret, or he will remember that troubles kept buried inevitably lead to even greater pain for more than just the one maintaining that silence."

As Frodo listened to the Maia's plan, he saw a connection he had not anticipated. "Is this how

you and Lindarinë supposedly helped him after he first came to live in Lórien?”

The redhead nodded. “Yes. We drove him first to distraction and then to the brink of anger with our persistence, involving him in life when he would have sooner withdrawn, but ere he turned his wrath on us, he understood what we were doing, and why. He is wiser now than he was then, my little friend. It should not take him quite as long to see reason, especially not if your kinsman also possesses this unique obstinacy. It was a much easier task when there were two of us to see to it.”

Frodo tried to imagine attempting such a thing; he grimaced. “I think we would stand a much better chance of prodding him into forgetting his promise to forego using his abilities so that he could turn us into toads. Even Bilbo and I together are *not* that stubborn.”

Ványalos chuckled. “And I think you are underestimating your ability. Olórin values your friendship more than his stiff-necked need for privacy in a matter he knows well indeed concerns you, not only himself. He may resist, but he will back down if you insist. And what you must insist upon is that he not continue to take himself off alone to brood. I will give what assistance I can in this, but ultimately, I believe it is you he will heed, not me. Your fates are bound together in ways he cannot ignore or deny.”

“Perhaps not,” the hobbit allowed as he returned the now-empty basket. “But I would rather make the journey to Mordor again than deliberately provoke him. His temper may cool quickly, but while it is still hot, it is something *I* would prefer to avoid.”

The Maia laughed as he swung his legs over the sill and dropped down to the ground again. “I cannot say that I blame you, but do keep it in mind. Olórin’s stubbornness has occasionally done him credit, as has yours, but at times, it is necessary to push and prod a bit to encourage such a person to be stubborn about the *right* things.”

As he walked off, Frodo considered what he had just said, and his own recent tendencies to be stubborn about the wrong things, such as his supposed failure in Mount Doom, and his unworthiness to be accorded honor and privilege for all he had done. Many people had been attempting to persuade him to reconsider those notions, and he had resisted, not because they were wrong, but simply because he was being obstinate. As all of them had a point in insisting otherwise, so did Ványalos. Perhaps there was a way to begin this campaign of nudging that might work, after all, and he was certain Ványalos, and Bilbo, would help him implement it.

Given that Shadowfax could run far more swiftly than any ordinary horses that would have been put at the disposal of Bilbo and his companions, Olórin managed to return before they arrived. After Ványalos had departed, Frodo had tidied up the kitchen and himself, then had settled himself on the front porch, ostensibly to read a book while he waited to see who arrived first. As he watched the great silver horse crossing the clearing at a gentle pace — he had taken to spending his time close to the house,

understanding as he did that his master had greater need of him than before — Frodo did his best to appear distracted, more interested in his book than anything else.

“Did Shadowfax enjoy his run across the grasslands?” the hobbit asked casually after the wizard had dismounted and sent the Meara off to graze. He turned to favor Frodo with a curious glance.

“Yes, I suppose he did. How... ah, never mind, I should know by now that Ványalos is constantly keeping watch over me.”

“He is, and he also told me that Bilbo and the others will be arriving soon. If Ványalos hadn’t told me that you were already on your way back, I might have thought you had gone so far so as to deliberately avoid being here when they came.”

“That was not my intent,” Olórin said, his tone such that it seemed he was torn between feeling offended or chagrined. “It may be some time before Shadowfax and I will have another opportunity to ride so far. He wished to see some part of the lands in which the oldest of his ancient ancestors were born, and I saw no harm in indulging him. But this *is* my home, and it would have been unconscionably rude of me not to be here when I know guests are due.”

“Yes, Ványalos told me something about the local customs concerning the duties of a host,” Frodo said with deliberate nonchalance. “I had thought you wouldn’t forget them, but lately, it’s difficult to be sure, since you aren’t terribly inclined to talk of anything but trivialities. I hope you’ll be in a more agreeable mood, once they’ve arrived. I cannot say I fancy the thought of spending however long this healing process takes with someone whose preferred topics of conversation are either not very meaningful, or nothing at all.”

The oddest of expressions twitched across the wizard’s face; he cleared his throat as if preparing to make some response, then very clearly changed his mind. “If Bilbo and the others are due to arrive soon, I should go make certain I’m presentable to receive guests.”

Frodo sniffed. “Yes, you should. And do try to remember that the whole point of having him come to visit is to persuade him that staying here for a time is a good idea. He’s not going to think that if you spend day after day being peevish and broody.”

As he passed by on his way into the house, Olórin paused to glance at Frodo again, this time with a faint frown. “I have *not* been peevish!”

The hobbit shrugged without looking up. “No, I wouldn’t suppose you’d call it that, it’s rather unflattering. You haven’t been going about snapping people’s heads off, you’ve just been gloomy enough to make me want to do it to myself. Peevish was the wrong word, then. When I think of what the right word is, I’ll let you know.”

The Istar had begun to move on, but stopped again on the threshold. “That’s a bit of an odd tone,

coming from you," he noted. "I don't believe I've ever heard it before, not even when you were still a child."

There was blithe indifference in Frodo's reply. "Oh? Well, perhaps it's catching. There are certain tones I've been hearing from you of late that I've never heard before — or, I should say, *haven't* heard, since these last few days, the only time you've said much more than please and thank you has been when we're riding and there was something about the countryside or the people or the local customs or some impersonal thing to talk about. I don't suppose Bilbo or even Elrond will mind that, since they're both as new here as I am, but it might bore poor Lady Celebrían to tears, especially since she's been about these parts of Valinor a good deal more than you, these past five hundred years. You might want to keep that in mind, or you might find her correcting you over things you thought you once knew but don't, anymore."

Frodo had to struggle not to look up to see what he felt certain must be the most peculiar of expressions flit across the Maia's face. He heard Olórin take a breath, the sound of one about to speak, but he exhaled it a moment later, said nothing, and continued on into the house. Only after the door had closed did Frodo look up, glancing in the direction Olórin had gone.

He let loose the breath he himself had been holding. He hadn't expected the wizard to grow angry with him, but he was well aware that he was pushing him in that direction, and that if he was not careful, he might go too far too fast and wind up in an unpleasant situation he would regret. Cheekiness of this kind was something Pippin managed far more skillfully, and though he thought back on that example to help guide him, he knew he could not do this as well as his absent friend could have done with ease. Being a nuisance was not something that came naturally to him, possibly because after his parents had died, he had been terribly frightened of being left alone in the world, and had done all he could to make certain he would not be a bother to the unde who had adopted him. His parents had left his life unexpectedly, for reasons he had not understood as a child; he had had nightmares about being abandoned, turned out to fend for himself, a threat he had heard other adult hobbits hurl at their children when they misbehaved. That he had never heard of anyone actually doing so had been immaterial; just the thought of such a possible fate had been enough to make him mind his manners, especially until he felt more secure in his life at Bag End. Really, even as an adult, Bilbo himself was much more of scamp than Frodo had ever been as a boy; he would be glad when his uncle and the others arrived and could assist him in his inexpert attempts at manipulation.

"Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger," he muttered to himself, very softly. "Remember that, Frodo, and perhaps you'll survive the day still in one piece!" With that thought in mind, the hobbit closed his book and spent a few minutes collecting his thoughts, preparing himself to continue the assault.

When he had closed the door behind him, Olórin hesitated before continuing on into the house. He closed his eyes, actively suppressing the instinctive desire to use his more esoteric abilities to

determine just why Frodo had been acting so strangely. The fact that he had to make such an effort to refrain from doing so disturbed him more than the hobbit's behavior. He was in the process of deciding whether or not to change his mind yet again and step back outside to discuss the matter in an ordinary fashion when the sound of a voice behind him startled him out of the notion.

"Ah, so I see you did have the good manners to return before your guests arrive," Ványalos said with his usual irrepressible cheer, from where he stood several paces behind his neighbor. "Had you delayed much longer, I would have indeed thought your many years in Endor had left you with no social graces whatsoever."

A frown clouded the wizard's expression as he turned to face the taller Maia. "As you have failed to learn any at all in your many years here in Aman," he answered a bit more testily than he had intended. He was not angry with his friend, but he did not know if Ványalos had already been waiting here in the house before he had entered, or if he had come a but a moment after sensing that his neighbor had returned. The latter thought unsettled him, for reasons he did not care to acknowledge. "I was under the impression that you were going to meet Bilbo and the others to guide them here, since Lady Celebrían has never before visited my home. If I had known you were not, I would have gone myself...."

The redhead curtailed any possible lecture with a broad gesture. "Yes, I know, which is why I said I would see to it myself. Your ride this morning was much longer than usual, and you should take a least a few minutes to rest. I simply stopped by before going to meet your friends to see if there is anything more I can do to help."

Olórin grunted as he moved on into the house, striding past Ványalos and toward his sleeping chamber. "Yes, you can go and do what you said you would do and leave me to enjoy a minute or two of the peace you insist I should have! I am quite capable of changing clothes and preparing to receive guests without supervision. Were you a mortal, I would think you had appointed yourself to be my mother, or my keeper."

The smile on Ványalos' face did not fade as he let his fellow Maia pass; his eyes glittered with mischief, though his expression was one of feigned indignation. "Alas, that was not my decision, *pityandil*. Lord Irmo gave me that assignment, and I am but following his will, as would any faithful servant."

Olórin's grunt was rather more pronounced and skeptical as he pushed aside the half-open door to his bedroom and entered, Ványalos in his wake. "Then be a good servant and go tell him I am abiding by my promise, and then go abide by yours. I do not require such constant surveillance, and if Lord Irmo has changed his mind on that account, I would sooner move myself into his mansions and let him make the observations directly rather than be constantly followed and reminded and asked the same questions again and again!"

He stalked over to a storage chest near the foot of the bed as he spoke, and punctuated his last words by lifting the lid and throwing it back so forcefully, it slammed hard and loud against the wall

behind it. Ványalos, having stopped on the threshold to lounge against the jamb, crossed his arms and clicked his tongue. "Now, now, there is no need to be testy and out of sorts...."

"I am *not* testy!" the wizard snapped back, focusing his attention on the clothing inside the chest rather than surrender to an impulse to glare at his neighbor. "And if I appear to be out of sorts, it's because I am beginning to grow weary of either being treated like an invalid or a child!"

"No one is treating you like a child, old friend," Ványalos said quite calmly. "Indeed, I would not truly know how one goes about doing such a thing, as children are not a part of the experience of life we of the Ainur know, and those of the Eldar with whom I am acquainted have had very few. But from what little I have seen, I would not call this a bad way to be treated, for it would appear to me that most parents love their offspring very much and treat them with great kindness and affection...."

This time, Olórin gave in to the whim and did glare at his guest, a look chill enough to freeze an entire lake in high summer heat. "You know very well what I mean," he said levelly, "and if I concede to your claim that you are *not* viewing me as a child, then it implies that you *are* treating me as an invalid. Continue to do so, and you will only prompt me to do something to prove that I am not!"

Ványalos' smile turned crooked as it faded slightly. "I am not saying that, either, and you are making this empty threat only to encourage me to let off with my teasing and go away. Very well, I shall do as you wish, since it is nearly time I went to meet your friends, but I hope you will not attempt any such rash act in my absence. I would not want you to suffer simply to prove a point that does not need proving."

The wizard grumbled as he went back to rummaging through the contents of the chest. "And I would not have made that threat if you had let me be when first I asked! Have you and Frodo formed some kind of conspiracy designed to irritate me? If so, you are succeeding admirably."

