

MAN CENNIË I SÚRË

(WHO HAS SEEN THE WIND?)

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Glorfindel had all but forgotten the beauty and peace of the land of Lórien — not Lothlórien of Middle-earth, the Golden Wood that had long been home to some of the most noble of the Eldar, but that region of Aman that was also called the Garden of Valinor, home of the Vala Irmo, the master of dreams, who was sometimes given the name of his realm, as was his brother Námo, lord of Mandos. For many years, Glorfindel had become familiar with Mandos, the Halls of Waiting, for after his death in the sack of Gondolin, it was to Mandos he had gone, as did the spirits of all Elves who did not refuse the summons. His memory of the time he had spent in those strange halls was not as sharp as his recollections of the time before, especially the final days, in which he had fought to defend the family of Gondolin's fallen king and himself ultimately died battling a Balrog so that Idril and Tuor and their son Eärendil could escape. Perhaps it was just as well that his memories of Mandos were dim, for he had heard from others who had also been released, Elves whose memories seemed to be clearer, that it was a cold and lonely place, full of sorrow and pain and bitterness. He did not know if it was true for all who answered the summons to Mandos, or true only for those who spoke of such things, or perhaps not true at all, but from the dim recollections that would come to his thought from time to time, Glorfindel knew that his own stay in Mandos had been sad and lonely, bitter only in that he wished he had been able to do more to help save the people of Gondolin before death had claimed his body. It was not until after his release that he learned how the Balrog had also died in their struggle, a great good that in part had helped win him his release before many others who had fallen long before him.

He remembered waking in the house of the Vala Nienna, the place to which many who were released from Mandos were first sent, and where many awaiting the release of loved ones would dwell — after a fashion, a hall of waiting for the living. Nienna's servants had helped him readjust to bodily life after so many years spent severed from his *hröa*, but no kin or friends had been there to greet him and welcome him back. Those who had died in the wars in Middle-earth had yet to be released from the Halls of Waiting; those who had returned to Aman after the ban had been lifted had not been permitted to venture beyond Eldamar. That ban would also eventually be lifted, but in the days following Glorfindel's release, it was still firmly in place, and thus he found himself alone and uncertain in the chill lands in the far west and north of Aman.

But contrary to some beliefs, Nienna the Weeper was not as cold and heartless as her realm on the bleak shores of the Sea seemed to suggest, nor were the Maiar who were her servants. They had cared for Glorfindel and aided him in becoming reacquainted with life in the physical world, as much as they, beings who were naturally disincarnate, could manage. After she was certain she and her people had done all they could to help Glorfindel, Nienna sent him south, into the keeping of her brother Irmo and his wife, Estë the Healer. There, the climate was more hospitable and more of the Eldar made lasting homes. Even though he had no living kin, Glorfindel needed the presence of others of his kind to complete his transition back to a full life, and Nienna was both wise and compassionate enough to know what place would best serve his needs, in both body and spirit.

Nearly four thousand years after his rebirth, Glorfindel once again walked through that lovely land, having lately returned from Middle-earth after a long struggle against evil — only this time, he arrived in the Blessed Realm alive and aboard a white Elven ship, not drawn hither by the summons to Mandos. Glorfindel smiled at the memories of his first days in Lórien. It was so unlike both the rocky shores of Nienna's home and the tall mountains of Middle-earth that had held the valley of Tumuladen, where his liege-lord Turgon had built his kingdom of Gondolin. Glorfindel had, of course, seen many a woodland and plain in Endor — and many more after he had been sent back to assist Eärendil's son, Elrond, during the struggles against Sauron in the ages just past —

but in none of them, not even in fabled Doriath or beautiful Imladris or even the Golden Wood, had he ever beheld a place of such serene natural beauty and peace. Coming here those many, many years ago had been a balm to Glorfindel's shaken spirit, but even in such a wonderful place, he had felt lost and lonely. The others who lived here each had some purpose, from the Lord and Lady to the Maiar who served them and the Eldar who had settled in its groves and hills and near its many streams and pools and fountains. Without kin or liege, the reborn Elf had felt like a ship without keel or rudder, sail or oar, adrift, unguided. The healing grace of Lórien's Lord and Lady had helped him to feel more secure in his new *hröa*, but he had not been able to feel at peace in his heart until he knew that he had some purpose to give his life meaning.

Soon after his first arrival in this part of Aman, he learned that each day at the setting of the sun, the people of Lórien would gather to sing thanks for the day before sharing their evening meal, a custom that preceded the Sun itself. Though Glorfindel had joined them, he had not been inclined to sing, for he did not know how to give thanks for an empty and meaningless life. He had expected that eventually, he would be told to leave or perhaps be given some minor duty to fill his days, but as the months passed, such did not occur. When he had begun to wonder if his release from Mandos was actually a strange punishment, it came to him to him that perhaps his idleness was tolerated because he had been sent here not only for healing, but to find that greater purpose on his own. So he had taken to spending his days traveling through this wide and lovely land that was the heart of Valinor, seeing all the many varied aspects of it, but never finding anything in it that captured and held his interest for long.

One warm summer day, while traveling through a more wild and hilly part of southwestern Lórien that marched near the great plains that were part of the lands watched over by the Vala Oromë, Glorfindel paused to refresh himself at a particularly still and clear pool he had come upon, tucked into a grove of tall trees beside a broad and grassy meadow. He had thought he was alone when he stooped to drink the sweet cool water, but noticed only after he had drunk his fill that someone was lying upon the grass on the opposite side of the pool, staring into the water's glassy depths. The fellow snorted softly as the ripples caused by Glorfindel's intrusion reached his side of the pool.

"Now that's spoiled it," he said somewhat peevishly, but not terribly so. "Could you not have at least waited until I was done with my meditation?"

"Forgive me, I did not see you there," Glorfindel said contritely, "or I would not have disturbed you."

The fellow sighed, all trace of annoyance gone. "No, I suppose not. You are new to this part of Lórien, and thus could not have known I come here each day at this time to gaze into the waters and meditate, when I am not out and about on other errands. So I forgive your intrusion, Lord Glorfindel, for it was indeed accidental."

The Elf's eyes widened, surprised that this stranger knew his name, then narrowed as he tried to see him more clearly. But the shadows of the trees on that side of the pool were deep; all he could make out was that the fellow was fair-haired, and clad in gray the color of an early morning mist. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir," he said as he tried to focus on the other man, but failed. "You know my name, but I do not believe I know yours."

The stranger chuckled, a pleasingly musical sound, like the sigh of a warm spring breeze through new leaves. "That is so," he agreed as he lifted himself from his prone position to sit at the water's edge. "I have seen you in the settlements of the Eldar here in Lórien, but I know for certain that you have not seen me, for during the time you have been here, I have been abroad, or have had considerable business with Lord Irmo that did not allow me the luxury of making your acquaintance."

