

## Chapter XIII

*A man's name, title, and rank are artificial and impermanent;  
they do nothing to reveal what he really is, even to himself.*

The next morning, when Aránayel returned, she found that not only had the others eaten breakfast without her (although Frodo had thoughtfully set aside what he considered quite generous portions of everything so that she would not have cause to feel slighted), but that all four of them were in the garden behind Olórin's house, planting the seedlings Lady Yavanna had sent for the halfling.

Frodo admitted that he was not as well versed in herb-lore as his cousin Meriadoc, but he had nonetheless learned quite a bit during his years in the Shire, first from his parents and other kin in Buckland, and then from the Gamgees in Hobbiton. The soil of Lórien was rich enough to grow anything, but pipeweed was particular in other ways, about the amount of full sun it received each day, the drainage of the soil, and other such matters. Frodo had selected a long strip well to the back of the garden patch, since it best suited all those needs, but as the rain had not stopped until just before dawn and the hour was early, the ground was still quite damp when they set about preparing it to receive the new plants. Olórin had been able to use his skills in manipulating heat and air to drive some of the excess moisture from the soil, but not until after all four of them were liberally covered with mud. The twins found the situation terribly amusing, as the rocky country of Lindon had not given them many opportunities for such play, and they had made great sport out of seeing who could get the muddiest before they went a bit too far and were chided by the elders for their behavior. They had immediately apologized, and did their best to help once things had been dried enough to make the ground more manageable, but when Aránayel arrived and saw the four of them just finishing their work and thoroughly splattered with half-dried mud, it was evident that she did not approve of such games. Though she held her tongue, her scowl was black and her eyes flashing with disapproval. The twins had recoiled from her as small birds might flee a snake about to strike; the harshness of her expression even made Frodo flinch, recalling days from his youth when he had angered elder hobbits who did not approve of childish pranks. As the children scurried off to make themselves more presentable, Frodo followed to help them, as much to escape Aránayel's glower as to assist the youngsters and do his own tidying up.

Olórin turned to the fuming Aránayel with an exasperated look of his own. His mild tone belied the spark of annoyance in his eyes. "Since our people were not blessed with a childhood such as the Eruhíni know and you have had few opportunities to become acquainted with their young and all their particular needs, I now understand why Melui and Lére are uncomfortable in your company. Children of all the races I have met have an energy about them that needs to be expressed in ways of laughter and lightheartedness, preferably shared with others, and not merely other children. They cannot thrive properly without it, as plants wither without sun or water, especially young seedlings. You need not play *with* them, Aránayel, but at the very least do not attempt to entirely deny them that need. They must learn discipline and gain knowledge, of course, but *all* these things are important to their well-being. They became carried away by their game and we indulged them, but they have already been properly chided for going farther than our indulgence allowed. Your disapproval came like a second — and unwarranted — punishment. You might have asked what happened before assuming the worst. Or is it your belief that Frodo and I would allow them to behave in any way they choose, no matter how inappropriate it might be?"

The scowl vanished from Aránayel's face so quickly, one might almost have thought the expression a mere trick of light that passed as a cloud moved overhead. "Master Baggins does seem exceptionally well versed in the needs of the young," she said in a strangely reflective tone. "And that is as it should be, for all of the Eruhíni appear to have similar needs during this part of their lives, be they mortal or immortal. I do not need you to instruct me, Olórin. Not only have I had these children in my care far longer than you, but it would seem to me that if there is true wisdom to be found in the learning of a thing, it will come from one who has genuine experience in the matter, not merely one who has observed it from a distance. You may have lived the life of a mortal Man, but you were never a child of *any* people. In this, Master Baggins has much greater experience and more profound understanding, and I shall take my inquiries in such matters to him. And since you did not have the good sense to make certain they were presentable in time for their lessons, I will go assist him, so that we can begin as soon as possible." With not another word, she turned and headed off in the direction of Frodo and the twins.

For a very long moment, Olórin remained where he was, the look on his face lost between astonishment and annoyance: the natural annoyance anyone might have felt upon being so clearly and summarily dismissed as unneeded, and astonished to realize that after nearly a full week of unnervingly obsequious behavior toward him, Aránayel had suddenly and apparently changed her tune. He briefly considered following her in an attempt to discern some reason for her behavior — for she never did

anything that she did not believe was ultimately to her own benefit — but he quickly decided that his answer would not be found with her. What he would see now would be the face and the acts she wished him to see, and if he was going to begin hunting for the truth, he suspected he would find it more easily elsewhere. He remained in the house long enough to clean himself of the mud and make certain all was well with the twins and Frodo, then went to meet with Ványalos.