"Not to irritate you, no," the redhead said quite casually, standing away from the doorframe to take several steps into the room. "But to look after your welfare, yes. For it seems that wise though you may be, you do not always demonstrate common sense when it comes to such things. Are you certain you do not need help with whatever it is you're trying to do?" he added when the Istar stopped his searching with a sound of exquisite frustration. The tall Maia leaned forward and peered into the chest, quickly taking note of the trouble his friend was having. There was very little in the trunk, and what was there was not in what one might call properly presentable condition. Ványalos understood the problem. "Ah, when Frodo asked after laundering facilities, you must have forgotten that you would need them as well for the time being, since you are forbidden to use other abilities to maintain what little you have in the ways our people habitually do. No harm done. It will take but a moment for me to—"

Olórin slammed shut the lid of the chest, punctuating the dark look he gave the taller Maia. "No, thank you, I can manage very well without help."

Ványalos' expression turned considerably more serious. "You are not thinking to do this on your

own, Olórin....” His words promised dire consequences if he was.

But though the wizard had been commanded not to make use of any skill that might sap him of his native strength, he could nonetheless effectively block his neighbor from seeing into his thoughts. “I promised I would not, and I will not,” he said bluntly as he straightened from where he had bent over the trunk. “But it does nothing for my confidence, or my spirits, if you do such things for me in the ways I have been denied. It was my own fault that I forgot I would have need to do this, and my resources are not as meager as you plainly think. I will make do. And you should leave, before Bilbo and the others take a wrong turn and become hopelessly lost!”

Though they had been friends for many thousands of years, Ványalos had never heard a tone such as the one now in Olórin’s voice. He did not know quite how to interpret it. “I meant no offense,” he said mildly, understanding that this, at least, was a part of the emotions he could not read. “I thought only that I might be able to provide assistance to make your tasks easier, but if you wish to attend to matters in your own way, of course, I will not interfere. I am concerned for your welfare, but I know you well enough to be certain that you will not forget to look after yourself, even though you have spent the past two thousand years minding the good of others and neglecting your own.”

“Not generally by choice,” the Istar said, still rather frostily, but the chill melted a moment later; his entire demeanor softened. “I know you mean well, Ványalos, and I suppose that I will appreciate it better after I have had more time to adjust to the ways in which my life has changed yet again. You may torment me with your impudence all you wish, but please, do not coddle me like an invalid and do for me things that I can still do for myself. I may be ill after a fashion, but I am *not* helpless and incompetent.”

“I would never even imply that you are,” the redhead replied, both honestly and ingenuously. “Perhaps I *was* being too solicitous, and I will endeavor to be somewhat less so in the future — though I am afraid I still must continue to observe, as Lord Irmo requires of me, until he tells me otherwise. I shall do my best to be more subtle in carrying out my duties.”

Olórin made a face of exquisite disbelief, then chuckled softly. “*Subtle* is a word only in your vocabulary, not in your repertoire of actions. Oh, be off with you, Ványalos, I am not angry. Frustrated, perhaps, but I will deal with that better if I do not feel as if every fumbling motion I make is being watched. And on your way, do tell Frodo that this ploy of yours will not be needed. I am not so lost to common sense that I cannot see what you are doing, now that I know both of you are a part of this plan. I remember quite well how you and Lindarinë once hounded me incessantly to draw me out and make me stop brooding over the ill turns my life had taken, and I would rather capitulate to reason now than suffer another such siege! You do not know the full scope of what you might have unleashed, bringing a hobbit into such a plan as this!”

The mischief returned in full to Ványalos’ grin. “Oh, I know it indeed, *pityandil*, which is why I selected this particular mode of action. Small they might be, but these little ones are more than your match for persistence, else they could not have succeeded in all they did during this past age. I will go,

and I will not doubt your word to behave, for I know I am leaving you in good hands." Still smiling, he bowed with exaggerated courtesy, then strode from the room. His soft footfalls quickly faded.

Olórin sighed when he was gone, relieved that Ványalos had had the presence of mind to eschew simply disappearing in front of him, which even the rogue had to realize would have been intolerably rude. He then glanced back at the closed chest, silently scolding himself for not paying attention to the fact that he had not tended to his own clothing as he ought. But in Middle-earth, he had owned very little, and though he had tried to keep as clean as possible, far too often his clothing had been washed by driving rains while it was still on his back. He had grown accustomed to washing both himself and his garb in cold streams and rivers, but it had been a necessity, seldom a pleasure. The times he spent in places like Rivendell and Lothlórien, where his hosts had been able and more than willing to provide better attire and more useful facilities for bathing and cleaning had been luxuries, very much appreciated, but not something on which he could rely on a regular basis. The nature of his work and his constant travel about the lands had precluded that. Before his life as a mortal, such things, especially the maintenance of one's clothing, had not been an issue. When one was capable of altering shapes and forms at will, it took only a thought to change one's attire in such a way that it shed any dirt upon it like water slipping away from oil. The more careful tending of the body, after the fashion of the Eruhíni, was also not a necessity, but was actually a daily ritual of understanding to those Ainur who adopted such forms, as for a few moments, it brought them closer to the peoples of Arda whose physical nature they chose to imitate. He had heard Frodo's question about laundering facilities, of course, but Ványalos was right: he had not realized that the question pertained to himself until just now. And it was that lapse of understanding that had frustrated the Maia just as much as the restrictions which forbade him from remedying the situation as he would have of old.

As he made a singular effort to not think about such disheartening things, the wizard bent and lifted the lid of the chest to peer at its contents once again. It truly had been very short-sighted of him, he admitted, to merely toss things aside after he changed out of them without giving a thought to whether or not they needed to be cleaned. He hadn't been involved in strenuous physical labor of any kind during the past days, but he had ridden as much as he was allowed and had tended the garden that had been planted to provide vegetables and herbs for the occupants. Given the size of his wardrobe, which was quite small, he should have paid more attention to its condition. Still, he was not without recourse, as he had told Ványalos. The clothing that had been made for him on the day of his return had remained untouched since his arrival in Lórien, and though it was less simple than his general preference, it would suffice. It was not, after all, wholly inappropriate for the occasion of receiving honored friends.

He had taken the things with him to the washroom and was in the process of making himself suitably presentable when he caught the shuffle and clatter of someone moving about in the kitchen, Frodo in the process of making tea, from the sound of it. He was attempting to think of some way to persuade the hobbit to forego participating in Ványalos' methods of "help" and was just about to collect his soiled clothing and leave the room when there was a soft tap at the door. It cracked open a moment later, and a hesitant Frodo peered through the opening.

The hobbit loosed a quiet sigh. “Oh, good, you really *were* able to take care of matters on your own. Ványalos said some things to me before he left,” he explained in answer to Olórin’s curious expression. “And I must admit, I’m glad he changed his mind about trying to help you by annoying you. I was willing to try, if he thought it really would do some good, but I’m afraid I’ve never had any talent for that sort of thing, not even when I was a boy.”

The Maia smiled crookedly as he finished collecting his things. “No, that was never a skill of any Baggins I ever knew. That talent was more a true gift of the Took, and of your generation, Pippin seems to have taken the greatest share of it, leaving precious little for his siblings and more distant cousins.”

Frodo laughed more easily than he might have only a week ago at the mention of a friend he would not see again in this life. If there was any positive side-effect to his unexpected condition, Olórin reflected, it was that it had given Frodo something to worry about outside of himself, opening him more fully to the healing nature of Lórien. That his concerns for Frodo were not having similar results meant, so the wizard suspected, that either Frodo’s condition was already improving enough to be less worrisome, or that Olórin was spending too much of his time looking inward, trying to find the answers to his own problem and thus interfering with any possible recovery. Unhappily, he suspected it was more the result of the latter.

Frodo spoke, interrupting his reverie. “Yes, and Ványalos is much more like him than I. He may be able to attempt such mischief and get away with it, but the most I could ever manage were harmless boyish pranks, like stealing mushrooms from Farmer Maggot, or hiding Bilbo’s favorite pipe. I never could even tease people the way some of the other lads did and not feel terrible afterward. I only agreed to this because I couldn’t think of another way to make you stop trying to pretend nothing’s wrong when we all know very well that there is.”

“I know,” Olórin confessed as he took his collected clothing and carried it back to his sleeping room. Once there, he began to toss it into the chest with his other things, then decided he ought to remove all of them and put them somewhere to remind him that they needed to be cleaned before they were used again. He continued to talk as he worked; Frodo leant his assistance by sorting out smaller items, like belts, that would not require washing, and rearranging them properly for storage. “Both of you meant well, but there is one thing you would do well to remember, Frodo: Ványalos and I have been friends for more years than you can truly imagine, but during these past two millennia, he has changed very little, while I have changed a great deal. It is the natural result of the lives we led during that time. Aman is very much the same as it was when I left, but in Middle-earth, change was an everyday occurrence. Had events here required it, I’m sure Ványalos and many of the others would have also changed to adapt to the circumstances, as I did, but they did not. I am not the same person I was when I left to begin my work in Middle-earth, yet I believe I am a better person now for what I experienced there, living as a mortal. My view and understanding of this vast world Lord Eru created and we helped to shape has been greatly enhanced.”

“That’s reassuring to know,” the hobbit said with a small smile. “Sometimes, it feels as if being a mortal is just a lot of fuss and bother that immortals like the Elves don’t have to worry about.”

“Not at all. The Elves have their own fuss and bother, and there is value to every kind of existence, else Lord Eru would not have brought it into being. But it is one thing to be aware of the differences, and quite another to have actually experienced them. Ványalos does not yet understand this, not entirely. He remembers our relationship as it was in the past, and though I’m sure he is attempting to comprehend the ways in which I have changed, he cannot know all that happened to me since I last resided here. I do not think he can quite grasp the full nature of the fears that are troubling me now. He does not know what living as a mortal truly means. He can imagine what it would be like to willingly refrain from using his natural abilities, but in the way you can imagine what it is like to be blind by merely closing your eyes. The sensation might be distressing, but all the while your eyes are closed, you know you can open them whenever you wish, and your sight will be restored. My eyes are closed now because I have been told I must do this so as not to injure myself further, but I have no certainty that when and if I am allowed to open them again, my sight will still be there. It is disturbingly possible that it may not.”

Frodo paused in his task of coiling a length of cord to look up sharply at his friend. “Lord Irmo told me you would not die....”

“No,” Olórin agreed. “Not as you think of it. But it seems to me much worse a fate, to lose one’s strength of being until they are nothing but a shadow of what they once were, unable to act, unable to do anything but drift aimlessly without direction or purpose or ability, unable to even leave the confines of Arda and move beyond it as do human spirits after death. If what Men experience when they leave this world is what I experienced after I was killed by the Balrog, I would happily choose to be mortal rather than endure such terrible diminishment. I would sooner willingly cast myself out into the Void and spend what is left of my days in utter nothing than become the barest wisp of an utterly powerless wraith in this world, as happened to Saruman and Sauron and the others. I do not think I have the strength or the courage to endure such an existence, much less the heart to stand by and know that with each passing moment, I am growing nearer and nearer to that empty and impotent state. It is a terribly frightening thing, Frodo, and I believe you understand this better than Ványalos, or even Lord Irmo.”

The hobbit nodded, remembering the mist-like shape that had arisen from Saruman’s body as it lay dead before the remains of Bag End, already faint and shapeless, to be blown away and scattered before the wind. He shivered, yet at the same time felt his resolve deepen. “Yes,” he said, his voice quiet but his words firm. “I think all mortals do, at some time or in some fashion. We all seem to have known someone who grew infirm with age, or were hurt by sickness or injury in a way that left their body helpless but their mind still alert. We pity them, and at the same time fear that we will become like them, still alive and able to perceive life around us, but unable to participate. I understand perfectly, Olórin, and I am not surprised others of your people like Ványalos and Lord Irmo do not. But that is no reason to give up so soon.”

