

I Entulesse

(The Return)

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Part Five

XVI

Frodo was not even aware that he had started to run after Olórin, madly hoping to stop him from doing the unthinkable without even a thought for where he was headed, until he was caught and held firm by strong arms, not even two full steps from the very brink of the precipice. The determined halfling struggled against that grip, but it did not let him go despite his best efforts. He glared up at his captor in the very moment that Manwë spoke, firmly but gently.

“No, Frodo, do not despair. Behold!” With a nod of his white-maned head, the Vala indicated that the hobbit should look over the edge of that terrible face of sheer icy stone. Ordinarily, Frodo would not have dared, for fear of the incredible height, but something in Manwë’s voice calmed that terror and let him do as he had been bid. Already far below, he saw a falling speck of white, barely visible against the snowy slopes of the mountain. Suddenly, there was a flash of light, as of the sun glinting off the sharp edges of fresh ice, and to his amazement, the speck was no longer falling. It had changed shape, still pale, but soaring on the currents of the wind, speeding away from Taniquetil and across the plains of Valinor. Squinting against the brightness, Frodo saw that it had taken the form of a white bird, and was now making use of its wings to hurry itself away from the mountains and a situation it could no longer bear.

As the hobbit marveled at the sight, Manwë spoke again. “Our people can assume whatever forms we wish, or none at all, and still travel about the land as we desire. Olórin had heard more than enough from me, I deem, and wished to hear no more. I cannot blame him for his anger, or his need to be away from me. Never before have I broken faith with one who has served me so well. Were I able to flee my shame as he has fled my presence, I would.”

When that small white form moved beyond his sight, Frodo finally relaxed, no longer resisting the Vala’s restraint. As Manwë let him go, he looked up at him, his face a mixture of warring emotions. “Why did you do it, Lord Manwë?” he asked, still unable to fathom such a thing. “Why did you disobey Lord Eru when you knew that *someone* would be hurt by it?”

As he knelt beside the halfling, Manwë remained placid, but sad. “Why did you put on the Ring below Amon Hen when you knew full well the danger of it, to yourself and your company? Why did

you risk drawing the attention of enemies who would have taken you and what you bore, and slain all of your friends and comrades with nary a thought?"

"I had no other choice!" Frodo answered instantly. "Boromir was trying to take the Ring from me, and in his madness, if he had succeeded, all might have been lost! He was so much larger and stronger than I, I had no other way to escape him but to hide as quickly as possible. I did the best I could to protect all my friends, and the quest..."

Something in the way the Vala was regarding him stilled the hobbit's explanation. It was not accusing, but compassionate. "Did you think to call upon the others for help instead? If you had cried out for aid, do you doubt that your comrades would have raced to your side at once? Were you so very far removed from them that such a course of action would not have been possible?"

Frodo's eyes widened at the softly-asked questions. He opened his mouth to speak, but found no words waiting to be uttered. He closed it, then began again, more quietly. "No, I wasn't so far away, and they would have come, certainly — though if I'd raised an alarm, it might have drawn our enemies as well."

"And did you *know* that they were so near as pose a threat? Was that risk greater than placing the Ring upon your hand when you knew beyond a doubt that so doing would attract the notice of enemies attuned to its evil?"

"I don't know," the hobbit said after hesitating for a long moment. "I did what I thought was best at the time. I suppose that in hindsight, I might have acted less rashly, and perhaps spared my companions considerable grief and hardship. But I didn't know that until after I had already done what I did. I truly thought that the only risk was to myself, and to no others. I was trying to help."

"As was I. As you believed the greatest danger to be to yourself alone, so did I believe that taking an action I had been told was perilous and should be avoided would harm no one but myself, the one who committed the transgression. Had you known that your actions might have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the death of Boromir and the capture of Meriadoc and Peregrin, you would have reconsidered the steps you took. Had I known that Olórin would be the one to suffer for my decision and my pride, I would have done the same. Who can say what might have happened had we both seen our errors and repented of them while perhaps there was still time to undo the wrong? Was the doom invoked at the moment of our choice, or did it come later? We cannot know now, for the time of choices is long past, and we can but live with the consequences of what we have done, and pray we find the strength and means to repair the damage."

Manwë rose, a tall figure of blue and white that towered over the hobbit, yet somehow seemed to be small and bent with sorrow. He sighed. "Know this, Frodo: If I could take upon myself the injuries that were done to Olórin, if I could give to him all my strength and by it make him whole again, I would, without hesitation or regret. He is not, perhaps, the most powerful or brilliant or masterful of my many servants, but his heart is like none other. He has a kind of courage that knows fear yet perseveres in

spite of it, and his wisdom is indeed as great as the tales tell. Though he sometimes acts rashly, he is far more patient than he often seems, and his generosity of spirit knows no equal, beyond that of Lord Eru. He is dear to all of us, save to those who are themselves small of heart. He does not deserve this doom, and I would sooner have brought it upon any but him."

A faint, sad smile touched Frodo's face. "As I would have spared Sam all that he suffered in helping me find my way into Mordor and to the fire. Such faithful service and generous friendship deserves better than that. But Sam, at least, was rewarded in the end. He has his home and his family and his life before him. If I made mistakes, I was the one who was made to carry the pain and punishment of them, in the end. Why can it not be the same for Olórin?"

Manwë answered with a like expression. "Perhaps because your mistakes were not of the same magnitude as mine. You erred in your judgement. I spurned the advice of Eru Himself, out of pride. May He forgive me my faithlessness! For even in his anger, Olórin remained wise. He spoke truly when he said that the one whom I have betrayed most grievously is Lord Eru, for He gave to me the benefit of His counsel to guide me, and I rejected that gift out of the prideful desire to not seem a failure yet again. All I wish now is to do aught that I can and must to make amends for the harm I caused Olórin."

He lifted his head and looked out across the panorama of the wide world spread around and below them. "I cannot hear him," he said after a moment, his brow furrowing. "He has closed his thoughts and his heart to me, very likely to all who might thus perceive him. I do not know what he has in mind to do, or where he has fled. I can see far, and perceive the movement of all within Arda, but he is putting forth his power to interfere with my sight, so that he will remain elusive. He learned that skill well two ages ago, when he worked in Endor in secret opposition to my brother Melkor. Had he not, he would have swiftly been discovered, and destroyed."

Again, the Vala sighed as he turned away from the edge of the cliff. "Yet his store of strength is sorely depleted, and will dwindle quickly the more he uses it to flee and to hide. I fear very much he will soon exhaust himself, and we will be hard pressed to find him. He was not bearing toward his home, and I do not know where he intended to go, save that I suspect it might be as far from here as possible."

"And where would that be?" Frodo wondered, shivering slightly at his last sight of the sheer mountain face before he followed Manwë back into the parlor.

"As you reckon distance, either south to the forests of Oromë, or north and west to the Halls of Mandos. Think you that he would seek either of these as a place of refuge?"

The hobbit considered the matter as best he could before shaking his head. "I don't know. He might go to the forests, since he always loved such places even in Middle-earth, but if he's wanting to hide and be alone for a time, I don't think he'd go there. It seems too obvious. And as for the other place...! He's not like that, Lord Manwë, the sort who wants to die when things grow difficult. I

panicked when he left because of *my* instincts, not his. I may not know him as well as you and the others here, but I know he wouldn't try to take his own life."

Manwë nodded slowly as he acknowledged Frodo's observations. "You speak truly, he is not that way, nor has he ever been. Our people do not seek death because it is beyond our scope of experience, and none invite the sort of diminishment that befell Sauron and Curumo, not unless they are fools enough to expend their all in seeking to dominate and conquer others. Yet Olórin is unique among us, for he has known death, and has returned from it. If the sorrows and pains of life have become too great for him to bear, he may wish to find that path again, though it is now closed to him."

"He wouldn't," Frodo insisted as he watched the Vala move to an archway to the left of the main entrance. He gestured for Frodo to follow, and the hobbit complied. "He loves life too much, I think, though..." He hesitated, remembering something the wizard had said to him on the day of their arrival.

Manwë paused, his hand upon the door, to glance at the hobbit. "Though?" he prompted.

Frodo shrugged, reluctant to say more, but aware that he should not withhold what might be valuable information. "When he told me about his death, he said that after he had died, he didn't come here first, but returned to wherever it is Lord Eru and the other Ainur live. He thought it was a very precious experience. Perhaps that is what he wants to find."

"He cannot," Manwë said, not without regret. "What happened to him then was a part of the mortal life imposed upon him, and a choice of Lord Eru's, not ours. We are all bound by an agreement we made to remain here within Arda until the End. There is no path for us to return to Him, unless He wills it. Even Melkor could not be wholly banished from the world; he yet lives, though bound, within the Void, where he will stay until the Dagor Dagorath. Though he may dwindle to but a flicker of what he has been, Olórin cannot leave these shores." He exhaled deeply. "Perhaps it would have been best if he had remained with Lord Eru, then. He would be free of this danger, and living the greatest reward any of us can hope to earn."

He opened the door, which swung aside with only the lightest of touches. He led Frodo down an unlit passage, into a large, round room through which the air moved in silent but unending motion. The chamber was dark, but as Manwë lifted his hands and spoke a word, all above them suddenly filled with light. Frodo saw that the roof, which was lofty indeed, was a huge dome that seemed to have been made of a web of crystal and light. In it, the hobbit saw beautiful shifting colors and the barest glimpses of images that would come into focus for only an instant, then change to something new. He found the sight both compelling and dizzying, and after a short time looked away, lest he grow faint from the spinning reflections of all he could not quite see before his eyes and in his mind.

Again, Manwë spoke in a language Frodo did not understand, but was coming to recognize as Valarin, the tongue which the Ainur had made for themselves even before the awakening of the Elves. In it, a single word could hold immense power; many could draw forth enough power to reshape half the world. The more he heard of it, the more he realized that he had heard a few words of this language

long ago, uttered on rare occasion by Gandalf in times of great danger. He did not know if he would ever grow fully accustomed to the sound of it, but as he understood it better, he appreciated it more.

Whatever Manwë had said just now caused the dome above to fill with many images of Valinor itself, flickering by too quickly for Frodo to recognize more than small bits and pieces of the few places he had actually been. He murmured another word after a time, and though the images did not cease, there was another almost immediate response. A calm voice spoke, one Frodo had grown to know quite well indeed.

“You search in vain, Manwë,” Irmo said, the sound of his voice preceding his appearance near the outer edge of the circle, facing the Vala king. “I advised you against informing Olórin of what you had done long ago, and if now he seeks refuge from his feelings of betrayal, you will not find him, though you search beneath every stone and tree and blade of grass in Aman. This gift he learned to evade the most powerful of our kind, at our behest, and he learned it well indeed. You will not find him so easily, nor will any of us, until he either wishes to be found or has so drained himself of strength, he can no longer maintain his disguise. Was it worth this end to have unburdened yourself so? Might you not have waited, until some answer to his predicament was found?”

“We will not find that answer easily,” yet another voice declared, quietly but with firm conviction. Frodo looked in the direction from which it had come, and saw Varda entering the chamber through a door opposite the one Frodo and Manwë had used. “As the source of the trouble eludes us because we have never lived the life of a true mortal, with all its cares and sorrows and joys, so too is this beyond us. How can we discover a thing which is so foreign to our understanding, we could not see it were it set before us, unhidden?”

“Varda speaks truly,” said a deeply resonant voice as Aulë appeared, not far from where Irmo stood. “You may have been the one to make the mistake by which these sad circumstances came about, Manwë, but we knew of those things the One said to you in counsel, yet none of us uttered so much as a word to make you reconsider your actions. We might have stopped this tragedy ere it began, but we did not.”

“We are all guilty of silence,” said yet another voice, deeper than Aulë’s yet even more piercingly clear. Frodo looked to the speaker, who stood near Varda, and was startled to see Námo. He had heard and been told that the lord of Mandos never spoke save at Manwë’s command, to pronounce doom, yet the king had given no instruction — perhaps because the doom to be pronounced would be Manwë’s own. “We all felt the stinging fear of failure, and could not bear the thought of failing yet again, when the price would be all of Middle-earth. What should we have done to end the menace of Sauron without risking further destruction of the world the Atani were to inherit? Should we have marched forth ourselves directly, come as a host of might and majesty to collect one truant child who had gone woefully astray? Should we have said to our servants, go in our stead, and use whatever means are necessary to end this matter as quickly as possible, no matter the terrible cost to Endor? No. What should have been said was that doing right sometimes entails great risks, and requires the skills of those willing to forego power and pride and praise for the sake of those they love. Varda spoke of this

indirectly when she said that Olórin would not be third among our messengers, but she spoke not plainly enough. None of us did. You commanded rather than persuaded, Manwë, and we allowed it when we should not have. All of us stand in equal blame, and for the sake of Olórin, whom we all betrayed in our silence, there is much that requires redress on our part, if we can but find the means."

"Yet what means will avail us?" still another voice asked, this a woman's. Frodo glanced toward her, a tall woman in green standing near Aulë, and recognized Yavanna. "Evil has poisoned him, as evil poisoned the Two Trees. Not all our song and weeping and power could bring them back; they were sickened beyond our abilities to heal. Can we now find some new means to draw the poisons from Olórin's spirit and repair what harm they have wrought? I have seen no way to do this."

"Nor I," Irmo agreed, "or my wife Estë. Yet even in their last throes of death, the Trees were able to put forth fruit and flower that allowed their life to carry on. It may not be possible for Olórin to continue his life as he once knew it, but that does not mean he cannot continue at all. Perhaps we are not finding the answers we seek because we are asking the wrong questions. Should we be searching for a cure to restore Olórin to the life he knew before, or should we be seeking ways to help him move from it into a new life?"

"This may indeed be what is required," Námo said, nodding to his brother. "What we must seek to find and understand is Lord Eru's will in this matter. Olórin's fate is not known to us, for he was removed from this world and the Music for a time, and returned to it by the will of Eru Ilúvatar. He alone knows what plans He had made for Olórin's future when He decided this. He has not revealed that fate to me, nor, I perceive, to you, Manwë."

"He has not," the Vala king confirmed. "Yet I cannot believe He meant for us to do naught but stand silent once again and watch Olórin dwindle into nothingness. Though Lord Eru's judgements may seem harsh at times, they are always just, meet to the crime of the transgressor. It would be less than fair and more than cruel to Olórin to have sent him back to complete a task after such long and hard labors, only so that he might return to us and let us stand witness to the pain of our mistakes as they are visited upon him, who had done no wrong."