The previous day, it had occurred to Olórin that Aránayel might be offended by his presence during her first lessons with the children under his roof. She was apt to consider any observation as some kind of judgement of her work, and her worthiness, but in such a small house, it was nearly impossible to avoid. To forestall this, he had made arrangements to accompany Ványalos on his daily rounds, collecting the various things he shared with his neighbors in the way of supplies for their meals. Frodo often went with him, now that he was more comfortable with the residents of the hill country, but today was his laundering day, and he spent those mornings collecting things that needed to be taken to the Elves who assisted him with such matters. That fortunate coincidence meant that Olórin could leave the house without worrying how Aránayel would treat the hobbit, who did not have the long association with her that both the wizard and the twins supposedly enjoyed.

He had cause to reconsider that fortune, however, when he met Ványalos in his neighbor's spacious kitchen, where he was nursing a cup of steaming tea as if it were the only lifeline between him and the abyss. The wizard had seen such faces on humans who had sat up through the night against their will, generally spending the time in an argument or some other odious discussion. Though their people did not require sleep as the Eruhíni did, those who chose to embody themselves in fanar akin to their bodies tended to live their lives as the Children did, out of respect for the form they inhabited. Ványalos had a number of remarkably mortal traits, a fondness for sleep second only to his liking for food and drink. No doubt a taste acquired from his long years of serving Estë; and he could be as irritable as the grumpiest sleep-deprived mortal when he spent a night awake for reasons not of his choosing.

"I had expected her to simply take herself off to the place I'd prepared for her, then promptly ignore me, but she didn't," Ványalos explained as he waved his guest into a chair at the round table near the cooking hearth, where he himself was seated. The room was large and comfortable, with wide windows overlooking a flowering garden, at the center of which stood a beautiful fountain. The sound of the rising and falling water was like clear music, and had often brought cheer to Olórin's heart. But it was plainly having no such effect on Ványalos. "I'd also expected that if she did not spend the night sulking, Aránayel would spend it attempting to bend my ear with every complaint she has ever had about you — *and* me, for that matter, since I was obviously part of the conspiracy to get her out of your house. Or I had imagined she might try to pry from me any information about you that she might use in her campaign of ingratiation. Instead, she spent the entire night pressing me for every detail I know about hobbits."

Olórin's eyes widened with genuine surprise. "Hobbits?" he echoed. "Why ever was she so interested in hobbits?"

Ványalos sighed. "I supposed at first that she was curious because she had never met one of the Little People before, but she seemed more interested in Frodo in particular than in hobbits in general. I thought that might be because *you* are so clearly fond of him, and she apparently wants to get closer to you for her own self-serving reasons, but she asked nothing about your relationship with him, beyond inquiring how it was you came to know each other in Middle-earth."

"What did you tell her?"

"What little I know," the redhead said with a shrug. "You were familiar with his elder kin, and he came of what his people considered a respectable family. She seemed rather surprised to learn that he was not some sort of royalty — perhaps she'd thought that only a mortal of such high rank would have been permitted to dwell here in Aman."

The wizard snorted softly. "I can well imagine. Such things have always been of value to her — largely, I think, because she covets similarly high position." He tapped the circlet about his head. "I tried to explain to her that I was given this as nothing more than an instrument of healing, but she didn't believe me. I suppose there is some truth to her notion that Lord Eru meant it to be a visible mark of His favor as well — He did tell me as much on the day He explained its purpose to me — but not in the way she imagines. My position among our people has not changed; I am no more or less than I have always been, Lord Manwë's vassal and a servant of all those to whom I can offer help. I am honored to know that I have earned Lord Eru's approval, that I did not fail the trust that had been placed in me, but I do not believe He ever meant for anyone to look upon this as a sign that I am anything more than I have ever been."

“Perhaps not,” Ványalos said, “but though you have not changed at heart, I do not think you will ever again be able to slip into the shadows of others and remain unnoticed. I know, you dislike even thinking of such things — you made that quite plain during last evening’s gathering! — but it is true nonetheless. You are the only one of a very few who were sent to oppose Sauron who carried out his tasks and returned. It was not mere chance that this came to be, for all the others faced the same choices as you, and failed because they chose their own designs over those of the Valar, and Lord Eru. If even one of the other Istari had remained true to your mutual mission and returned with you, things might be different now, but I suspect not. You took this impossible task upon yourself not once but twice, and sacrificed much in carrying out those onerous duties, alone. Whether you wish it or not, your position *has* changed, and it would seem that Arányel is more keenly aware of the scope of that change than you. She has even seen how it encompasses your friends, such as Frodo.”