“I am not giving up,” he was instantly assured. “But it *is* the reason I have not been myself, lately. I am not a stranger to fear, but I am uneasy with this kind of uncertainty. This situation is something I never anticipated, never even began to imagine. I trust Lord Eru’s wisdom, but I can see nothing of my own future clearly, and that is making it more difficult for me to adjust to the

limitations set upon me. If you, at least, will help me to remember the necessities of living as a mortal that I cannot seem to remember on my own, I promise I will not continue to be so rudely distant. You have been trying to help, as I have tried to help you, and it has been worse than impolite of me to refuse to acknowledge your concern, especially since you are my guest."

"I would be more than happy to do whatever I can, as I have tried to tell you before. I really do not intend to pry when I ask what's wrong, but I *have* been worried about you. Whenever you were so close about something in Middle-earth, it always turned out to be quite dreadful, in the end. And I have occasionally wondered if perhaps keeping it to yourself was not the wisest thing to do. As Sam's Gaffer used to say, *when wolves are prowling 'round the fences, half an eye is as bad as none.*"

Olórin sniffed as he set the more neatly stacked clothing atop the chest after Frodo closed it. "I believe I might actually miss old Hamfast's peculiar words of wisdom. I take it by this he meant that serious situations need to be watched very carefully to keep the danger to a minimum."

Frodo chuckled. "Or something to that effect. He also said that a sick person makes a bad healer, and he *is* right about that. A person in pain or fear usually isn't the best judge of how to make things better. I know that was the case for me ever since I returned to the Shire. Other people had to find the best solution to my problems, and I would like to repay some part of that favor, however I may." He let loose a heavy sigh. "I've said that I want to help so often, these past few days, I may scream instead if I must say it again. Do you not believe me, or do you think I should not, or cannot, be of any use?"

The Maia answered honestly. "Neither. What I believe is that I've been absurdly thickheaded and stubborn, which Lord Manwë warned me against the very first day we arrived. Do forgive me, Frodo, I shan't allow myself to be that obstinate again. There are many other things I am not permitted to do; adding one more restriction of my own choosing will not be a burden, especially if it will make life less unpleasant for both myself and those around me."

"I could have dealt with it," the hobbit said, making his tone as confident as possible, "but Bilbo might not have been so patient. And as for my help with matters of mortal living, there is already one thing I can offer. When I asked after matters of laundering, everyone told me to talk to the local Elves, since they attend such things in what I think of as ordinary fashions, whereas your people apparently deal with them in ways we lesser folk cannot. So I did, two days ago, when you showed me the place where the people who live in this area gather to talk and sing and do things I would call going to market. While you were busy with something else, I was directed to a very kind Elf lady who makes the most lovely weavings, Mirimë. She apparently has frequent need to wash cloth and clothing because of her craft, and she said she would be happy to show me where she does it, and how it is managed. Today is one of her regular washing days, and when I told her that it would be difficult for me to come, as we were expecting guests, she offered to come collect my things and take care of them for me. It would be no trouble at all, she said, since she has others to help her and my needs are not great. I cannot imagine she would object if we added your things to the bundle. Your clothing may be larger than mine, but there is considerably less of it."

Olórin rubbed his chin as he glanced at the pile of cloth; it was an odd motion, as his reflexes had been long accustomed to the presence of a beard that was no longer there. "You're right, she would not object. Mirimë crafted the bedclothes and many of the other fabrics in this house; I recognize her handiwork. She would do this for both of us without a second thought. Thank you for thinking of this. I had begun to wonder if I would need to prevail upon Ványalos to help, after I had already told him I would *not* need it, since I doubt that Bilbo would have much interest in local laundry customs and I will not be able to wear the same things until he is gone."

Frodo agreed as he gathered the heap of fabric into his arms. "She said she or one of her assistants would come to collect my things before midday, and that should be any time, now. I'll just put this with the other things I have ready for her."

He turned, about to bustle out, when a hand firmly laid on one shoulder stopped him. Frodo looked up to see Olórin smiling down at him. "I am not so far beyond hope that I cannot manage to carry my own dirty clothing into the next room," he told the halfling, a thread of laughter running through his words like veins of silver in stone.

Frodo smiled back and conceded the point as he handed over his burden. "Of course you can, and I shall do my best not to forget that in the future. I should see to the tea, in any case. Bilbo may prefer it brewed strong enough to curl even a hobbit's hair, but I seem to recall Elrond's tastes are somewhat more refined. Are you going to wear that, too?" he asked as they both moved toward the door, his eye happening to fall upon the crystal circlet, still resting on the bedside table where it had been set days before, untouched since Olórin had removed it after their arrival. "It was made to go with that clothing, wasn't it?"

The Maia both shrugged and shook his head. "I have no idea, but no, I was not planning to. This is not a formal occasion, after all, and it would seem rather too ostentatious for greeting guests when they have just arrived after a long journey."

"True. I remember how I felt after I awoke on the field of Cormallen, and all I had to wear were orc-rags, when everyone but Sam seemed to be dressed for a much more splendid occasion..."

He rambled on, recounting memories of that day while he headed to the kitchen to attend the tea. Olórin listened to his relaxed storytelling while he took a moment to set his clothes atop the pile of those Frodo had set aside for cleaning, in an out-of-the-way corner between the front door and the bathing room. He was glad to hear the hobbit able to speak of that part of his past without pain, and more relieved to know that the notion of a conspiracy to harass him out of his recent reticence had been ended. Perhaps it would be better, after all, to stop searching so hard for the answers that slipped farther away the harder he tried to grasp them, and instead seize each moment as it came. Since he could not see to what end he was bound, there was more wisdom in looking at the road close at hand, within his sight, so that he would not fall into some unforeseen abyss in his haste. He had been patient for two thousand years to finally see the end of his hopes to defeat Sauron; with the aid of the friends who had provided the most help in achieving that goal, he could find the wherewithal to be patient just a little bit longer.

XIV

Bilbo's reaction to his first visit to Lórien was very much as predicted: astonishment to discover that any part of Aman so closely resembled the Shire, delight over the prospect of being able to spend as much time here as he wished, still among the various fair folk who inhabited the land, and genial annoyance with both Frodo and Olórin for not telling him about this beforehand. Although Olórin's house was not a hobbit hole, it seemed quite pleasant and homey to Bilbo, who quickly grew comfortable there. By the end of that first day, he was willing to admit he would be quite happy to stay for as long as was necessary and even a bit longer.

During his leisurely trip with Elrond and Celebrían, he had quickly admitted that any fears and misgivings he might have had had been quickly dispelled. The lands of Valinor beyond Eldamar and the city of the Valar were breathtakingly beautiful in many different ways, but in none that Bilbo could not comprehend. It made perfect sense, he had realized, for Aman to be so. It was, after all, the last remaining part of Arda that had not been spoiled by Melkor's hate and madness; in it were all the things of which the Ainur had sung, and that they had labored long to make manifest for the Children of Ilúvatar whose world it was to be. Melkor had tried to destroy them beyond recognition in Middle-earth, but he had not succeeded. Though things were different here, there was nothing Bilbo saw during their journey to Lórien that struck him as wholly unfamiliar. It pleased him, in fact, to know that he had been given the privilege to see even a small portion of the world as it had been meant to be, had evil not tainted and twisted it. And though he was mildly miffed at Olórin — whom he continued to insist upon calling Gandalf, declaring that he was too old to break this lifelong habit — for not being more specific when he had asked him to come, it passed swiftly, as he was too delighted by what he had unexpectedly discovered to remain cross for more than a minute. Several days later, when Elrond and Celebrían continued on to visit Celebrían's friends in other parts of the land, the old hobbit had not even a glimmer of a second thought about staying. Between the familiarity of the countryside, the friendliness of its inhabitants, and no lack of food and drink and song and other creature comforts, Bilbo could not have asked for more to convince him to stay.

Time passed, as it was wont to do. Frodo tried to keep count of the days, but soon realized that in Aman, there were no schedules kept for work or business that required careful attention to what day of the week it happened to be. The people who lived here were attuned to the rhythms of the land in which they lived, and allowed life to continue at that same pace. By some instinct, they knew when certain days arrived and when it was time for things to be done; other than that, they followed the courses of the sun and the moon, and worried not at all about the count of weeks and months and years. That, Frodo supposed, was one of the distinctions between mortals and immortals, though even those who did not die held each day as a precious gift.

Several months passed by Frodo's count, through what would have been the fall and winter in the Shire, though here, the weather remained comfortable, the only difference in the season being that some of the plants went into a sort of resting phase, in which they stored up strength for the spring, when they would blossom and bear fruit yet again. Their leaves did not fall, nor did the grass fade and the flowers die; new blooms arose in the meadows and woodland floors suited to this season, and the

birds did not fly off for the winter. During those months, he became very well acquainted with Estë and Irmo, as he and Olórin were often summoned to their mansions, or were on occasion visited by them. Frodo noticed his own condition slowly improving with the help of the Lord and Lady, and also of Olórin, who had greater knowledge than they of mortal existence and suffering, and was currently very well suited to explain to them the difficulties of leading a mortal life, on many different levels. Irmo's original plan to have the Istar be the one to directly assist Frodo in this healing had been abandoned when it became plain that Olórin's own difficulties were not improving, and were gradually growing worse.

The Maia did not attempt to hide those troubles, nor did he make an issue of them, but on occasion, his frustration, and his fear, was plain to Frodo. A sharp word, an expression of distress, a moment of distant silence — the younger hobbit needed no more than that to understand. Bilbo was not quite so perceptive of such things, but then, his nephew had always been more thoughtful and contemplative, as well as more sensitive to those around him. His experience with the Ring had heightened those sensitivities, as for Bilbo it had stretched out his life; Frodo had thought he would never be able to look upon this change as anything but a curse, but now, he was grateful for it. It not only aided him in enduring what was necessary for his own healing, but it helped him to grasp how and when he could best help Olórin to prevent his condition from deteriorating more quickly. He was developing a fine instinct for knowing when was a good time to encourage Bilbo to chatter about things he had discussed with the other residents he met during the evening meals or at the local gathering place during the days, when it would be best to draw the Istar into their conversations or activities, and when it was wise to let him be for a time and allow him privacy.

Bilbo was not wholly unaware of Frodo's machinations, and when he was not too distracted by excitement to pick up on his nephew's cues, he was rather adept in doing what was needed to assist. Life in Lórien had been very kind to the old hobbit, giving him back a considerable amount of his more youthful energy and ability. By no means was he even as fit as he had been when he had left the Shire for good, but he was far more alert and capable than he had been since he had given up the Ring. He was not able to go tramping over hill and field as he had in his younger days, but he was quite up to walking about the most settled part of the hill country, exploring it and getting to know its many fascinating residents — and doing whatever Frodo thought was needed at a particular moment to help their host through this rather trying period.

Olórin was well aware of what both hobbits were doing on his behalf, and neither attempted to thwart it nor begrudged it. He was, in truth, quite grateful for it, as it did what he had hoped and helped him fall back into the patterns of mortal life he had been forced to follow in Middle-earth. From time to time, he acknowledged that he chafed under his restrictions and longed to simply be himself again, but he supposed that life as a Man was now a part of what he was, for he would never be able to forget the two thousand years he had spent in that guise. Even so, the hobbits did not let him completely forget what he had been before that sojourn in Endor, but they managed to find ways of doing so that did not violate the necessities of his current condition. Bilbo's fascination with songs had not diminished over the years; as he was restored to a more lively state, once he saw the harp and realized that his old friend supposedly knew how to play it, he had pestered him with doubts that he could until Olórin gave up

and proved it. In that, the hobbit reminded the wizard of Lindarinë and how he had come to own the harp in the first place. Frodo, who was not quite so insistent but nonetheless supported his uncle in this curiosity, adroitly played the role Ványalos had taken so many years ago, and thus reminded the Maia that no matter how much his life had changed, some things would forever be the same. His friends would be concerned about his well-being and happiness just as he was concerned for theirs, and he was glad of it.

