

The Last Homely Housekeeper

Diary excerpts of a long-suffering Rivendell Elf

by Rolf Luchs

with affection and apologies to JRRT

All dates are Third Age. For simplicity's sake the Common Speech (Westron) is generally used throughout.

March 1, 2941: Gandalf stayed again last night. Just breezed in around midday without forewarning or by-your-leave, the way he always does, then stood there in that weathered grey cloak and battered blue pointy hat, leaning on his staff, drumming his fingers on my counter impatiently. As if all the world revolved around him.

I leafed back through the guest book's voluminous pages. 'I see it's . . . hmm . . . thirty-one years since we last enjoyed your company in Rivendell.' But then I re-read the comments he'd scribbled in the book back then: 'Service substandard — must be improved! Also: towels musty, room draughty.' Critiques of this kind always put my back up, implying as they do that our lovely valley and homely house are no more than a public way station, to be reviewed by travellers like some country inn. Not one of the last strongholds in Middle-earth of the proud and ancient race of Elves.

Checking the room list for a free single, I enquired innocently: 'Business or pleasure?' Knowing full well that he must have come to me straight from urgent consultation with Lord Elrond himself. Gandalf is forever flitting from one great crisis to the next, and I wondered fleetingly what had brought him this time: an Orc invasion or Wight infestation or Troll convention, perhaps. But he merely raised a big bushy eyebrow and glared at me from beneath that wide-brimmed hat with those keen grey-blue eyes.

It wasn't until I left the protection of the reception counter to lead him to his room, that I actually smelled Gandalf. Ugh! That awful array of odours must have arisen from long months of roughing it in the bathless wilds: a mix of fetid sweat and bodily grime and stale campfire smoke, layered with crusted muck and who-knew-what further foulness. I hurried ahead of him through the passages, trying not to breathe, reflecting that Elrond either had a strong stomach or even greater powers than we knew.

Once in the room I threw open a window, and lit an aromatic candle for good measure. But Gandalf stalked straight over to slam the window shut again. Then he kicked off his big black boots — muddy of course, aside from the ensuing stink — and removed his

hat and shoulder bag then cast those down on the bed. I thought he might join them there, and feared for the snow-white hand-woven linen.

'Would you care to, er, use the facilities now?' I offered politely from the safety of the doorway. Hoping he might take the hint and bathe.

'No,' he replied in that deep voice, gruff as gravel, as he loosened his grubby, once-silver scarf. 'But,' he brightened, 'I'd care very much indeed for some pipe-weed.'

'Pardon?'

'Pipe-weed! Also called Sweet Galenas, Westmansweed, or Halfings' Leaf,' he lectured. 'Come, my young Elf, surely you've heard of it!'

I thought: young Elf? Listen old Man, I turned four thousand just last week! And I nearly said so — then recalled that despite appearances this was no Man but a Maia: an angelic power come into the world to fight evil, and clothed in human form only temporarily. Though we Elves might be immortal, he was literally older than time itself.

'Naturally I know of pipe-weed,' I explained civilly. 'Only I doubt very much that it can be found in Rivendell.'

'But you will look?' he persisted.

'Well, I'm afraid' — feigning regret — 'that smoking in the guest rooms is strictly forbidden in any case.' Which although true, I soon really did regret saying.

'Oh is it?' he rumbled ominously, eyes flashing and fingers tightening on his staff. 'We shall see about that!' The very air crackled, and I felt my hair stand on end. Which reminded me suddenly that meddling with wizards is unwise, for they can be remarkably unsubtle and quick to anger. I sensed that within Gandalf a veiled power was coiled, a hidden fire ready to burst forth. Don't get burnt, oldboy, I told myself.

Therefore I beat a hasty but dignified retreat, away from the madman, and sought out my colleague Lomdir who heads the commissary. I found him as usual down in the cellars, literally up to his neck in work: checking a newly-arrived shipment of provisions, heaped high all around him, against the waybill.

'Lembas, lembas . . .' he muttered, scanning the stacked foodstuffs. 'Ah, there!' he exclaimed, ticking the parchment with his quill. 'Three packages.' Then he spied me from between some rounds of cheese. 'Tiron! Whatever brings you down here?'

'It's that Gandalf again,' I grumbled, folding my arms and leaning against a crate. 'He's demanding pipe-weed, of all things. Do we happen to have any?'

'Pipe-weed?' he repeated, perplexed, and put aside his writing

utensils to ponder this. 'Hmm . . . can't say offhand. Othwen would have known: she always handled the unusual items.' That being his former co-worker who was gutted by a rampaging Warg during an ill-starred moorland picnic a few hundred years ago. Since then, Lomdir has had to run the commissary all on his own. 'But hold on! I thought there was no smoking in the guest rooms.'

'Yes. You try telling him.'

'Ah, I see. "Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards—"'

'Exactly.'

'Right then, pipe-weed it is,' Lomdir said. 'Let me think . . .' As he mused, his hands went to one of the packages, tore open a corner and drew out a small flat item wrapped in a large golden leaf. He removed that and began nibbling the delicate brown wafer within. A delightfully enticing aroma wafted through the air.

'So that's lembas: the special waybread?' I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. But then my stomach growled like a wild beast.

He grinned and nodded, swallowing. 'Just in from Lorien. They say a single piece will sustain you for a long day's march.' He took out another one and gave it to me.

Having missed breakfast as usual, I accepted it eagerly, ripping away the pale Mallorn leaf then biting into the crispy cake. It was delicious! Not only that but mysteriously filling. 'My, that is sustaining!' I declared.

'Off we go marching,' jested Lomdir as he finished his own lembas then wiped his hands on his ample belly. Of course neither of us was in danger of marching anywhere, and he'd grown pale and plump from long years spent indoors handling the stores. 'Now about that weed . . .' He extricated himself from the pile of provisions and began nosing into obscure corners of the cellar.

Meanwhile my mind roamed, spurred by the scent and savour of this treat from our Elf cousins in distant Lothlorien. It reminded me, inevitably, of Arwen Evenstar. How many years now has she been away there, sojourning in the land of her kin? She of the ebony braids and alabaster arms, of starlit eyes set like jewels in a face that shines like the full moon. Such grace and beauty I'd never imagined, before she came into the world. Since then, all other Elf-maidens have paled by comparison.

I've loved Arwen for over two-and-a-half thousand years. Secretly of course: how could one of my low standing ever hope to taste that fairest fruit of the great houses, held to be the living image of that loveliest Elf ever, her ancestress Luthien herself? Not to mention, she's Elrond's daughter. So I admire her from afar, always seeking yet dreading those brief moments when the light of her eyes might chance to fall upon me and pierce my heart.