For a considerable time, Olórin said nothing, his gaze fixed on the garden fountain and the glitter of sunlight on the rising and falling waters. Ványalos followed his glance, and allowed him his long moment of silence while he finished his tea, then took the cup to the kitchen basin to rinse it clean. When he was done, he looked back at the wizard. “Have I offended you, *pityandil?*” he asked, genuinely concerned.

After another moment, Olórin shook his head, and sighed. “No. I am not so foolish as to deny the truth, only to wish that it might be otherwise. When I chose to return from death to complete my unfinished tasks, I suspected that if I were to somehow succeed, I would never be the same person in the eyes of our people. Rightly so, perhaps, for all that I have endured in these past two thousand years has changed me. Had any of the others returned with me, they too would have been altered by our lives as mortal Men — which may well be a part of why I am saddened that they failed. If even one of them had come back, I would share the curiosity and attention and praise of others with them, and I would feel considerably less discomfited. But they did not, and I must bear this change in my life as well as I can.”

He shifted his gaze to favor Ványalos with a curious expression. “Why are you asking this? Were the answers I gave last evening unclear, or insufficient? You have never questioned my aversion to such attention before.”

“Nor am I questioning it now,” he was assured. “We have known one another so long and so well, I knew you would not return to us quite as you had been before, but I also knew that naught could ever change your heart. You will always be humble, and given my own tendencies toward audacity, I have long found your humility and your dislike of adulation both calming and educational. But as your position is now unique among our people, so too is Frodo’s, being a mortal permitted to dwell in Aman, praised by the Valar and blessed by Eru Ilúvatar Himself. He is not utterly unique, I know,” Ványalos added when Olórin began to correct him. “But there are several reasons I can see for why Arányel would have no interest in Bilbo: he was not so profoundly involved in the matter of the Ring, and thus was not as highly praised for his part in it; and he lives with the Elves in Tirion, not here with you — and the blessing he received from the One was neither so dramatic nor obvious as the healing of Frodo’s hand. Arányel put on the appearance of being interested in hobbits for their own sake, but it was clear to me that her interest was in Frodo alone. She asked of his likes and dislikes, his daily habits, and such things as one might want to know of someone whose favor they wish to curry, or whose vanity they might seek to flatter. It occurs to me that after seeing the friendly and sociable ways of the halflings yesterday, she decided that it might be equally effective, and altogether more pleasant for her, if she attempted to influence you by befriending one who is close and dear to you.”

He shook his head, sighing yet again as he stepped across the room to open a small storage closet near the door that led from the kitchen to the garden. From inside, he fetched the baskets he used to carry the provender he collected on his rounds. Olórin joined him, and took the things Ványalos handed to him while the taller Maia continued his speculation. “I have often wondered, given what I have heard of her over the years, what aspects of Arányel are reflected in Arda, or vice versa. What did she see in this world to be that drew her to want to be a part of its shaping? After being interrogated by her last night, I feel fairly certain that I have identified one trait at least. We recognize rank among our own people, but not to the degree or in the same fashions that such things are honored among the Eruhíni — especially among the mortals, from what I have learned. I had never truly grasped the concept of heirs before I met Frodo and he told me the tale of his life in Middle-earth, how he had been the heir of Bilbo, and how he had designated his friend Samwise to be his when he came West. He told me of the Man who had become king of what remained of the Númenórean realms, and though I suppose it is a logical arrangement, to pass things from parent to child, it seemed quite peculiar to me at first.”

“As it did to me,” Olórin admitted. “None of our kind have ever known what it is to be a child, to have parents in the way the Eruhíni do. I do not believe I truly understood the feelings of the Atani toward parents or children until after I had grown close to some of them, then stood by helpless and watched them die. Even though I know it is a gift to those who pass beyond, I also

understand the pain it can be to those who are left behind. The matter of heirs is the only means they have to give a sense of stability to a time which for them can be one of great sorrow and despair.”