Glorfindel pondered this for a few moments, quickly reaching the obvious conclusion. "You are a Maia, one of his servants? I have met but a few."

"No doubt, for you have been seemingly restless, even here in a land of peace. Yes, I am Maia and I serve Lord Irmo, but as his counselor, not as one of his people. My master is Lord Manwë, and I am permitted to make my home here in Lórien by his grace, to be of assistance to Lord Irmo — and because I myself have a special fondness for this part of Aman. I came here for healing and rest once, long ago, and here I have stayed between the journeys I make on behalf of my master. Ilmarin is quite beautiful, but hardly large enough a place to house all of those who serve Lord Manwë and Lady Varda. You yourself came here for healing, so I am told, but I perceive that now, you seek something more."

"That is true," Glorfindel said, nodding as he rose from where he had crouched beside the pool to drink. "At the moment, I find myself still searching for some clue as to your name."

The Maia laughed, a bright sound that rang in the glade like the silver bells of Valmar. "Boldly said," he replied, still laughing as he also rose to his feet, even more gracefully than the Elf, "but also fairly spoken. I am called Olórin, and I will be surprised indeed if you claim to have heard of me."

Glorfindel searched his memory to determine whether or not that name was familiar while the Maia came out of the deep green shadows and around to his side of the pool, where slim shafts of sunlight pierced the canopy of trees above them as the wind stirred the leaves on their branches. In their brighter light, it was plain that Olórin was one of the ageless Ainur, but to Glorfindel's amazement, he was remarkably small. From what he had seen of both the Maiar and the Valar since his release from Mandos, they were a tall people, yet this particular Maia was no taller than Glorfindel himself, perhaps even somewhat less. Since the Ainur chose how they would appear when they manifested in a physical shape, the Elf wondered why, in a land where most folk, both Elda and Ainu, were tall and fair, any Maia who took a man-like form would have selected such an aspect to his appearance.

Still, in most other ways, he was much like the Maiar Glorfindel had seen since his emergence from Mandos: agelessly young, strong yet graceful, beautiful in a fashion that was faintly akin to that of the immortal Elves, yet also quite different, almost otherworldly. His eyes seemed dark, but at one angle were the bright blue of a summer sky, and at another the deepest blue of midnight; they were keen and fathomless, revealing the truth of the uncounted years of his existence, both in Arda and in the Timeless Halls, and all he had experienced and beheld since the first awakening of his thought. His hair was straight and flowing, unbound and unadorned, but required no other enhancement, for it was as bright as sunlight — not golden, as was Glorfindel's own hair, but shining and pale, almost white; it reflected the light that fell between the branches as if it had absorbed it. He was simply clad in plain travel clothes of silver-gray linen, but he was unshod, perhaps because he favored the sensation of the lush grass of this dell to the confinement of even the lightest slippers.

Glorfindel marveled at the odd incongruities of this Maia's appearance, at once both striking and unassuming. He wondered if Olórin had actually chosen all the aspects of his visible form, or if some had perhaps been imposed upon him by greater powers, for some purpose the Elf could not begin to imagine. Strangely, though he was neither majestic nor lordly in appearance, Olórin reminded Glorfindel of the king of the Valar, whom he had met briefly after his release from Mandos. During his life in Middle-earth, the Elf had always envisioned Manwë as a figure of power and majesty beyond the understanding of any of the Eldar, his images doubtless influenced by the tales of those older Elves who had once lived in Aman, and had beheld its king with their own eyes. In some ways, Glorfindel had found all they had said to be true, but in more ways, he had discovered that much had been left unsaid. The Lord of the Air and King of all Arda had not failed to live up to all Glorfindel had expected of him, yet though he was regal and profoundly dignified, he had also been surprisingly amiable, kind and gentle of both demeanor and heart. Glorfindel had not for a moment doubted that such gentility would vanish in an instant and be replaced by stern authority if circumstances required, but that had not been the face Manwë had shown to the newly reborn Elf. He been grateful for that kindness, and awed by it.

All of those unexpected qualities Glorfindel now saw, to a lesser degree, in the king's servant, met by chance in this glade in Lórien. Olórin was not of such lofty station and proud bearing as his master, but seeing him clearly as he stepped into the sunlight, Glorfindel knew he was indeed of Manwë's people and no other's. The Elf bowed graciously in polite greeting as his thoughts came full circle, returning to the matter he had attempted to call to mind before he had been distracted by the sight of the Maia.

"Then I fear I must surprise you, Lord Olórin, for I have indeed heard of you." When he saw Olórin's eyes widen much as his own must have a short time before, he smiled faintly. "Before I came to Lórien, I was in the keeping of Lady Nienna and her servants. When she told me of her plan to send me to the realm of her younger brother for my benefit, she mentioned that I might chance to meet a Maia called Olórin, one of her pupils who made his home here. She said that if I continued to feel estranged from my own people and was in need of someone with whom to talk to ease my heart and mind, I should seek him out. I had forgotten her advice until this moment, but it would seem that fate has guided my steps on the proper path, without my conscious thought."

Olórin laughed again even as he agreed. It was a sound that came readily from his lips, and carried not even the slightest hint of mockery or other unpleasantness in it. "So it would seem. I am pleased, then, to meet you, Lord Glorfindel, although I will admit that I would have been somewhat better pleased had fate led you to me but a few minutes later."

The humor sparkling in the Maia's dark eyes told the Elf that he was not truly serious, and Glorfindel took both the point and his gentle raillery with his own soft laugh and a wider smile, the first genuine feelings of even mild merriment he had felt since his release. "Yes, the timing was rather awkward, and I do beg your pardon for interrupting you, though it seems this meeting was preordained. You said you come here each day to gaze upon this pool and meditate. It is a lovely place, but so are many of the fountains and ponds and streams here in Lórien. What do you look for in these waters?"

"Oh, many things," Olórin said lightly, turning back to the now still surface of the pool. "Reflections, mostly, of the sky, the sun, the trees, the birds of the air, the wind...."

"The wind? Surely you mean ripples in the water, such as the breeze might stir — or the thoughtless actions of a wandering Elf. One cannot see a reflection of that which cannot be seen."

The Maia favored him with an oddly amused glance. "Indeed? Have you ever tried to see the wind?"

Glorfindel shook his head, not certain if this was another jest. "No more than I have tried to touch it. One cannot hold the wind, for it was not made to be contained and imprisoned so. Nor was it made to be seen."

"Ah, but you *can* touch it, and hold it contained, imprisoned for a time, before you set it free." When Glorfindel's brow creased in a puzzled frown, Olórin explained, in a good-natured manner. "You touch the wind with every step you take, my good Elf, when you feel the movement of the air upon your skin, and you hold it captive with each breath you draw to sustain life in your body. When you breathe, you do not inhale nothingness, for that which is not could do naught to bring life and health. And this was meant to be, in your nature as well as that of the air which moves about all of Arda, and is called the wind when it passes by. The movement of the leaves and grasses and the ripples of water are but the footprints of the wind, not the wind itself, and if one watches carefully, one can see more than such... aftereffects."