At least so it was — until suddenly she was gone, off for an

extended stay with her grandparents the Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn. Now the dull decades fly past, and though Arwen often visits my dreams, I feel that every day spent without her presence here is wasted.

'Found some!' Lomdir called out, rousing me from my melancholic reverie. He hurried over to hold out a small wooden box adorned with writing: Cirth runes spelling strange Westron words.

'Old Toby?' I read doubtfully.

'The previous owner,' he guessed with a shrug, and cracked open the lid. Inside it was packed with dried, shredded leaves and whatnot, somewhat sad-looking yet curiously fragrant. 'Behold the infamous smoking herb.'

I took the box. 'But why do we keep any here?' Smoking is a ghastly, unhealthy habit that's spread rapidly among mortal folk in recent centuries. As soon as Elves encountered it, we restricted its practice within Rivendell.

'I believe it's meant for visiting Rangers and delegations of Dwarves. Not that we see many of those nowadays. I hear they've all come to crave this weed and can't get enough of it.'

'Wizards too, it seems. How odd — I wonder why.' Then I thanked him, and bearing a couple of extra lembas as emergency rations, headed out.

'Away already?' he asked, downcast, eyeing his unfinished chore reluctantly. 'I get so few callers down here.' I last glimpsed Lomdir disappearing into that pile of provisions again like a down-on-his-luck Dwarf descending into a coal mine.

Poor sod, I reflected, as I made my way back upstairs toward the dragon's den. What good is immortality if you have to spend it eternally engaged in such humdrum work? Yet it's much the same everywhere in Rivendell: endless things to do and ever-fewer hands to do them. Which was why I chased up that pipe-weed myself instead of sending some minion: I don't have one.

But why are we so few? If we live forever, how can Elves possibly be declining?

Well first, immortal doesn't mean invulnerable: we die from mischance just like other living beings. Old age won't kill us but a sword-thrust in the gut will.

I'm told for example that the original housekeepers here were quite a large and jolly crew. That is, until the entire lot were drafted in to fight during the three-year siege of Rivendell back in the Second Age, and ended up slaughtered by a horde of Hill-trolls. Then because there was nobody to replace them, everyone just made do, housekeeping-wise, for the next seven centuries or so. Until I was born, came of age and — lacking high birth, good

connections, martial prowess, or any other notable skills — finally took over the duties.

After that, things went fairly smoothly in the housekeeping department for well over two millennia. Bit by bit I even managed to add some staff. Then along came another big bloody war, in the course of which my brave young assistants got flailed to pieces by the Witch-king of Angmar himself. That was more than 1500 years ago; since then I've had to do the whole job alone.

Aside from losses in combat, there's also an ongoing exodus of Elves who grow weary of Middle-earth and leave it for the otherworldly paradise of Valinor, the Blessed Realm of the divine Valar in the far west, to which we can retire whenever we wish. Because in practice, everlasting earthly life is less glamorous than one might imagine: the toils and cares of existence tend to wear you down, over the ages. Of course the frequent warfare doesn't help. But even the infinite beauties of this world can begin to pale for those who have infinite time: a spectacular sunset may seem less so to someone who's seen countless thousands. Anyway, many of my people choose to escape it all by simply sailing into the west.

And where are the children — the Elflings — to replenish our diminishing numbers? Have we forgotten the ancient secret of how to make them?

Not exactly. Many Elves are quite . . . shall we say socially active? There being little else to do here aside from working, at least if you've tired of the equally endless singing, storytelling, and — may the Valar protect us — poetry-reciting. But few of us wish for children these days, and Elf-maidens have become wise in the ways of avoiding unwanted births. So over the ages our once-bustling homely house has emptied of Elflings, its chambers and passages no longer ringing with their melodious merriment or whispering with the delicate pitter-patter of their tiny feet.

Ironically enough I was brooding about exactly that, on my way back to Gandalf, when something suddenly sprang out of the shadows, howling, and nearly bowled me over. 'Have at thee!' I cried, an archaic phrase summoned from some deep well of memory, as I thrust forward the little pipe-weed box in a pitiful attempt to ward off the assailant.

But it was only the Man-child, Estel. 'Didn't see me coming!' he crowed, delighted with his successful ambush and my discomfiture.

This ten-year-old terror was fostered as a toddler by Elrond, after the father fell prey to an Orc arrow. Which may be because the lad is of good Dunedain lineage — the so-called Rangers of the North — and therefore distantly related to our Lord of Rivendell, who has Man-blood on both sides. Yet methinks it has more to do

with the mother being such a comely young widow, and Elrond's wife so long absent.

'Listen here, boy!' I scolded sternly. 'If I were armed I might have run you through!'

'But you weren't, were you?' he jeered. 'Ha ha!' Then before I could lay hands on the brat, he was careening away down the corridor, trailing raucous laughter.

'Next time I'll give you something to remember!' I yelled after him uselessly.

So I was already in a foul mood when I finally reached Gandalf's room, only to find that the wizard was in fact lying on the bed, draped across its fine coverlet in his travel-stained clothes. His stench now permeated the place, the candle's perfume far too weak to mask it.

He sat up at once. 'Did you find any?' he enquired eagerly.

'Yes.'

'Well? Give it to me then!' he demanded, springing to his feet with a vigour that belied his age.

Yet I was no longer much inclined to accommodate his whims. I'm the housekeeper not your bloody servant, I wanted to tell him — and didn't of course. Instead I just stood there, silent.

He glared at me balefully for a tense moment; it sent a shiver up my spine but I held my ground. Then with a disdainful snort he very reluctantly growled: 'Please.'

'We do aim to please,' I retorted tartly, and surrendered the little box.

He snatched it away, clutched claw-like in hands that I was now shocked to see were trembling. His face wore a greedy look as he examined his prize. 'Old Toby,' he muttered almost lovingly. 'A most precious variety.' But when he opened the lid, his aspect darkened. Lifting the box, he thrust his enormous nose straight into the herbs and sniffed loudly. 'Why, this pipe-weed isn't fresh!' he complained.

'It's what we have,' I said simply. 'Apparently we only keep it here for occasional Dwarf dignitaries and suchlike.'

That mollified him. 'Only for dignitaries, eh?' he repeated with obvious satisfaction and the wisp of a smile. 'Well then . . .' Turning to the bed, he reached into his bag and pulled out a long-stemmed wooden instrument with a small bowl at one end — the eponymous pipe — which he then carefully packed with weed. Next, I noted with silent approval, he went to the window and opened it wide: crisp winter air wafted in. Finally he lit the pipe-weed using the guttering candle.