Even so, all the concern and watchfulness had not improved his declining condition. Though he studiously avoided the use of any abilities that would expend power he could not afford to lose, the simple maintenance of a physical body was enough to cause a slow but steady deterioration. Each day, he tired more easily, each morning he woke apparently restored to full vigor, but it slipped away a bit more quickly as the day wore on. Several months after their arrival, shortly after the time the hobbits would have called Yule back in the Shire, the turning of the year, no solution to the wizard's problem had yet been found, though one discovery was made that concerned not only his condition, but Frodo's as well.

"There was not a simple means to examine this matter," Irmo told them one day after they had been visited by the dream master and his spouse, the latter of whom had departed to rest after aiding Frodo through another phase of his physical recovery. "You have both been injured by evil, yet you did not confront it in the same fashions, and there appeared, at first glance, to be no commonality between your experiences, unless it be the source of that evil, Sauron and the lingering poisons of Melkor in Endor. There was one other matter, which I initially dismissed, but as I have pondered and examined the situation, I have come to see that it had more bearing upon these circumstances than I had thought. Why is it, Olórin, that you were able to successfully resist the lure of evil throughout your tenure in Middle-earth, even the lesser lure which Aiwendil felt, that led him astray from his mission and rendered him ineffectual against the enemy he had been sent to oppose?"

The wizard smiled crookedly from where he stood near one of the windows in the central hall, a vantage that looked out over the gardens beyond the veranda. "I have often wondered that myself, my lord," he admitted. "I know that we were chosen in part because of our different natures and abilities, but also in part because we were deemed to be peers of Sauron, though I have never felt myself to be so. The only explanation for this I have ever been able to devise is that I somehow managed to make fewer mistakes than the others, when it came to errors of judgement, choices that would lead to good or to evil. I have never thought that it was because I was better than the others, or somehow blessed in a way they were not."

Irmo — who was seated in a most comfortable chair near the cold central hearth, having been fussed over by Bilbo, who could not bear the thought of entertaining such exalted guests without offering them more than an average measure of hobbit hospitality — answered with his own small smile, eyes full of a knowing gleam. "Perhaps you did not, but both were true, in their own ways. Of the others, only you and Aiwendil never held notions of personal gain from your work here in Arda, and worthy though he was, he lacked a certain strength of character which you possess, and which helped you greatly throughout your embassy. And though you did not ask for it, nor did any of us perceive the

fullness of its meaning until recently, you were indeed blessed in a way they were not, a way that we now believe had much to do in sparing you a part of the injuries of evil from which the others suffered more greatly."

Bilbo, sitting near the entrance to the kitchen, seemed puzzled by the Vala's remarks, but after a moment, Frodo, who had taken a seat nearer the back windows, made a soft sound of understanding. "The Elven Ring," he said, seeing the connection. "Narya. None of the other wizards were given such a thing, were they?"

Irmo shook his head. "They were not. It was not planned for Círdan to make such a gift to any of our messengers, yet he was moved to do so when he first met Olórin, despite the fact that he seemed to be the least of all who came. Though the Elven rings of power were not at all akin to Sauron's Ring in nature and effect, they were nonetheless precious and potent things, capable of a great deal within their natural limits, while their power endured. When we thought to examine this aspect of similarity between the two of you, we spoke with Círdan, to discover, if we could, why he was so moved to surrender his ring to a complete stranger. He said that he had lived long and seen much, and was sometimes able to see farther and deeper into the true heart of another than most people. He is indeed one of the First Born, awakened at Cuiviénen when the world was still in twilight, and his sight is keener than some who were born here in the Bliss of Aman. Yet he also admits that he felt strangely moved in his own heart when he first saw the Gray Messenger, as he did at times when he knew he was being given guidance by Ulmo, lord of the waters. But Ulmo denies any part in this; it was not he who gave such inspiration to Círdan, nor did any other of the Valar. We knew of these rings, of course, and of their purported abilities, but our concern was wholly with the One, that presented great danger to all of Arda. The others were the business of those who owned them, and their fates for their bearers to choose. That Círdan made such a choice was no mere whim, for its giving had far greater results than any of us anticipated."

Olórin paced toward the hearth, momentarily lost in thought. "He offered it to me for support and comfort, or so he said when he surrendered it," the Maia said. "It did indeed provide that, if not in the ways and measures I might have wished at times. I often felt as if the power it possessed helped to lighten the burdens I was doomed to carry, so that I would not be crushed beneath their ceaseless weight. That alone gave me hope that my mission would not be in vain. Without it, I fear I would have lost heart as the struggle dragged on. I would not have given up, but I would have felt it more keenly."

"And there you see the blessing you were given, and the common thread of experience you and Frodo shared. Each of you bore a Ring of Power. Its effect upon a mortal body and spirit was after the nature of the One; it stretched out his life even as it tormented him with its weight and malice. It is the gift of his people to have remarkable resistance to such evils, which allowed him to carry out his task, but he was not unharmed by it. And you, who carried one of the Three unsullied by evil, were by its nature protected from it, not enough to keep evil from ever touching and injuring you as our people are affected by it, but enough to slow the poisons and prevent them from consuming you or subverting your mind and your purposes as they did your fellow Istari. Without Narya, you may yet have returned to

us, for your heart and your dedication to the will of Lord Eru is powerful, more so than your fellows, but you would have come back to us far more injured and diminished than you are even now.”

Frodo brightened. “Then would it help if we brought Narya from Valmar?” The ring had not been removed from the body Olórin had left behind, and rested with it still.

But Olórin already knew the answer to that. “No. Its power was all but gone by the time we reached these shores, Frodo. By now, it would have faded completely. It was never meant to be a part of Aman, just as the One Ring was a product and problem of Middle-earth, and was fated to meet its end there.”

“Just so,” Irmo agreed. “We here in Aman were aware of the both the power and potential inherent in these seemingly innocuous creations, but as the Eruhíni were meant to be the inhabitants and governors of Endor, so too had Sauron bound himself and his own fate to that land, following in the path and desires of his own teacher, Melkor. Had one of these things been sent here while it still wielded power, it would have been refused, for they were all enmeshed in the history, and the future, of Middle-earth and its peoples. Yet Círdan chose to surrender his ring to one who was sent as an emissary of the Valar, moved, I now deem, both by his own heart and the hope — but not the control — of a will greater than his own. For though we wished to protect our messengers however we might, the plans we set into motion did not allow us to interfere so directly. We might turn our thoughts to those who sought our guidance and so aid them, or we might make known to those in critical positions a choice they might consider for the betterment of all. We did not even contemplate showing Círdan the notion that he might choose to offer his ring to one of our servants, yet someone did, or so it now seems. And if it was not one of us, there is but one Will that might have done so.”

Olórin stopped his slow pacing to glance sharply at the dream master. “You believe this was prompted by Lord Eru? Why?”

Irmo’s smile became wistfully wry. “Need you ask? You have been in His favor ever since you chose to sacrifice yourself for the sake of your company and its greater mission. This you know, but it would appear that He had some interest in your welfare long ago, and that an interest above and beyond the love He shows to all of us, both of the Ainur and Eruhíni. I cannot say why He did this, or why He chose you and not one of the other Istari. Perhaps there is a destiny awaiting you that none of us can see. Perhaps He wished to be certain that this embassy did not fail, and so gave at least one of your number the possibility of some blessing to help ensure it. Or perhaps your amusing notion that you are the youngest of us is not so amusing after all, but is the truth, for Eru Ilúvatar is the Father of us all, and oft times parents have a special place in their hearts for the last of their children. We are not as the Eruhíni; there will be no more of us than those who were made before the beginning of the world. Thus, it is not unthinkable that if you were indeed the last child of His thought to be born, He holds you dear in a way He does not look upon the rest of us. But I truthfully do not know why. All I know is that it was the power of the ring you were given that helped protect you from even greater injury of the spirit.”

The wizard frowned. “Then I *was* given an advantage, and the others were not...”

“Perhaps so,” the Vala quickly interrupted. “But I do not think it was given because you were deemed less able to carry out your tasks and thus in need of aid. I believe, actually, that this was done more for Círdan’s sake than your own. He had lived many years isolated on the western shores of Endor. He governed his people well and sent aid when it was needed, but seldom did he himself set foot outside his land after the war with Sauron at the end of the Second Age. He was becoming distant from his brethren in Middle-earth, and needed, I suspect, to begin thinking again of the world that lay beyond the Havens. Your coming moved him to do so, and in giving you Narya, he gave to himself a reason to pay closer attention to the rest of Middle-earth and the events that were threatening to tear it apart. There is much he did after your coming that he might not have done, had he not given Narya into the hands of another whom he felt was wise enough to know how to best make use of its gifts. Do not look upon this turn of events as a confirmation of personal weakness, Olórin. Círdan could have chosen otherwise, but in you he saw the strength to do what he could not: use the ring for the benefit of far more than just a small haven in a growing sea of darkness and despair. That it also protected you was but a minor consequence in comparison. Yet even this small thing caused good where otherwise only greater evil might have happened. Perhaps this information is not useful to your current condition, but it may so be. We must continue to think upon it, to see if it might bear fruit, and enlighten us as to why Frodo’s healing is progressing well while yours is not.”

Bilbo snorted — softly, in deference to the Vala’s presence. “I don’t understand,” he said candidly. “If such a ring protected Gandalf when he was in Middle-earth, couldn’t another be made now that would do the same thing? Not make him better, perhaps, but at least stop things from growing worse, and let him live his life in a normal fashion.”

“The skill exists, Master Baggins,” Irmo replied, “but the effort would serve no purpose. Aulë, who has such gifts, has long since regretted how Sauron, who was once of his people, took the skills he learned from the master of all such crafts and perverted it to evil. Devices of power should gain their potency from the blessing of Lord Eru, not the instilling of one’s own will. It runs contrary to the purpose of Eru Ilúvatar, and however benevolent the initial intent, the use of such items always exacts a toll upon those who use them — the greater the power, the greater the price paid. You but held the One Ring little used in your possession, yet it left a dark and lasting mark upon you. The power of Narya kept the land of Lothlórien free from blemish and stain, Vilya made safe and fast the haven of Imladris, but not without cost. The use of the rings’ power weighed heavily on those who commanded them, darkening their days with cares and burdens, some of which touched those dearest to them. Such an item could be made here in Aman, but none who understand the true price of power would dare to fashion it.”

The dream master sighed. “There are other things we might do to help, but they also would be temporary, and done too often, would have tragic results. We of the Ainur could support Olórin with our own native power, to free him of the restraints now imposed upon his actions, but it would only be an illusion of healing, which would fade quickly, and it would exact its own terrible price. It would be as if you were to pour water again and again into a broken vessel. It will hold the water for a time, and all seems well, but slowly, it seeps away, leaving the vessel empty. In time, as more water is poured upon the broken shards, it causes what is still whole to crumble utterly, until at last it can no longer

contain anything at all and falls to dust. Thus would it be if we of his people attempted to return to Olórin a semblance of the life he should have without healing him of the hurt that was done to him. I would gladly give him my own strength if such a thing could cure him, but it would not be a lasting remedy. He would improve for a time, but as he expended that borrowed strength, none would come to replace it, for the damage that had stolen it would not be repaired. Indeed, at length, what began as an act of pity would but hasten the coming of utter diminishment. None of us wish for this to happen; our desire is to see him made whole again. Do you not also wish this for your friend?"