“So I have come to understand. The Elves are not the same, and I was quite confused by the mortal matter of inheritance, until it occurred to me that it was only natural for them to desire such things because they are *not* immortal. In general, our people do not overly concern themselves with status and rank because we each have known some measure of the place we hold in Lord Eru’s thought, and how we are meant to fit into His designs for this world. Not as clearly as we might wish, perhaps, but we do know, and when we hold true to our purposes, we know that no other could take the place appointed for us. The desire for power or dominance beyond that which was given us in our beginnings has generally been a trait common only among those who have followed Melkor. Aránayel is not of that sort; her craving for higher rank and greater recognition is not evil in and of itself, or so it seems. From what I have heard and seen, traits such as hers are quite common among the Atani. Ever do they struggle to reach above that place where they began, to improve their lot in life, for themselves and those who will come after them. Some do so for the benefit of their kin and descendants, or all their people, to increase their knowledge and wisdom and skill so that they might make their world a better place — as you have grown and learned from your experiences here in Arda, and have shared your growth with all. Others seek such increase for base reasons: greed, a craving to dominate others, self-serving pride. And still others do so for reasons that are neither noble nor utterly ignoble. Like Aránayel, theirs were gifts that gave them, for a time, the recognition and adulation of their peers, and by that, they came to gauge how others viewed them and approved of them. Rank to her is not a means to power; it is the only means by which she knows how to be certain she is loved. That is doubtless why she rejected you so long ago, Olórin. You offered her your heart, but you could not offer her an increase of status that was her only understanding of love. Indeed, she saw no wrong in refusing you, and that she should suffer diminishment for speaking the truth that was in her own heart is to her worse than a puzzle; it is a terrible injustice.”

The wizard’s brows arched with surprise as he followed Ványalos out of the house to begin his errands. “And you have deduced all this from one night in her company? I know you are neither a fool nor ignorant, Ványalos, but you have never struck me as one who spends long hours contemplating the lives and woes of others — in particular others with whom you have no acquaintance.”

The redhead shrugged, smiling crookedly. “I shan’t say that you have underestimated me, for in general, what you say is true. It is not that have no regard for others, but rather that my nature is not capable of bearing so many cares and concerns, as you often have done. But when those others are friends who have been as dear and as close to me as kin, then their joys and woes are part of my life as well, and what concerns them concerns me. When I first met you soon after your arrival in Lórien long ago, I knew at once that we would share such friendship and kinship, until the end of days and beyond. You came to this land in pain, and I wished ever after to understand what had caused it, so that if it lay within my power, you would never suffer so again.”

Olórin acknowledged his effort with a gracious nod. “And as much as you were able, you have done exceedingly well. Even when you irritated me, I always knew that your heart and your intent were good. But I have long since put my past history with Aránayel behind me. It sounds to me as if you have not.”

“Also true, to a certain extent. I had not met Aránayel until yesterday, but I have gathered what information about her that I could, and I have spent much time thinking upon it, so that I could winnow the truth from gossip and hearsay. Remarkable, I know, since I have a reputation as one of the greatest carriers of tales in Aman! If it surprises you to know that I have done this for more noble reasons, then I am pleased, for I never wanted you to think that I was prying into private matters or attempting to protect you when you were well able to protect yourself. I am not allowed to leave Aman — a just restriction, I must admit, for the more I hear of life in Endor, the more I understand that I am not well-equipped to deal with such an existence. Still, I have not ignored the world beyond the West. I have done what I can to see and understand what transpires across the Sundering Sea, and though I had never met a one of the Second-born until the hobbits came among us, I have noted their lives and their history with interest. And a good deal of what I have heard about Aránayel struck me as quite similar to the struggles for stature among the Children, especially the Atani. For some, it is a means of satisfying ambition, or acquisition, but for others, it is the only way in which they know how to measure the love of others.”

“Quite so,” the wizard said, his eyes slightly distant as he pondered all Ványalos had said. “If there is some part of this world that reflects the thought that gave life to Aránayel, it is this. I have seen much of it among the Eruhíni, and though I often found it to be an unpleasant expression of avarice or pride, at times, I was moved to pity when I saw such ambitions risen from a want of love that could only be understood only in such puzzling ways. Neither rank nor wealth of worldly possessions are a true measure of affection, but to some, that is all they were given by those who should have given them the love of their hearts. And

it is a double-sided coin, for some only understand the giving by such means, as others only comprehend the receiving through the same things. I have known children who loved their parents dearly, but were given no affection unless they worked and behaved according to the high standards of those parents, who found only achievement and success to be worthy of their love. And I have seen cold-hearted husbands shower their wives with wealth and gifts in abundance, thinking it to be the greatest expression of love when their ladies wished only to be closer to them in their hearts, but the very things that provided the wealth stood between them. They could only see the outer appearances; they had no perception of the greater treasure that lay within."