Olórin smiled brightly at the skeptical silence with which Glorfindel answered. "I see you do not believe me."

The Elf began to disagree, but hesitated a moment, then tried to be truthful. "Let us say that I have doubts, Lord Olórin. I know that your people have gifts and abilities mine do not, and I am not well acquainted with any of your folk. But never have I heard tell of anyone who could actually see the wind, even in the old tales of the world before my people first awakened. I am more inclined to think that you are jesting with me. How can I know otherwise?"

"Would you like me to show you?"

Again, Glorfindel hesitated, then nodded. "If that is possible, yes, my lord, I would. For perhaps if I can learn to see the wind, I might also learn ways to find the direction I cannot see for my life here in Aman."

"Then I would be happy to give you such instruction, if you will but give me something in return."

Glorfindel grimaced. "I have naught to offer as payment..." he began, but Olórin stilled him with an amiable gesture.

"This is not a price beyond your means. I ask only that you call me by my name, and nothing more. You will discover soon enough that I am far from the greatest of any of my people, quite likely the least of all. I am no lord; you owe me no oath or loyalty, and I have no desire to pretend to be more than I am."

The Elf considered his request, then smiled. "That I can indeed pay, and will do so gladly, if you would be kind enough to return the same favor. I was once a lord of my people, it is true, but I have been adrift for too long to feel as if I still merit such an honor. And you are no more my vassal than I am yours."

The flickering sunlight glittered in the Maia's eyes like the sparkle of kind but unheard laughter, as if he had expected that very response. "Fair enough," he said. "I have always been most comfortable giving instruction to those who are willing to look upon me as no more than their equal. I suspect you will be a very apt pupil, Glorfindel."

Looking back at that first meeting so long ago, the Elf lord still did not know if Olórin's assessment of his ability had been correct, but he understood now as he had not understood then that the Maia had been expecting him that day. He had been told of his coming to Lórien by Lady Nienna, and had carefully and surreptitiously watched the Elf ever since his arrival. That Glorfindel now knew these things did not matter, for the friendship that had grown between him and the Maia had been genuine, and had survived the last two thousand years, in which Olórin had been trapped in the guise of an ancient Man, laboring long and hard to guide the peoples of Middle-earth to break free of the threat of Sauron. What he had learned from Olórin those many years past had prepared him for his own task of returning to Middle-earth to assist Elrond in that same long struggle, and though he had never literally learned to see the wind, he had learned to see other things equally invisible and ephemeral, so that he could help protect his people in Endor of the Second and Third Age against the deceits and betrayals of an Enemy that had been the lieutenant of the Great Enemy who brought about the ruin of Gondolin.

Equally important to Glorfindel was his friendship with the Maia who had been his teacher. He had become a loyal follower of Olórin as much out of love for the individual as out of respect for his great wisdom and knowledge. Unlike others the Elf had come to know in Valinor during those years, Olórin had a remarkable sense of humility that was neither false nor excessive. He understood the value of those gifts he had been given, and did not lack in self-esteem, but neither did he glory in his own self-worth. He had been made for a purpose, he often told Glorfindel, as were all of Eru Ilúvatar's children, both of thought and of the physical world. He was not yet entirely sure what that purpose might be, but he took great joy in the search for it, and in helping others who were on that same path toward enlightenment.

Glorfindel had learned much from him, and though he had not refused the Valar's request that he return to Middle-earth to aid the great-grandson of his lost liege in his efforts against Sauron, he had been sad to leave Lórien and the teacher who had helped him find new purpose for his life. He had not known that they would meet again in the mortal lands of Endor, the Maia embodied in a strange guise that Glorfindel had not immediately recognized. Once he had, and had acclimated himself to this profound change in his mentor, the Elf had done what he could to support him in his mission. And when the end at last came to both their tasks in Middle-earth, Glorfindel had been more than ready to return to Aman, where he had once thought he could never feel at home.

Since his return, the Elf lord had spent much of his time assisting Elrond in establishing his household with Celebrían in Tirion — giving special help to Bilbo, since he had become friends with the old hobbit during the years Bilbo had spent in Rivendell — but even though the great Elven city reminded him strongly of Gondolin, which had been built in its likeness, Glorfindel did not feel at home in it. Years ago, his first sight of Tirion had wakened both longing and distress in Glorfindel — longing for the land he had died defending, distress in that the sight of Tirion reminded him of all he had lost — but such feelings had vanished from his heart. His life had changed greatly since the days when he was one of the lords of Turgon's kingdom, head of the now lost House of the Golden Flower, and he no longer yearned for things and places long gone. He had seen too many years of war and strife, and now wanted above all to enjoy peace, of a kind he had come to know only in Lórien. That was the home of his heart, and when he had finished his work in Elrond's house, it was there he returned.

He had been to Lórien several times since his arrival in the Blessed Realm, less than a year before, but he had not yet been able to stay as long as he would have liked, feeling that other obligations should be attended first. But they were now by and large finished, and he was at last able to return to the place he had missed during his many years in Middle-earth, the place he had come to think of as home. He had his own dwelling in the wooded hills of Lórien, a small house that was nothing at all like the home he had once known in Gondolin, or the one he had known in Rivendell, but it was more than enough, especially here in this most beautiful of lands, surrounded by all the people he had come to know and love when they had helped guide him back into a joyous and meaningful life. He had returned late that morning, and had easily resettled into his home in the Elven enclave, spending his time not with such matters as unpacking — which he had done months before — but enduring the greetings of his neighbors who were glad to have him back in their midst for more than a few weeks. After he had given them what tidings he had to offer of recent doings in Eldamar, he excused himself so that he could give greetings to other friends who lived in more distant parts of this peaceful land. Several hours after the sun had fallen from the noon, his path took him to the great meadow in the westernmost part of Lórien.

Standing atop a gentle rise to the east of it, he looked across the windswept grasses and its surrounding woodlands and streams with a fond smile, thinking back to the first time he had traveled here. Then, the meadow had been empty; today several horses were grazing on its sweet grass. One lifted his head when he saw the Elven lord, and called out his greeting. Glorfindel

lifted one arm in a friendly salute acknowledging that polite welcome, and he knew that if Shadowfax was here at this time, his master would not be very far away.