Aulë sighed. "Even so, it would appear to be the case indeed, so long as we can find no means to help him. I regret this as bitterly as you, Manwë Súlimo, for had I but considered that my servant Curumo's pride was as great as his skill, I would have known from the first that he was ill-suited to this embassy. But never have I been a good judge of others' hearts. I have also been too quick to act without considering all that might come of my deeds. Yet even when I disobeyed the will of Lord Eru, He was swift to grant me forgiveness when I showed repentance, and did not make the innocent to suffer for my error. Surely He will not do otherwise for one of His own servants who has done well indeed."

"I cannot believe He would allow this to continue to a tragic end," Yavanna agreed.

Námo sighed, a heavy sound like the trembling of the deepest roots of the earth itself. "Yet so He forewarned us," the dark Vala reminded the others. "Tragedy was the end He foretold, and thus

would it be, were Olórin's life to end this way, poisoned by evils from which he had asked to be spared, diminished in strength and power until he joins the nothingness into which his own enemies have fallen. What end more bitter and tragic could any of us imagine? It may indeed be Olórin's fate, much though all of us would wish to change it. We brought it upon him through our words and our silence, even as Melkor brought pain into the world through his defiance of Lord Eru. Now we know how easily he fell into evil, for we ourselves have most surely fallen as well."

There was an infinite moment of ponderous stillness in the domed chamber, in which all of the Valar present acknowledged their blame. At length, Varda spoke. "Dark indeed have matters grown, yet even in the deepest darkness, light can fall if but the smallest crack is opened to it. We have all acknowledged our guilt and our shame, but we have not asked Lord Eru to be forgiven. Should we be so proud as to avoid this, when we have so often sought His counsel on other matters? Perhaps this is not so far-reaching as the fate of Endor, the wars against Melkor and Sauron, and the defiance of Númenor, but it is close to all of us, for it involves the fate of one who has been held dear to us all. Can we never act out of love, but only seek to conquer evil and hate?"

"We can," Manwë answered, "and we should, but first we must find Olórin and let him know that we will do this. Indeed, I see now that we should have done it long ago, but again we fell victim to pride and our belief that we have power enough to mend any harm in Arda that we so choose. We know full well that we do not. Yet he has skillfully concealed himself. Where should we look to find him?"

An answer suddenly appeared in Frodo's thoughts, so clearly, he almost believed a will other than his own had put it there. But it was only a memory, despite its clarity, prompted by the discussion of those around him. "He said he would sooner cast himself into the Void than suffer what happened to Sauron and the others," the hobbit said softly, surprisingly uncowed by the presence of these powerful beings, but not wanting to rudely interrupt their discourse. He looked up at Manwë, who was standing nearest him. "Is there a way he could do that?"

"It is not impossible," the Vala replied after taking a moment to consider what Frodo had said. "But it is not as simple a thing as walking from here to there. The Doors of Night are shut fast and well guarded, to prevent Melkor from returning to Arda. They can be opened now only by our will, or Lord Eru's. We would know at once if Olórin attempted this, and he has not."

"Yet it disturbs me to hear that he had even considered such an act," Varda said, her beautiful face dimmed with sorrow. "Such despair is unlike him, who was once a spirit of great joy. Is this the burden of all who have been mortal?"

"At times, yes," Frodo answered, since the lady had looked upon him when she asked her question. "Especially for those who are sick, or crippled. It can be very difficult to carry on from day to day when your life has nothing more than ordinary mortal hardships, but when you have more heaped upon you by illness and injury, you feel... different, unlike everyone else, a burden to yourself and to others. I felt that way after the War was over and we returned home. I tried to return to a normal

life, but I had been hurt too deeply, in ways that would not heal. I wasn't like my friends and neighbors, anymore; I was a stranger to them, an object of pity, or sometimes even scorn. I don't recall that Olórin ever fell ill the way ordinary mortals do, but I know that he had been hurt several times, probably more than I know of for certain. He experienced those feelings as we true mortals do, and I suspect he was hoping that once he returned home and could be himself again, he would be able to put them behind him. I can't imagine it's been an easy time for him. At least in Middle-earth, other people knew what it was like to be sick and hurt. Here, he must feel very out of place, since nothing like this has ever happened to one of your people. If you were gone for many years, my lady, then came home and found that you had become a curiosity, something to be pitied more and more as time went by, could you be happy in spite of it, and not feel that all was indeed hopeless?"

Varda inclined her head in acknowledgment of Frodo's words. Aulë sighed. "Perhaps we ourselves should have gone to the aid of Endor in such a mortal state, for it seems that though the experience is not an easy one, there is much to be learned from it. Yet we cannot step back in time and unmake what was done, only go forward and make reparations as best we can. Olórin cannot leave us through the Doors of Night, nor do I believe he would sincerely try, but if he is seeking solitude, the shores of the farthest west might provide what he desires, for that is a desolate country, where even the most curious of the Eldar seldom go."

"Nienna will search, then," Námo said, his voice still dark and deep. "Our sister knows that land best of all our people, for though others avoid it, she sees in its seeming emptiness things which they cannot perceive."

"Ulmo will also help," Manwë added, approving the plan. "As she is familiar with the western lands above the waters, he best knows the those barren shores and the shoals that stretch out from them into the Encircling Sea. Together, they will find him."

"And then what?" Frodo's voice sounded small even to his own ears. He felt the eyes of all the Valar turn to him, but with compassion, not scorn.

"We will bring him home," Varda replied, the pity which filled her face the most touching of all. "And we will do whatever we can, whatever is necessary to help him. He should never have come to such a pass as this."

"But what if you can't? I don't mean to sound disrespectful, but it doesn't seem as if anyone has been able to think of a single thing to heal him. Will he have to fade into nothing, like the Maiar who turned to wickedness, in spite of it all?"

"I do not know," Manwë said gently, settling his hands on the hobbit's shoulders. "But if at the last we cannot find the answer he so sorely needs, and indeed nothing can prevent him from that unwarranted end, I will ask Lord Eru to show him mercy, and take Olórin back to the Timeless Halls, as He did after his death in Moria. No work of evil can long endure in the light of Eru Ilúvatar's presence, and there he would be restored to strength and wholeness, as he was in his beginning. The

harm Olórin suffered was not healed when last he was there because, I deem, we who had wronged him needed to be shown the full truth of what we had done, to learn its bitter lessons. Naught would have been learned had we not seen for ourselves what had become of him. If we have studied to Lord Eru's satisfaction, and have made every attempt to amend the result of our mistake, He will not allow Olórin to suffer needlessly."

Manwë's answer both relieved and disturbed Frodo. "So if that is what is needed to make him well, I may never see him again." It sounded terribly selfish the moment he said it, but again, the hobbit was startled when he was answered not with a rebuke, but with compassion.

"Perhaps not in this life," Námo replied, his deep voice surprisingly sympathetic. "But in Lord Eru's plans, there will come a time when all His children shall meet again, to sing the Second Music after the last battle. Meager consolation this may be to you, for you will be saddened to lose your friend, as will we, but I see in your words and in your heart that you truly wish what is best for him, as he wishes for you. If this is what must be, we must all bear the parting for his sake, and take what small comfort we can in the knowledge that there *will* come a time of joyful reunion, when all the world will be healed."

Somehow, the halfling took more solace from Námo's honesty than he might have from a thousand reassurances that a solution would of course be found, the unwanted end avoided. It was indeed a small comfort, but it was better to know the truth than to be given false hope. Even so, Frodo continued to pray that such extreme measures would not be necessary, though as he looked up at the dome above and its many shifting images, he found himself wishing that in one of these myriad reflections, Olórin would be found, and the much desired answer as well.

In all the long years of his life, Olórin could not recall a time when he had ever wished to flee anything more desperately than he had run from Manwë and the words of betrayal he had spoken. The occasions on which he had fled Sauron in Dol Guldur had not been prompted by fear or upset, merely a prudent realization that he had not the power, nor the authority, to confront the rising Dark Lord alone; better to escape and gain the help of others in so doing, to make victory certain. Had he but known how Saruman would betray them all with words of deliberate misdirection, lulling them to inaction, he perhaps might have done differently. But skilled though he was at seeing and understanding so many other things, Olórin was always shocked and saddened by betrayal when it revealed itself to him, because such an act was so alien to his very nature. He could not consciously betray another; he did not even know that he could do so unconsciously. Yet time and again, his trust in others betrayed him. First Aránayel, then Curumo, now even Manwë himself.

And the last to be recognized was beyond doubt the most terrible of all, not because of what it portended for his future, but because he had so loved and trusted and believed in the goodness of the lord he served. Manwë knew the pains of betrayal well; his own brother had done so to him more than once. He had witnessed the injustice of it countless times in his position as the king of Arda, as he had

been made aware of what Aránayel had done to Olórin long years ago. Knowing what he did, how could Manwë have even begun to justify this most cruel betrayal of all — not of his servant, but of Lord Eru? For He was the one Manwë had defied, and such defiance was beyond Olórin's comprehension. Every child chafes against the authority of their parents as they grow, and perform small acts of disobedience which allow them to grow and stand firm on their own as an adult, but this had been no act of childish rebellion. It had been a chosen rejection of a clearly-given instruction, and that was what Olórin could not begin to imagine. He could not have done the same and ever justified it in his own heart, not for a moment. Yes, he had made many mistakes during his life, some with dreadful repercussions, but none of them had entailed breaking faith with Lord Eru's will, in even a small way. As Manwë could not truly comprehend evil, Olórin could not truly comprehend this act of defiance. Betrayal had hurt him too often, too deeply and apparently in ways it had not hurt the king of the Valar.

So now, all he could do was flee his master until he had somehow managed to calm his distraught emotions and at least attempt to find some explanation, some bit of insight that would help him understand how this could have happened in the first place, when it should not have happened at all. One thing he did know: it hurt him far less to know that Manwë's choice had caused him very lasting and serious injury than it did to realize that the Vala he had served so faithfully ever since their entrance into Arda had not known or trusted him enough to make him privy to the true reasons behind his command. He had not had enough faith in Olórin's loyalty to know that there would be no question of his participation, regardless of the personal dangers, so long as he was told why it was needed.

That would have been enough. Manwë need only have spoken his mind plainly, and Olórin would have willingly agreed. He saw the wisdom in not doing so before the others who were to go. Curumo in particular would have taken Manwë's reasons badly; his reaction to Varda's words at the council was sufficient proof of that. But even a concern to avoid dissension among the Istari before their mission was begun was not reason enough for Manwë to have simply ordered Olórin when he had been warned that such an act would bring bitter consequences, especially when he should have known that his servant would do anything to give his aid to any cause that would benefit from it. Did Manwë truly know him so little, or had he himself never truly known the Vala whom he served?

It was a question that could not be answered, not now, and in his heart, he could not help but feel that even were it known, the answer was long since past the time in which knowledge of it would make any difference. They would come looking for him soon, worried that he would exhaust himself beyond the point of no return, but at the moment, he neither wanted to be found nor cared if he did push himself beyond his limits. Olórin had very few illusions left to him; he had lived too long and seen too much for that. But he had held the belief that of all the beings in Arda, Manwë was if not perfect at least incorruptible, understanding so little of evil that he would never fall to it in any significant way. Yet he had, full knowing that his act was one of which Eru disapproved, and now, to Olórin's shock and dismay, the unthinkable had happened. His own diminishment was not so hurtful as the loss of his faith in the Vala king, now shown to be just another illusion that had shattered like a bubble of thinnest glass against a boulder of hardest diamond. No, he had no wish to be found, for once again, he felt as if someone he had admired and loved had reached inside him and torn out his very heart.

So he fled, swifter than the bird he currently appeared to be, clinging to the shape not because it could help him flee faster, but because some part of him still feared that if he wholly abandoned incarnate life, he would never be able to assume any physical form again. He felt the strength draining from him more swiftly with each passing moment as he flew headlong away from the mountains and toward the empty west; he made use of the skills he had learned ages ago to keep himself hidden, as he had once hidden from Melkor to work in secret against him. If he could but fly far enough before his strength was gone, he could conceal himself in simpler ways, and spend the time coming to terms with this most bitter betrayal. He had not the heart to think of sharing this with anyone else, least of all those he counted as his friends. He needed to be alone.

He was all but exhausted when he at last saw the Ekkaia, the outer sea, stretching away from the land to the west beyond West, where only the Void awaited those who would dare travel those dark paths beyond the Doors of Night. Had he retained enough strength, he might have considered attempting that escape from the world, such was his mood, but he did not think it, for he knew he was too exhausted to try. When he could not carry himself farther, he allowed himself to glide down as far as his wings could carry him, and at last came to land on a rocky shore where the rolling surf broke against the bleak dark stones in an endless rhythm like the pulse of Arda itself. He lay where he had fallen, unable to do more, and made no effort at all to alter his form. Perhaps this was fitting, after all, for he had often felt like the tiny bird amid the greater ones of the flock that was all the Ainur. It suited to think that he might meet his end this way, as the smallest of birds whose wings had at last failed, and left him to fall, broken in heart and body and spirit, on the hard, unfeeling rock of a cold and desolate shore.

XVII

Where water flowed, so too did the awareness of Ulmo, Lord of the Waters. What water touched, Ulmo knew, and when he bent his thought to it, he could perceive almost as much of what passed in Arda as Manwë could at the summit of Taniquetil. At the behest of the Lord of the Air, he turned his thought to the western shores of Aman, seeking one spirit whom he did not know quite as well as many of the other Valar, but who was yet known to him. In all his traveling through the many parts of the world, eager to learn and curious to know, Olórin had come to the sea from time to time, admiring its beauty and appreciating the wonders water itself provided for life in this physical world. He had not served Ulmo often, but he had on several occasions, and the Vala had come to appreciate the unassuming Maia. He saw certain things which Ulmo often thought he alone could see, a comprehension of how what seems small and common and unassuming can be more effective than the powerful and the majestic. The strength of a storm-driven sea pounding against the shores of the world was both terrifying and inspiring of awe, but it was the more gentle trickles of water, dripping over thousands of years in little hollows below the earth that made the incredible glory of caverns and built natural halls of immense beauty where otherwise nothing but overburdened rock would have stood. Some, such as Aulë's Dwarves, appreciated the artistry of these sights, but few appreciated what had actually made them. Olórin did, because he himself understood much of simplicity and humility, and for that alone if nothing else, Ulmo was fond of him.