I should have left then. But I'd never yet witnessed anyone smoking, from up close, and despite my distaste I was consumed

by a morbid curiosity. So I waited and watched.

For his part, Gandalf now appeared oblivious to my presence, being fully focussed on this reunion with his beloved herb. He drew deeply of the smouldering substance, with closed eyes and an odd expression: at once both blissful and lustful. He puffed prodigiously, breathing smoke like a dragon, such as I was sure would do him lasting damage and shorten his days — were he not an immortal angelic being.

I stood there appalled, mesmerised, transfixed. Then the smoke drifted toward me — 'twas sweeter and pleasanter than I'd imagined — making me cough. His eyes popped open as he became aware of me again.

So I decided to ask: 'What's the purpose of that strange device — of all this fire and smoke?'

He erupted in a deep cackling laugh, which alarmed me far more than the smoking had. 'You wouldn't wonder if you used this herb yourself!' he answered with unnatural merriment. 'You might find that smoke breathed out cleared your mind of shadows within.'

That's not how it looks to me, you crazy old conjurer, I thought. Yet I kept on watching as he now began blowing rings made of smoke, each perfectly round but of various sizes and colours. They went wherever he directed in the room, then returned to hover over his head — it made him look strange and sorcerous — before finally joining together to fly out the window in one great multicoloured ring.

It disturbed me that this craving could so captivate Gandalf, for the whole scene called to mind stories of the infamous Rings of Power — those awful artefacts of old — which in the end always possessed those who thought to possess them. No good would come of this fixation, I was sure.

'Shadow,' the wizard suddenly whispered, and I saw that his visage had turned pensive.

'Pardon?'

Once more he fixed me with those grey-blue eyes, now somewhat reddened, to announce portentously: 'There is a shadow rising in the east!'

I reacted without thinking. 'What, again?' I retorted, sarcastic.

His face instantly flushed, and he leaned forward, eyes glinting dangerously. 'Meaning what exactly?' he demanded.

Cursing my stupidity, and acutely aware that this powerful and moody mage had spent the best part of 2000 years battling our nameless Enemy, I struggled to explain my careless words. 'I—I meant only . . . it seems as if there's forever a shadow rising somewhere or other. Over time, well, one rather gets used to it. Rising shadow has become almost the normal state of Middle-

earth . . . so to speak.' Which was a very bad explanation indeed.

His aged countenance now went hard and menacing, like the chiselled monument of some terrible king. His eyes were coals suddenly leaping into fire. He took a step toward me, and in the wavering candlelight Gandalf appeared to grow larger, a great majestic shape that filled the room. All else went dark as night; only he could be seen standing bright and tall before me.

So I turned and fled. I ran a very long way, right out of the house and deep into the pine-woods bordering Rivendell, before sheer lack of breath stopped me. There I stayed, hugging myself and stamping my lightly-shod feet on the frosty ground, until the cold was too much and I had to sneak back inside.

After that I steered clear of the wizard for the rest of the day, then until he was safely gone early this morning. In the guest book I saw that he'd written: 'Surly housekeeping staff! Also: pipe-weed supply stale, urgently needs replenishing.'

June 21, 2941: 'Hmm, it smells like Elves!' So help me that's what he said — he being that funny little chap, the Hobbit Bilbo. This was on the evening when he and his many companions arrived out of the wild, riding a long line of ponies down into our valley, where a number of us were already waiting amongst the trees, having heard their clamorous approach from miles away. Bilbo may not even have known that he muttered those words to himself, but we did. For days afterward my sharp-eared friends and I exchanged greetings like:

'My, but you're smelling very Elvish this morning!'

'Why thank you! I daresay you also have an Elven air about you.' And so on.

Is this the inevitable price of being the Firstborn children of Middle-earth, that the younger races have such odd ideas about us? Or are we ourselves to blame for the many misconceptions? These are the sort of useless questions that I now have time to ask myself as I lie bedridden, exhausted, ill, with only a package of lembas for comfort, reflecting on all that has befallen these past weeks.

They arrived here in early June: tired, hungry, bedraggled. Uninvited of course. Thirteen — I rubbed my eyes — Dwarves with none other than dear old Gandalf at their head, and a halfling of all things trailing along. We hadn't seen anything like it in Rivendell for a long age. With the house already fairly full, I had to pack them three, even four to a room, squeezing in extra beds to accommodate them all.

I was too busy running around to worry about avoiding the wizard, who anyway never mentioned our previous encounter. And I sighed with relief when I glimpsed him slouching toward the bathrooms, bearing a towel and soap.

Meanwhile some of our lads and lasses had been unhelpfully teasing the Dwarves, singing silly songs about their long beards and other such nonsense. This was mostly due to the visitors arriving amidst our annual wine-tasting party, with many of my people already in jolly mood. But I think it also arose from our reputation as Elves, part of which holds that we're merry child-like folk who jest and sing at every opportunity. When you have a name for something you often strive to live up to it; only this time they laid it on a bit thick.

Yet paradoxically we're also seen as sober sages, austere purveyors of ancient wisdom. Which while no more true than the other notion, leads some Elves to employ lofty old language in order to demonstrate how deeply they cogitate, pronouncing platitudes intended to improve the dull listener.

Dwarves are immune to such pretense: it merely annoys them. For one thing they know us better than most, a result of the

long and often fraught history between our peoples. And they're themselves too practical to bother overmuch about appearances. (Aside from their beards, of which they're immensely proud, even though they do in fact look rather funny.) Elves generally don't care for Dwarves, believing them to be coarse and grasping; but I found these ones refreshing.

That's why I ended up leading an impromptu late-evening tour of Rivendell as soon as they were housed and fed. Not for them though the wonders that leave other guests spellbound: the rich paintings and tapestries, the fine fountains and statuary, the lush gardens and groves. Instead, the Dwarves wanted to get right to the roots of the place: the foundations and supports, the tunnels and passages, the vaults and cellars. All those unseen bits upon which everything else rests, and without which nothing would work. Lomdir — working late as usual — was absolutely delighted to welcome them down in the commissary, and to show off his inventory-keeping and storage secrets to the inquisitive visitors.

Following which the second-oldest Dwarf, Balin, began this exchange with me:

'Where do you do your business?' he asked, his dark little eyes squinting out from behind a great grey-white expanse of beard, hair, and eyebrows.

'Our meeting rooms are all upstairs,' I replied. 'If you like we can go—'

'No: your business,' he amplified gruffly. 'The private kind, I mean.'

I was nonplussed. 'Private . . . business?'