Bilbo cleared his throat and hedged for a moment. "Well, well now, of course I do, I just didn't understand. I can't quite imagine these injuries you and the others have been talking about, but from what you say, it sounds like what happens with us mortals if we have a wound that festers and instead of cleaning and caring for it properly, we just cover it up and hope that it goes away."

The Vala nodded. "Very much like that. Those parts of Frodo's wounds that have been troubling him are akin to Olórin's though not quite the same; it is easier for you to understand them because they have left physical scars which you can plainly see. But the deepest part of your nephew's pain is in the poisons of the spirit evil left behind, and that is the portion most difficult to draw out so that he may be cured."

"But *I am* getting better," Frodo pointed out. "I know it will be a long time before I'm completely free of it, but I've been able to feel myself growing stronger and more at peace with each passing day. Why can't you find at least this much of a cure for Olórin?"

"Because we have never known how to heal a spirit that was injured in this way. The shadow that weakens him is rooted in some way we cannot fathom; it came upon him through no fault of his own, and he does not appear to be clinging to it of his own free will. It is as a leech to his strength, a very elusive one, and we have yet to determine how to pry it away and set him free. But that we will do, Frodo, have no fear. If I must call upon Eru Ilúvatar Himself and beg Him to give me the answer, then that I will do. Olórin has served me well for many years; I owe him more than that for his service."

"My service was offered without any expectation of reward, Lord Irmo," Olórin told him, "but I am grateful nonetheless. And I am glad to see that Frodo, and Bilbo, are both benefitting from their stay here in Lórien. Perhaps this is a just payment, for I have spent many more years enjoying life here in Lórien than I likely should have, being a servant of Lord Manwë as I am."

Irmo gave a surprisingly undignified and skeptical snort as he rose to his feet. "The healing and refreshment of Lórien are free to all who come here, for as long as they need or wish it, and you know that well. Indeed, if we did not offer this to all who visit or dwell in this land, what purpose would my lady and I have here in Aman?" Smiling, he placed one hand on the Maia's shoulder. "Worry not, my counselor and friend, Lord Eru has filled this world with myriad answers to all the questions we could ever think to ask. We will find the one you need, ere long."

The Istar acknowledged the remark with a gracious nod. "Of that, I no longer have any doubt, since it would seem that Lord Eru has been looking after my welfare for many more years than I had realized."

He then thanked the dream master for having stayed to tell this news, and saw him to the door. Irmo and the others had long since recognized that it would be impolite to simply vanish in front of one of their own who did not dare to use such abilities. When he returned to the hall, Bilbo was still sitting, a frown puckering his face as he thought furiously over all that had been said; Frodo had risen to collect the empty wine goblets, though he was also thinking.

"Do you really think this offers any new hope?" the younger hobbit asked Olórin as he moved to assist Frodo with the cleaning up. "It does explain some things I'd wondered about, but will it make any difference in helping you get better?"

The wizard shrugged. "I would like to think so, and I did not exaggerate when I told Lord Irmo that I did not doubt a cure could be found. I knew when I was sent back after Moria that Lord Eru had taken interest in my mission, but I had thought it merely a reflection of His approval for what I had done in allowing myself to die so that the rest of you might live and carry on. Some of what He said to me at the time could have implied that His interest was considerably more far reaching, and of earlier origin, but I had thought it quite vain to believe such an interpretation was the truth. Apparently, I was in error, and this does encourage me. But I cannot presume to understand more than the tiniest bit of Lord Eru's plans, or His mind. We must choose our own paths, and though our choices may lead to the wonderful ending He plans for the world, the steps we must take to reach it may be dark and terrible, and full of pain. And we may make the wrong choices, and thus fall forever into darkness. I do not want to meet with such an end, and I will make every effort to avoid it, but I have made mistakes before. If I err now, it is possible there will be no returning from the dark abyss."

Bilbo harrumphed as he pushed himself out of his chair. "Not if your friends have any say in the matter," he said bluntly. "If this Lord Ilúvatar is as benevolent as you and the Elves and everyone I've met here have been telling me, I cannot believe He could let something like this happen to you of all people and not lift a finger to prevent it! Oh, yes, I know," he said, waving his hands to forestall whatever Olórin had been about to say. "He gave everyone a will of their own, and if we make mistakes and choose to do evil or just be a witless fool when we should know better, it's our own fault and we must pay the price for it. That makes perfect sense, and I'm glad to know that all the mean-spirited people I've known who never apologized for any harm they caused will likely get their just rewards in whatever end we all come to.

"But that's just my point, Gandalf! You didn't *do* anything to warrant the same kind of end as Sauron and those other wizards who turned bad! You did everything you were supposed to do, and more, and if you ever did anything evil to merit such an awful punishment, you've done a splendid job of hiding it. Making mistakes is *not* wicked; even the Valar have done that from time to time. It shames us when our mistakes hurt others by accident, but no one is perfect. Does Lord Eru make no allowances for that? Or for the fact that you became sick like this because of something beyond your control?"

It was quite likely the most impassioned speech Bilbo had given in many years; both his nephew and his host were startled by it. Frodo somehow managed to find his voice first. "He's right, you know," the younger hobbit said quietly. "I've thought all these same things time and again since we realized you had been hurt by your life in Middle-earth, and I keep coming round to the same thought over and over again. If Lord Eru approves of all you did and you are in His favor, can't He do anything to help you now? You've more than earned it, more than I earned the privilege of coming here and finding hope and life and health again."

Olórin was silent for some moments, looking at the goblets he had picked up to carry into the kitchen without actually seeing them. Finally, he let loose a soft breath that shivered with regret. "He could," he answered, "but that does not mean He will, or must. His plans for the world and all in it are sometimes beyond our understanding. If His will requires us to leave it untimely, we can try to oppose it, but in the end, His will always shall prevail. I have served Him faithfully from the moment He made me, and He is the only parent I have ever known. He created us to be His servants and helpers in the marvelous work of shaping and tending the world and guiding as we could the children He made to live in it. I do not *want* to meet with an unpleasant end, but if He does ask it of me, should I at the last break faith with Him and refuse to accept my part in His will out of selfish pride?"

Both hobbits saw his point, though neither liked it. Bilbo grumbled, "Well, when you put it that way...."

"No," Frodo said, reluctantly. "If you were going to do that, you might as well have taken the Ring when I offered it to you and turned straightaway to evil, like Melkor and all his followers. But it still seems quite unfair."

The Maia nodded. "I agree, it does, which is why I am doing my best to believe that all will be well in the end, even if the road is dark and full of pitfalls. I have walked such ways before. I can do so again, if needs be."

A disgruntled expression twitched across Frodo's face as he carried the dishes he had collected into the kitchen. "I had been under the impression such things would *not* be needed again, once we reached the West. I had thought that it had not been spoiled by evil."

"Not spoiled," Olórin said as he followed the younger hobbit. "Yet still touched by it. Evil deeds have been done here, and each of us carries the seed of evil within us, in that very freedom of will Lord Eru gave to us. We can refuse to allow it to take root and grow so that we ourselves do not become evil, but even the innocent can suffer at evil's hand. Many who died in the Kinslaying had no evil thought and did no evil deed, yet they were injured and killed by those who had allowed that bitter seed to flourish within them. So long as we have a will and the freedom to use it as we would, we cannot avoid such things. And there will always be innocents who are dealt unwarranted ills through no fault or act of their own. The only place where no evil is suffered is in the Timeless Halls where Lord Eru Himself dwells. Arda will forever have that flaw, for Melkor marred the Music almost from its very beginning."

Perhaps someday, after the world is changed, this world will be perfected, but for now, we must make the best of the way it is."

"Which has always been the way of life," Bilbo said as he joined them in the kitchen. He scowled good-naturedly at his nephew. "Don't keep encouraging him like this, Frodo, or we'll get nothing from him all day but profound wisdom and gloomy remarks. If this is how you act when you feel encouraged, Gandalf, I shudder to think of how dismal you might be when you are disheartened!"

The wizard laughed, the sound shattering the darkening mood that had been growing about them. "I beg your pardon," he said, still chuckling. "These are very old habits, I'm afraid, and I shall do my best to avoid falling into them overmuch. If you still had questions about the history of this part of Lórien, Bilbo, perhaps when we are finished here, we can go harass Ványalos about it. The rogue doubtless knows as much as anyone on that account, certainly more than I, and I think it would be quite fair if for once, we went to pester him in his own home rather than suffer his invasion of ours!"

Less than a month after Irmo's visit, in a time Frodo reckoned to be late January, Bilbo went off to visit Glorfindel and his kin for several days. The younger hobbit had let him go, confident that nothing would happen while he was gone that Frodo could not deal with alone, or with the help of their neighbors. Nothing did, not precisely, but one morning, Frodo woke and found Olórin already risen and nowhere to be found. Shadowfax was still in area he had made his paddock and pasture, yet there was no sign of his master, and no note left to say where he had gone.

Frodo tried not to be concerned by this while he made his breakfast, but the oddness of the situation nagged him with one worry he could not banish: what if something had happened during the night to cause Olórin's condition to abruptly change for the worse, hastening it so quickly down that dark path that he had already dwindled to nothing? He repeatedly told himself that such an idea was nonsense, that surely, someone would have sensed such a dire turn approaching. But still, the thoughts would not leave him. He was able to choke down no more than a few bites of his meal, and finally decided that he should go consult Ványalos when he heard the sound of a door opening. For a moment, he feared it was the redhead come to tell him the terrible news, but the fear dissipated when he saw Olórin move past the entrance to the kitchen, headed into the main hall. He breathed a sigh of relief as he pushed away from the table and went after his friend.

"Thank goodness!" he said even before he reached the hall. "I was just about to go find Ványalos to see if he knew what had happened to you. I don't mean to be such a frightful nuisance, but when I saw Shadowfax still here...."

The words still unspoken fell silent in his throat, unspoken, when he entered the hall. Olórin was standing at the window where he had stood on the day Irmo had last come to visit, as still as a guard post, looking out upon the leaf-dappled morning light on the garden. Something about the way he stood

had caught Frodo's voice and silenced it, something that seemed at once very unusual and disturbingly familiar. After what seemed the longest of all moments, the Maia spoke, softly.

"It was three years ago, this very day. How strange that it seems an age past now, yet only yesterday. I had fought many battles, faced many enemies before, but I had never imagined a struggle against such a terrible foe. Ten days we fought — ten days! How can it seem as if it lasted but a heartbeat's span, yet continued for an eternity? Never had I felt such exhaustion, such dreadful pain. I did not know one could be both frozen and burned at the once, but so it was, even as we fought in our last desperate stand. I scarce expected a mortal shell could endure such torment for more than a moment, but I discovered the truth, and took ten days in the learning.

"He could have won that battle, if he had simply fled from the depths and not answered any attack I offered. I could not have escaped on my own; I did not know the way, and I could not have found it alone, injured as I already was from the battle above and the long fall engulfed in his fire. But he wanted to crush me, not merely leave me behind to die in the darkness far beneath the earth, nor had he wanted to defeat me in some nameless place where none could see his victory. If he had not been so impatient and eager to attain it in his own way, I would have died far from the sight of any living thing in a nameless sea as cold as the Void, and he could have returned to the world above in triumph. To this day, I do not know how I was able to drag myself out of the icy depths; I was already exhausted, frozen, burned, in pain unlike anything I had ever felt or imagined. I continued the fight only because I knew I must, until either my enemy was defeated, or I was myself slain. I cannot say where I had found the strength to go on, but for ten days I did, and only with the last of all the strength I had left to me was I able to cast him down. When that was spent.... I had thought death something to mourn, something to pity — but I know better, now. It is indeed a gift, a reward to the weary and broken who can go no farther. It is a release from bondage, not cruel punishment. Three years ago this day, I learned that lesson. Did I learn it well enough, or must I be instructed yet again?"