Now, Manwë and the others had called to him, seeking his help in finding that humble Maia, and Ulmo did not hesitate to agree. He knew of Olórin's skills in avoiding detection when he wished, but if he was still in physical form of any kind, Ulmo would be able to find him so long as he touched water. He would know where Olórin had gone if he stepped into a stream or fell into the ocean, or stood under a shower of rain. If he stooped to drink, Ulmo would sense it; if he shed tears, Ulmo would know it. There were ways to discover where the Maia had gone, and Ulmo called upon all his power over water in all its forms to aid him. The small clouds in the skies over the west of Valinor spread and grew heavy with rain; soon, their showers fell upon all the lands below, not so heavily as to drive those in the open to cover, but gently so that one moving through them would feel no need to avoid them. The waves of the sea itself lifted to greater heights, reaching farther ashore, washing over as much of the land as could be managed without endangering any of the lesser creatures who might be near its edges and would be swept away to their deaths. Ulmo focused all his thought upon what the waters whispered to him, and he examined each murmur with care.

He was not particularly aware of the passage of time; the movements and changes of the sea were endless and unceasing, and in that part of the world, mere hours or days were meaningless. But at length, one faint whisper of the falling rain spoke to him; it was echoed in the rush of a wave over stone and sand. Ulmo listened more closely, and the sounds were heard again as the drops of rain continued to fall and another wave washed upon a rocky shoal on the western shores. The sounds became clearer as he focused on them, and at last, he was able to perceive where they were pointing. Ulmo opened all his senses to the place; at first, it seemed as barren as all that stony shore, but when the waves rolled over it yet again, he noticed a small speck of white, barely visible amid the rocks and rushing waters. His thought touched it, and though it did not respond, he knew it for what and who it was.

The place was not far from the halls of Nienna, and it was to her that Ulmo now called. *A little one you know and love has fallen on the shores of your home*, the lord of the seas said to her. *He needs your help, and quickly, or it may soon be too late. Come, follow my thought and I will bring you to him.*

Moments later, Nienna was standing atop a rise of stone that formed a natural sea wall along the shores west and south of her house, which stood near the Doors of Night. A tall figure in black and gray, she seemed almost a part of the desolate shore, but though she stood still, her eyes and her thoughts searched what lay before her, moving unerringly to the place which Ulmo had indicated. She saw that small dot of white amid the dark rocks, and without hesitation went toward it. She moved nimbly over the wet stones, never slipping despite the treacherous footing, and soon stood beside the fallen white bird. Gently, she took it into her hands and returned with it to the land above. As she went, the rain ended, and the sun shone once more. But even as the skies brightened, Nienna wept.

It was her way, her gift, not merely the understanding of sorrow, but the healing that is brought of the expression of grief and pity. Olórin had been her greatest pupil, ever the most willing to learn the lessons of compassion and patience she had to teach. He had acted in haste, taking flight from Taniquetil and depleting his meager store of strength to run from the hurt of betrayal, but she had not come to judge his motives. She wept, not only for the pain she could sense within him, weak as he was, but for the ache she felt in her own heart over all the injustice he had endured. Nienna was called the Weeper, and some thought her distant and cold and heartless, but she was perhaps the most feeling of all the Valar, the one most sensitive to the emotions and physical conditions of those around her. So she had taken to herself no spouse, and lived in the far stony land of the western shores, away from most who dwelt in Aman, yet also close to those who were often most in need of pity and understanding, the spirits of the dead who resided in the halls of her brother Námo. Few truly understood Nienna and her ways and powers and purposes, but one of those few who had made the most remarkable effort was Olórin. He had first come to her in grief, in need of solace and healing for his heart, and had left a much stronger and wiser person, who came back often to learn from her, not only the lessons of pity and patience, but of endurance and hope as well. He was almost as a son to her, one in whom she held great pride, and now, he came back to her lands broken and empty and in despair.

So Nienna held the still white body in her hands and wept, her tears falling upon him like the rain that had passed. In her tears were comfort and strength, which she poured into him as one pours water into a vessel of clear crystal. As she held him and her tears fell, he finally stirred, very weakly. She bent to lay the gentlest touch of a kiss atop the tiny head, and an instant later, the shape of what she held shifted, became for a moment a bare gleam of white light, then was cradled in her arms as a small man of pale hair and snowy garb, Olórin once again. He was not conscious, but neither had he dwindled beyond recall. She gave him more of her power to strengthen him, and as she did so, Ulmo, still near at hand in the seas, lent his aid to her effort by offering a measure of his own strength, cascading down from the heavens as a sudden rush of rain. It stopped when finally, the Maia stirred, his eyes slowly blinking open to regard Nienna. He was too weak to speak or move, but he remained himself, not yet diminished into nothingness.

“Do not despair, Olórin,” she said, her voice filled with compassion even as tears still slipped down her pale cheeks. “Hope is not yet lost. We have been too idle, thinking not that your need required great attention *now*, and that is the greatest of our failures. For too often have we chosen to wait rather than act, out of prudence, out of fear, and yes, out of cowardice. We of the Valar have power, but not all wisdom — indeed, too often we are woefully unwise, and thus poor governors of Arda, ill-chosen leaders of our own servants. If you cannot forgive Manwë his misguided choice, please forgive us our ignorance. For though we knew there would be terrible repercussions stemming from his error, we did not even dare to dream that they would bring harm to you, and in our fearful lack of courage, we could not summon the strength to act. We let too much of the burden of your troubles fall to Estë and Irmo and to your friends; we delayed overmuch. This should not be, and though I suspected it from the beginning, the others have come to see this now as well. All of us will help you, and we will not rest until we have found a way to obtain lasting healing for you. They and your friends await you at your home. Will you let me take you there, or do you wish to remain here and seek your own ending?”

He could scarcely move, but instead reached out with the faintest of thoughts. *I will come with you. But I fear there is no hope left for me.*

“You live,” Nienna said as she stood, and with no effort at all lifted the smaller Maia into her arms. “And life itself is an affirmation of hope. You know that lesson well, for I taught it to you long ago, when you first were made to suffer because your trust had been broken. But Manwë is not Aránayel, no matter what he may have done. He lost faith because of fear, and on you fell the price of his transgression, which he rues more greatly than you can see in your anger with him. He loves you, as ever he has. He grieves for the wrong he did to you, and wishes not to buy your forgiveness with acts of penitence, but to pay whatever price is needed to obtain your healing. Has your heart become so bitter that it cannot allow him, or any of us, to try?”

Olórin did not need to speak or move or do more than think the thoughts; Nienna perceived his answer with ease. *No. And I forgive you, my lady, for you have never done me harm.*

“Then let us go,” she said, glad that he had found at least the strength to forgive again. “There is much to be done.”

With the swiftness of a thought, Nienna returned Olórin to his home. In spite of the help she and Ulmo had given him, he was still incredibly weak. He had lost more than power, she perceived; he had lost much of the hope that had long been one of his most defining traits, and had given him the strength to fight against impossible odds and come out the victor time and again in the past. For all their efforts thus far, no hope had been found to support the belief that he would yet be healed, and in light of all that had happened, it was not surprising to Nienna that as he was losing his ability to hold and keep other things, his grasp of ever elusive hope was all but gone as well. She took him not to the hall but to his own bed, where he could at least rest in comfort. The others had shown the wisdom to not appear in their usual fanar; their presence could be felt in the little house, but they did not physically manifest,

save for Irmo and Estë and herself. Others there were as well, Eönwë and Ványalos and the two halflings, the elder brought back by Glorfindel, who had stayed on out of worry after he had returned Bilbo in answer to the summons.

Frodo had returned to Lórien with Eönwë on eagle-back while the Valar searched for Olórin; it had taken almost two days for Ulmo and Nienna to find him, such had been his desire to remain undiscovered, and that had also been time enough for Bilbo to be brought home. As the Elf lord stayed out of concern, so too had Eönwë, and Ványalos.

The usually impudent Maia had sobered considerably once he became aware of what had happened, and Frodo was touched to see him shed tears when at last Nienna brought her favored pupil home, weak and much faded. He understood Ványalos' reaction, for he felt it just as keenly. The friend who had seemed always full of life and light was now so dimmed and diminished, it did not surprise Frodo to see Nienna carry him to his bed with such ease. She was tall and strong, yes, but Olórin was so pale, he seemed transparent to the hobbit's eyes, so frail and insubstantial, Frodo felt certain he could have lifted the Maia himself, despite his greater size. When she had settled Olórin where he could be comfortable, she and all the others whose presence filled the house set about their work at once.

In after times, what Frodo recalled most about the days that followed was a personal feeling of helplessness. The greatest powers in Arda had all come to Olórin's house to do all they could to heal him, and there was nothing a mere hobbit could do but watch and wait. At the times when the great ones needed to consult with each other about what they had learned and what new method to attempt, or to rest — for they, too, wearied, especially when the labor was long and difficult and required them to spend much of themselves — Frodo and Bilbo would sit with their old friend, sometimes with the other Maiar and Glorfindel, sometimes not. His condition fluctuated greatly, for though the Valar attempted to sustain him with their own strength, he had become like a sieve to it, unable to hold any power for long before fading back into debilitating weakness. Whether he had done himself great damage in his deliberate and long use of his Maia abilities or whether he was making no effort to hold on to the strength he was given was impossible to say, for though he allowed the great ones to do what they would, he seldom spoke to them or revealed his heart.

Though this disturbed most of the Valar, it actually gave Frodo some measure of hope that all was not yet lost, and they were not fighting a battle doomed to defeat. The friend he had known both here and in Middle-earth had ever been stubborn, and though he appeared not to care what became of him, that he kept a part of himself private, beyond the poking and prodding of those above him, said to Frodo that he was being stubborn still. He had not given up, not entirely, and where even a single ember still burned, a fire could yet be reawakened.

But he did need help, that was plain to both of the worried hobbits as they kept him company while the others were busy with greater matters. Bilbo did more talking than Frodo, telling Olórin tales of the days he had spent with the local Elves. The wizard did not often respond to them, but on occasion he did, with a faint smile or a whispered word, and that was more than he gave the Valar on most days, so it was encouraging, at least to Frodo. But still, no answers were to be found.

Hours became days, days became weeks, and Frodo at last lost count of how much time passed while Olórin's condition failed to improve, despite the concerted efforts of the Valar and their servants to find the cure for his illness. Neither Frodo nor Bilbo nor any other of the wizard's friends could fault them for giving less than their all to the effort. Irmo, Estë, and Nienna seldom left the house, and always, Frodo could somehow sense — in ways Bilbo could not — that many of the Valar spirits were present, sometimes all, sometimes only several, as some would depart from time to time to search elsewhere for information that might provide a clue to guide them. Frodo knew that they had called to Lord Eru for help, but He was strangely silent. At first, this annoyed Frodo, but as the days slipped by, he began to realize that there was a purpose behind this as well. Had they called to Him for aid and He simply stepped in to right the harm they had caused, not only would He then raise the question, "Why did you not help in ages past when the world was marred and broken?" but He would also have done the work for those who had made this error, requiring nothing of them to make the most necessary reparation. It was a punishment they had earned, for in struggling and failing to help one of their own for whom they cared, they were learning much of what was common life for the mortals who had inherited Middle-earth.

It was bittersweet to Frodo, for they did deserve to learn this harsh lesson, they who had so often held themselves apart and aloof and cold when the world they supposedly governed was crying out for help. Frodo especially remembered the tales of the First Age, when great sorrow and suffering was occurring in Middle-earth because of Melkor and his evil, but the Valar did little to help, remaining apart because they felt that doom had decreed that they could not intervene until one person found Valinor and came to plead for help on behalf of both Elves and Men. Frodo had never understood why they had not acted earlier, why so many people had to suffer and die because ultimately, one person, Fëanor, had brought a kind of madness to his people, and some had been foolish enough to follow his wicked lead. Perhaps they deserved punishment, for they had killed innocents in the name of vengeance against another and for the desire of what amounted to baubles, but the Elves and Men of Middle-earth who had had no part in that insanity had done nothing to merit sharing in that fate.

Frodo had never understood how the suffering of so many could be justified by the acts of a few, nor had he ever truly grasped why the Valar had felt so constrained by a prophecy one of their own had uttered. They might say that it was Eru's will, a part of Eru's plan already written in the Music, but if others, through the exertion of their own will, could change what was foreseen for evil's sake, why could no one ever act to change a fate already caused by evil toward the sake of good? Perhaps this had been a large part of his hesitance to meet the Valar when he had first arrived in Aman. He did not know how to think of persons who had sat by for hundreds of years and let innocents die all for the sake of prophecy. It made no sense to him, and he could not imagine that he would be able to understand beings to whom it apparently did make sense.

But now, he better understood the truth of the matter. The Valar did occasionally act of their own wills, and not always to a bad end, but they had become afraid. Their actions in the First Age had been disastrous for the world they had been charged to protect and nurture, as had been their inactions in the Second Age when they failed to move more decisively against Sauron before he had tricked his way to Númenor and corrupted most of its people. Even though new evils were always waiting to come forth

in the world, had they acted sooner in dealing with Sauron, the woes of the Third Age might never have been.

Of course, Frodo knew that one could never go back and undo what had already been done, but at the very least, he would have expected them to learn more from their mistakes than fear of continued failure. But then, those failures had never truly touched them directly, until now. Now, they had failed and that failure was threatening the very existence of one of their own people, and if he was lost, it would not be something they could brush aside as a cost of war, an act of the Enemy. They bore the responsibility for this, and thus they had become the Enemy. They understood it now, all too clearly, and Frodo acknowledged that they were at least trying to make amends by doing and giving all they could. If Lord Eru did not require this of them, they would go on as always, and nothing would be learned, leading eventually to even more mistakes. Frodo knew, somehow, that if this was to be his end, it was at least an end which Olórin could accept because it would contribute significantly to a far greater good.