His wrinkled face wrinkled even further in frustration. Dwarves aren't renowned for their patience, and this one was struggling. He tried again, speaking slowly and enunciating with great clarity:

'Where—are—your—crappers?'

'Pardon?'

Then he barked: 'I'm talking about yer shit, laddie! The brown stuff that flies out of yer arse!' he added, pointing at his to elucidate. 'I'm asking where you put the crap that you all make: how you get rid of it!'

So light finally dawned for me, accompanied by much boisterous but good-natured jollity from the other Dwarves.

First I showed them around our indoor lavatories, in which waste is deposited and channelled away, as well as the compost toilets outdoors. Then on to a large sealed tank where our lavatory sewage is broken down by anaerobic bacteria, before being piped into a greenhouse where it's sent through a long series of open tanks filled with various long-rooted or free-floating wetland grasses and plants, as well as snails, clams, fish and so forth:

purified via natural processes, only more intensively than in nature. My guests were interested yet not entirely impressed.

Their leader, Thorin — taller and more comely than most, but brusque even for a Dwarf — enquired: 'Why not save the trouble and just dump your sewage straight into the river?'

I shrugged. 'Because it's the river.' Which in a nutshell sums up our peoples' different views of the natural world.

He sniffed the air. 'How do you deal with the smell? Or doesn't yours stink?'

'We add special substances to the sludge that lessen it.'

Raising a huge dark eyebrow, he leaned in close. 'Magic substances?' he enquired quietly.

Mirroring his posture, I whispered back all confidential: 'Well, there's some things even magic can't fix.'

For several heartbeats his bright blue eyes stared hard into mine. Then he suddenly burst out laughing: a deep rolling sound like thunder. 'Aye, that's true!' he guffawed, clapping me on the upper back with a powerful paw. 'You're not so bad for an Elf,' he conceded charitably as I rubbed my injured shoulder.

After that we had to go join the wine-tasting, which was still in progress, although increasingly disordered as the night wore on. The Dwarves quaffed immense quantities of every vintage, declaring all of them good. Meanwhile, Balin and Thorin expounded proudly on the sewage system they'd had back in their lost Kingdom of Erebor under the Lonely Mountain. This involved toilets flushed by gravity-fed water that was then piped into great vessels, where it was stored until the rainy season. At which time they released it all into a river that flowed out from the mountain, having first warned the poor folk living downstream. But thanks to the influence of wine, my memory of things afterward is murkier.

At some point we broke out a new batch of pipe-weed I'd managed to procure: the air quickly filled with numerous smoke rings floating every which way. In my weakened state I was even prevailed upon, against my better judgement, to try it myself. This led to much coughing from me, and mirth from all, yet not a single viable ring. The weed had a very peculiar effect, different to that of alcohol, though not in the head-clearing way Gandalf had alleged — quite the opposite in fact!

But what I mostly recall was a lot of talk, and singing too, about gold and jewels and killing dragons. Dwarves are great ones for treasure: making or taking it, hoarding it, gloating over its possession. In this they're actually quite a lot like dragons, which is no doubt why the two hate each other so. For Dwarves, the amassing of precious metals and stones and all things made thereof is their greatest passion, far surpassing for example those of the

flesh. (Though that may also have something to do with how their females look.)

Anyway, I retired to bed very late that night, with songs of plunder ringing in my ears, a good deal of wine sloshing in my stomach, and the odour of pipe-weed all over me.

None of which made for a good mood when I rose early the next morn to begin my housekeeping duties: bleary-eyed, head aching, reeking of stale smoke. Straight away I devoured a wafer of lembas — a recent habit which I've found eases the awful rising-from-bed process. Because aside from serving as a swift and healthful breakfast, that wonderful waybread also feeds the will and gives uncommon strength to master sinew and limb. Yet even its potent virtues couldn't overcome my over-indulgence of the previous night.

Soon afterward, I was lugging a great armful of linen toward the laundry when I spied the Man-child Estel in a foyer that I passed, up to no good as usual.

But first some history . . . In that place we keep on display the shards of Narsil: the ancient sword of Elendil, first High King of Men in Middle-earth, which was broken when he fell in personal combat with the Dark Lord at the end of the Second Age. The King's son Isildur then took up the hilt-shard to cut the One Ring — greatest of the Rings of Power — from the Enemy's hand, and so overthrew him. Though the hard-won Ring was soon lost, and its evil maker eventually rose to plague us again, the remains of that sword have been revered in Rivendell for nearly 3000 years now.

So I was horrified to see that little pirate Estel playing with them as if they were his toys. He was actually standing on top of the display, waving the hilt-shard around in battle with imaginary foes and yelling: 'Have at thee!'

'You there, boy!' I shouted — he being some way off. 'Put down Narsil this instant!'

He paused mid-swing to give me a calculating look, the pale grey eyes in his pale face regarding me slantwise. He took in my armful of laundry, my distance from him, and the unlikelihood that I would drop the former or cross the latter in time to catch him. Clearly he judged himself safe; his lips wore a sly smile as he turned toward me. Raising the hilt-shard, he repeatedly thrust its jagged point in my direction while exclaiming: 'Take that you varlet! You knave! Take that! And that!'

It was more than I could stand: I snapped. Throwing down the washing, I charged him with a lightning swiftness that surprised even me. Though he scrambled desperately to get down and away, I managed to seize the rascal by his collar ere he could escape. The dropped hilt clattered to the floor as he struggled to loose my grip,

but I held firm.

Then while he kicked and scratched like a wild thing, I raised an open hand and swung it down hard, spanking him soundly. 'And you take that!' I cried. How the blackguard squealed!

My satisfaction was deep but short-lived. For who should come along just then but the miscreant's mother, Gilraen the Fair. She ran up with her long blonde braids flying, tore the boy away, and clung him to her breast. He broke out sobbing on cue, bewailing his cruel and completely unwarranted treatment.

'My poor baby,' she cooed consolingly, drying his tears with her golden locks. I was just wondering if I ought to be getting back to my work, when suddenly she turned a fierce eye on me. 'How dare you strike my son!' she admonished.

Of course I tried to explain myself: his outrageous provocation, my just and reasonable response. But Gilraen was having none of it. Instead, once his blubbering lessened, she sent him off gently — 'Run along now my precious' — in order to give me her full attention. The imp limped away as if my paddling had crippled him.

'No one has ever punished that child before,' she went on haughtily, after he'd gone. Which came as no surprise whatsoever; but there was more. 'I will not allow him to be brutalised,' she declared. 'Such a harsh regime would hinder his emotional and social progress, undermining his confidence and self-worth.'