Although some things had changed during the years he had spent assisting Elrond and the remaining Eldar in Middle-earth — additions or alterations to the cities and residences of the immortal inhabitants of Aman — the land itself was very much the same as Glorfindel remembered it. Things built or wrought or shaped by hands and hard labor were admirable, but the land itself held an ageless beauty that no amount of time or change could sully. The green of lush grass, the sparkle of clean water, the blue of a clear sky, the majesty of towering mountains and clouds and stately trees that reached up to touch the heavens... no matter how much they seemed to change to the eye, they forever remained the same in the heart. That was what Olórin had been trying to tell him on that day so long ago, when Glorfindel had first come to this place. The wind was perhaps invisible to the eye, but the beauty it wrought was clearly seen in the heart, where one could appreciate not only its effects upon the world, but the simple fact that it existed, and brought with it life to all of Arda's creatures. The Noldor had suffered not because they made war upon an ancient and powerful Enemy, but because they had desired things of ephemeral value and had been blind to what was truly important. They saw the magnificence of the Silmarilli, the brilliance of their light, but they had failed to appreciate the true worth of their light until it was too late. They had only seen the footprints of the wind, and had given no thought to the wind itself.

Glorfindel moved quietly from the meadow into the grove where he knew that quiet little pool still lay. As he came to the edge of the glassy water, he saw Olórin precisely where he expected him to be, where he had always been at this time during his days in Lórien, lying upon the soft cool grass and gazing into the still waters. Like the rest of the West, he was very much as he had been before, yet not quite the same. His garb was simple, as it had always been, but was now of white rather than gray, and in one hand, he held a thin and seemingly fragile band of clear crystal, a circlet he seldom removed, as it had been given to him by Eru Ilúvatar Himself, Who had also instructed him to wear it always until he was told to set it aside. The instrument of an unexpectedly necessary healing, Olórin had taken that command to heart, for he had no desire to invite the return of the terrible and life-threatening weakness that had come upon him after his release from the body in which he had been sent to Middle-earth. He seldom removed it, and when he did, it never left his person. Why he had removed it now, Glorfindel could not discern, but the intensity with which he concentrated upon the pool told the Elf that his arrival had not been noticed. Smiling, he bent to find a small stone, and, taking careful aim, tossed it into the pool. When the ripples of its impact reached the other side, the Maia snorted softly, but without annoyance.

"If you wished to attract my attention, Glorfindel, you could have done so less disruptively. I knew you were coming when I heard Shadowfax call out to you as you crossed the meadow."

The Elf laughed as he moved to join his friend at the opposite side of the pool. "Ah, yes, I forget that Shadowfax speaks more clearly and with greater purpose than ordinary horses. My apologies then, old friend. I was merely thinking of the first time I came to this glen, many years ago. What elusive things do you look for in the waters today?"

"The past," Olórin said, blowing lightly across the surface of the pool. As the pebble had caused ripples to disturb it, the passing of his breath calmed them back to perfect stillness. When the waters were once again mirror smooth, he considered what he saw in all they reflected, and sighed. "For the first hundred years after I was sent to Middle-earth as one of the Istari, I was startled every time I glimpsed my reflection."

Glorfindel chuckled as he lowered himself to sit beside the Maia. "That does not surprise me. I know that once I realized who you truly were beneath that unusual... disguise, I was quite taken aback by it whenever I saw you, for a good number of years. You looked so very unlike the person I had known here in Aman, it was nearly impossible for me to reconcile your physical appearance of an aged Man with the very lively spirit that lived within. It was not helped by the fact that you were not quite the same even in a spiritual regard, as your embodiment had taken so much of your memories and knowledge from you. Once I was convinced that you were indeed my old friend and teacher, I was angry for a time — not with you, but with those who had sent you to do a tremendous task so terribly crippled. The wisdom behind giving you an aged appearance I grasped fairly easily, but I could not understand why the Valar sent five of their wisest and most intelligent Maia servants to aid in the struggle against another Maia, but allowed them only very limited ability and knowledge. It would have been kinder, I thought, for them to send some of the most powerful of my people, who at least had great motivation to see Sauron defeated."

Again, he chuckled, but more ruefully. "Of course, after a time, I came to realize that such motivation was precisely why they did not make that choice. My people would have been too greatly tempted to seek vengeance, not a justly won defeat, and they

would have been little interested in uniting all the peoples of Middle-earth to rise against the Enemy. I dare say they would have likely disdained even a new Alliance with Men, for the houses of the Second-born that remained were fast losing the strength and dignity that remained to them after the fall of Númenor. I can well imagine how my own late king of Gondolin would have reacted to the actions of Arvedui and Eärmur in the battles with Angmar! Like as not, he would have left Men to their own fate and sought only to ally himself with the Elven powers remaining in Middle-earth. And that would ultimately have led to an even greater defeat. Even at the time of the wars with the Witch-king, it seemed clear to me that the fate of Middle-earth would not lie in the hands of any one people, but of all its people, from those we called high and mighty to the ones we thought of as weak and simple, of little consequence in such important matters. I cannot imagine that, given no constraints, you would have revealed yourself as a powerful emissary of the Valar, come to defeat Sauron's might with your own, but Saruman at the least would have, and I suspect that before the end, the stubbornness of the Free Peoples would have frayed even your patience beyond endurance, and prodded you to do more than perhaps you should have. I am given to understand that it was your embodiment as a mortal and the restrictions placed upon you that made it possible for you to be so sorely wounded by the thousands of years you spent toiling among the evils in Middle-earth, and for that, I wish there had been another way. But there was wisdom in this method, and in the end, I believe it was the best way to achieve the goal of removing the threat of Sauron, forever, even if it was not the best or kindest method for you."

Olórin looked up, smiling. "Ah, but in the end, it *was*, Glorfindel, despite all that has happened. If I had not been sent in such a way, hampered and restricted by that human embodiment and the commands laid upon me by the Valar, I would not have shared with you the experience of simultaneously defeating and dying in combat with a Balrog. If that had not occurred, the Balrog would have remained as an unperceived threat, and might well have been called to ally itself with Sauron in his desperation to crush all who opposed him. That certainly would have gone ill for everyone in Middle-earth, but because we stumbled across him in the dark of Moria, we were given a chance to remove his hidden threat before he had a chance to come forth and wreak havoc. And even the fact that I was forced to face him as a Man and not as an unhampered Maia served a greater purpose, for if I had not died then as I did, I would not have strayed beyond the circles of the world, out of time, to be caught by the hand of Eru Ilúvatar Himself. That alone was a blessing unlooked for that I shall cherish until the world is remade and my people are freed of our vow to remain here in Arda until its end. Had I perished wholly as a Maia, I would simply have returned to Aman, and either stayed there or been sent back to complete my work in another fana. And you are right, long before the end, I would likely have grown impatient with the obstructions and foolishness of stubborn and short-sighted people — even as a Man, I fell prey to those weaknesses, but being limited as I was, I was less tempted to try to force their wills and actions with my own. I do admit that I was greatly dismayed to find that so many years lived as a Man in mortal lands tainted by Morgoth had profoundly injured my very spirit, but even that led to a greater good than I could have anticipated."