"And that is what I see in Arányel, Olórin. I have seen it before, in both my distant observations of the Atani and of the Eldar here in Valinor. Seeking a means to share rank and honor through association rather than personal merit, they make the sounds and gestures of friendship, but they are false. They love not the person, but the position, and the love that appears to come with adulation and honor. They delude themselves, of course, for love needs neither praise nor exaltation; it is often at its most noble when it is humble. But like Arányel, they knew too much of affection given in reward before they learned of it as something given for its own sake. She wishes to gather to her people of some importance, so that she might eventually become close to the even greater persons she sees in their acquaintance, and thus herself become beloved by all. It was not enough that you offered her your heart when you were young. You needed to offer her the hearts of others, but she could see only your humility, which made you in her eyes the most lowly of all. But things have changed, as you have changed."

Olórin continued to reflect upon his neighbor's conclusions, then suddenly groaned and laughed at the once, shaking his head not in disbelief but at the clarity of his own past opacity. "Yes, now I seem to have the blessings of the Highest of All, along with the friendship of persons who have status and renown unique throughout all of Arda! I believe you are right, Ványalos, though I could not have understood this all those years ago. I can only suppose that I have not realized this sooner because I have been deliberately steered away from Arányel's company and thus had only very old memories to guide me."

"You are certainly not to blame, whatever the case," Ványalos agreed. "I do not know that I would have understood this myself, had I not endured her interrogation last night. Until I started to wonder why she was so keen to know more about Frodo, I had only pieces of a picture that did not seem to belong together. Last night, she provided the key to assemble them into a whole. She had no desire to be near you again until she saw that your status had changed, no longer a small and eager servant of Lord Manwë, but one who had accomplished an impossible task against near-insurmountable odds, a task you should have shared with four others of our people, but were forced to complete alone. You have been praised by all the Valar, who themselves labored long to help save you from a terrible fate; during your journey from the North, you were shown hospitality and honor Arányel could not have imagined you would merit from what she knew of you long ago. You wear a token of Lord Eru's grace, and brought her to a house gifted to you by those who love you, many of high station. In that house waited a friend and companion who though small and seemingly weak achieved the downfall of Sauron himself, and his respect and affection for you is plain enough, even for her to see — as she also sees that he has your affection as well, in full measure. She wishes very much to be a part of this, to have it for herself. If she cannot make such a life on her own, she will try to do what others have done to achieve it — thus her curiosity concerning Frodo — and failing that, she will attempt to take what she desires from those who have it. I am not the greatest servant of Lord Irmo and Lady Estë, but I have learned much from them about the hearts and minds and dreams and motives of others. And I tell you, I looked upon Arányel as she spoke with me last night, and I saw the heart of someone who wishes to reawaken a part of your past so that she might share in your future, to be freed from a life she despises."

The wizard grimaced. "I would gladly release her from it, since I believe it was more harsh a punishment than she deserved, but I cannot go back and be again the person I was. There is a saying among the Atani, that there is no fury greater than that of a woman scorned. If she is seeking a relationship with me that cannot be, then I fear she will attempt some dreadful retribution."

"Which, perhaps, is why Ornedil attempted to warn us. If she perceives that she has been made to lose face again because what she wishes of you is denied, she will not take it kindly. I am now all but certain Ornedil felt that if she cannot hurt you, she will attempt to hurt the children placed in your care. She surely will not take your rejection as well as you took hers."

Olórin's laugh was rueful. "You are exaggerating, old friend, if you believe I took it well, but I know you speak from kindness. There is another possibility you have not considered, however." When the redhead blinked at him with curiosity, he explained. "She may have already contemplated this possibility, that if she attempted to ingratiate herself to me, I would rebuff her. Though her reasoning may differ from yours, that conclusion is sound. It is possible she has already deduced this, and knowing that wrath would be expected as her reaction, she plans to demonstrate how she has earned release from her penance by

deliberately arranging the circumstances to encourage my rejection, and then accept it graciously rather than become angered by it. It would be considerably more to her benefit, would it not?"

Ványalos wrinkled his nose. "Oh, certainly — which is why I doubt very much that she will choose such a path. In the past she could have simply spoken of you more kindly in your absence to win her pardon; she chose to spread falsehoods and malice instead. Who in Aman would believe her now, especially since she has already behaved in ways that have recently made others question her motives?"

The wizard conceded the point. "Few, I'm afraid. She has done little to make matters easier on herself."