Even so, the hobbit still did not believe that this *would* be the wizard's end; it seemed unthinkable to him, for reasons he could not quite grasp. What little he could do to help, he did, and always he searched in his own ways for the answer no one could find. He begrudged the needs of his mortal body that required him to lay aside that search to eat and sleep and do the things all mortals must to sustain life and health. Yet from time to time, when the Valar themselves required a least a few hours of rest, Bilbo and the others would rest as well, and Frodo would volunteer to spend that time with Olórin so that he would not be alone. The hobbit could think of nothing more horrible than to be so weak and helpless and to be left with no companionship, abandoned to the darkness of what must be painful and brooding thoughts, unlightened by the presence of even one other. So he took that watch gladly, and even if he could think of nothing to say to his old friend, he could at least be there to let him know that he was not forgotten.

One day — Frodo knew not how many weeks after all this had begun, only that the world beyond the windows looked to be changing seasons yet again — he had been told that such a rest period was nigh, and had gone to wash himself a bit and change into fresh clothes before he took up the vigil. While sifting through the contents of a small chest in search of a particular belt, he came across Arwen's jewel, which Estë had asked him to set aside at the outset of his own healing process.

The hobbit saw it lying where he had put it safe by in a corner of the small chest, which he seldom used. It was still as bright and beautiful as the day on which he had first seen it, worn about Arwen's neck with a beauty almost the equal of her own. As he lifted it by its silver chain, he remembered the comfort it had so often brought him during the long and difficult months between the time he had left Minas Tirith and his departure from the Grey Havens. Although the Healer's efforts were now wholly focused on another patient who needed her most desperately, Frodo had not felt any urge to take to wearing the jewel again. He had felt no twinge or ache of pain from any of his old wounds since the dawn of the day after the white ship's landing in Valinor; truth be told, he almost never thought of those horrors and agonies, for his concern was completely involved in the worry and care he felt for Olórin. Those aches in his heart and spirit, the dreadful fear that he might lose his dear

friend to a fate literally worse than death had taken the place of those he had felt for himself and what he had endured. As he studied the jewel and remembered its gift to bring ease to an overburdened heart in despair, he did not for one moment think that he might use it to comfort himself. Now, he wondered only if it might be able to provide some small portion of much needed comfort for another.

He held it up to the early afternoon light that streamed into his sleeping room, marveled at the way it glittered like all the stars of the heavens, and made a decision. He took it, put it in his pocket, and finished dressing just as he heard someone call for him.

“Ah, Frodo my lad,” Bilbo greeted when he reached the hall outside Olórin’s room. The elder hobbit had been bearing up under all the strain remarkably well, but he, like the Valar who had been pouring their efforts and energy into the aid of their servant, looked exhausted, and very much in need of rest. Glorfindel had gone off with Ványalos perhaps an hour ago, to see to collecting fresh provisions for the house and to take care of other necessary matters which its occupants had not the time to bother with. Eönwë came and went on errands for the Valar, and had left early that morning on such a task. For now, only Frodo and Bilbo remained in the house, and it seemed strangely quiet.

Bilbo managed a smile for his nephew. “They’ve gone for now, but they promised to be back before suppertime. Will you mind sitting alone with him for a bit? I simply can’t keep my eyes open much longer, but I won’t need more than a good nap, and Ványalos said he’d be back soon.”

“It’s all right, Bilbo,” Frodo assured him, answering with his own brave smile. “I don’t mind sitting alone, and you definitely do need the sleep. Rest as long as you like, I’ll manage just fine, especially if Ványalos returns soon. He’ll keep both of us company, I’m sure, and even help ready tea for you before you wake.”

His uncle sighed with gratitude. “Thank you, dear boy. I’ve lived through many a difficult time in all my days, but it breaks my heart to see poor Gandalf fading away like this. He’s just not the sort to give up without a struggle, but he hardly has the strength left to him now to fight a bare breath of air. I can’t help but think that the answer to his troubles is right in front of all our noses, but we’re just not seeing it because we’re looking at it the wrong way or some such.”

Frodo nodded, understanding the feeling well indeed. “I know what you mean, but I’m beginning to think the problem is that we’re all trying so hard and are so tired, we couldn’t even see our noses if we tried, much less the answer lying in front of them. Rest, Bilbo, and I promise I will too, as soon as I have the chance. The great ones may not feel they have the time for that, so perhaps if we hobbits rest up well and get our wits about us, we’ll be able to find what everyone’s been missing.”

“Oh, I do hope so,” Bilbo sighed as he headed across the hall toward his own room. “Don’t hesitate to wake me if you need me,” he reminded his nephew.

“I won’t, if Ványalos is due back soon. Rest well, Bilbo. We’ll need both our wits sharp if we’re to find what even the Valar cannot.”

When the old hobbit had gone, the door to his room closed behind him, Frodo went to Olórin's chamber. The door was still partly open, and he entered quietly, in case the Maia was asleep. The room had changed little since Nienna had brought him here, but for the addition of two chairs and the removal of some small objects from the surfaces near the bed, put away in safety lest they be accidentally broken. The Istar's head turned slightly toward the faint creak of a door hinge as Frodo stepped inside; the halfling saw that his dark blue eyes were open and appeared to be focused, even though they seemed as transparent and exhausted as the rest of him. Frodo summoned the most heartfelt smile he could manage, his hand wandering into his pocket as he moved to the chair beside the bed, which was usually occupied by Estë or Irmo. It was a bit taller than was comfortable for most hobbits, but after using it for at least a little while each day, Frodo no longer made a bother of it. "You really do need to get better, Olórin," he said in the lightest tone he could muster. "Or I will simply have to start growing to the size of one of the Big Folk just to use these chairs properly, and Merry and Pippin will never forgive me for having beaten their records."

He saw a shadow of a smile momentarily lighten the Maia's near-transparent face. "They would indeed," he answered, his words barely more than a breath. "But I fear that may not be my fate."

"So do many others," Frodo said candidly, "but even if they — and you — are growing ready to give up, Bilbo and I have not. What purpose would be served if you faded to nothing, like Saruman and the others of your people who brought themselves to a bad end? Naught that I can see."

"More than you know," the wizard said, to the hobbit's surprise. He had grown so very weak, he seldom had more than a few words to say. "Manwë and the others are learning much they have never known about mortals, and life in the world Melkor poisoned. They are learning that some mistakes cannot be amended, and that children cannot always rely on their parents to make right what they made wrong. If that is the role I was meant to play, then I gladly accept it, for I think it will do much to make the Valar better guardians in the future. But I do not *want* to go, not like this. For I love all of Arda, and the people in it, especially those I have come to call my friends. More difficult than fading from this world is the sorrow I feel at the prospect of leaving behind the people I love and being forever parted from them."

"I know," Frodo said softly, nodding his understanding of such feelings even as he marveled at the fact Olórin had managed to say so much without utterly wearying himself. "I don't think I'll ever quite understand why Lord Eru chose to make mortals and immortals, and have them be a part of each others' lives. It was always very hard to think of being friends with an Elf or someone like you, because I couldn't help but know that in time, either they would leave for the West and I would never see them again, or I would die, and they would live on and forever be losing people dear to them. I thought it was sad that Arwen chose to be mortal when she knew Elrond had already made his decision and would have to leave Middle-earth. Now I understand even more what a bitter grief this must be for him, for the longer I stay here in Aman, the more I realize that immortals aren't as aloof and unfeeling as they sometimes seemed to be. And I cannot bear the thought that someday, no matter what happens now, I will leave and cause pain for people like you, who have been and have become my friends."

As he spoke, he felt dampness welling in his eyes. Determined not to cause further upset for either himself or Olórin, he rubbed away the unshed tears with one hand, then brought out the jewel in his pocket. "I know you told me some time ago that this could not help protect you from the ills that had befallen you, but I was thinking that perhaps it might give you some comfort, as it helped me through the most difficult days after I had returned to the Shire. It isn't much, I know, but if it would help you even a little, I would feel that I have not stood by, completely useless, through all this trouble."

A dim but warm glow lit the Maia's eyes. "You have never been useless, Frodo," he said very softly, "not in all the years I have known you. I have made many friends since I entered into Arda, yet it seems quite odd to me that the ones I have come to cherish most are those who came last into my life. I will accept your gift, of course, as you wish. It was given to Arwen to ease her grief over the trials and loss of her mother, and so she gave it to you to ease the burdens you suffered because of the evils of the Enemy. My injuries came upon me more subtly, and I hastened my own decline in my angry reaction to Manwë's confession, yet the source of my affliction was the same, the poisons Melkor and his servants left in Middle-earth. Perhaps the jewel's passing into new hands is a sign that your own griefs are near their end. I would be glad of that, especially now, when mine may be nearing an end of a very different sort."

Frodo tried not to frown as he leaned forward and set the jewel in Olórin's hand, helping him as he attempted to close his fingers about it. "I do wish you wouldn't say such things, or even think them. Yes, I know we cannot deny the inevitable, but if you accept that it *is* inevitable before we know for certain, you might make it so when it needn't be. The only persons I ever knew who could somehow manage to find hope in what seemed like hopeless circumstances were Sam, and you. Please, Olórin, don't give up yet. I know in my heart that this isn't the way things are meant to be. I cannot tell you *how* I know this, but I do. Please, don't leave us before we've tried all we can."

Olórin closed his eyes for a moment, an easier way to signal his acquiescence than moving his head. "I will do my best, I promise. Thank you for the gift, Frodo. It is very much appreciated."

"It's the least I can do. And thank you for telling me about it. I never knew how it came to Arwen, and with all that has happened since she gave it to me, I never remembered to ask. I'm glad it was you who told me, because now I can remind you that if you can still tell tales even now, there surely must be hope remaining."

"Perhaps you are right," Olórin admitted after a moment's consideration. "Ever since I relinquished my mortal body, I have felt as if some shadow lay between my eyes and the world around me. As my condition grew worse, it grew thicker and darker, and now, the world seems forever in twilight. When my fingers closed around the jewel, the shadows seemed to lighten, if only a bit. If it can do this, small as it is, there must be some way, some thing that can help even more. I will hold onto my hope as best I can." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes as his fingers tightened almost imperceptibly about the gem.

To Frodo's eyes, he looked perhaps the smallest bit less pale, but more weary than ever. The hobbit sighed softly. "I am glad you felt up to talking with me for a while, for I have sorely missed our conversations, but I would rather you hadn't if I had known it would tire you so. I think you need to rest, now...."

"As do you," another voice said, unexpectedly. Frodo looked toward the door and saw Ványalos just entering; Olórin recognized his neighbor's voice and did not bother to open his eyes. "You will help no one if you tax yourself too heavily, Frodo."

"Let him be," the wizard suggested, cracking open one eye ever so slightly. "I do not begrudge him this. It was strength well spent."

"Not if it hastens an end that might otherwise be avoided. The others are using this time to rest, as should you, *pityandil*. Or would you prefer to ignore the advice of your healers?"

Olórin's snort was soft but ever so clear. "It was the ignoring of advice that brought this upon me, and thus far, I have not noticed any especial healing that has occurred on my behalf. But before you take me to task for sounding bitter, I will rest. Sleep is far preferable to yet another pointless debate."

"Then I will keep watch for a while so Frodo might do the same." The tall Maia made a sweeping gesture, indicating that Frodo could relinquish his task for a while. The hobbit reluctantly agreed to the suggestion, and climbed down from the chair.

"Rest well, old friend," he said before leaving the bedside, and was gratified to see a small but sincere smile in answer. Reassured by it and the way Olórin kept his fingers closed about the jewel, he stepped out of the room.

Ványalos followed him into the hall, just far enough to make certain he headed off to his own bed. But tired though he was in heart, Frodo knew he would not sleep even if he tried, so agitated did he feel inside. He looked up at the watching Maia and spoke quietly, not wanting Olórin to hear. "He's much worse than he was yesterday, Ványalos, and say what we might, I can't help but fear that we are going to lose him soon, despite all that has been tried. He said he wants to stay, but I don't think he has the strength and enough will to manage it, anymore. Is there truly nothing that can be done?"

The red-haired Maia glanced into the bedroom, saw that Olórin had already drifted off to sleep, and pulled shut the door to keep their soft words from reaching his ears. "Some of the Valar have begun to believe so, for their own skills are not of use in this task, and the power they have to lend has done little to do more than alleviate Olórin's weakness for a brief while. They feel as if they have attempted again and again to throw a life line to someone in greatest peril, but that rope is covered with oil and try as he might, Olórin cannot hold fast to it for more than a few moments."

“But do *you* believe they’re right? Do you think we should give up and let him go, so he won’t suffer any longer?” It hurt simply to say the words, but for all that he knew or felt that he knew, this was a possibility Frodo could not deny.

Ványalos’ answer was perhaps the most serious he had given in his entire life. “No. Perhaps the Valar know more of power and strength and healing than I, but I know Olórin better than they. He will only let go when he has utterly no strength left to hold on, or if Lord Eru Himself steps in and bids him to do so. All of Aman calls him stubborn, and that he is, Frodo, make no mistake of it. It is a reputation well earned, and he will hold onto this life with all that is in him until no other choice is possible. He is weak now, yes, very weak, but that stubbornness is still there, and it is strong. He has some time left to him, I deem, and if the Valar cannot find the cure he needs, then it is up to us who are closer to him to finish the task. Is that not appropriate, my little friend? For it was not the Valar but the humblest of their servants who at last found the means to achieve the impossible, to defeat Sauron. And Olórin himself was able to accomplish it only through the unflagging efforts of the smallest of Lord Eru’s children.”

That comparison had never occurred to Frodo, and though he was not sure it was entirely applicable, it was at the very least food for thought. Ványalos smiled at him and gently ruffled his dark curls. “Rest then for a while, my friend. It will do you good.”

Frodo nodded, but still, he knew he would only toss and turn if he went to his bed. “If you don’t mind, I think I would find much more rest in taking a walk than in trying to sleep when I know I cannot. I can’t remember the last time I left this house, and perhaps seeing more of the world outside would clear my mind and help me relax enough to rest a little later.”

Ványalos agreed. “There is sense in what you say, and I will admit, I have not seen you set even a foot outdoors since you returned from Ilmarin. I will keep watch for you as long as you like, and I vow I will not allow Olórin to come to further harm.”

Frodo’s smile was watery, but genuine. “I know. I know the Valar care for him in their own ways, but at times, I think they cannot care as much as those of us who are not quite so powerful. They are so used to carrying burdens as large as the world that it seems they cannot quite understand how to deal with smaller ones.”