He raised the hand that was holding the circlet. Even in the shade beneath the thick canopy of leaves on the surrounding trees, it caught and reflected every tiny bit of light, glittering like the starry heavens on the clearest midnight imaginable. Olórin closed his eyes for a moment, not wincing at the brilliance of the captured radiance, but appreciating how it reflected the purpose of the thing, drawing to it the power of the Secret Fire that gave life to all the world, and in turn gave what it gathered to the Maia so that he might slowly be healed of all he had suffered. When he opened his eyes again, he looked fondly upon the circle of crystal, and smiled softly. "For all that I am called the wisest of my people, I can be terribly foolish," he admitted. "I would have put this gift aside or given it away or somehow hidden it, because it embarrassed me to have been given such a thing by Lord Eru — not because I did not appreciate its beauty or feel grateful for knowing that He approved of my work these past two thousand years, but because I did not believe I had earned such high praise, and I did not want others to think I had grown too proud. Yet the truth is I had not grown proud enough. I feared becoming Curumo, Saruman. He would have reveled in such praise and even more in such an emblem of honor, and I was so repelled by the thought that I might fall to his weakness, I saw Lord Eru's gift as a test, not as the act of kindness and support He had made it to be. Such foolishness, Glorfindel. I was seeing the movement of the grass and the swaying of the branches, and not watching the wind itself. By now, I certainly should have known better."

Glorfindel chuckled as he nodded. "Indeed you should have. But after so many years spent in a form that disconnected you from what you truly are, is it any wonder? It seems to me, looking back on all that has happened, that Eru Ilúvatar knew this would be your reaction, and indeed counted upon it, to make one last attempt to instruct the Valar in matters they had failed to learn time and again. If He used you as His instrument of teaching, He was doing nothing more than you yourself have chosen to do for much of your life here in Arda, helping others to grasp difficult concepts, to see the wind rather than just the things that are moved by the wind."

Olórin looked back at the Elf, eyes sparkling brightly. "Quite true. Had He asked me to be His instrument in this, I would have said yes, no matter what He asked me to do, and He knew my heart so well, there was no need for Him to ask. I bear no ill

will in this, for I made the choice myself when I chose to attempt to refuse His gift, and needed to learn my lesson about misplaced humility."

"Which I am certain you will not need to learn again. So what part of the past are you looking for so intently in the pool today?"

"Naught of such significance, I'm afraid. As it took me a hundred years to grow accustomed to the form I was given as one of the Istari, I grew *so* acclimated to it that I now find myself having difficulty remembering what I had looked like before! Absurd, but whenever I see my reflection, I find myself flinching much as I did when I first arrived on the western shores of Middle-earth. It seems that I have not changed much at all from what I can recall of the way my fana manifested before, but there is still something that feels... different."

Humoring his friend, Glorfindel glanced from him to his reflection in the water, then back again. "Well, as I recall, your ears were not at all Elven in those days, save for the times you went among my people as one of us, and then you looked not at all as you do now. Not that I should call their current form Elf-like — more Halfling-like, I should say."

Olórin grunted softly. "Yes, that observation has been made a number of times, starting with Frodo and Bilbo. That, actually, is not what surprises me. There is more of what I am at heart in the hobbits than I could have dared to admit in Middle-earth, and more, I think, than even Lord Eru acknowledged openly. I suppose that when all is said and done, I am simply not used to... well, *not* looking old! Absurd, as I said, but there it is."

"Then why do you not change your appearance to something that will be less disturbing? You have the ability again, do you not?"

Olórin nodded. "Yes, I am sufficiently healed to manage that without trouble. But I have seldom chosen my appearance, as you well know. When I took on the form of an Elf, I merely took whatever shape would have best suited what and who I am, had I indeed been one of the First-born of the kindred among whom I was living. That is always the way of it. My appearance is nothing more than a manifestation of what I am at heart, put into the form of the *kind* of being I choose. So now, when I take form as one of the Eruhíni, I have ears rather like those of the hobbits, whom I had never known before my long mission to Middle-earth."

Glorfindel saw his point. "It would seem, then, that in your true heart, you are not an old Man. What you were in Middle-earth was not of your own choosing, was it?"

The Maia shook his head emphatically, brushing back the long bright hair that had fallen across his face with the motion. "No. I do not know who chose the appearance of the bodies we were given — several of the Valar, I think, and perhaps Lord Eru as well. There were some aspects of them that mirrored our common fanar here in Aman — Curumo arrived with dark hair, as he had always preferred here, Aiwendil was tall and slender, just as he was when he served Lady Yavanna, and the others also retained some traits of their favored fanar. I was shorter than all of them, which was the same both here and there, and my hair was as near to the same as it could be while retaining mortal coloring for a human of the age I was supposed to be. Otherwise... I don't know how much the form I had as a mortal Istar would have been the same, were I to take the fana of an old Man in the way I adopt all other veils. I could make a trial of it, to see how they might differ, but I don't believe that is the answer that will settle my discomfort. To be blunt, I don't honestly *want* to be an old anything, not old as I was in Middle-earth."

"Very true," Glorfindel said with a wry smile as Olórin pushed himself away from the water to sit upright beside the Elf. "Literally speaking, you and all the other Ainur are much older than any of us who were born in Arda, but you are the children of Ilúvatar's thought, not His children of this incarnate world. Age is meaningless to those who came into being before the existence of time itself. Yet since you have taught me to look beyond that which can be perceived by ordinary senses, I have come to realize that there is indeed a form of age among your people that can be seen with more than just the eyes."

Olórin arched one pale eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh?"

The golden head nodded. "A thought does not have wrinkles and creases and creaking joints and gray hair to show how poorly it has worn over time; it becomes stagnant and wearisome if it will not change and grow. You have always seemed young to me, not because you were, as you have said, the last of your people to come forth from Ilúvatar's thought, but because you have

ever been willing to learn and explore and discover and try to understand more than just those tasks which have been appointed to you. Yet to my heart, others of your people have truly become *old*, in the sense that they have brought about an unpleasant and unhappy decline of their spirit by accepting only those things that are a part of what they consider their specific function. They have no curiosity, no eagerness to be or know more than they were in their first moment of existence, and thus they have fallen into useless stagnation.”

Olórin sniffed softly. “A lack of curiosity or little desire to reach beyond the limits of their original purpose could describe many of the Ainur, my good Elf, but I would not call more than a few of them uselessly stagnant. Some, perhaps. A closed mind ultimately withers and dies. Life can go on in the body, but if the spirit within is withered... you are right, it becomes old, inflexible, without purpose, and there are some of my people in particular who seem to have withered in that way. When their part of the Music was accomplished, they simply had no interest in exploring the rest of Arda, to see what else they might do. That is a fair description of Tom Bombadil; he is so strongly bound to that small part of the Music that fashioned one particular corner of Middle-earth, he no longer even remembers that he once was a Maia with another name and another purpose. I fear much the same happened to Aiwendil during his time as one of the Istari. Strangely, they both seem young in many overt ways — almost childish, in fact — but they have aged greatly in their spirits.”