"Just so. You are very wise, *pityandil*, and ordinarily I would not dream of disagreeing with your wisdom, but unlikely as it seems, there *is* one area in which I have greater experience than you. You counsel Lord Irmo, and very well indeed, but I have served him for far longer than you have been his advisor. It is not without reason that he has been called The Desirer, for he understands much of that aspect of the living heart, and from him I have learned to recognize those things that have earned him that name. As she spoke to me last night, I looked upon her and saw in her eyes little *but* her desire. It has nothing to do with love, unless that love be of herself. I have never seen a more terrible longing of any kind. I do not believe there is any act she would consider too heinous if it will gain for her what she longs to have: not only her freedom, but the high position she once enjoyed. She has no affection for you; you are but a stepping stone that lies between her and her goal, and if you attempt to block her path, she will but bring down her foot upon you with all her might. If that means using others to make you cooperate with her schemes, then she will do so without hesitation."

"I fear you are right," Olórin said, sighing softly. "I could offer to intercede for her with those who hold her fate in their hands, but I know it would do little to help. She must win this through her own choices and actions, as she won her punishment in the same fashion. Were I the only one who would be affected by her malice and manipulation, I could bear it, but it troubles me deeply that she will use the children and Frodo as pawns, the young ones because they are vulnerable, and Frodo because he is the only other person at hand whom she would regard as sufficiently prominent to be worthy of her attention."

To his surprise, Ványalos suddenly grinned. "Happily, that situation should not continue for long."

"You've said that before, or words to that effect," Olórin pointed out. He measured his companion's apparent good humor with a keen glance. "What have you and Frodo concocted in my absence?"

"Nothing to trouble you, I assure you. You and he are not the only persons in Lórien who have won renown, after all."

The wizard considered this for a moment. "Certainly not — but who have you coerced into participating with your plans? Aránayel has already met the Lord and Lady of Lórien, and seemed singularly unimpressed by them, as they are not among the most powerful and influential of the Valar. Melian has notoriety, but in general she leads a solitary life; I have seen her less than a handful of times since my return, and I would not ask her to suffer Aránayel's company simply as a diversion for my sake. Glorfindel might have been convinced to take on such a task, but he returned with Bilbo to Tirion two weeks ago, and has duties to discharge there before he feels he can return to his home here, permanently."

"Very true," Ványalos replied, his long queue bobbing across his back as he nodded his head. "But Glorfindel's home is not far from here, and there are many important travelers who come to Lórien. Some will be arriving soon — perhaps today, or tomorrow — and he has offered those travelers the use of his home during their stay. I would venture to say that there is at least one among them whose favor Aránayel might covet — more than Frodo's, certainly. If her attention is diverted to such activities, it may give you time enough to find a permanent home for the twins. In the safekeeping of their own people, they would be well protected. And with the matter of their immediate future settled, Aránayel would have little reason to remain here. Indeed, if during her time in Lórien she shows that she is capable of treating others with respect, she might at last win the parole she seeks."

"If there is sufficient time," Olórin agreed after another moment of reflection. "It sounds like a viable plan, but who have you jollied into taking on such a monumental — and potentially unpleasant — task?"

The tall Maia's expression turned impish. "Ah, now that would be telling you more than you want to know, and it shouldn't be long before you have your answer. Besides, there was no need to persuade anyone. It was by a remarkably happy

coincidence that while we were attempting to devise a method of dealing with Aránayel's potentially troublesome nature, we were told that certain noteworthy persons had already been planning a visit to Lórien. No coercion was required; we had but to mention our situation, and help was offered. You have a great many friends, Olórin, and I cannot think of a one who would not willingly do anything on your behalf. There is much to be said for humility and generosity. People remember those sterling qualities and forget instead your occasional fits of temper and stubbornness."

Olórin chuckled. "And it would seem that while you have a good grasp of generosity, humility will forever elude you. Well, we are what we were made to be, my friend, even Aránayel. If there will be an opportunity for us to keep her occupied so that no one will need to fully suffer her attentions while the fate of the children is settled, then we should avail ourselves of it and hope that there will be time enough for it to succeed."

Ványalos' mischievous expression faded to wistfulness as they came to the first of their destinations, the house of Failon, the Elven baker. "That is the greatest *if* in our plan, alas. For if there is one thing I have seen in common among persons with such tremendous desires, it is that they can be both as immutable and unpredictable as Time itself."