“Just so. I am very used to carrying burdens much smaller, and I will let you know at once if there is any change, for the better or the worse.”

“Thank you,” the hobbit said with a small bow, then headed off to see what changes had come to the world outside.

He did not intend to go far, no farther than the small commons where local residents were often wont to gather, but his feet carried him into the western meadow, and before his distracted mind was aware of it, he found himself in the little green glen where Shadowfax had brought them to help his master, what now seemed many years ago. The afternoon sunlight fell in fingers of radiance through the branches overhead, which Frodo noticed were not only thick with new leaves, but also in what could only be spring flower. The grasses below were still littered with a few of the old fallen leaves that had not been carried away by the wind, and all about was strewn with delicate and fragrant flowers, as beautiful as those in the meadows and vales of the Shire in spring. He somehow found the spot where Olórin had fallen, and there he settled himself to lie back and look up at the skies and listen to the murmur of the nearby stream as it flowed over its bed of silver and white stones.

He lay there for a while, several hours at least, not truly aware of time's passage, thinking of all that had happened since his arrival in Aman. Finally, when he noticed that the sun had fallen past mid-afternoon, he sat up, let his eyes follow the flowing water of the stream, and sighed. "It's not fair," he said to the world around him, confident that it at least would not be so bold as to argue with him. "It's just not fair. This never should have happened."

"That is certainly true," came an unexpected answer. Frodo started, glanced about wildly to see who had spoken, and saw Ványalos coming down the gentle slope into the glen. The halfling frowned.

"I thought you said you'd stay and look after Olórin," he scolded. "How could you leave him alone? Unless..."

The Maia shook his head as he gracefully lowered himself to sit on the grass beside the hobbit. "He is not alone," the redhead assured him, "and I have not come with news of woe. You have been gone for some time; I am concerned for your welfare, and thought you might need to talk. Your uncle listens, but he does not always hear."

Frodo sighed, both at the truth in that remark and in relief that the situation had not taken a turn for the worse. "That is true, most of the time. Bilbo can be very sympathetic when he pays attention and listens to what others have to say, but much of the time, his head is too full of other things to manage it for more than a few minutes. I love him dearly, but it is the truth."

"As you also love Olórin dearly, in spite of his flaws. Nothing in the world is without them, and at times, it is the imperfections that make something, or someone, precious."

Frodo sniffed. "Sometimes, though some people's imperfections seem much more... imperfect than others'."

Ványalos chuckled. "You are referring to the Valar, of course, and at times I have felt much the same toward them. Greatness is its own burden, and where power is great, very often fault is equally great. I cannot blame the Valar for their intentions, for they have ever been motivated by what they perceived as good, but they have often failed to look beyond the result they wish to achieve. They found

the Elves in the twilight of Cuiviénen, and in their delight of them and their knowledge of Melkor's threat, they wished to protect them. That was not an ill motive, for many things could Melkor have done to them had they been given no guidance whatsoever. They saw those needs, and that the Elves could best be guarded if they were not left to fend for themselves in a land far too close to the fortress Melkor had built for himself. So they took them as far away as they possibly could, to Aman itself, where it was most convenient for them to be teachers and protectors. They did not stop to think that they need not have taken them so far, nor that removing them entirely from Endor might indeed cause more harm than good. They did not look far enough to consider those possibilities; they devised a plan that seemed good to them, and they did not consider its possible repercussions. They have done this so often, I am moved to wonder if they have not gone blind, in some ways. Their fear of evil too often makes them avoid rather than confront it."

"Perhaps they have," Frodo said, plucking a small blue flower from the grass beside his maimed right hand, to study it without truly seeing it. "I can understand why Olórin became so angry and upset with Manwë when he finally told him the truth about why he had fallen ill and was not getting better. Kings and rulers and other people with very large responsibilities make mistakes when it comes to governing those things over which they have authority, but to do something you have been told is wrong, and hurt someone who is essentially a member of your own family...!"

The halfling shook his head. "Lord Manwë explained himself to me, and I do see why he erred, and that he had meant to hurt no one but himself, but it makes the result no easier to accept. Olórin was all but a member of *my* family when he lived in Middle-earth, Ványalos, like a traveling uncle who came now and again and told wonderful tales and did what things he could to help whenever he visited. If *we* love him and want what is best for him and will do all we can to help him be healed, why won't Lord Eru? You and Bilbo have both said that if the Valar cannot succeed, then we must, but much though I detest saying it, it's obvious that no one in this world is going to find the answer he needs to be whole and well again, not quickly enough. If Lady Arwen's gift could give me ease from my pain and help me survive until I could come to a place where I *could* be healed, why can't Lord Eru do something like that for Olórin? He was the one who sent Olórin back to finish his tasks. I think it's terrible that He sent him back still crippled, and won't do a thing to help him even now...!"

Though Frodo was clearly upset, Ványalos remained surprisingly calm, a beneficial side-effect, Frodo supposed, of having served the placid Lord Irmo and Lady Estë for so long. "And why do you think He has *not* done anything to help?"

"Because Olórin's getting worse, not better!" the hobbit exclaimed, exasperated, hurling the flower into the stream. He watched as it was swiftly carried away, swept away by the rushing water as he was beginning to feel hope be swept away from his own heart. "Everything Olórin's told me about Him makes Him seem like an incredibly wonderful and loving being, but how can someone say they love another and let them hurt when it isn't necessary? Does Olórin have to die, truly *die*, before the Valar will learn whatever lessons they need to learn? Does he have to sacrifice himself again, and be dead and gone before Eru will be satisfied? Isn't that cruelty, not love?"

Ványalos nodded; his voice remained steady despite the halfling's agitation. "It is, and He would not do such a thing. You and the others believe that all the supplication made on Olórin's behalf has gone unheard, but if it seems so, consider this: Is it because those pleas are not being answered, or is it because they had already been answered before they had even been spoken?"

Frodo blinked, not quite certain he understood that remark. "How can anyone answer any request before it's been made?" he wondered, perplexed.

The Maia smiled wryly. "When one has made all the universe and knows what is to be before it happens, one can easily act before action is demanded. All Eru's children, both of thought and of the incarnate world, have wills of their own. If they were interfered with too often, there would be no point in having given such a gift. But it was music that defined this world, and as many songs can end on the same chord, so can many different themes be woven into a work that will come to its conclusion at that same desired chord. Each of His children sing their own themes in the use of their wills, and He does not hinder them, for He loves their songs, even the sad and harsh ones, but it is His will that shall orchestrate the final shape of the Music. For good or ill, He allows each of His children to fashion their own part of it. But He knows how the Music will play out, and at times, He uses His knowledge for the benefit of His children when it will not conflict with their freedom of choice. Thus, if He is aware of some coming hardship that need not be fully suffered for that theme to be expressed, He can act to minimize the harm even before those who will feel its pain are aware that such succor will be needed. So can a cry for help be answered before it has even been uttered."

Frodo did not feel especially enlightened by that explanation. "I don't understand what you're trying to say," he admitted. "If all the prayers asking to help Olórin have already been answered, why is he still fading?"

"Because sometimes, though we have eyes to see, we can look upon something and not understand what it is we truly behold."

Though he and Bilbo had spoken of the same thing earlier, now, Frodo felt as if he would scream from frustration. He could sense there was something not being said, something he should be able to grasp, but could not. "I still don't understand. What are you saying? Speak plainly, please! What can't anyone see?"

The redhead reached out and gently took the hobbit's maimed right hand between both of his own. "The token you seek has already been given, Frodo. All life is part of a great circle, and *this* circle remains unbroken." With a smile, he released the halfling's hand, then stood and swiftly left the glen.

Still confused and frustrated, Frodo started after him. "Ványalos, wait!" he cried, pushing himself up from the ground...

...and as he did so, he gasped. He saw both his hands splayed upon the grass as he prepared to rise, and could not believe his eyes. He fell back on his heels, and held up his right hand in one of the streams of sunlight, touching it with the left to break what was certainly some illusion.

But it was not. Where moments ago there had been but four fingers, there now were five again, whole and real and unharmed.

Frodo nearly fainted from shock as he realized this was no figment of his imagination; when he was able to think somewhat clearly again, he leapt to his feet and raced out of the glen. "*Ványalos!!*" he cried, but when he reached the meadow, he saw it was empty; the Maia had left in the way of his people, gone as swiftly as a thought. Frodo wished desperately that he too could move about so quickly, but spurred on by all that had been said and what had just happened, he ran as fast as he could, hurrying back to Olórin's house where for once, he hoped to find a direct answer to his questions.

XVIII

Frodo was nearly out of breath by the time he reached the woods surrounding Olórin's house, but an occasional glance at his right hand — which remained whole and restored — kept him moving when he began to think he could run no more. His mind spun with myriad questions, buzzing about like a swarm of angry bees. How had Ványalos done what he did? And *why*, when there was another person far more in need of such healing, someone who was a very old friend? Had all his puzzling remarks been his way of saying that the answer had been found, and Frodo should come back? But why would he have spoken of it so cryptically? If it had been meant as a jest, it was a very poor one, and Frodo had every intent of scolding the Maia soundly, should he discover this to be the case. He ran on, across the meadow, across the commons, through the woods, and finally to the clearing that opened before Olórin's house. He saw Eönwë and Bilbo on the porch, and headed straight for them.

"Is Ványalos here?" he demanded between gasps for air.

Bilbo took one look at his nephew and immediately went to help him up the steps. "Yes, he's inside with the healers. Sit down, my lad, before you fall down...."

But Frodo shook his head emphatically. "No! Bilbo, you don't understand, I have to talk to him...!"

"He is needed elsewhere at the moment, Master Frodo," Eönwë said quietly, his fair face filled with worry. "And I think it best if you do not disturb that work."

"There's been some new trouble," Bilbo clarified when the herald's words only deepened Frodo's confusion. "Ványalos called the others back a short time ago. It seems that whatever the Valar had been doing to help keep Gandalf from fading away suddenly isn't working, anymore. So Ványalos called them here, then woke me and told me to come and keep an eye out for you, since he didn't feel he dared leave Gandalf long enough to fetch you."

That provided a reason for why Eönwë had returned, but Bilbo's words merely made matters more puzzling. "That's not possible! He came and talked to me near the meadow, no more than fifteen minutes ago! He made it sound as if everything was going to be all right — and Bilbo, he did this!" Frodo held up the hand that for the last three years had been missing a finger. The elderly hobbit gasped when he saw that it was whole again; even Eönwë made a sound of astonishment.

"Ványalos could not have done that," the herald said, utterly certain. "Is this some strange illusion?"

"No, it's real," said Frodo, extending the hand for Eönwë to see more closely. "I thought the same thing, that it was just a trick he'd played with my imagination, but it's solid and healed, not an illusion. If Ványalos could do this, surely he could help Olórin...!"

Eönwë took the proffered hand to examine it more closely; when he touched the part that had been restored, he suddenly let go and gasped. “Ványalos did *not* do this,” the herald declared, his eyes wide, his tone hushed and reverent. “You have been touched by Lord Eru, Frodo. It was He Who healed you.”

Frodo took back his hand and stared at it for a moment before looking up at Eönwë, shaking his head. “No, I’m sure it was Ványalos...”

The Maia nodded slightly in answer. “I understand your confusion, little one, but I am certain of this. The person who spoke to you may have looked and sounded and even behaved as Ványalos would, but it was a form He assumed that you could comprehend, so that He could speak with you without frightening you. I know Lord Eru’s presence, as do all the Ainur. It was He Who touched you, and restored your injured hand.”

For what felt a very long time, Frodo could not speak, so overwhelmed was he by Eönwë’s quiet words. When he had managed to absorb enough of them to feel the first glimmers of understanding, he finally found his voice. “But why? Why would He bother with something as trivial as my hand when Olórin needs His help so much more than I? Why didn’t He come *here*, where everyone has been asking Him to come?”

“I do not know,” the herald admitted. “What did He say to you?”

Frodo had to think hard to remember, so much had shock muddled his mind. “Mostly things about why He thought the Valar made the mistake that caused all this, and why they needed to learn from it. I said how cruel I thought all of this was to Olórin, making him suffer so that others could learn from their mistakes, and how none of the pleas for help seemed to have been heard. He said some things I still don’t quite understand, about how a prayer can be answered before it’s even uttered. Then He took my hand, said something about the circle being unbroken, and then He left. I was confused, I thought He was Ványalos, so I started to go after Him, and that was when I noticed my hand had been healed. When I realized what had happened, I hurried to follow, but He was already gone. I truly thought it *was* Ványalos, and that he’d come back here the way your people go from place to place when they’re in a hurry, so I ran back as fast as I could. Do you understand what He meant, Eönwë? What does it mean, *the circle remains unbroken?*”

“Many things, perhaps,” Eönwë answered after a moment’s thought. “I think this was not a coincidence. Come inside with me, Frodo. Perhaps the ones I serve can better understand the full import of your tale.”

Anxious, Frodo glanced at Bilbo, who waved him on. “Go ahead, my boy, I’m sure they won’t bite, certainly not like Gollum did. But I’ll come along, too, if you want. I’d like to know what really happened almost as much as you do.”

Eönwë agreed to his oblique request, and led the hobbits into the house. The sensation of power concentrated within its walls was palpable, like walking from the torrid outdoors into the cool of a snug hole under the Hill on a hot summer's day. It seemed strange to Frodo that it should feel so cold inside when the very walls were throbbing with the power in the air. It made him think of ashes in a cold hearth, the pit of a freshly dug grave, the bottom of the river where his parents had died, chill and dark beyond all light and knowledge. Shivering, he reluctantly followed Eönwë across the hall and to the room he had left not so long ago, still clinging to some tatters of hope that all would indeed be well.

Ványalos was standing just outside the open door; he glanced in their direction as they approached. From his expression, he did not think the hobbits should be here, but Frodo could faintly feel the thought that flicked between the two Maiar, a swift explanation of why they had come. The redhead's expression changed rather abruptly, from doubt to awe. When they drew near, he bent to speak with Frodo. "I can assure you that Eönwë is right, you did not speak with me in the glen. I am honored that Lord Eru chose my likeness as one you would readily accept and would not fear, but I have no more notion than you why He chose to do this, especially now. Come, I think Lord Manwë will wish to see how you were blessed more closely. Of all the Valar, he is still the one who best knows the ways of Lord Eru's thought."