Even though he could tell that the final question was not meant for him to answer, Frodo could sense that Olórin had been speaking to him, though he had not once turned in his direction, nor had his voice raised above that wind-soft murmur. The hobbit did not even try to venture a reply to the rhetorical query. "I didn't know you remembered your fight with the Balrog like this," he said instead as he stepped farther into the hall, understanding that the Maia had been speaking of that conflict, and of its end, which had been death for both the victor and the defeated. "I thought only I had such dreadful memories that I relived each year. Why did you not say anything of this before?"

"Because it would have served no purpose. I knew that when the time was right, I would return home. I thought I would be able to put it behind me here, let time and distance and healing take the sting from the memories, as they had after my heart was torn apart by Aránayel. And to speak of it to you would have only deepened your pain, for you already had heaped yourself with enough blame for all that happened during the journey of the Ring to the fire. I only spoke of it now because this is the first time since my fall from the Bridge that you and I were in the same place when the day of my death came round again. Unless I were to leave you alone until the day is done, I could not hide this from you, and I have promised not to try. Speaking of it does help, actually, for I know that you understand such

inescapable memories and the feelings they stir. I am glad that coming here has been able to help you find some measure of the relief I had thought I would know much more quickly and easily."

The hobbit frowned. "And that is yet another unfairness, since you were the one who asked leave for me to come here, and this is your home. Can't you ask Ványalos or Lord Irmo or someone to help you the way you helped me the day after we arrived?" It disturbed Frodo to remember that what the Maia had done on that day was quite possibly what had led to the hastening of the weakness that now would not leave him.

Olórin finally turned his face away from the window and looked down at his small friend, a sad smile in his eyes. "Perhaps, but it isn't necessary. My struggle with the Balrog left me burned and frozen and broken, but I was not poisoned by him as you were by Shelob and the Morgul knife, nor maimed in the way Gollum tore the Ring from your hand. The memories are dark, I do not deny it, and they trouble me deeply, but I feel no pain such as you feel from the reawakening of your wounds. You still live in that same body which evil hurt and maimed; mine that suffered so was left behind three years ago, crumbled to dust. We both bear scars that continue to cause us pain and grief, but they are not quite the same, for we are not the same." The smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "I left for a little while this morning to walk in the woods and think, alone, so that when I returned, I could tell you the truth even before you asked what was troubling me. I had expected to return before you woke. I'm sorry if my unexpected absence frightened you."

Frodo's cheeks colored ever so faintly. "Only because I have a terribly over-active imagination, I'm afraid. After seeing what happened to Saruman when Wormtongue killed him on the very doorstep of Bag End, my mind kept conjuring up images of something of the same sort happening to you, because you'd taken a sudden horrible turn for the worse. You don't look especially well this morning," he added, raking the taller Maia with a critical eye. Olórin looked paler than usual and tired, a weariness that dimmed the sparkle in his eyes and made his skin seem like the translucent glass of a lamp in which the flame has sunk low and is about to gutter and go out. "Perhaps we should speak to Lord Irmo, or Ványalos, at least. I haven't done much good in trying to help you get well again, but I can at least go to fetch someone who can..."

But the wizard shook his head. "It's not necessary, and you've done as much as anyone else has been able to do — more, in fact, since seeing that you are at last on the mend has done my heart good. I'm tired, my dear Frodo, nothing more. My sleep last night was troubled by unsettling dreams, no doubt because I knew this day was coming, and did not welcome it. You've told me you have always anticipated such anniversaries with dread."

The hobbit conceded the point. "I did, and I don't suppose it ever helped that when such days arrived, I was in less than the best of health because I had slept so poorly for several nights before. I was fortunate to have Lady Arwen's gem to help me through the most difficult days." A sudden thought occurred to him, brightening his whole demeanor. "I still have it, you know, though Lady Estë asked me to set it aside when she began my healing in earnest. Might it have some strength in it as Narya did, to protect you? It came from the Elves, and its power has not waned."

“True, but its power was naught but a pale reflection of even Narya, the least of the three Elven rings. It could not give such protection, though I thank you for offering it. I think it would be best if I simply tried to live the day as I would any other, and neither resist nor invite the troubling memories. There are enough tasks that need to be done that we have been neglecting, and if you would bear me company to attend them, I should require no more than that to keep myself sufficiently distracted. The garden is especially in need of attention, or we will soon have a snarl of unruly growth not even Lady Yavanna could hope to untangle!”

After Frodo cleared away the remains of his breakfast, they set to tending the garden, taking their time about it and sharing lighter tales of their past history with other plant life. Olórin recounted several incidents during his recent life in Middle-earth that had convinced him that cockleburs and nettles were as much a product of Melkor’s evil as orcs and trolls, while Frodo told of his more amusing youthful forays into gardening which had been so abysmally unsuccessful, he had been all too easily persuaded by other lads to engage in pilfering the crops of Farmer Maggot rather than continue to murder poor unsuspecting plants under his care. They had been at work for some time and were laughing over Olórin’s tale of how he had first discovered the existence of cockleburs after unwittingly making camp after dark in a virtual bed of them, only to wake and find his clothes and hair and beard full of the nuisance things, when Frodo, about to carry a basket-load of root vegetables to the house, happened to look up and see a shadow pass over the sun. He looked again, more carefully, then gasped.

“It’s an eagle,” he said, pointing to the huge bird gliding high overhead. “But see how large it is! Why, I think your friend Gwaihir would seem but a hatchling, beside this one.”

Olórin turned his gaze to where Frodo was pointing, shading his eyes with one slightly dirty hand. “He would indeed,” he agreed. “That is one of the eagles of Lord Manwë, I am not certain which. Doubtless others have been born since I was sent to Middle-earth, and I have not had an opportunity to become familiar with the descendants of those I knew of old, the true eagles and not those of my people who served Lord Manwë in that form. They are seldom seen far beyond the Pelóri, unless he sends them on errands.”

“It’s beautiful. Do you think perhaps he might be going to see Lord Irmo and Lady Estë?”

After a moment, the Maia shook his head. “No, I think perhaps he is coming here. He is already circling to land, and he appears to be headed for the clearing in front of the house.”

The hobbit’s eyes widened. He found himself trembling. “Lord Manwë doesn’t send them to take people away, does he? Will Shadowfax be frightened of him?” He felt as if he were babbling, asking silly questions, but the words tumbled from his lips, unable to be stopped.

Olórin chuckled as he climbed to his feet. “No, and no. Calm yourself, Frodo. There is no reason whatsoever Lord Manwë would ever banish you from Aman now that you are here, so put that absurd

notion from your head before it has a chance to take root. Shadowfax has seen Great Eagles before, if none quite this large, and he has faced the Lord of the Nazgûl without so much as flinching. He will not be bothered by this. But we should go see what is afoot, since the eagles do not come here without some purpose.”

When they reached the front door, however, they did not see the eagle settled on the ground. Instead, they saw a person coming toward the house to meet them, a passenger whom the eagle had swooped down to deposit on the ground before soaring into the skies once again. As the shadow of the great bird’s wings passed, Olórin recognized the blue-clad newcomer. “Eönwë! To what do we owe the honor of this visit?”

The tall herald smiled as he climbed the stairs to join them on the porch. He was still a striking figure even without the ceremonial garb in which he had greeted them upon their arrival, though to Frodo’s eye, there was a shadow in his expression that had nothing to do with those cast by the eagle or the nearby trees. “Does friendship require an excuse to prompt a visit?” he asked, his glance and smile catching and holding the hobbit as well. “I have been curious to see the results of deeds for which I was partially responsible—” A sweeping gesture indicated the new house. “—and it has been but a few days less than three years since I last was here, before this place was changed. Will you begrudge me this as a call of courtesy?”

Olórin’s answering smile was not dimmed by any shadow; there was the sound of humor in his voice, the raillery of long-time friends jesting in matters with which they are completely at ease. “No indeed, but I note that you came hither in a *most* unusual fashion! The eagles of the highest peaks of the Pelóri are as large and swift as their ancestors of ancient legend, able to carry many full-clad warriors upon their backs without trouble, but not even they are as swift as the thought that can carry any of our people from one place to another in less than the blink of an eye. Was it but a coincidence that one of Lord Manwë’s eagles was bound in this direction for other reasons, and he offered to carry you with him so that he would have company upon the journey? That is not the typical habit of those who are well used to the lonely heights at the very roof of the world.”

Eönwë’s smile dimmed to wistfulness as his glance returned to his fellow Maia. “You miss little, my old friend, as ever,” he said softly. “No, it was no coincidence, and my visit is not simply a call to satisfy my curiosity, intrigued though I might be to see what others have wrought, in part at my suggestion. Lord Manwë sent me to ask if you would please come to Ilmarin, for he wishes to speak with you as soon as may be.”

Olórin nodded his understanding. “I am as always his servant, no matter where I happen to reside. I will, of course, obey his command, if I may have but a few moments to clean away the dirt from the garden.”

“There is no need for haste — and this is no command, Olórin. It is our master’s request, not a summons. There are matters he desires to discuss with you, but if you do not wish to come, you may refuse, without regret or shame, no matter what your reason.”

The wizard had begun to turn back into the house; something in the herald's voice gave him pause. He studied Eönwë for several lengthy moments before speaking. "As I was told I might do so if I wished, when I was summoned to the Máhanaxar to decide the matter of whether I should return to Middle-earth to complete my unfinished tasks as an Istar? It is not our master's habit to extend social invitations to his servants, save on days of festival and at times when there is clear reason for celebration. I somehow sense that neither of those situations apply today. And never before have I been asked to come to Ilmarin as a guest and not in the service of the Lord and the Lady. What are you not telling me, Eönwë? Do you know what it is Lord Manwë wishes to discuss?"

The eyes of the Istar met those of the Herald, both the same vivid yet deep shade of blue, which they shared with the Vala whom they both served. Eönwë did not look away, but he closed those eyes for a moment before answering, as if he had felt a brief stab of pain. "I know," he said, "but I am not free to speak of it. It is important, Olórin, that much I can tell you. I would say more if I had not been enjoined against it, and I think you would want to know what you will hear. More than that, I cannot say, except that if he so desires, Master Baggins may come with us, for what will be said might affect him as well."

Olórin paled. "Then this matter must be important indeed, for never before has any mortal set foot upon the heights of Taniquetil, with or without the leave of Lord Manwë."

He glanced at Frodo, saw the suddenly troubled expression on the face that had been laughing but a minute before, then pushed aside his own uneasiness and favored the hobbit with a smile that at least appeared genuine. "You are being offered a great honor, Frodo, to be the first of the Second Born to see the magnificence that is Ilmarin. Few of even the greatest of the Eldar are permitted there. You need not come if you do not wish, but I do not think it likely you will be made such an offer again. If you have any desire at all to see the heights of Taniquetil, this is the time to satisfy them."

Frodo did not need to debate the matter. "Have you decided to go?" he asked. "For if you have, then I will go, too, but if you prefer to stay, then so shall I. I would not feel right, going alone, and doubt I would be welcome to come without you, in any case."

"Perhaps not, and I would not want you to be robbed of such a unique opportunity merely because I was suffering from a lapse into stubbornness! Very well, Eönwë, we will both come, as soon as we have cleaned away the dust of our work. And I will trust that whatever it is Lord Manwë wishes to discuss, it will not be as grim as your mysterious words seem to forebode."