“But for all you have endured in the years I have known you, and in the years before we first met, you have not,” Glorfindel said. “If I had seen a face and a body so tremendously different from the one I knew for countless years each time I saw my reflection for nearly twenty centuries, I suspect I would have trouble adjusting to the fact that my appearance had profoundly changed yet again, even if the face I saw was a familiar one. You have always struck me as a remarkably flexible person, Olórin, but you would not be the person I have come to call my friend if you did not react at all to such a sudden and marked change. If you did not have *any* traces of vanity, I would think you as dead at heart as those who withered from stagnation. Even the most humble of persons need a sense of dignity and self-worth, or they *are* nothing. There is a vast difference, after all, between humility and humiliation.”

The Maia laughed, accepting what he knew to be a gentle remonstrance with good humor, as he knew it had been offered. “Wisely spoken, my friend. I shall make every effort to remember this when I see my reflection and feel the urge to wince. So, have you returned to Lórien to stay, or is this merely to be another brief visit?”

The Elf grinned in return. “This time, I plan to stay, as much as you ever do between your journeying — which I understand, will be vastly less than it was, if the Valar pay heed to certain warnings Lord Eru gave them concerning you.”

A sound not unlike a strangled splutter escaped the Maia. “Was every word spoken on that day repeated and spread throughout all of Aman?” Olórin asked with mild exasperation.

Glorfindel shrugged, still thoroughly amused. “Since I was not there to hear the whole of it first hand, I cannot say, but I suspect it was indeed. You must remember, Olórin, that among the exalted persons present on that occasion, you also had two of the most incorrigible carriers of tales I have ever known, your neighbor Ványalos and Bilbo Baggins. If there had been a scribe present to record the incident, he could not have taken down each word and nuance of how they were spoken as accurately as either of those two.”

The wizard glanced to the heavens, as if beseeching higher powers to spare him from such things. “Yes, I do keep forgetting that. The fact that Lord Eru ‘borrowed’ Ványalos’ typical appearance to give us — and Frodo in particular — a visible form humbled him into better behavior for all of a week or two, and Bilbo had regained his typically inquisitive bluntness even before that remarkable visitation ended. It is true, none of the Valar have asked any labor of me since that day, at least none that I had not already made plain I was willing to give. I have spent so many years as a wanderer, both here and in Middle-earth, it is very pleasant to at long last have a home where I can stay for as long as I like, and friends both new and old with whom I can share it. I would have been sad to return to Aman, leaving behind all the friends I had made during my years of struggle and strife, just as I would have felt adrift and unwanted even in Middle-earth if I had known no one but my fellow Istari. I was never well acquainted with Alatar and Pallando, Curumo and I have always had oddly strained relations, and though Aiwendil and I had been on friendly terms, we had not been especially close, and his approach to his task tended to separate us, perhaps more than it should have. I had once known Galadriel, but while we were amiable enough, she had a notorious tendency to rebel against any she perceived as figures of authority. That had changed by the time we met again in Endor, but her life and her responsibilities had

also changed, greatly, and though we became friends and supporters of one another, it was not at all the same as the friendship you and I had known — once you were able to see past that mortal guise and realize who I was, of course.”

His smile was both wistful and earnest. “I cannot tell you how grateful I was to find that you were not only eventually able to see beyond the shell in which the Valar had all but imprisoned me, but that its decidedly uncomely appearance and the many ways in which my skills and memories were hampered by it made no difference at all to you — that you still remembered me, and treated me as your friend. Though I was not denied all my abilities as a Maia when I was thus embodied, from the first moment I awoke in that body, I understood the terrible loneliness of being mortal. Death is nothing compared to the isolation of the mind and spirit that is all the Second-born know from cradle to grave. I was not so fully cut off from others as they, but having known the freedom of my people, the restrictions that were imposed upon me felt as dreadful as if I had lost all sight and hearing. They are accustomed to it, for they know no other life, but it frightened me at first, and in time taught me to both pity and respect them all the more. What they accomplish in their lives, brief though they seem, they accomplish with only those skills and senses they are given at birth. They can learn new crafts and train their bodies to great strength, but they can never reach out with their minds to touch the spirit of another, and know that they are not alone in the world. They are to be admired, for they do much with what we think of as little, and perhaps when they reach the end of their days within the circles of this world, they go on to another to learn and achieve more than ever we shall. It is both a sobering and humbling thought.”

“It is indeed,” Glorfindel agreed. “I have had the honor of working beside Men of three ages of this world, and though at times they have frustrated me greatly, I came to understand that my own frustration must be insignificant beside theirs, for my people were given great gifts that they were not, and yet they strove to establish a lasting place in Arda, as noble as any house or kingdom of the Elves. They have suffered setbacks, yet so have my people, and in the end, they will outlast us. I also grew to admire them, but it is also very hard to become close to them, for their lives are brief, and the joy we know with them doomed to be lost all too soon.”

“It is, but there is one consolation, that when the full Music of Arda is complete and all Lord Eru’s designs for it fulfilled, the world will be remade, and those we have lost will be found once again. I have held fast to that knowledge in all my friendships with the Atani. It does not erase the sting and sorrow of losing them, but it is a comfort for the future. I was saddened by the thought that I would quite abruptly leave behind all my mortal friends when I returned home, and thus I was filled with joy when Lord Manwë told me that I could indeed bring Frodo and Bilbo to Aman to find healing and rest. I was also delighted when I found that you would also be taking ship with us. It was as if I had come full circle, from the Maia who had once been your teacher, to a strangely bound and hampered old Man who could only cling to tattered memories of what I had once been — and to the more fleeting ties I forged with mortals whom I had come to love, but from whom I was inevitably sundered — and back to a Maia who had learned from those experiences. I have many new friends I made while I was in Middle-earth — though I have also lost many to the Gift of Ilúvatar — yet I also have the blessing of renewing my friendships with those I knew and loved before I was sent on that mission, whose company I can now enjoy again in a place of peace and beauty. There are very few I knew before that journey *and* during it, and I am glad that they and the ties between us remain, now that it is done. It is a gift I have been given, Glorfindel, by the Valar, and Lord Eru, and all my friends, such as you. I will never forget the kindness and support — and the love — you have offered me since first we met in this charming little glade.”

The Elf smiled broadly. “I have given no more than I was fortunate enough to receive. As much as I believe I was intended to come here to meet you that day for my own benefit, I believe that our friendship was also meant to be, in preparation for that time when you would go to Middle-earth as one of the Istari, doomed to a wandering life of hard labors that would give you few opportunities to forge lasting ties with any of its inhabitants, even among the Eldar.”