So there it was. The hands-off creed in the cult of child-rearing.

'Estel is a deeply sensitive soul,' she added, against all evidence, 'and must have the freedom he needs to unfold into his true self.'

Hearing this tripe, I simply couldn't hold back any longer. 'That boy is no flower!' I objected, very unwisely. 'His most notable quality is a genius for making trouble.'

With astonishing swiftness her charming face now twisted into a hideous mask, almost Orc-like. 'You don't know who he is!' she shrilled. 'You don't know anything about him!' But then she collected herself with a visible effort, and continued in a cold quiet voice dripping with disdain. 'Shall I tell you who he is, Elf? Who he really is?'

I'd stumbled onto dangerous ground, I saw too late. I was at least spared the dilemma of how to reply, since Gilraen suddenly turned on her heel and stalked away. But only minutes later, when I'd just delivered the laundry, I was summoned to see Lord Elrond.

On my way I kept mulling over this riddle: who is the boy? Estel means 'hope'. What sort of name is that? Probably a made-up one. I realised suddenly that the Man-child is never seen in public

when guests are present, that even in private he's seldom spoken of. But why — why keep him hidden? What's the secret?

Aside from all that, there was a more urgent question for me personally: what would Elrond do? How would he discipline me for striking his foster-son?

I entered his chambers high up in the house to find him standing at an open window, hands clasped behind him, looking out over the River Bruinen far below. Its swift waters roiled through the deep-cloven valley and cascaded over its waterfalls, the sound of which reached our ears as an endless murmuring music. I waited at a discreet distance, savouring this brief respite and trying not to think about what might happen next.

At length, still staring away, Elrond spoke in his usual ponderous manner: 'Can I take it, Tiron, that you inflicted on my young charge no grievous or lasting harm?'

'I believe his pride was wounded more than was his posterior, my Lord,' I replied in like style. He being one of those Elves partial to high language.

He turned then, fixing me with his piercing grey eyes and perpetually grave expression. He wore a rust-coloured mantle and embroidered linen shirt, stiff and high-collared. At that moment I noticed how much, with those pale eyes and skin framed by long dark hair, he looked like Estel. An infinitely more venerable version mind you, yet now that I saw it the resemblance was striking.

Only Elrond was no mere Man, and he bore upon his brow the woven silver circlet that marked him as chief Elf of Rivendell. 'You did not think to approach me before punishing him personally?' he asked. Again that penetrating gaze — had he any other? — but still I detected no real reproach.

'I admit, my Lord, that I did not. The circumstances were such as to brook no delay.' Then for good measure: 'I pray that my precipitate actions have not caused serious offence.'

Instead of replying, he stepped over to a small serving-table and poured himself something clear, either water or a more fortifying refreshment. 'This is not the first such incident involving Estel,' he said soberly, staring into the ornate crystal glass. 'Far from it: this is but the latest of many.' Then he actually sighed, and took a good swig of his drink.

I almost sighed myself, understanding now that I would escape the expected dressing-down. 'My Lord's . . . son is exceptionally spirited,' I ventured.

'My foster-son,' he corrected hastily with a look of dismay, before catching himself and adding, 'who of course I have come to love as a son of my own.' He took another sip, then in a low tone: 'Though I would that he were more alike in sensibility to my own

offspring.'

Which of course instantly brought Arwen to my mind. This is agony: constantly missing her, hungering for her presence, wishing I could get away — even for just a few years — to go try and catch a glimpse of her in Lothlorien. But at the same time it also sustains me somehow, inwardly, like a waybread for the soul. Because to think of her is like lighting a candle in my heart.

'As for offence,' Elrond was now saying, 'none was caused to me — much as I care for the boy — but to Gilraen, whose protector I am. Our homely house has been for her and for Estel not merely a place of refuge but a home.' With a final swig he emptied his glass. 'It is our obligation and sacred trust to make them welcome, and to respect their needs and wishes to our utmost ability.' I nodded my solemn agreement, though it sounded as if he were talking more to himself than to me.

I studied Elrond's visage, thinking how his wife's absence must weigh on him. Elves aren't meant to age outwardly, yet the tale his face told was a lengthy one full of cares. He'd already been married to Celebrian some 2400 years when, on a journey without him over the Misty Mountains, her company was waylaid by Orcs. She received a poisoned wound, was captured and then 'tormented' as they put it. Although rescued soon after by her sons Elladan and Elrohir, and tended with Elrond's considerable healing arts, she could no longer find any joy in Middle-earth. So she sailed over the sea into the west. That was more than four centuries ago: a long time to be parted, and to sleep alone in a cold bed.

'It was,' I opined, 'a chivalrous act, my Lord, to offer the young widow and her child a sanctuary here in Rivendell.'

'Her late husband was of the Dunedain, therefore our ancient allies and my distant kin,' he explained automatically. But then he stopped and shot me a sharp glance, adding: 'Which is the sole reason for their now dwelling amongst us.' This is the sort of thing that makes people think Elrond can read minds; the prosaic truth is simply that ages of experience have made him a keen listener and observer.

From there the interview might still have moved toward a graceful close, had I not insisted on voicing further foolishness. Oh why can't I learn the trick of silence? But Gilraen's final words kept turning over in my mind, and I knew the question would haunt me if left unasked. 'Who is Estel really, my Lord?'

Elrond set down his empty glass slowly, pinned me with his most penetrating gaze ever, and took his time replying. 'It would be well for you not to delve into the matter, Tiron,' he declared with rare bluntness, grim-faced.

Only having come this far I couldn't let it drop so easily. 'I beg

pardon, Lord Elrond,' I said, fighting to present a calm front as my heart raced. 'But I am surely not the first to enquire into this, nor will I be the last. People will ask that question increasingly in future, and speculate.'

Suddenly, yet with feline stealth, the crafty old warrior swiftly closed the distance with me to stand intimidatingly near, and his voice went deadly soft as he stared straight into my face.

'Speculation is a most unwise path to tread,' he warned, eyes blazing. 'It might even be deemed dangerous.'

I flinched, only just managing to hold back the terrified squeal that rose in my throat. For how many long-dead foes had Elrond's fierce grimace been their last sight in this world?

Then just as suddenly he wheeled away from me and stepped over to the window again, this time leaning against the sill with both hands, gazing out silently.

I stood there trembling, full of fear at his naked threat. In a small corner of my mind I marvelled at my ability to land in hot water twice within just a few minutes. What doom would the Lord of Rivendell now pronounce on me?