Gently, he laid a hand on the younger hobbit's shoulder to guide him into the room. The sensations Frodo had perceived upon entering the house were much stronger here, where all of the Valar had gathered, in body or in spirit, in a last desperate attempt to save their servant who was swiftly slipping away, fading beyond recall. When Frodo dared to look at the figure on the bed, he was both distressed and not surprised to see that Olórin seemed more transparent than ever, a shadow of his former self that was growing more faint with each passing moment. His eyes were closed, and Frodo could not tell if he was awake or even aware of anyone who was with him; the halfling hoped he was not, for the mere thought of being able to feel yourself not dying, but inexorably being drawn from life as water slides down a drain had to be horrible indeed. Frodo struggled to swallow the thickness clogging his throat and was glad for the excuse to look away when Manwë spoke his name.

The Vala, who seemed understandably distracted, as if he were focusing his mind and his strength on two matters at once — listened to Frodo repeat what had happened while he knelt to carefully examine the hobbit's healed hand. He completed his study as Frodo finished his story. "Do you know what He meant, Lord Manwë?" the troubled halfling asked very softly, as he had told of recent events. "Why would He heal me and not help Olórin instead?"

"I do not know," Manwë sighed, his exhalation as mournful as the winter wind through barren branches in the dark of night. "We have asked, I assure you, but He has been silent. And though I see in your thoughts what happened as you experienced it, His words are no clearer to me than they are to you. That we Valar needed to know all the ills that came of our decisions, and had to make the effort to repair the damage we caused, is no new revelation. I am surprised that He could speak of us as charitably as He did, after our acts of willful disobedience, but I cannot see how our supplications have long since been answered. We did not even know what harm had come to Olórin until after he had returned to us, and now, nothing we can do seems able to help him. I would sooner believe that Lord

Eru had chosen to withdraw any aid He might have been giving to Olórin, for since we left but a few hours ago, he has begun to slip away from us far more quickly than we can offer strength to help him hold on to this life."

Frodo bit his lower lip, deliberately inflicting the pain to keep back the tears burning in his eyes. "I feared it might be so, before I left the house. He's barely talked at all, these past weeks or months or whatever it has been, yet after all of you had gone, we spoke a good deal. I didn't want to even think it then, but I fear he was saying goodbye, because he knew what was to come very soon. But it makes no sense! If it truly was Lord Eru Who came to talk with me in the glen, what He said seemed to be words of encouragement — but none that I could fully understand."

Manwë agreed, his nod slow and heavy. "Nor I. I can see how you perceived your conversation with Him, but I cannot see into His mind as well. He reveals it to us only in His time, for His reasons. I do not know this token of which He spoke, nor can I clearly see what was meant by a circle which remains unbroken. There are many circles in this world, not physical marks upon the ground, or bands of gold invested with power; there are circles of friends and family, there are the circles of the world in which Arda is contained, and that has not been broken, save when Lord Eru opens a path for the spirits of Men to leave, bound for a fate we Ainur do not know."

"Might He have meant that our efforts would not be in vain, for those circles would not open to allow Olórin to leave this world again?" Ványalos wondered.

"Perhaps so," the Vala king said after briefly pondering the notion. "If Olórin's spirit is fated to remain here with us, even far dwindled and diminished, there will ever be a chance that we might find a way to restore him to wholeness and strength, though he may spend some years faded beyond the ability to interact with those of us who have not suffered this doom. Lord Eru may well have decreed that this would be so, should Olórin succeed in his mission, when He sent him back to Endor to complete his unfinished tasks. The circle that was broken by his death in Moria was made whole again, and to the best of my knowledge, it has not been breached since."

"But what token was given?" Bilbo, who had been hanging back near the door, asked, perplexed. "He did say something about that, didn't He, Frodo?"

His nephew nodded. "Yes, He said the token I seek had already been given." A thought suddenly sprang to mind. "Do you think perhaps He meant Narya, after all?" he said, turning back to Manwë. "It did help protect him for many years, and it does seem that Lord Eru was the one who moved Círdan to give it to him. Could He have known this problem would come so long ago, and acted even then to forestall it? Olórin didn't begin to have difficulties until he returned to Aman...."

A frown of intense concentration creased the Vala's face. "True, but—"

He was interrupted by a soft but sharp call from Irmo, who was standing on the far side of the bed beside his seated spouse. "Manwë, he is leaving us!"

He needed say no more to return all the king's attention back to the matter of his fading servant. Although he spoke no word as he lent his power and the strength of his will to the struggle to prevent the disaster Irmo could sense was imminent, Frodo had no doubt that Manwë's concern for his fading servant was great. The look of anguish upon the Vala's normally serene features declared more eloquently than any speech his sorrow and regret and intense determination to do all that he could to prevent Olórin's loss. But blended with those expressions was one of inescapable doubt, the fear that all their power combined could not stop the demands of fate from claiming Olórin's very being in payment for his master's mistakes.

Frodo, distraught by the sound of worry in Irmo's voice and the sight of Manwë's face, looked again at his friend upon the bed. Olórin had become so literally transparent between the time of Frodo's arrival and this moment, the hobbit could see Arwen's gem, still clutched in his hand, through the very flesh and bone. Its polished surfaces caught the errant light from the window, mocking the tragedy of what was happening to the person holding it as it, a carven sliver of cold, unliving stone, glittered brightly with light and life. Frodo shut his eyes tightly to hold back the tears, and because he could not bear to see the very moment when Olórin finally dwindled to nothing, like the remains of Saruman's spirit on the wind. The circle of life in Arda might well remain unbroken, but this part of it was coming to an end, as was the history of help given to those in need by Arwen's jewel.

Frodo remembered — bitterly, now, the happiness of the memories now mocking him — the day they had arrived and how joyful Olórin had been to let go of his mortal life to be an unfettered Maia once again. Had he only known that this would be the result, perhaps the wizard would not have been so quick to relinquish mortal existence, for all its troubles. He remembered the quiet talk they had had, sitting on the hillside at the end of the feast, watching the sun rise over the eastern sea, the way its radiance had made bright the white clothes and crystal circlet the Valar had given him....

Frodo's eyes abruptly snapped open as he focused on that memory, then thought back to an earlier part of that same day, when the Valar had gifted him with the clothing, and the —

"Circlet," he whispered to himself, barely more than a breath. "The circle remains unbroken — *this* circle remains... oh, good heavens!" With the suddenness of an avalanche, a hundred different connections fell into place in Frodo's mind, and he knew at last what all of them had been failing to see. Frantic, he pushed past Manwë to the head of the bed, to the small table that stood beside it. "Where is it?" he demanded aloud, finding that the surface was bare. He glanced at Bilbo and Ványalos. "The things that used to be here — where are they?"

Ványalos appeared puzzled; Bilbo provided an answer. "Oh, I put them away in the little chest over there, weeks ago, when Lady Nienna first brought Gandalf home. These Big Folk kept bumping about and tipping things over and brushing them off to the floor." He snorted. "You'd think they'd never had to walk about any home smaller than a huge mansion before, or didn't care if other people's things were broken. Shamefully impolite, if you ask me...."

He might have said the same for his nephew's behavior, for rather than stand and listen to the explanation, once he heard where the things had gone, Frodo again pushed past anyone in his way to reach the chest which Bilbo had indicated. There were few things in it, and it did not take long for Frodo to find what he sought: the delicately woven circlet of crystal that had been given to Olórin on the day of his return. He held it for a moment, swallowing thickly, dredging up from his memory the words Manwë had spoken when he had bestowed it. *"One last gift, in token of His approval,"* he murmured, as one recollection spurred another. *"The token you seek has already been given."* Of course, it was simple, too simple for anyone to have seen amid all the upset and confusion.

The halfling turned about to face Ványalos and Bilbo again, since they were the only ones who appeared to be watching him. He held up the circlet; it caught an errant ray of sunlight and gleamed brightly, a ring of cold white fire in his healed hand. "Where did this come from, Ványalos? Who made it?"

The Maia shrugged, uncertain, but Frodo received an answer, from Manwë. "It came from Lord Eru, and to the best of my knowledge, it was He Who wrought it."

"Then that's what He meant!" Frodo said, trembling with the excitement of having made such a discovery, and the fear that his conclusion might be wrong. "Olórin was fine until he stopped wearing this, but he left it on the table near his bed, and every morning, after he'd spent the night sleeping near it, he'd wake up and seem his old self again. But he couldn't hold onto that strength when he was away from it, and it faded faster and faster each day, because every day, he went farther and farther away, for longer times. And then... then after he went to Ilmarin and let himself get so upset that he deliberately pushed himself far beyond his limits, it was put away, to keep it safe, and... and...." In his agitation, Frodo could say no more.

Manwë turned toward him fully, reaching down to take the glittering thing. "You may indeed have the right of it, Frodo, and there is but one way to know for certain." Moving swiftly but certainly, for time was of the greatest essence, he turned back toward the bed and moved to the head of it. Estë, understanding what he intended, leaned forward to lift Olórin's all but invisible head so that Manwë could set the circlet upon it.

For a moment, Frodo feared the wizard might already be too insubstantial to wear it; yet it stayed in place. Nothing happened at first, but as Estë gently lowered the Maia's head back to the pillow beneath it, one of the shafts of sunlight filtering through the windows fell fully upon his face and head. It struck the circlet's woven crystal and set it afire, the full light of Anor's flame causing it to blaze with a sudden glory that momentarily blinded all in the room, mortal and immortal alike.

The light was so brilliant, Frodo could still see it even through his tightly closed eyelids; when it began to fade at last, he dared to crack them open, desperate to know if this had been the light signaling a new beginning — or a tragic end. What he saw stole his breath in amazement.

The radiance that had flared from the crystal had shifted into a distinct form, that of Olórin, but unlike him in any way the hobbit had ever beheld. As he had earlier seemed to be as fragile as glass, now he appeared to be made of glass indeed, thin and clear without flaw, but filled with that same white light, only dimmed ever so slightly in its containment. Frodo was suddenly reminded of the phial of Galadriel, a crystal filled with the glow of Eärendil's star — yet this vessel was not cold and inanimate, but lived and breathed and moved. It was the most astounding sight Frodo had ever seen, and in his own wonder, he was completely unaware of the reactions of those about him.

As the light finally began to diminish, Olórin slowly became less transparent and more solid; the radiance flowed through him like blood flowing through veins, bringing life and health and strength to every part of him. Color and substance returned to his body, which swiftly grew whole again, as his mortal shell had been renewed and reborn atop Zirak-zigil. He turned his head to look at Frodo, and the halfling watched his eyes become those he had known so well, clear and bright and shining with life. He smiled at the hobbit — then, as he at last became fully solid once more, he looked away, toward the foot of the bed, and smiled even more broadly.

He sat up, lifted his hands, and reached out to touch other fingers that reached back to return the handclasp, seemingly come out of thin air. Frodo followed Olórin's gaze to see who had elicited this response from the Maia; his breath caught. It was Ványalos — yet it was not. The tall Maia was standing behind Frodo, with Bilbo, and from the sound he made, no one was more surprised to witness this than he.

The second Ványalos favored his double with a smile that was every bit as impish as any the Maia had ever made; He then turned his attention back to Olórin; the affection and pride in His expression brought a mist of tears to more than Frodo's eyes. "You have done well, my littlest one," He said, His voice the very echo of Ványalos', yet resonant with a depth and breadth of knowledge and experience that went far beyond any other voice, mortal or immortal. "You have faced the greatest perils of life and spirit, and emerged the victor. You have fulfilled the potential of my thought for you, and exceeded it. Live now in joy and peace, for your labors and trials are at an end. There will ever be things for you to do, help that you can give for the sake of others, but for now, your part in the Music you knew is done. Rest well, for you have earned it indeed." He clasped His own fingers more firmly about the Maia's, smiled brilliantly and warmly, then released his hands and turned to the others.

Frodo suddenly felt that the room had grown much smaller, and in a way it had, for all the Valar were now here, in solid form and not merely in spirit. They and the two Maiar who were in attendance bowed in reverence to the One Who was plainly not Ványalos. Frodo could see it now, even though the appearance was utterly the same; it was something not able to be grasped by ordinary senses, and in his upset at the glen, he had not been able to perceive it.

For the moment, His attention was not on the hobbit, but on Manwë and the other Valar. He sighed, and the sound was that of a disappointed parent about to lecture His wayward children. "This is not the first time I have tried to teach you the lesson of considering the consequences of your choices and actions — *all* the consequences, not merely the ones that are most desired or most obvious to you.

Time and again, you were faced with decisions of far-reaching effect, and time and again, you erred in the same fashion, by not looking beyond the goals you hoped to achieve. If the fate of all Arda was not enough to make you learn this, my governors, then I deemed that a smaller but vastly more personal lesson was required. I advised you against the very choice you made, and who is to blame that you chose to invoke this fate upon a servant well-loved by each of you? Olórin might have been more stubborn, it is true, and refused to take up the burden of this task even after he had been commanded, but his heart has ever been faithful to you, and to my will.

“And so he suffered for your mistakes, first in Middle-earth, and then here. These past months, you could not find the cure for his predicament, despite your diligent search and other endeavors, for you held fast to your pride, and the belief that the solution lay wholly within the scope of your power. Your worry for Olórin was genuine, and your efforts as generous as you were able to make them — which does you credit — but did a one of you pause to consider that others could have seen what you perceived of his condition when he returned to Aman, were at least as concerned as yourselves, and that an action might have already been taken in an attempt to bring him aid? Had Frodo failed to see the answer which you could not, I would have intervened directly, for those who have said Olórin did not deserve such a tragic end in reward for his devoted service spoke truly. But I would not have done so before this lesson was fully learned — and it very nearly came to the bitterest end before you knew and understood all your folly.”

He folded His arms across His chest, His piercing gaze flicking from one Vala to the next in turn, resting last and longest upon Manwë. “In the ages to come, Endor will be governed by others, those you call the Second-Born, and not yourselves, yet it is my wish that you do not utterly abandon them. Guidance may be asked for, and guidance may be given, yet in far subtler ways than have been employed in the past. Your work in Arda is not yet at its end, and I shall make my will known when I deem the time appropriate. For now, reflect upon all that has happened in this past age, and consider well what might have been had you *not* disobeyed me, and had I not felt Olórin worthy of my care to heal what he has suffered. Both will take time, and when he is whole once again and I believe you are ready to listen and learn, I will speak with you more plainly about what is to come.”