Olórin considered that possibility as he watched a ripple of leaf-filtered sunlight move across the still waters. “Perhaps so,” he said. “I would not have thought that possible, given that the idea of sending the Istari did not truly occur to the Valar until well after you yourself had gone back to Endor to assist Elrond — not, at least, so specifically that they would have known that I would be one of the messengers chosen for that mission. But it seems that a Power even greater than the Aratar has been looking after my welfare for a long time, and He is able to see far more of what is likely to come than any of His children, of any kind. I would not be surprised to discover that you were released from Mandos at that particular time because it came to Lord Námó’s thought that he should do so to fulfill the Music as it had been revealed to him, but what he was in fact heeding was a prompting sent to him by Lord Eru. Each of us has destinies we might fulfill if we but try to sing our own songs in harmony with those of He Who made us. It is not always easy to know how the notes we choose now will fit into the greater Music of the future, or if they will indeed fit at all, but try we must, as best we are able with those powers and gifts that were given us. Whatever the case, I am

glad that matters turned out as they did. I was delighted to see you in Elrond's house when I first came there. It was like discovering a single beacon star on a dark and clouded night. It mattered little that you did not recognize me at once, or even if you recognized me at all. It was a tremendous relief to me to see a person I knew and recognized quite clearly, when so much of my mind and memory was shrouded in confusion."

The Elf nodded. "I eventually came to understand that, though I was rather confused myself, at the time. For some years, I presumed that you had not told me your true name at once because you had been forbidden to do so, and when I realized that you had been unable to remember, so great was the burden of the mortal shell you had been commanded to assume, I wept. I at least was able to return to Middle-earth whole and in full possession of all the memories and abilities that were mine. It angered me for a while, to know that you had been so dreadfully diminished in the name of the same struggle we had both been sent to undertake. It seemed terribly unfair, and I felt the Valar had been cruel to make such a demand of you. I had not understood the power of the Ring, then, for it still lay asleep in the Anduin, and I had not been among those who faced Sauron in the great battle at the end of the Second Age. It was only when I began to see how Saruman's keen interest in the thing was beginning to undermine his purpose and poison his mind against us — an interest that grew without him ever being in the presence of the Ring itself — it was only then that I saw the full wisdom of what the Valar had done."

"The Ring was the most terrible temptation that I think has ever existed in Middle-earth," Olórin agreed. "The Silmarils sparked tremendous covetousness, but they were fashioned in Aman, not in Endor, and their power came from the West. Sauron's Ring was firmly rooted in the East. It needed to be destroyed in the place where it had been wrought, but there, it also presented the greatest danger. If we had gone as we truly were, as Maiar with no inhibitions upon us, we would all too likely have disdained that danger, believed that we could use it without being corrupted by it, and fallen. Even in his lesser state, Curumo succumbed to that belief. It would have stricken him much more quickly had he not been restrained by the forms in which we were sent. They brought not only a lessening of power, but doubts, and a deeper understanding of our limitations, with or without such constraints."

Glorfindel gave a small snort. "I do not think Saruman ever achieved such an understanding of himself. Of course, I suspect he never tried, or even saw the use of trying. He seemed quite patient in that he always recommended caution in our dealings with Sauron and his minions, but it was the patience of a spider in its web. All he did in Middle-earth had in it some ulterior motive that was for his own benefit, not that of the people he was sent to aid. I did not see that in him at first, but then, I had been given no reason to look more deeply. But I knew you well enough to see that what you were at heart was neither changed nor clouded by mortal embodiment. I cannot imagine that you would have ever given in to the temptation of the Ring, but sometimes, evil finds the weaknesses in the purest hearts, and corrupts them. Perhaps if you had not been so restrained, you would have had the strength to resist its lure, no matter what — but then, it is also possible that under those same circumstances, it would not have occurred to you that the only certain way to defeat Sauron was by destroying the Ring. You would have sought some way to cure him of an evil that could not be cured, because of your great pity for others, even your enemies. It took embodiment as one of the Atani — real and not feigned — for you to see the dangers of Sauron from the perspective of those who were made to dwell in Arda, who were doomed to either die beneath his fist or live under his yoke if he was not eliminated once and for all. Even we Elves never gained that perspective quite so well, for we could leave for the safety of Aman, or die, and perhaps be returned after our time in the Halls of Waiting. It was the right choice, after all, but only if you and your fellow Istari properly availed yourself of the lessons to be learned by leading a human life. It does not surprise me that Saruman failed, for I am given to understand that he was ever too proud for his own good, but it rather shocks me that all of your brethren somehow failed as well."

Olórin sighed, one finger distractedly tracing a line of the twined crystal threads that fashioned the circlet in his hand. "It often shocks me as well," he admitted. "Curumo was all but predisposed to such a failure — though I would not have said so before we departed to begin our mission — as was Alatar. Both of them were brilliant and gifted, much more than myself."

Glorfindel chuckled. "Or so you thought."

The Maia accepted the correction with a small gesture of concession. "Or so I thought. I have never been especially good at measuring my own merit. But even before we were sent, I knew their common habits. They were forever seeking praise for all they did, even the smallest of tasks, rather than taking pleasure in the satisfaction of a job well done. Pallando and Aiwendil... They had their own gifts, and their own weaknesses. Pallando was ever a follower, too easily inclined to take the lead of others rather than find the path that was right for him alone. And Aiwendil was wise in the ways of the *kelvar* and *olvar*, but less wise in the ways of people. Here in Aman, he served Yavanna well, but often, he allowed himself to become so lost in one task, he neglected others. His love of the birds and beasts and plants of Arda made him a good champion for those things under Yavanna's care, but that same

devotion made him less well suited to serve the free peoples of Middle-earth, whose well-being was a far greater part of our purpose. Without them to resist Sauron, there would be no safety for the lesser things of the world, which Sauron would use or destroy as he saw fit.”

“That is what I surmised when I realized that you were alone in remaining true to the tasks for which the Istari had been sent. If I could have done anything to make up for all you lost in losing their help and support, I would have, Olórin. At the very least, I was sorely tempted to ride out and find those who remained to tell them precisely what I thought of their treason, intended or not.” He gave a short, rueful laugh. “But it would have served no purpose — indeed, it may well have made matters worse, especially with Saruman. He resented anyone who took your side, and even more he hated those of your allies who spoke out against him. I fear I had long since fallen onto Saruman’s bad side, and in the end, berating him would have been unworthy of all you had taught me before I came back to Middle-earth. I sometimes think he met with too kind an end, but when I manage to set aside my feelings of anger toward him, I realize that by his own actions, he lost all that he had ever had, both in Aman and in Endor.”

“So it would seem.” The wizard’s gaze returned to the still waters of the pool; a shadow dimmed his face that had nothing to do with the shade from the trees overhead. “I have been told that he will not be permitted to return to Valinor, and that in Middle-earth, his spirit will never again know an incarnate form, or be allowed to rest. He wanted to seize the world to rule as his own, and in the end he lost everything. At times, I wonder if he has been given too stern a punishment, but my heart tells me that the judgement is just. He may not have fallen into the utter nothingness that awaited Sauron, but into some other hall of waiting where he might do penance for the wrongs he committed, and repent of his wicked ways. I do not know. Whatever the case, he chose his fate. His power was always greater than mine, and he would have had the strength to resist the temptation of the Ring, if he had truly desired such a path. It grieves me that he did not, for there was much he might yet have done for the good of Arda, and all our people. By his own will, he threw it all away, and I fear I will never be able to truly understand why.”