The wizard would have felt better about his decision had the herald answered with even the vaguest agreement. But Eönwë remained silent, and Olórin could not dispel the worry that settled upon his heart to both clutch and pierce it like the icy claws of despair.

Ever after, Frodo found it difficult to describe the experience of his visit to the home of Manwë and Varda atop Taniquetil. The flight was surprisingly swift, as each stroke of the great eagle's wings carried them much farther than the fastest horse ever born could hope to run in the same span of time. Lórien was soon far behind them as they climbed ever higher in the skies above Aman, so high that even the clouds were left far below, and the very air felt thin and cold. Something, Frodo knew not what, protected them in these surroundings. As they approached the summit of Taniquetil, white with everlasting snows, gleaming with the light of the halls built upon it, the hobbit saw the sky itself seemingly turn to deep blue glass, through which the stars of the heavens could be seen even though to the world below, the sun was near the noon; at this tremendous height, it seemed but the most brilliant and nearest of all the great stars in the firmament. The mighty eagle bore them ever upward, above the halls of Ilmarin, and as he wheeled toward them, gliding in preparation to land, Frodo beheld the legendary mansions of the Vala king and queen. He saw the domes and the walls of purest white, the pristine courts and gleaming windows that looked out over all of Arda, but what he remembered most was the light, the brilliance that shone through every part of it, as if all had been fashioned of naught but radiance made tangible.

Nothing but the sound of rushing wind could reach his ears while they were in flight, but as the eagle at last slowed and settled, bringing them to a broad court that could easily accommodate its magnificent size, the hobbit heard music, very faint and distant, so soft that he almost thought he was imagining it. All else was silent, save for the breath of the wind and the soft murmur of water flowing in a fountain at the center of the round courtyard. It seemed very strange to him, though he did not know why; but Olórin noticed it as well.

"It seems unusually quiet today," the wizard observed, the ceaseless wind blowing long strands of his pale hair across his face as he looked up at the white walls and gleaming domes about them. "It has been long since last I was summoned here, but if there is one thing I recall above all else, it was the singing of the Vanyar who dwell here. I remember several occasions on which you and Ilmarë asked if they might be told to be silent for a time so that you could better concentrate upon important tasks. Is something amiss?"

"No," Eönwë replied, and even to Frodo's ears, the answer seemed to come too quickly. "I was told there had been a birth among the kin of Ingwë who dwell on the lower slopes, a rare thing among his people, these days. Those of the Vanyar who live here in Ilmarin have gone for the day to celebrate this great blessing with their kin."

"A rare event indeed," Olórin agreed with a smile. "Is this why I was asked to come, so that I might hear with my own ears what I think has not been heard in Ilmarin since the day the Vanyar came to live among us: peace and quiet?"

"Nothing so simple, I fear," Eönwë said, sighing. "Though I may not say more, I can tell you that Lord Manwë and Lady Varda have both watched the progress of your healing with keen interest.

Whatever else may be said, do not doubt that our master has been concerned for your well-being, and Master Frodo's."

The wizard's smile faded; he looked at the herald with a puzzled expression as Eönwë led them to a beautiful archway of pearl and adamant, not the most impressive of the many entrances facing the fountain court, but quite lovely nonetheless. "I have never doubted it. Your words do nothing to ease my mind, Eönwë. I may have been forbidden the use of all my abilities as a Maia, but I do not need them to tell that something here is very wrong, and that it somehow concerns me."

The herald made no answer. They moved through the arch into a well-appointed entrance hall, elegantly embellished with decorations and furnishings of white and silver and many shades of blue. The tiles beneath their feet were glazed in such a way that it looked as if they were walking upon the sky itself, flecked with white clouds; the translucent dome that arched above them shimmered with adornments that made it resemble a star-filled sky at midnight. Several more entrances were set into the walls of the hall, one each at the four compass points; Eönwë led them to the largest, a pair of tall silver and sapphire doors opposite the arch through which they had entered. He laid his hand upon the left of the doors and was about to open it when he paused, and turned to the wizard.

"I do not know how matters will settle in the end, Olórin," he said, his voice quiet but intense. "But whatever betides, please remember that I will ever be your friend, as will the many others of our people and the Eldar — and the Atani," he added, nodding briefly toward Frodo, "who both respect and love you."

Olórin regarded him, his face full of grave perplexity. "I do not doubt this, either. You do not encourage me — indeed, your words darken my heart. I think it best that you say no more, if you cannot speak plainly. Whatever lies before me, let it be revealed as it will."

Frodo could not have agreed more, as he also found Eönwë's remarks troubling. The herald nodded his acquiescence to his fellow Maia's request, and laid his hands against the double doors. They opened both effortlessly and soundlessly, and through their high arching entrance, Eönwë led them.

Frodo had not known what to expect upon the other side; what he saw as they entered seemed both surprising and appropriate. As with all else he had seen here, everything was made of white and blue and silver and crystal and all the things that spoke of the skies and the stars and all the heavens above the world. The room was quite large by hobbit standards, but remarkably conservative by those of the Big Folk, especially what Frodo had seen of kings and queens and other nobility. The nearer portion of the room reminded Frodo very strongly of some he had seen in Rivendell, an inner chamber appointed for the comfort of one or two persons, not a sleeping room, but rather a parlor where one spent private time in study or reading or conversing with kin or close friends. The wall opposite the door was scarcely a wall at all, being instead a series of archways that opened onto a broad terrace with no roof and — to Frodo's astonishment — no rail. Nothing stood between the marble and crystal balcony and what lay beyond: a sheer drop of what appeared to be many thousands of feet, straight down the most precipitous rise of the snow-covered stone of Taniquetil itself. Though he had grown

somewhat accustomed to heights in his travels, and had not been too badly disturbed by the flight on the eagle's back, this was more than Frodo's hobbit instincts could manage, and he made a point to stay well clear of it.

Fortunately, it did not appear as if they would need to step out onto that lofty terrace. As they entered the room, Frodo noted that Manwë was already waiting for them, standing before the arch farthest to the right, looking out at the skies above and beyond the treacherous balcony. The wind moved constantly through the chamber, not strongly, but as gentle breezes that move the air and keep it forever clean and fresh. It stirred the Vala's white hair and blue robes, the latter of which were surprisingly simple, the garb of someone at ease in their home and not presenting an image of majesty before the rest of the world. He did not turn or move in any way when they entered, but he nonetheless knew that they were there.

"You may leave us now, Eönwë," the king said quietly, his tone very much akin to that of the herald's when he had arrived in Lórien: subdued, threaded with some indefinable sadness. "I thank you for bringing my guests."

Eönwë hesitated before acknowledging his master's words with a bow. To Frodo, it seemed that there was something he wanted to say, but thought better of it before uttering a sound. "I am ever at your service, my lord," he said as he bowed, then paused to glance at those he had brought before departing. His steps made only the faintest sound, as did the closing of the doors behind him.

Since they had not been given leave to speak or to sit, Frodo followed Olórin's example in remaining where they were, awaiting some indication from Manwë as to what they should do next. The Vala continued to gaze beyond the terrace for more than a minute, silent, then at last turned to his guests. It was the same face Frodo remembered from the day of their arrival, but without the easy cheer and geniality he had shown that day. Manwë looked troubled — almost, Frodo thought, like a young hobbit who knows he has neglected his chores and feels both the guilt and the fear of punishment inevitably to come. Why he might be in such a mood, Frodo could not begin to imagine; briefly, he hoped that he was not misreading that expression, and that they, not Manwë, should be the ones in fear of punishment.

But there was no rebuke or hint of it in his voice when he spoke. "I am glad you chose to come, Olórin — and you as well, Master Frodo. I have no doubt that both of you are at a loss to understand why I extended such an invitation."

Now free to speak, the wizard did not hesitate. "Completely, my lord, especially since Eönwë mentioned that you had forbidden him to explain it to us, yet what little he was able to say left me feeling quite uneasy. I can think of nothing either of us have done to warrant your displeasure, so I can but assume that the disquiet I sense is somehow related to the matter of healing which both Frodo and I share. I am certain you have held council with Lord Irmo and Ladies Estë and Nienna, so am I wrong in concluding that this visit might involve some unpleasant news concerning what they might have discovered about it?"

To Frodo's great relief, Manwë shook his head. "No. They have kept all of us abreast of this situation, and we are pleased to know that Frodo's condition has been steadily improving, as has that of his uncle. They have, in fact, improved more quickly than we had anticipated. But perhaps you are not entirely in error, for we have also been distressed to hear that no progress has been made on your account, and that while it is not happening as swiftly as the hobbits' healing, your condition nonetheless continues to deteriorate, with no solution yet in sight. This does trouble us, and it especially troubles me, for I am the one wholly to blame for what has happened to you."

It did not take more than a moment for the implications of those softly-spoken words to register on both the hobbit and the Maia. Frodo's expression became one of confusion, suspecting that he must have heard wrong or misunderstood what had been said; Olórin's went quite still, changing little but for an impression of utter disbelief in his eyes. "That cannot be possible, my lord," the latter answered, certain this must be so. "What happened to me was the result of dwelling too long amid the evils of our Enemies in a form too vulnerable to their more devious attacks. How could you have done aught to be blamed for this harm I suffered?"

Manwë took a very deep breath, and again released it in a sigh. "It is not as long a tale as one might think, and I had very much hoped that it would never be necessary for you to hear it. But as time passes and Irmo and Estë can only report that you grow weaker, not stronger, I know that I cannot keep silent. Irmo advised me against this, saying it might only make matters worse, yet there is also the possibility that if you know all of what brought you to this pass, you who have actually lived through it and not merely viewed it from afar might see in this the answer that eludes those of us who are trying to help. As the halflings are themselves a part of the mortal race, I felt it might be wise to let them share in this, for they have unique insights into such things that we do not. But I also thought it would be kind to spare the elder Master Baggins this burden, for even here in Aman, his years will not be many, and they should not be dimmed if at all possible."

He turned to Frodo. "If you wish to leave now before you hear aught that might distress you, you are free to do so. The choice is yours."

The hobbit sniffed softly. "If you think I might be able to help if I know what you're about to say, then I certainly want to stay, Lord Manwë. Olórin has been my friend all my life, and I have promised to do anything I can to help him now. But I don't understand. Everything I've heard thus far about why he is in such difficulty said that it was the forces of evil in Middle-earth that hurt him. As far as I am aware, you have not set foot there since the end of the First Age. How could you possibly be responsible for what happened?"

The sadness that filled the Vala's face was so deep, Frodo had to blink to hold back unbidden tears. "By being responsible for sending Olórin when I knew I should not."

The wizard made a skeptical sound. "Lord Irmo has spoken of such things, that I should not have been sent to Endor because of my feelings toward the Eruhíni, but you are certainly not to blame for that,

my lord. They are not a part of what caused my troubles, and you did not use them to persuade me to go as one of your messengers....”

“No, I did not,” Manwë agreed. “I *commanded* you to go instead — and therein lies my fault.”

“That is still not a reason to blame yourself for this. I am your servant; you asked me to do something that clearly needed to be done. I should have accepted the task and not refused it, out of loyalty to you, if naught else. If anything, I am to blame for my circumstances, for it is a faithless servant who shrinks from a task out of personal fear, wishing instead to leave it to another so that he need not take the risk and remain safe while others walk into peril.”

But the sadness in the Vala’s expression deepened, and mingled with pain. “Oh, Olórin, you do not understand. I am grateful to you for attempting to exonerate me, but you have not allowed me to explain more fully. Sit, and hear me out before you say another word.”