The stillness dragged on, heavy as lead; even the song of the river waters seemed muted. The only movement was the slight rise and fall of Elrond's shoulders as he breathed deeply, in and out. Then he made an abrupt little sound, quickly cut short — a stifled cough, perhaps? But when he finally continued speaking, his manner was utterly transformed.

'Well, such strong disagreements do arise from time to time, even in our homely house,' he mused, now in a calmly philosophical tone. 'Yet in the end we must each follow the dictates of our own conscience, come what will.' He turned back toward me, his face unreadable. Which I thought signalled the conversation's imminent end; I prepared to be dismissed. But not quite . . .

'Speaking of possible futures, Tiron, a query of my own.' His intonation was strangely light, almost cheery by his standards. 'I understand that you have displayed a great interest in our waste disposal and treatment regime. As it happens, our director of waste management has never been entirely satisfied in that post. In fact she has had a transfer request pending these past several hundred years.' Then a slight pause during which I realised: he was enjoying this! 'I wonder therefore if we might consider an exchange: your position for hers? But only of course if your current occupation should prove too dull and burdensome to carry on with.'

Which goes to show it wasn't his good and kindly ways that made Elrond master of the Elves of Rivendell. Since then I've kept quiet about our Dunedain guests, and carefully avoided anything that smells of waste management.

After that, the remainder of the Dwarf company's stay was less eventful if no less exhausting. Between my daily duties and seeing to their special needs I was kept constantly busy all the while. That's aside from extracurricular merry-making with the visitors, which I indulged in far too much for my own good, leading to a nasty flu and my current bedridden state.

Along the way I got to know the Hobbit Bilbo, he of smells-like-Elves fame. He's really quite a pleasant chap — thoughtful, kind, amusing — and not the giddy cherub he first appeared. I found myself admiring his deep and genuine enjoyment of life's simple things: having a chat, sharing a drink, going for a walk, or just hanging about and doing nothing much. Also eating of course: it's amazing, come mealtimes, what the little fellow can put away. Anyway, I daresay there's much to commend.

Yet this selfsame trait — his engaging simplicity — is also what leads him to gush endlessly about all things Elven. And while it's true that we Elves never completely tire of hearing how wonderful we are, it turns out that there can be such a thing as too much breathless admiration.

'Rivendell is fabulous!' he opined once while playing darts. 'I would gladly stay here for ever and ever!' This the day after he'd eagerly attended yet another interminable evening of songs, stories, poetry, and other 'entertainment' — all of it by, for, and about Elves. Then he continued humming the tune *A Elbereth Gilthoniel*, a hymn to that divine Vala who made the stars and constellations, who set the sun and moon in their courses, whose very face is said to radiate the light of the Father of All. That is, if you credit such tales.

'Over time you'd likely weary of it here,' I countered, missing my third shot. I think his humming distracted me. 'This place may make a good first impression but it's really no paradise.'

'Why of course it is!' rejoined Bilbo, taking aim himself. 'Consider, my dear Tiron: you enjoy a most beautiful setting and temperate climate' — he threw and hit the 20-point field — 'comfortable lodgings, delightful entertainment, convivial company' — a nod to me, then his next dart struck a double-20 ring — 'but above all, regular meals of the finest quality and nearly limitless servings' — his last shot was a bullseye. He looked up at me; a genial smile lit his good-natured face. 'What more could anyone ask?'

'What indeed?' I laughed, conceding the argument and the game. I didn't take it upon myself to try and disillusion him. For despite the Hobbit's mostly valid points, Rivendell and our whole Elven way of life is in my view less a paradise than a prison: one we built ourselves, assembled from the shiny broken remnants of our

own history. Yes, it's a comfortable coop with all the amenities anyone could want; but a cage is still a cage, even if golden. Because we are a people with no way forward, no future, just a very long past: we live in it, are trapped there, can never escape.

Elves awoke in Middle-earth ages ago — the fabulous Firstborn! — and for a brief thousand years or so, enjoyed an incredible flowering that's been unequalled since. In nearly every craft, in all the arts, in the acquiring of knowledge, in mastering the very fabric of which reality is woven, we reached our greatest heights then. In those Elder Days our people had, so the histories say, an insatiable thirst for creating, for learning, for discovery — for life.

What caused that to change? Well, a number of things, not least reckless behaviour born of our overweening vanity. For none are so apt to foolishness as those who deem themselves wise.

But mainly we were simply worn down by the ceaseless struggle against our evil Enemy and his teeming minions and allies: Balrogs, Dragons, Giants, various Monsters and Beasts, Goblins and Orcs, Spiders, Trolls, Wargs, Wights, Wraiths, Wolves and Werewolves, and of course always very many Men. In war after war we were forced to fight them in order to save ourselves and all that we'd wrought in the world. When we lost, it meant the destruction of entire Elven kingdoms: their beautiful, talented, passionate people and wondrous works. Yet even when we won, we often found those fine things for which we'd bled, slipping from our weakened grasp. And win or lose, our countless dead were irreplaceable.

Understandably in light of this, our people focussed more and more on just keeping what we had. Unintentionally at first, that became a choice between starkly divergent paths — because you cannot stand still and move forward at the same time. So instead of creating, we preserved; instead of learning, we remembered; instead of discovering, we clung to what we already knew.

In everything, Elves increasingly looked back into history — to those bygone Elder Days. All of our art and craft and knowledge was now bent that way, toward the past. We mostly stopped making new things, striving instead to save, recreate, and relive familiar old ones. Yet try as we might, somehow we couldn't seem to match our former feats, nor summon quite the same delight we once had in them as in all else. Over time it became clear that we never would: our spark had dimmed. We were no longer the same people who had achieved such greatness, and would from now on have to live in their shadow. Ironically, our best efforts at protecting what was dearest to us succeeded only in ensuring its eventual loss and our slow fading.

It was with unhappy thoughts like these in my mind that I followed Bilbo back to his room after our darts game. He wanted to show me something he'd acquired in the wild on his way to Rivendell. His company had encountered and petrified three Trolls who turned out to have in their hoard, aside from the usual gold and silver, some unusual weapons.

'Here it is,' he said, handing me a dagger in a shabby leather sheath. This looked unpromising until I saw the hilt with its finely-rendered motif of a winding branch sprouting leaves. I drew the blade: it emerged in a bright flash of silver. Then I turned it, glittering, in the sunlight of the room, admiring its graceful lines: the slim leaf-shaped cutting edge terminated in a barbed stipule-like guard, so that the entire blade had the appearance of a larger leaf sprouting from the hilt. It was a piece of fine martial art, both gorgeous and deadly. Though I'm no weapons expert, I knew that this masterful melding of form and function must be Elven work from the Elder Days.