Not a one of the Valar uttered a word, but all respectfully and humbly acknowledged what they had been told. He Who was not Ványalos then turned to Frodo, and smiled upon him. Though the hobbit started, he had the presence of mind to bow politely, in hobbit-fashion, and smile back. “Thank you, my Lord, for healing my hand and helping Olórin,” he said with appropriate deference. “But I don’t understand why you did this.”

He chuckled softly, the sound of His amusement remarkably like that of the Maia whose appearance He had borrowed. “Because if I had not, many others, not only you and the Valar, would have grieved sorely over his loss, and he indeed had not earned such an end. As for your hand, I restored it because I wished you to know that such things are possible — indeed, that within my will, *all* things are possible. Is the healing of an injured hand more wondrous than the healing of a broken heart, or a shattered spirit? You had thought your maiming to be beyond any healer’s skill to repair, yet deemed the healing of your mind and spirit perhaps less difficult. Yet I restored what had been taken

from you physically with only a touch, while it has required many days more for that cure which you had thought to be the simpler to be achieved. Know you what day this is, Frodo?"

The hobbit did not, but having seen the world outside again, he was able to make an educated guess. "The twenty-fifth of March?"

The One laughed, well aware that it was indeed a guess. "Just so. And you had no notion of this, felt none of the debilitating pain and heartache and emptiness from which you have suffered on this day, each year since Sméagol in his madness provided the remedy for your own madness by biting off your finger, and destroying the Ring. Yet on this occasion, more dreadful than the day of your wounding on Amon Sul, there was no one to intervene on your behalf, for those who might have been of aid were otherwise occupied."

"I was too worried about Olórin to think of it, I suppose, like they were," Frodo admitted.

"Indeed yes, and now you perceive how you have healed yourself in spirit as I have healed your body. It is in the joy they may bring to others that all my children of honest heart find their own greatest joy, and it is in caring for the pain of others that they find the ways to ease their own. If you forever worry at a wound, forever disturbing the dressing and breaking the new skin while it is still fragile, it will never mend. Yet if you tend it properly, then let it be, the wound will in time become whole and sound again, with little extra care. And that time will go by more quickly and with less discomfort if you look beyond your own suffering and turn your thoughts and actions to pity for others who suffer far more than you. You were aware of this in some measure, though you did not ponder it overmuch, for as you say, you had other matters of great concern to keep you occupied."

"But I wasn't the only one. Everyone was concerned, at least everyone I know of, and they did much more than I could to try to help." A sweep of his arm indicated the silent but attentive Valar. "Why did you come and speak to me, rather than help one of *them* realize how to solve the problem?"

From the glitter in His eyes, this question had been expected. "Because you were already nearer to finding it than they — and because if it had been asked of you, you would have given your life to save your friend, with greater knowledge than my governors have of what such a sacrifice means to one of mortal life. You never spoke of it aloud, but that thought has long been on your mind and in your heart, ever since that day in Moria where you first witnessed the full pain and price of such steadfast friendship. The triumph you achieved at the end of your Quest came not in your strength of will to destroy the Ring, which was beyond the ability of any mortal to truly bear. It came long before, and began with what you learned of pity and loyalty and love that is willing to give all for the sake of others. It grew in your continued acts of mercy toward one who had rightly earned harsher judgement, and the fruit it bore came of that seed. For it was indeed Pity that in the end saved both you and all of Middle-earth — and so it is now. You will find that the sores of your old afflictions are no longer so tender; in your distraction of compassion for Olórin, you have given them time enough to allow the poisons to drain away and the wounds to begin healing; ere long, they will trouble you no more. Do you not find this a splendid way to celebrate that victory over the darkness which happened four years ago? Olórin

has back his life, as do you, and both will be happy ones. Evil wounded each of you, but it could not triumph, in the end. This I said to Melkor when first he tried to despoil the Song I and his brethren had made, and thus shall it ever be.”

Frodo found that affirmation reassuring, yet for some reason, he could not feel as delighted by it as he felt he ought. He was trying to determine just why he would have such feelings of hesitance when the One dismissed the Valar.

As they paid their respects and then vanished, Eönwë departing with them, He turned back to Olórin. He touched the seemingly fragile circle of crystal set upon the pale head; it shone even more brightly under the hand of the One Who had fashioned it. “Do not remove this until you have been told otherwise, littlest one,” He said with gentle affection, a father speaking to a beloved child who has done much to make him proud. “I fashioned this to be your shield against the darkness that scarred your very spirit while you lived the life of a mortal in poisoned Endor, but Manwë evidently did not grasp this when I gave it to him to be bestowed upon you. I might have spoken to him more plainly, for I truly did not wish to prolong your suffering, but he and the others had yet to show that they had learned the most vital lesson of their errors. That he did not fully understand when I gave him my gift for you and spoke to him of it was but further proof that he sorely needed this instruction.”

“There is no need for you to apologize for this, my Lord,” Olórin answered, his voice and expression tinged with mingled amazement and delight that he should be treated with such respect and consideration by one so far above him. “I knew in my heart that you had some greater purpose in allowing my condition to remain unhealed, for you certainly were aware of it. If it will indeed make the Valar better counselors and guides of the mortals who have inherited Endor, then I regret naught that I have endured. It is over now, and I am honored to have been allowed to be of even humble service in such a noble and necessary cause.”

The One smiled softly upon the Maia, eyes shining. “You are ever of service to me, littlest one, and your willingness to give of yourself for the benefit of others does you great honor among all my children, your own people in especial. Which is why I fashioned my gift thus, for such things have long been considered a mark of high grace among all the peoples in Arda, and I wished others to know beyond doubt that you stand as brightly in my favor. As it guards you from the shadow which would sap your strength and wither your very being, so does it heal what evil harmed, and in time, the power of the Secret Fire which is ever drawn to it will banish that shadow forever and restore and repair what you have lost. I could, if you wish, heal you as swiftly as I did Frodo...”

But Olórin shook his head, an emphatic motion that was at once sincere and humble. “No, that is not necessary, my Lord. It would be more *convenient*, perhaps, but I have long known that the quickest answer is seldom the one which provides the greatest wisdom and opportunity for learning. Frodo, I think, had already learned all he could from what was done to him in the Sammath Naur, and after hearing your words to the Valar, I especially would not choose a path of expediency. And I do not think I could bear to be parted from your gift, now that I know it did indeed come from your hands. But would this end have been any different, had Lord Manwë *not* commanded me to go, and instead helped

me to see why my aid was needed? For I know now that in this, he was *not* in error, for I know no other of our people who could have brought to that struggle the same traits and abilities which I did, and time proved that such things were sorely needed to achieve Sauron's defeat in the manner that was desired."

A new smile danced across the familiar face. "It would have been *different*, in that had he given no such command, he would have been abiding by *my* will rather than his own. Perils would still have stood before you, for your kind were not meant to live as true mortals do, but had Manwë only spoken of those dangers to you, openly, making plain his heart and his knowledge rather than concealing his fear out of pride, you would have been more clearly warned, and thus could have gone and made better use of your own skills to avoid being injured so deeply, much as you did when you came to Endor to oppose Melkor. Very likely, you would still have been hurt, for you were to be denied full use of your abilities, but the wounds would not have been so deep, nor the poison so fully absorbed. Your healing would have been a matter much like Frodo's, and the Valar could have helped you as they helped him. It would not have been beyond their skills, and no bitter near-tragedy would have come of it."

"And would you have let Gandalf die if the Valar *hadn't* learned their lesson?" Bilbo wondered, finally having recovered from his shock over the whole business well enough to speak.

The gentle smile turned upon him. "No, Bilbo, I would not have allowed that to happen. Had worse come to worst and my governors utterly failed to pass the course of instruction they needed so badly, I would have brought Olórin home to me once again. I would not have told them this, not immediately, for in suffering the loss of one of their servants by their own fault, they would have finally learned what had so long eluded them, and gained a fuller knowledge of the Eruhíni, mortals in particular. But I would not have let Olórin diminish into the same nothingness that was earned by Sauron and Curumo and those who sought only to work their own wills and dominate or destroy all others. I am not so cruel, nor so inflexible, as to permit an evil like this to happen to one who has done naught but good. The fear of such a loss brought so very near was enough to awaken the Valar to the truth. But think you that death is a punishment? It is not, though you have yet to truly understand why it is a gift to all mortals. The incarnate life of innocent Men may be shortened by works of evil, yet it does but bring them to know my gift more swiftly. Some day, you will know why this is so."

With a start, Frodo realized why he had not been encouraged by knowing more about his own healing. "It is a gift for us mortals, perhaps, but it seems to me that for immortals, it's almost a punishment. We die and leave this world and they do not, so they lose all their mortal friends, if they dare to make any, and never know what truly became of them because *they* cannot die."

The One laughed softly. "*Never* is a word I think I should not have taught to any of my children, for none can truly comprehend it. What you say is true of Arda as it is now, but it will not be so forever. It will change again, it will be renewed, and then shall all of my children, the dead and the living, come to live together in peace. Does it trouble you to know that in time, you will leave behind your friends of the Eldar and the Ainur?"

The younger hobbit shook his head. "No. It troubles me to know that when I leave, they will still be here in a world they *cannot* leave, and that even if they eventually forget me, for a while, just the fact that I left will hurt them. If death is indeed a gift, why can't they share in it, too, or at least not feel the pain of the parting?"

"For reasons you could not comprehend, even were I to attempt to explain them to you. Yet I understand your concerns, for by accident or by choice, you have lost many in your life for whom you have felt the grief of separation, and are certain you can never meet again. And you would not wish to be a faithless friend to those immortals whom you hold dear, and to whom you owe much, leaving them only a legacy of sorrow. It seems a riddle with no answer, does it not?"

"Much knottier than any of Gollum's puzzlers, that's for certain," Bilbo agreed with a soft snort. Ványalos, who for once could not have been impudent had he tried, nudged the old hobbit, scolding him for his impertinence.

The One placed a hand atop each of the hobbits' heads and smiled softly. "Yet there is no riddle for which I do not have an answer, and so this gift I offer to you now: I do not release either of you from what is called the Doom of Men, for it is your fate and your birthright as mortals. But henceforth, so long as you dwell in Aman, you shall not know the wear and weariness of the world as would others of your kind, and the time of your leaving shall be wholly of your own choosing, when you are ready to know what lies beyond this life and not when the weight of the world presses you to the decision, as it does with those of humankind who do not meet death untimely. This gift I make not only for your sakes, but for Olórin's as well, for he alone of his people has truly lived as a mortal and survived the experience, and more than just the knowledge of it is now a part of him. It cannot be separated from him, and thus, I will not require him to be separated from those few of his mortal friends who live in this undying land, until he and they are full ready to part."

His eyes slipped toward the wizard, who was as surprised by this declaration as the hobbits. "You have not spoken of it, Olórin, but I see in your heart how the thought of at last being sundered from the company of all mortals pains you, and there is no need for you to suffer this. For now, you do not wish them to leave, and neither do they wish to go. Is this not an obvious solution to the problem?"

"Perhaps," the Maia said, his words slowed by his reflection upon the question. "Soon after I returned to Aman, Lord Irmo did express his concern that this very matter might prove to be more difficult to face than I wished to imagine. But I am afraid that like the Valar, I have not all wisdom, and I readily admit that I cannot see how this might turn out badly, in the end. Yet I also believe you would not do anything to deliberately harm a one of your children, so I can only presume that this is indeed a generous gift you offer, and not some punishment in disguise. For you are right. I had begun to reconsider the wisdom of asking these of my mortal friends to come here, for I knew that no matter what healing and peace they might find, at length, they would leave — perforce by madness, or willingly by mortal weariness — and when that time came, I would grieve deeply in the knowledge that I could not follow. This is not a promise of eternity, but it is a gift of precious time, and that is more than I had hoped possible. Thank you, my Lord."

“You are most welcome, child. Does this plan also meet with your approval, little ones?” He turned back to the hobbits, still smiling warmly.

Frodo was attempting to decide whether or not he had heard correctly; Bilbo was less reticent. “So if I understand you aright, you’re saying that Frodo and I can stay here for as long as we like, not worrying about getting old or sick or driven mad with boredom or fatigue, and give up this life only when and if we have a mind to?”

The One chuckled at the elder hobbit’s forthright manner. “That is precisely what I am saying, and I say this also for any others of your Fellowship who suffered in their service to the defeat of Sauron and his minions, and who might come hither in later days. If those whose fates are not already tightly bound to the foundation of Endor’s future should choose of their own free wills to seek relief from their burdens in this haven, and out of love for the friends who reside here, then I shall allow them to share in this choice. I cannot say if such will ever happen, but this I promise to do, out of my love for all of you, who have served so very well indeed.”

“Cannot say, or *will* not say?” Frodo wondered, amazed a moment later by his own temerity in asking such a thing.

But Eru Who was not Ványalos merely laughed, a refreshing and joyful sound like the first sweet rains after a long and hard drought. He smiled upon them all, and vanished.

Bilbo sniffed. “Well, *that* was an answer that didn’t need to be heard to be understood. But heavens, if anyone had told me this morning all the things I’d see before the day was over, I’d never have believed them! You *are* all right now, Gandalf, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” the wizard assured him as he shifted position to leave the bed. There was no hesitation or weakness in his movement or his voice, which was a notable change from only a few brief minutes ago. “And I daresay not a one of us could have anticipated this. Lord Eru saved me once before; I had no reason to believe I was worthy of being rescued a second time.”

“And why not?” Frodo demanded, still trembling a bit from all that had happened so quickly. “He was concerned for you even before you truly began your work in Middle-earth. He was the one Who put the notion in Círdan’s head to give you Narya, after all.”

“And He has given me so much more,” the Maia sighed, brushing his fingers upon the circlet, then laughing ruefully. “I suspect He created His gift in this fashion quite deliberately, so as to make drawing attention to it unavoidable. I shan’t ever understand how humility can be considered so highly praiseworthy, yet then be constantly subverted by the very people who supposedly value it!”

Bilbo half-laughed, half-snorred. “Ah, you *must* be feeling better, Gandalf, you’re already getting testy, and with Eru Ilúvatar Himself!”