As the sun approached midday, they finished with the last of Ványalos' many appointed stops, and Olórin marveled at the sheer volume of items they had collected. "I cannot believe that you and Frodo and I could possibly consume this much food and drink in a single day!" he declared, since their baskets had long since been filled with a wide variety of things, and their final stop had added another three very large and full baskets to the total. "I hope you didn't plan to have me whistle for Shadowfax to carry all of this back for us. He has never taken kindly to being asked to act as a mere pack animal."

Ványalos laughed. "Truthfully, that hadn't even occurred to me, but never fear, we will manage. Mirimë's house is not far, and Frodo expected he would be finished with his business there by now — and here he comes, punctual as always. With his help, we should manage nicely."

The wizard's expression was wry. "Perhaps so, but I still cannot understand why there is so *much* of everything! Have you secretly taken to gluttony, Ványalos?"

His neighbor shook his head as he laughed once more. "No, although having the example of a hobbit to follow, I have greater reason than ever to enjoy such simple delights. I have collected more than usual because I am now providing for more than usual. Or have you forgotten that you now have two additional young mouths to feed under your roof? The Eldar may not need sustenance as the Atani do, but they still must eat, and soon, there will be other guests in our company who will doubtless appreciate refreshment."

Olórin snorted expressively. "An army or two, from the look of it."

Ványalos clicked his tongue. "Now, then, don't exaggerate, unless you wish to set a bad example and encourage my habits in that way. To be honest, I have no idea how many we might expect, but I felt it was better to make adequate preparations, since they will be coming soon."

"And sooner than we expected," Frodo said as he joined them on the porch of the house where they had just obtained an assortment of fresh fruits that did not grow in their glen to the east. He took the baskets and sacks that Ványalos handed to him while he explained. "Mirimë just told me that a party of riders from Eldamar was spotted crossing the river into Lórien, perhaps an hour ago."

"They made very good time, then," the redhead opined as he shouldered his own burden, once Frodo had his things well in hand. "But we should have more than enough time of our own to return home and put away our provender before they arrive."

Olórin harrumphed. "Now that they are practically on our doorstep, would you be so kind as to tell me *who* these guests might be?"

Frodo smiled crookedly, glancing up at his old friend with a touch of sheepishness. "Well, in all honesty, we're not entirely sure. We spoke — or rather, Ványalos did; I haven't any ability at all for speaking with people over great distances, much less going to and fro in the blink of an eye. Much of what we know came through Glorfindel, and that simply by accident. I'd wondered how

his trip with Bilbo to Tirion had fared, and when Ványalos was kind enough to find out for me, it came up that others would be traveling here, and would use Glorfindel's house during their stay. A number of names were mentioned, but the plans weren't definite, and we weren't sent final word as to who would be coming. I suspect someone wanted to keep this a surprise for all of us, not just for you and Aránayel."

Olórin reflected on this for a moment while he settled the burden in his arms, then sighed softly. "Then I do hope no one in Eldamar has decided this would be a good time to start toying with unpleasant surprises. I eventually came to tolerate the tradition of so-called practical jokes among the mortals in Middle-earth, but I never understood why some people took such great delight in them."

Frodo knew he was referring to Pippin, and as they headed toward home, he delighted in recalling some of his young cousin's more outrageous pranks. It felt good to him to be able to remember the joys of his past life in the Shire, before the Ring and all the terrible events that had injured him so deeply. He still missed the people he loved, but here in Aman, the memories he held of them remained sharp and bright as sunlight on clear water, never dulling with time or weariness. The clarity of his memories was a comfort to him, for he knew that as long as he remained here in this land that gave him healing and peace, the friends he had left behind would remain forever young, full of laughter and joy and boundless energy. That was a great comfort to him, to be able to close his eyes, summon up a memory of one he missed, and recall a time of happiness with them that was so vivid, he could hear their voice, smell their scent, and know that somehow, they were there with him again.

When they arrived at Olórin's cottage, the twins were seated near the wide windows at the back of the central gathering room, working upon a lesson in scribing that Aránayel had set them, as she was of the opinion their penmanship left much to be desired. They were quietly hard at work at a table set by the windows overlooking the back verandah, where the streaming rays of the noon sun provided more than adequate light for their work. She followed the others into the kitchen, her expression one of faint annoyance.

"I had not been told I would be left completely to my own devices on my first full day in Lórien," she told her host, the same hint of annoyance in her voice.

Olórin shrugged as he began removing things from the parcels they had settled on the table, handing them to Ványalos and Frodo, who put them away. "It was only for a few hours," he pointed out, "and it was not as if you had nothing else to do with the time. I thought you would prefer to have some privacy while you attended to the children's lessons, rather than put up with me loitering about. I had no desire to give the impression that I was spying on you."