'This was really in a Troll-hoard?' I asked unbelieving, returning it somewhat reluctantly.

'Yes,' replied Bilbo brightly, 'along with some lovely swords that Gandalf and Thorin took. This old dagger was the smallest. To a great big Troll it would be only a little pocket-knife, but for me it serves as a short-sword.' He twirled the blade around in front of himself, slashing a neat hole in the air; I could see how well the weapon suited him. But then he stopped and eyed it doubtfully. 'I suppose if I ever stuck a Troll with this, he'd think I was just a bee.'

'Oh, I'm sure he'd regret the encounter,' I demurred. 'That's quite a sting you have there!'

He laughed in his bubbly Hobbit way, then went quiet and gave me a shyly hopeful glance. 'Do you think this could even be . . . well, a magic blade?'

I had to laugh myself, though not unkindly. Mortal folk are forever asking if this or that thing is 'magic'. Most Elves don't even know what's meant by it: crafted items simply have their individual properties, some more uncommon than others, depending on their makers' skills. 'It might well be,' I allowed judiciously, and he was so overjoyed at the mere possibility that I could almost see the hair uncurling on his furry feet. 'But if you truly want to know,' I cautioned, 'you should ask Elrond.'

Yet if my assumption was correct and Bilbo's blade actually was created in an Elven kingdom of old, then it would definitely have certain special attributes such as, for example, shining with a cold light when Orcs are near. That level of workmanship used to be standard for our smiths. Which is really quite impressive when you consider the command of various natural materials and forces

needed in order to infuse a slab of metal with a property like that. Such feats mark how great we Elves once were.

Or by the same measure, how far we've fallen: for the Elven-smiths today would be unable to accomplish this. They no longer have the necessary knowledge and craft, nor the inner fire. Oh, they could surely engrave an old blade like that, maybe even mend it if required. But they could never make a new one. So it's no doubt only a matter of time before my declining people come to speak of magic in the same credulous way Bilbo did.

His company set out again this morning after two weeks in our 'paradise'. They were treated to the usual Elvish farewell songs, which made the Dwarves stop up their ears while Bilbo listened raptly. The Dwarves were by now impatient to be gone and on their way, but the Hobbit went all teary and sentimental, promising repeatedly to return one day and stay much longer. As for Gandalf — well, who knows anything about wizards?

I was by then feeling quite sickly, but dutifully crawled out of bed in order to say my good-byes. It's abnormal for an Elf to fall ill: this must be the price of consorting so much with mortals. The lembas does help though. I've discovered that its potency increases if I eat nothing else, not mingling it with lesser foods.

Anyway I was determined to see them off. The Dwarves had only just revealed the whole purpose of their journey: to travel east to the Lonely Mountain — their lost Kingdom of Erebor — where they intend to slay a terrible dragon who's been squatting there for some time, and thereby lay claim to the immense treasure which said beast has hoarded.

Of course they don't have a chance, and it makes my heart heavy to think of them all being roasted by dragon-fire and devoured, especially cheerful little Bilbo. Yet he does seem to be an extraordinarily lucky chap, so perhaps . . .

I managed to take a look at the guest book before collapsing back into bed. The Dwarves, in their usual fashion, had merely scrawled a few crude drawings and earthy jokes that I'll not repeat here. Bilbo went on for eight effusive pages about Rivendell and the Elves, mostly in the form of an epic poem of praise which I'll do my best to erase from memory. Gandalf's only comment was: 'Not enough hot water!'

September 10, 2951: 'Have you heard the news,' Horneth asked excitedly, 'about our dear Estel?'

'No!' I replied as my eyes darted around searching for potential witnesses. 'I don't know anything about him!' Then, realising how that sounded: 'That is—I meant to say . . . No, I haven't heard any, um, news . . . about him. At all.'

She gave me a puzzled look. 'Tiron, whatever is the matter?' Horneth is our director of waste management, so out of an abundance of caution I'd been keeping my distance from her during the ten years since my little chat with Elrond. Except on that day — weeks ago now — she'd cornered me behind the counter at reception. Horneth is quite a nice person, very likeable in fact, but I do sometimes detect on her a faint scent of sewage. 'Everyone's talking about it,' she added.

'Are they really?' I enquired cautiously. 'Everyone?'

'Oh yes! Estel especially: he's telling anybody who'll listen.'

Curiosity won again. 'Telling them . . .?' I prompted.

'Why, that his real name is actually Aragorn. That besides being Chieftain of the Dunedain he's also the one true heir to the thrones of both Arnor and Gondor: the rightful High King of Men in Middle-earth!'

I almost laughed, so absurd was the statement. That delinquent should be King? But then Horneth's determinedly earnest expression made me freeze, open-mouthed, and my mind reeled. As the awful reality began to sink in, I buried my head in my hands. 'But . . . but how?' I moaned. By which I meant: how could this travesty even be possible?

She took me literally though, and dutifully trotted out his long lineage: 'Well, you see he's the son of Arathorn, and he was the son of Arador, who was the son of Argonui, who was the son of . . .'
Except I wasn't really listening, and only took notice again some time later when Horneth ended the recitation with: 'Which makes him, in unbroken line from father to son, the thirty-ninth heir of Isildur and the fortieth of Elendil himself. Isn't that amazing?'

'Who could've imagined?' I agreed sardonically, having begun to recover my wits. It seemed to me that the length of his descent from those great Kings of old might explain much, for in making a copy of a copy of something, each successive iteration is less and less faithful to the original. 'Yet I still don't understand: why is he saying all this only now?'

'He didn't know until now! Both Elrond and Gilraen kept the truth hidden from everyone, even him.' She sidled nearer to whisper: 'Because the Nameless One must not learn that an heir of Isildur is alive in Rivendell.' Well, that made sense: we didn't need to give our relentless Enemy yet more grounds to destroy us. She

went on: 'Only this morning did Elrond finally decide that Estel — Aragorn I mean — was old enough to be told the truth.'

Old enough at just twenty years? That's very young indeed for the Dunedain, who are much longer-lived than other Men. Yet I reflected that the Dark Lord, Sauron — yes I'll name the villain — had but lately revealed himself again in Mordor, bent as always on bringing the whole world under his evil dominion. So since there may anyway be little time left before we are dragged into perpetual darkness, Elrond likely saw no point in waiting to tell Estel/Aragorn about his heritage. For all the good it will do him.

Horneth sighed deeply. 'Aragorn is so fair and noble and, well, kingly,' she rhapsodised. 'And so early come to Manhood,' she added dreamily. 'Who knows what mighty deeds he may be capable of?'