The wizard made a face of pure exasperation, but laughed brightly nonetheless. To Frodo, that was better than all the reassurances in the world, for it was a sound he had missed very much indeed during the darkness of the past months. In a surfeit of relief, he enthusiastically embraced his old friend. "I'm glad you're back, Olórin," he said, rather more fiercely than he had intended.

The laughter remained in Olórin's voice, strong and clear. "I was never away, my dear Frodo, and so long as I have any say in the matter, I shall never come close to doing so ever again. Now, then," he added, turning his glance to his silent neighbor as he released his smaller friend, "have you nothing at all to say, Ványalos? I have never seen you stand for so long without making a sound when no one has commanded you to hold your tongue. Or do you not find it intriguing that of all the people in Arda, Lord Eru chose to appear as you?"

The red-haired Maia opened his mouth slightly and began to speak, but only a small and inarticulate sound emerged, followed by a noise of exquisitely extreme dismay as he flopped to the floor in an apparent faint. The others laughed at his comically exaggerated display of distress, and at long last, to Frodo, all seemed right in this wonderful new world.

Epilogue

Because only Eru Ilúvatar is perfect, it could not be said that the years which followed were perfection made manifest, but to Frodo's mind, they were as near to it as he could ever imagine. When he had agreed to come to Valinor, it had only been with the thought that here, he might at last find rest and surcease from the darkness that continued to plague his body and spirit. In truth, he had more than half-expected that here he would soon die, but that his end would at least come in a place where his passing would not further trouble the lives of his younger friends and cousins who had already seen too much of sorrow and darkness and evil. He had given up Middle-earth so that they could be happy. He had not expected to find such happiness himself, not in the measure he had been given, nor after facing a near-tragedy that had in the end burned away the remnants of his own suffering, like the last faded leaves of an old autumn tossed onto the trash fire of the following spring.

Bilbo never did change his habit of calling Olórin by the name he had known for him in Middle-earth, but at the very least he finally grew comfortable with his changed appearance. That adjustment was helped along considerably when the old hobbit one day asked the Maia a barrage of questions that had been collecting at the back of his thoughts since the weeks after their arrival, his two most burning questions being why Lord Eru had called him His "littlest one," and why he alone of all the Maiar had ears rather like those of a hobbit.

Olórin had laughed, amused by such "important" inquiries, but had given the best answers he could. He was "the littlest" to Eru Ilúvatar's mind because he was — apparently — the youngest of all the Ainur, something he had long suspected but had heard confirmed only on the day of that remarkable visitation. And because he had not consciously chosen any aspect of his current appearance — this particular detail of which had *not* been a part of him before his return from his long mission to Middle-earth in mortal guise — he surmised that it was a manifestation of something Lord Eru had mentioned, the fact that more than just the knowledge of mortal life was now an indelible part of him. Neither matter disturbed the Istar, and that a visible aspect of his connection to humankind was now evident after some small fashion of the hobbits delighted him, for though he had great respect for all the Second-Born, his greatest fondness would ever remain with the halfling folk who were distantly descended of his Song sung before Arda had been made.

Since there was no longer an urgent sense that he must spend as much time as possible with Bilbo before he passed on, Frodo decided to remain in Lórien after his uncle returned to Tirion to finally spend some real time in the rooms he had been given in Elrond's house, and where he could delight in meeting and becoming acquainted with some of the greatest of the Elves ever to be born. Though he enjoyed the company of the Elves, and visited his uncle often, Frodo was happier in the quiet and beautiful land that was, he now perceived, the inspiration for the region of Middle-earth called the Shire. The other residents of Lórien's hill country had offered to build him a home of his own when he made known his intent to remain there, at least for a time, but so long as Olórin did not object to sharing his house, Frodo decided he would prefer that arrangement. Ványalos had teased and coaxed him with suggestions of constructing a proper hobbit hole, since many of the locals, himself included, were curious to know more about such an unusual dwelling, but Frodo had merely answered that perhaps someday, he and Bilbo

could show them how it was done, but for now, he was content. In the little house in the woods, he was not alone, and there he had a sort of family once again, complete with many frequently visiting “relatives.”

For they certainly did not lack for company. Not only was there the omnipresent Ványalos, always ready to provide Frodo with whatever he needed in the way of food and drink and dining companionship, once it had become common knowledge that Olórin was no longer in danger of losing his very existence, the Elves and others of his own people who had been a part of his life before his mission to Middle-earth came to call quite often, sometimes for pleasure, other times as pupils, wishing to learn from him.

Frodo had never seen this particular aspect of his old friend, not quite so clearly expressed. In Middle-earth, his attempts to impart knowledge or wisdom to others had seldom been presented as any kind of true instruction; it had typically been offered as advice, there for the individual to accept or reject as they would. A result of the restrictions that had been imposed upon the Istari, Frodo understood, not to force their wills upon others, but only to persuade. On the days when he deigned to teach those who came to him in search of such things, Frodo always watched and listened, fascinated, and in the process, he learned more things than he had ever imagined about this world he now inhabited, and the relation between it and the mortal world he had left behind.

And as for Olórin himself.... If Frodo had thought he had seen him as he truly was in the few days between his return and the onset of his illness, he had been mistaken. Even then, he had been weighed down and held back and darkened by the hurts from which he had already been suffering. Even Ványalos, with his sharp sense of humor and amusing ways, did not have the sheer joy in life that Olórin possessed, and from having this long opportunity to know him and watch him simply *live*, Frodo gained a tremendous understanding not only of his old friend, but of how to appreciate his own life as well, both past and present. The Future would take care of itself if they but took care of the Now.

For his own part, Olórin was highly amused by the irony of how his circumstances in Valinorean society had subtly shifted; not that he was held in any greater esteem or reverence because of what had happened, but that he who had for so long been a pupil of the Valar was now *their* teacher. For no one in all of Aman — indeed, in all of Arda — had the singular comprehension he now possessed of what it meant to be both mortal and immortal, in truth and not merely in abstract theory; no other had lived as an immortal, died as a mortal, and yet come back to resume a mortal life, and thence to immortality once again. As Lord Eru had made it clear that their roles in the future would require a clearer and fuller understanding of humankind, the Valar had come to realize that merely viewing the life of Men from afar was not enough. They had never dwelt among mortals, nor had anyone still possessed of mortality lived for long among them. Overseeing their lives and affairs from the aloof safety of Aman was no better than watching a shadow-play; it allowed them to see appearances that did not provide deeper knowledge of the beings these illusions appeared to be. They could see into the hearts of Men, could perceive their thoughts, but they did not fully grasp all the feelings and motives and frailties they beheld. Some seemed very akin to their own, but others were shockingly foreign to their thought.

They could have asked for such insights from the mortals among them; in fact they did, but they had soon recognized that Frodo and Bilbo could not tell them enough, for they did not think like Ainur, nor had they ever lived such a life. Only Olórin now knew both, and the intimate knowledge he possessed of the differences was invaluable to the Valar as they struggled to prepare for whatever tasks Eru Ilúvatar might have for them in the ages to come. So the humblest of their servants became their teacher, and Olórin was glad that he had long ago availed himself of Nienna's lessons in patience, for without such wisdom, he would swiftly have lost his temper and given up on them as hopeless. Now, he merely took wry amusement from it, and found odd satisfaction in its unexpected irony.

But as Lord Eru had also enjoined him to rest and enjoy the peace of Aman now that his greater tasks were over, such times of instruction came only at the Maia's discretion, and his masters knew better than to go against the will of the One, especially where Olórin was concerned. He and Frodo, and sometimes Bilbo and others of their friends who were more lately come to Valinor, traveled the length and breadth of the Undying Lands, exploring all that it was not out of a sense of restlessness, but to enjoy the wonder and beauty of Arda Unmarred that remained a delight each time it was beheld anew.

Some years later, on another anniversary of the twenty-fifth of March, Frodo and Olórin had celebrated the day by going to the meadow to watch the new foals of the great horses at play in the open fields amid the long grasses, bright with the blossoms of spring. One in particular — a handsome young colt who was the offspring of Shadowfax and a lovely sweet-natured mare who was also of the *Mearas*, the steed who looked to the Lady Estë as her mistress — commanded their interest, for he held himself both proudly and with the faintest hint of the smug vanity of all youth, aware that he was the center of attention, as was his due. He was not quite so dappled a gray as his dam, but neither did he have the silver mane of his sire; both his mane and tail were already of flowing pure white, like the foam of the sea, and in the fullness of time, he would grow to even greater beauty and intelligence. Estë had given the colt his name, *Lossemár*, in the Elvish rather than Valarin or Rohirric fashion, and none who saw him as he raced across the meadow doubted that he was as good a beast as his name implied.

As they sat atop a the slope of the hillside between the commons of the local settlement and the easternmost edge of the meadow, Frodo watched not only the colt, but his ever-protective parents, especially his sire. Shadowfax so reminded him of a proud but defensive father as he followed his offspring across the meadow full of lengthening shadows that heralded the nearing sunset, that the sight of him brought a smile to the hobbit's lips. "You don't suppose that Lord Eru included Shadowfax when He said none of us would need to pass beyond this world until we wish to do so, do you?" he asked.

Olórin shook his head, the motion causing the near-dusk light to gleam brightly on the circlet of crystal he had not yet been told to set aside. "As noble and intelligent a beast as he is, Shadowfax does not possess the same kind of spirit Lord Eru gave to His children of Aman and Endor. He will leave this life when it is his time, yet he will never be fully departed from it. There are not many births here in Aman, for the nature of this place does not often require it, even among the lesser creatures, but their lives are still not as long as even yours might have been, had Lord Eru not granted you His special gift. Shadowfax will live on in *Lossemár*, and he in his offspring, when the time is ripe. For now, I find it a delight to watch them, since it was rather plain that Shadowfax was quite annoyed with me once I was

able to move about freely without him. For a time, I suspected he would never let me near any foal that bore his blood. I shan't ever make *that* mistake again, seeming to ignore him after all he has done for me! I think I now know how Lord Manwë felt when he discovered the error he had made in disregarding Lord Eru and commanding me to go to Endor."

Frodo laughed, remembering the great stallion's seeming fit of pique when for several weeks, Olórin — in his enthusiasm over finally being well and whole again — had done all his more distant traveling without Shadowfax. It had been almost entertaining to watch the *Meara* deliberately ignore his friend and master in his irritation, as well as the various gestures of apology that he had required of Olórin to get back in his good graces. Ványalos had found no end of jests to make over the situation, but it had quite possibly been those jokes and seeing his master made the butt of one too many that had finally prompted Shadowfax to forgive him. Since then, he had shifted his aloof disregard to Ványalos, his pointed rejection a subtly appropriate revenge against the gregarious and sociable Maia.

As they watched the horses run off to the far side of the meadow, to drink from the stream that ran through it, Frodo recalled the first time he had ever seen Shadowfax, after the war was over. In the encampment on the field of Cormallen, most of the horses had been stabled away from the places where the soldiers and civilians ate and were quartered; thus, it had not been until the day they made ready to ride to Minas Tirith for Aragorn's coronation that Frodo had finally seen the beautiful stallion of whom he had heard so much, especially from Pippin. The young Took had filled Frodo's ears with many a tale of what he remembered as a harrowing ride from Rohan to Gondor, but no opportunity had arisen for Frodo to actually see him until the day of their departure. He hadn't thought any horse could grow so large without appearing somehow monstrous, but for all his great size and strength, Shadowfax had seemed only noble and gentle, not unnatural. Gandalf had offered to have Frodo ride with him, but as Merry and Pippin were to be on ponies rather than such magnificent horses, Frodo had chosen to ride as they did, and not diminish what honor they had earned by seeming to put himself forward, a sentiment with which Sam had fully agreed. Nonetheless, he recalled his first sight of the great stallion quite clearly, and now, knowing that he too had served hard and well during the war, it pleased the hobbit to watch him free and at play with his own kin and family.

Frodo sighed, also remembering Sam's first startled reaction to the sight of the lord of the *Mearas*. "Do you think Sam will ever choose to come here, Olórin? He *was* another Ring-bearer — perhaps not for long, but at a very crucial moment. If not for the difficult choice he made near Cirith Ungol, all would have been lost."

"He certainly has earned it," the Maia agreed, watching the flight of the horses even as he listened to the approach of others behind them, Ványalos and Bilbo bringing the evening meal while other local residents also gathered to share food and song and the always splendid sight of the coming sunset. "But the choice is up to him, Frodo, and we could not influence him if we wished. If you want my opinion, however, I would say he will definitely come, when he has gained all he desires from life in Middle-earth."

"And when will that be?" Frodo wondered.

Olórin laughed, a sound of pure merriment that to the halfling was as great a delight to hear as any grand and glorious music ever made. “Even if I knew, you know I wouldn’t tell you. There are some things in life that should remain a surprise — especially a thing such as this, which can only lead to happiness. He will come soon enough, and then you can begin a whole new life here, showing and teaching him all you have learned during your time in Aman, as I have done for you.”

The hobbit smiled. “You did, though it won’t be an entirely new life, of that I’m sure. Bilbo has been my father in all but the name since I was a boy, Sam was my best friend, especially during the struggle to reach Mordor and Mount Doom, and you have been the brother I never realized I missed having, until I came to know you well. Even Ványalos has begun to feel like a permanent fixture in my life, though I can’t quite decide how and where he fits in — perhaps some unusual distant cousin, like Pippin. No, when Sam comes, I see no reason at all why my life should start over. *This* music hasn’t ended, after all; he will simply be adding another voice to the choir.”

The wizard chuckled at the appropriate metaphor, and gracefully rose to go help the other members of their tiny chorus carry the things they had brought for the meal and for their comfort in sharing it. Frodo also joined them to lend a hand with the preparations, and after all had been readied, the now familiar ritual of saying farewell to the day and welcoming the night began once more. He glowed with pleasure at the sound of it, fully able to understand both languages in which it was sung.

*O stars that in the Sunless Year
With shining hand by her were sown,
In windy fields now bright and clear
We see your silver blossom blown!*

*O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!
We now remember, we who dwell
In this fair land of twilit trees
Thy glory o’er the Western Seas.*

*Ah! One, Who ere the world was wrought
And Song was heard in ancient days,
Brought forth from heart and mind and thought
Thy servants, who now sing Thy praise:*

*Watch o’er us in this distant land,
Where entered we in darkest night;
Grant us Thy peace; put forth Thy hand
To guide us ever with Thy Light.*

The End of the Beginning