He gestured to simple chairs of carved white stone with blue and silver cushions, near one of the arches overlooking the terrace. When his guests were seated, he took yet another deep breath, and continued. “When we Valar first conceived the plan to send our Maia servants as messengers to oppose Sauron, we knew that this could not be done by the means we had used before. In our struggles against our Enemies, each time we have intervened in the affairs of Endor by traveling to it personally, disaster has followed. Even when we attempted to do so from afar, the use of power to counter the dark powers has only ended in tragedy. How much longer could Endor endure such upheavals without finally being struck by a cataclysm so tremendous, naught could hope to survive? We feared making such a mistake yet again, so we decided that this time, our intervention must be more subtle, using persuasion rather than might to achieve our ends.

“Yet even if we sent only Maiar to do this, it would be difficult. Those who went could not be themselves weak, for the task of uniting the peoples of Middle-earth through love and persuasion would require great wisdom, intelligence, and the ability to adapt to whatever situations might arise. If such persons were sent unfettered, free to use all the abilities and knowledge at their disposal, in time, frustration alone might prompt them to use those powers to simply have done with subtlety and achieve the end more quickly, to the detriment of the Eruhíni — and very possibly all of Endor. So it came to us that the solution to this problem was to send our messengers *as* those whom they were to succor. In the forms of true Men, they would come to know and understand far better the people they were meant to help, and the weight and restrictive nature of that flesh would impose a diminishment of power and knowledge that would prevent them from freely using their native abilities as they would. But although we can rehouse the *féar* of the Elves, that is but rebuilding something which was lost after the patterns of the old. To make a wholly new body which is of true flesh, not a fana, requires an act of creation, and that is beyond our power and authority. So we decided to ask the counsel of Lord Eru, to seek guidance, and His aid in constructing these bodies for our messengers, should He approve of our plan.

“All of this, you know, as it was made clear to you before you were sent as one of the Istari. What you do *not* know is what happened before that council at which those who would go were selected. I

was the one who presented our plan to Lord Eru and asked for His help. He told me that the idea had merit, and could indeed succeed without causing calamity to Middle-earth, though because of this diminishment of power, the chances for failure were greater. And, He said, there were perils to inhabiting living flesh that we did not and could not understand; thus, all those who were to go must be warned of the danger before they departed. He would fashion the bodies for our messengers and place their spirits into them, but we were to be extremely careful in our selection, and all should make this choice of their own free will. None, He advised, should be commanded to go, for if such were to be done, tragedy would result, of a kind we would bitterly regret."

Manwë had been looking directly at Olórin, his gaze fixed upon his servant while he spoke; so it was that he saw the Maia's eyes widen and his face grow ashen. "But... my lord, *you* ordered me to go...."

The Vala closed his eyes against what he could see growing in that suddenly stricken face, something he could not bear to behold. "I know," he near-whispered. "And that is wherein lies my blame, Olórin. I was counseled not to do this by Eru Himself, yet I did not heed that counsel, as I ought have done. You need not ask why; the answer is all too plain, for it is what lies at the root of every supposedly well-meant error that harms another: pride. When we held the council to put forth this plan to our servants, we asked for those who were willing to be a part of it to step forward, and only Curumo and Alatar responded. When no others would come forth, I began to feel the rise of fear within me, for I knew both of them well enough to realize that skilled and learned and powerful though they might be, they did not have a sufficient store of the wisdom that would be needed to carry out their mission while living a life in which both their learning and their power would be greatly inhibited. They were also proud after the fashion of those who have great ambition, and desired to be held in reverence; they knew little of how to accept an unassuming role and do a thing only because it must be done, not because it will win them renown or praise.

"In my growing alarm, I could think only one thought: that if none but ones such as they took part in this embassy, we would fail yet again, and Endor itself would be forever lost to Sauron and the shadow of evil, Melkor's evil, which we had tried and failed to fully uproot of old. I could not bear that thought, for we had already inflicted much harm on Arda when in earlier days, we did not consider our actions well enough, or pondered only the immediate results, not those of a much wider scope. Alone, Curumo and Alatar would have certainly failed; the task was greater than any two of your people could manage, least of all two who would swiftly grow impatient to see their goal achieved, by whatever means necessary. What was needed was greater wisdom, humility, and patience, and as I realized this, the answer came to me that *you* could bring to this mission all those qualities. Yet when I asked, you resisted and refused, and my fear grew all the more. I do not know if it was that fear or some foresight which prompted it, but I felt very strongly that you *must* go, that I could not allow you to refuse this task or all would come to ruin. So though I attempted to make light of it in my words, saying that your own fear of Sauron was all the more reason why you should oppose him, I did what I knew I should not, and ordered you to go as my messenger.

“Later, after you had acquiesced and all was being made ready to prepare for the effort, I saw my error, but I could not bring myself to revoke my command. Though I clearly recalled what Lord Eru had said, I felt that I could suffer whatever tragedy might befall me if in the end, it allowed this mission to succeed. Only long after you had departed for Endor did I realize the bitterness of which Lord Eru had spoken: that the tragedy to come would not fall upon me, the one who gave the command, but upon the one to whom it had been given, who did not deserve such a reward for his faithful service.”

Manwë laughed, but the sound was hollow and self-mocking, heavy with grief. “Fool that I was, I thought that the tragedy which was doomed to befall you came when you faced the Balrog of Moria and were slain. I did not even begin to see the horrible truth until you returned to us, and I perceived for myself the scars that mortal life and so many centuries of human exposure to the evil at work in Endor had left upon your very being. Even then, I did not fully understand your plight; I felt certain you would be quickly healed, now that you were home. It shames me deeply to realize that I was in error yet again.”

Frodo listened to the Vala’s quiet but earnest speech with a blend of astonishment and some other emotion he could not define — pity, perhaps, for Manwë’s apparent naivete, or trepidation, a fear that there might indeed be no answer to Olórin’s predicament. His astonishment came of the realization that this mistake had been made by the king of the Valar himself, whom Frodo had thought was too inherently good and noble to knowingly commit such an act.

He could not tell for certain, but he suspected that Olórin shared in his astonishment, for that was the only thing he could read in the wizard’s otherwise blank and pale face. His eyes were fixed on his master as those of someone who beholds, unexpectedly, the shattered fragments of some beautiful and precious thing they had not believed could ever be broken. Frodo could almost feel the churning of thoughts and feelings within him, confused, upset, undecided, aggrieved, aghast — it was impossible to tell if any one was stronger than the others.

At length, Manwë spoke again. “Lord Eru told me naught but the truth when He said it would be bitterly regretted if any of us did this thing He advised me against, and none regret it more bitterly than I. I cannot undo what I have done, yet it eats at my heart to know that if I had been less anxious to succeed and more patient to do what was right, this would not have come to pass. Now, I can only ask your forgiveness for my terrible folly.”

Olórin did not yet look away from his master. He continued to stare at him for what felt a very long time to Frodo, then slowly rose from where he sat and at last turned from the Vala king. He now faced the broad white terrace and the open skies beyond; the wind stirred his pale hair and tugged at his white robes, the only motion about him as he stood with his back to his companions. Finally, he spoke. “You wished for me to go as your messenger because you felt I had wisdom and patience and humility enough to help the work of the Istari succeed, despite the obstacles pitted against us.”

“Yes,” Manwë agreed with a nod as deep as his voice. “I could think of no one better suited to achieve such an impossible task, and I was so certain of this, I knew the mission would fail if you were not a part of it.”

Olórin remained motionless for several moments more. He then turned to face Manwë, his eyes filled with a sudden fury that even to Frodo felt like a physical blow. Yet despite the blazing anger, his face was damp with tears, anger commingled with anguish. “Then if you knew me so well, my lord, why did you not trust my much-vaunted wisdom enough to tell me the truth? When I said that I feared Sauron and felt myself too weak to oppose him, could you not have *explained* to me the reasons behind your desire rather than disregard the counsel of Eru Ilúvatar Himself to *force* my compliance? You knew that harm would come of it. Even if you did not know how or in what way or time it would occur, you had been warned. All of us who are called the Ainur, from the least to the greatest, were brought into the world to serve Him — you above all others! How could you disobey Him to achieve an end which you could have reached by simply telling me *why* you wished me to go? Did you think so little of me that you could not even trust me to understand your reasoning? Did your pride deem it necessary to force this upon me, when you should have known that I would do whatever was asked of me, no matter how perilous or difficult, if only I was allowed to understand the need? Was it from you, my lord and king, that Aránayel learned how to betray and destroy those who have given naught but faithful service and unwavering devotion?”

His last question was asked with such sharp bitterness, Frodo grimaced even as Manwë lowered his head. “You have every right to be angry with me, Olórin,” the Vala said quietly, “even more than I am angry with myself. But I did not mean to betray your trust...”

“No indeed,” the Maia replied, his calm facade crumbling like a dam of sticks and dust before a raging flood. “I would not think such a thing had entered into your mind, for that is but the smallest of misdeeds when measured beside the betrayal of Lord Eru’s will!”

“You do not understand...!”

“Yes, my lord, I do not! Of all of the Ainur, you are the greatest, the one nearest to Eru Himself, the one who knows most clearly and fully His will and His plans for all Arda. We had not yet come to the last notes of our song when the Istari were sent to Middle-earth; your knowledge of what was to be had not reached its end. The One Himself told you *Do not do this!* and yet you chose to do that very thing. Oh, you say that you thought whatever tragedy was to come would fall upon you, and I will not deny that you spoke the truth as you believed it to be — but why, my lord, why did you not pause to consider that ever in the past, when ills have come as the result of your actions, *never* did the blow they caused fall upon you? You have known me from well nigh the beginning of our existence, yet did you truly know me so little that you doubted my willingness to help, regardless of the consequences, if only I knew that my help was truly needed? Did *your* wisdom fail you at last?”

A lesser being might have answered with anger, but Manwë was not of that ilk; he bore the rebuke as just, for he knew too well his own responsibility, and what he had done to cause such merited

outrage. "It would seem that it has. I may stand as the regent of Lord Eru here in Arda, but I am not Him, and when I err, it seems always that I do so to my everlasting regret, and the pain of others. Yet even admitting my fault does not mitigate my blame. I have no means to make right what I have done to you by my wrongful choices; I can only ask for your forgiveness, and hope that others will find the way to amend my mistakes."

Olórin glared at the Vala in silence for the span of several heartbeats, then spoke in a low voice of frighteningly level intensity. "Two thousand years ago, I would have given what you ask, had you but told me what you had done before you sent me away to live a life you could not possibly understand, toiling toward a goal you had scarce hope could be achieved, and at the last drawing ever closer to an end against which you had been warned, but did not heed. I will pay the price of your errors and misjudgements, my lord, for I myself have made many which I deeply regret, and it befits what I am and always have been to make such a sacrifice for another. But I cannot grant you forgiveness to ease your conscience. I am not the one you have most greatly wronged; I am but the one from whom the penalty will be exacted. Let it be so, then, and let it come swiftly. But the forgiveness you seek is not mine to give. All I can offer is my life in payment for your deliberate betrayal of Lord Eru's will."

Before either of his companions could react in any way, he turned and swiftly strode out onto the terrace, increasing the pace of his stride until he was running across the tiles of adamant and crystal, headed directly and without hesitation toward the edge that was guarded by no kerb or rail.

Frodo saw where he was going, what he was doing, and in utter horror sprang from his seat. He did not think to ask Manwë to intervene, did not even notice whether or not the Vala was reacting at all; he only knew that somehow, he had to stop his friend before it was too late. "Olórin!" he cried, the words torn from his throat in utter anguish. "*Gandalf, no...!!!*"

But before the cry had time enough to reach Frodo's ears, the Maia raced over the edge of the precipice, fell from sight, and was gone.

To Be Concluded