Glorfindel watched him while he listened, and sighed very softly at his last comment, and the deep sadness with which it was spoken. “That does not surprise me,” he said lightly. “You are not as naive about evil as Manwë, but you are much like him, in some ways. You comprehend more of the darker side of Arda and its inhabitants than he does, for you have experienced more of life beyond these hallowed shores, but I doubt very much that you will ever understand why anyone would choose such a path as Saruman did. You grasp the concept of temptation, and why one might make the mistake of reaching for things they should not, but your reasons for considering such an act are far removed from the motivations of people like Sauron and Saruman. You have told me how the Ring tempted you, but its lure was a honeyed lie that promised you strength to do good, enough good to defeat Sauron and spare the rest of Middle-earth from the ravages of war. And I am certain you wanted to believe it could be so — but in your worst moment of trial, did you ever lose sight of the fact that it was indeed a lie? No, because it is not in your nature to desire power or command, and the nature of evil is contrary to all that you are. You have flaws and failings, my friend, just as we all do, but you have acquired the armor of wisdom and common sense to protect your weaknesses from being fatally exploited. That is why I followed you the day we first met. I saw in you someone who knew great joy and compassion, but also someone whose spirit was tempered with humility and an understanding of his own foibles. You could not have prevented Saruman from choosing his path, not even had you sailed with him to Middle-earth and remained ever by his side. I did not know him here in Aman before I departed on my own mission, but on those occasions when I saw or heard him, I knew that he was proud in ways that would lead him to disaster unless he himself chose otherwise. You taught me to see the wind, and a gale of self-destruction was building in his heart and soul long before the Istari were summoned to take up the task of guiding the resistance against Sauron. Did you not see this yourself?”

Though his eyes remained fixed on the water, a crooked smile danced across the Maia’s face. “Yes, here — but I’m afraid once I was placed into the body of a Man, my vision was considerably impaired, and remained so for a very long time.” He looked up at the Elf, the smile losing its wryness and becoming more earnest. “But I always knew I was not like Curumo, and never would be. The Ring certainly tempted me greatly, but even more greatly, it frightened me, as Sauron himself frightened me. And I now understand why it was that Manwë said being fearful of him was the reason I should go to oppose him. That fear was stronger than even the lure of the Ring, and it would keep me from developing the kind of fatal fascination that doomed Saruman — and also Alatar, I suspect. Fear was as much my armor as wisdom, probably more so, though it is kind of you to say otherwise. Strange that it should be so, but there it is. The Music has led us both in ways we would never have anticipated, and in spite of all the sorrows we have known, the joys of faithfully completing our tasks remain sweet. The worst did not come to pass, and the harmonies that have been played were more pleasing in their end than I sometimes felt they could be, after all that had happened to cause discord.

There is music in all sound, it would seem, that can be heard by those who bend their ear to listen, as one can see the wind itself, if one trains one's eyes to see beyond mere physical vision."

Glorfindel grinned, and looked up at the swaying branches overhead, with the light flickering upon the dancing leaves. "There is a fine breeze today, warm and pleasant," he observed. "Perhaps it would be a good opportunity to watch the wind as it goes by."

Olórin laughed, a bright and merry sound that completely dispelled any lingering traces of melancholy he might have felt. "Perhaps," he said as he casually resettled the crystal circlet about his pale hair, with what had finally become well-practiced ease. "But to be truthful, I think I have had enough of looking at reflections and beyond surfaces and into the past, at least for a while. What has been is what it is, and we cannot change it, not if all the people of Arda combined their might and their wills to do so. For now, I will leave the wind to Lord Manwë and the past to Lady Vairë, and the future of the Music to itself, as it is revealed to us by Lord Eru. I find myself in a mood for lesser music, the kind made from voice and string and pipe, not by the singing of nature, beautiful though it may be. Of all the many things in Middle-earth that reminded me of what I had left behind, it was music that made me yearn most strongly for home. If you have no other plans, would you share the evening meal with us? Frodo has been teaching Ványalos all the nuances of hobbit cuisine, and when I heard you were returning to Lórien today, possibly to stay, they began planning what Ványalos says is the first proper hobbit meal Frodo will have had since he left the Shire."

As he rose to his feet, Glorfindel's laughter echoed the Maia's. "Ványalos has not changed one bit in the past four thousand years. I had thought for a time that the shock of realizing that Eru Ilúvatar had used his likeness to briefly appear in Aman would change him, but he is the same as I remember. Remarkable, for a being who does not require sustenance as we of the physical world do to be so incredibly enamored of food and drink. But it would be most welcome, and I will gladly accept your invitation. I have never sat down to a proper hobbit meal, here or in Middle-earth, and I would enjoy the opportunity for such an experience."

Olórin snorted softly as he also rose, even more gracefully than the Elf. "You may change your mind after the first five or six courses, if you do not sit down to the table all but perishing with hunger."

"So I have heard, and I assure you, I am quite ravenous after the long journey from Tirion. I was in haste to at last return to my home, and had naught to eat or drink on the way. I have also heard, through Bilbo, that Frodo is learning to play the harp. However is he managing to deal with an instrument fashioned for someone nearly twice his size?"

"He isn't," Olórin replied, his smile broadening. "Aside from the fact that Frodo is perfectly convinced that my harp would never allow itself to be properly played by anyone but me — rather the way Shadowfax tends to refuse other riders, even Lord Oromë — he understood that difficulty even before he mentioned his interest in such instruction."

"Very sensible," Glorfindel approved. "Then if what Bilbo told me is true, how is Frodo able to learn?"

Olórin chuckled, with an odd combination of impishness and exasperation. "That, my friend, is a long story," he began, and proceeded to explain as they left the glen, without any especial hurry.

As they were about to move beyond the eaves of the trees, Glorfindel glanced back into the cool green shadows, at the glitter of leaf-filtered sunlight as it flickered across the surface of the pool, now ruffled gently by the wind. For all the years of his life, he had known the shadows as a place of fear and danger, where the darkness of evil ever lurked and hid itself from the light of truth. Yet here in the shadows he had met the person who had taught him how to see truths that were hidden, things that could not be seen through sight alone, and that knowledge had given him strength and courage throughout the long struggle against Sauron. He had learned with difficulty, but for all the days that were left to him in Aman, he would forever remember this glen on the edge of light and shadows with fondness, as the place where he first began to learn to watch the wind. Knowing that it would always be here, just as it was today, he hurried a few steps to catch up to his teacher, his smile bright with joy.