For some time, Aránayel did not answer, but only stood by and watched as the others continued their tasks. It was plain upon her face that she was torn between the knowledge that she would have done just that, admitting it was so, and realizing that Olórin knew what she would not acknowledge. Finally, she appeared to reach some decision, and rather than speak, she returned to see if the children had completed the work she had set them.

When she was gone, Frodo caught Olórin's eye, his own expression full of relief, but he said nothing, not wanting to risk being overheard by sensitive ears only a short distance away. Ványalos, however, said aloud what he had not dared, albeit softly. "So, it would seem we missed seeing a display of Aránayel's legendary temper by the skin of our teeth, as they say. Do you suppose she is finally coming to understand the cage she made for herself, and in which she has been trapped for many long years?"

Olórin snorted. "If you mean is she beginning to see that she has only herself to blame for both her exile from Ilmarin and the disapproval she continues to encounter from others, then perhaps she is. She has never been a dullard, only lacking in vision beyond the narrow confines of the world as she would have it. But there is nothing surprising in this. As I told you, she has spent much of the past week on a campaign of ingratiating, and our arrival here only gave her new reasons to continue."

"What reasons?" Frodo wondered, but his question went unanswered, interrupted by the cry of a horn. It was still some distance from the glen surrounding the cottage, but near enough for the notes to be clearly heard. Olórin looked up from his task toward the eastward windows, his dark eyes widening with surprise.

"I know that call!" said he, astonished. He listened to the notes as they were repeated. "Yes, definitely. It has literally been ages since last I heard it, but I remember it well."

Both Ványalos and Frodo frowned, puzzled. “Who is it?” the tall Maia asked, mildly annoyed to realize that Olórin already knew more about who was coming than he.

But the wizard did not answer. Instead, he set aside the things he had been about to hand to Frodo and headed for the front door of the house. “Who *is* it?” Ványalos repeated more insistently as he and the hobbit hurried after Olórin, winning themselves a scowl from Arányel and curious glances from the twins as they passed through the common room to follow the wizard.

When they reached the wide front porch, they found Olórin at the outer rail, looking off to the east. There, just now coming into sight beneath the shadows of the trees, was a mounted party of travelers. There was perhaps a score of riders in the group, and they moved without hurry. The dappled sunshine beneath the woodland leaves made the colors of their rich clothing glow in clear gem-like hues; here and there, glints of gold and silver and even mithril caught the bright light like twinkling on wind-rippled water. Their voices and laughter declared their merry spirits, a counterpoint to the ever-present birdsong in the wood. One of the riders toward the front of the party bore a long golden staff, from which a silken banner fluttered in the breeze.

Ványalos did not recognize the device upon the banner, nor any of the riders he could see; he frowned much as Arányel had only moments before. “Olórin,” he said somewhat stiffly, “it’s wonderful that you still remember things you knew long ago, but would you please enlighten those of us who haven’t your memories to draw upon? What call did you recognize?”

Frodo did not speak, but it was plain that he also was keen to know the answer, as was the petulant Arányel, who just then emerged from the house, seeking an explanation for all the commotion, Melui and Lére discreetly following in her wake.

“A very old one,” Olórin said as he continued to watch the riders move through the woods toward his house. “We have never met in the flesh, but I saw him often long ago, when I walked unseen among the peoples of Middle-earth in the First Age. I heard the call of his horns and saw the brightness of his banners on days both joyful and tragic. His land is long vanished from the earth, and it warms my heart to see and hear his tokens again. I had thought I never would.”

“But *who*, Olórin?” Frodo finally asked, his curiosity piqued by his old friend’s remarks. “Who is it?”

The wizard did not answer immediately; he watched the newcomers moving into pool of sunlight on the far side of the clearing, his smile small and wistful. The cloth of the fluttering banner was blazoned with an emblem he knew well. As he gazed across the clearing, Olórin saw not only the approaching riders, but a time and a world long gone, a place he had visited in utmost secrecy, walking among the people unseen to kindle hope in hearts growing cold with despair. He had seen that land many times in his travels long ago, and the sound of the horn and the sight of the banner woke the memories to sharp clarity. The name of the one whose device was woven and stitched into the fine-crafted silk left his lips in a slightly startled manner as he saw the man himself, for this was, perhaps, the last person Olórin would have expected to visit his house so unexpectedly:

“Turgon!”