I could only stare at her incredulously. But before I was able to question her sanity, one of Horneth's waste colleagues ran up, breathless, calling her away to deal with some sewage emergency.

All that day, as I worked, I pondered these things. Though Aragorn's ancestry was a shocking revelation, it was Horneth's closing comments that kept coming back to me. For as baffling as I found her attraction to him, it's really nothing new: there's a long history of Elf-maidens falling for mortal Men.

The most famous case occurred ages ago when Luthien — a half-Elf, half-angel of unsurpassed beauty — paired with the rough outlaw Beren. For her trouble, Luthien eventually ended up losing her immortality, and so alone of all Elves actually died of old age. My people have been mourning her loss ever since. Yet despite this instructive example — or perhaps perversely, because of it? — other Elf-maidens have also tasted mortal fruit, though never again with such dire consequences. But whatever do they see in these short-lived, ephemeral Men?

Late that afternoon I was mopping along a corridor when I came to that place where the shards of Narsil are displayed, and saw Aragorn standing there. Though wearing Elven raiment — a fine mantle of grey and silver — he could never be mistaken for one of us. This is due to his graceless bearing and overall unfinished appearance, topped off by the ragged beard and moustache he's trying to grow. Yet he's at least no child now but a Man in stature and strength, and I'll grant that he's not completely ugly.

He had his hand on the sword's hilt-shard, and was wearing a most serious look. As I approached he glanced up suddenly as if startled. 'Tiron!' he exclaimed, turning toward me. 'Excuse me, I was deep in thought. For this morning I was given tidings of great import. You see, I have learned that my true name is—'

'Yes, I heard.'

'Oh,' he muttered disappointedly.

'Congratulations,' I offered.

His grey eyes regarded me uncertainly. 'Thank you,' he replied. 'Yet I am not sure that congratulations are in order. This bequest may well prove a heavy burden to bear.' He gazed into the unseen distance with a sombre expression. 'I am now perforce the one responsible for the fate of all Men in Middle-earth.'

'Well, not to worry,' I reassured easily, straight-faced. 'No doubt you'll grow into it.'

Aragorn nodded sagely, then turned back to Narsil and laid his hand on the hilt-shard again. 'I have decided,' he pronounced, 'to carry this shattered sword with me wherever I go, as a constant reminder of my noble heritage.'

'Ah yes, of course,' I said, suddenly understanding, 'as Isildur's heir that must belong to you now.' It was hard to digest all this. I recalled the last time I'd found him with Narsil. Now he could play with it as much as he liked, and no danger of paddling. 'But is that really advisable, to haul around a broken blade everywhere? It sounds rather impractical.'

He frowned pensively. 'Perhaps you are right, Tiron. I shall think on it further.'

Then I noticed the finely-wrought ring he wore on his left hand. It consisted of intertwined silver serpents with gleaming emerald eyes, whose heads met beneath a crown of golden flowers. Though I'd never seen this before I knew it immediately from descriptions. 'The Ring of Barahir!' I breathed in wonder. It was given by Finrod, a mighty Elf-lord of old, to Barahir, a great warrior Man who saved his life in battle. Since then this treasure of the Elder Days had been passed down through countless generations of Men, and now . . .

'Tis lovely, is it not?' remarked Aragorn, clearly pleased that I admired it. 'This ring and the sword were delivered to me today by Elrond as tokens of my inheritance.'

'It's quite beautiful,' I admitted. 'Narsil will be too, if it can ever be re-forged.' Then I remembered something else: 'But what of the Sceptre of Annuminas?' Surely that exquisite silver rod, the ancient emblem of the former Kings of Arnor, should also now be his by right.

But Aragorn's aspect darkened and he hung his head. 'Elrond . . . withheld that from me,' he answered thickly. 'He said I have yet to earn it.'

'Oh, I see,' I returned in sympathetic tone. 'Still,' I went on encouragingly, 'who can say what might be possible in the fullness of time, with a bit of effort?' After all, little stands in the way of his future Kingship but Sauron.

Then I took my leave to continue mopping the corridor, since some of us do have to work. Shortly afterward I heard from behind me: 'Lindir! Excuse me, I was deep in thought. For this morning I was given tidings of great import . . .'

But I soon put Isildur's heir out of my mind, due to something infinitely more important: Arwen Evenstar finally returned! She arrived late that very night, unheralded, with a small escort from far Lothlorien. I was for once delighted to be roused from bed to deal with accommodating the visitors.

I saw Arwen only briefly before she retired to Elrond's quarters, where a room always awaited her. For one fleeting yet seemingly eternal moment we even stood face to face. She was covered in a simple grey travelling cloak, with her long black braids hidden beneath its hood, out of which her face gleamed like the full moon from between clouds in the night sky. She exuded an intoxicating aroma: composed partly of Lorien where she'd been staying, partly of the wilds she'd just travelled, but mostly of her lovely self. With a furiously beating heart I dared to look right into her shining grey eyes. It was like gazing at the first bright stars in the evening heavens; my head swam with vertigo.

Of course I wished to grasp this opportunity to say something worthy of the occasion and of her. But I could only manage to stammer: 'M-My Lady!'

She smiled! I cannot begin to describe that wonder or its effect on me, for mere words are tools too dull for the task. I can only compare it to the joy our distant forbears must have known, back when the new-wrought moon and sun set sail to light and warm the young world. Because in that instant all the cares from my long years of pining for absent Arwen were wiped away, and I was, for the first time in my life, truly happy.

Then suddenly she was gone again, away upstairs. But my spirits remained sky-high, for she was back now — back to dwell in Rivendell! I felt the comforting certitude of a Dwarf-king who, though he may seldom view his entire vast treasure, knows always that it sleeps safe in deep vaults.

Returning to my room afterward, with the visitors bedded down and no one else about, my heart was so overflowing with childlike glee that I actually skipped down the hallway softly singing: 'Arwen, Arwen, Arwen, Arwen!' The rest of that night I lay in bed awake, humming and chuckling contentedly.

The next day passed like a dream. I kept watch for her of course, but expected nothing so soon after her long and taxing journey. Yet I began already to imagine the chance and not-so-chance meetings we'd be having in the years ahead, savouring them in advance like a meal that's planned and prepared long

before it ever sees the table.

When my work was done I went for a walk in the woods at sunset. I found myself following a path that led through a large stand of birches, in the midst of which was a greensward where Arwen sometimes used to go of an evening, treading in the rich long grass. It so happened that I knew of an old stump there, hidden amongst the trees, where one could sit in comfort and out of the way while enjoying the view.

I'd rested there but a short while when I was rewarded by the barely-hoped-for sight of my beloved, gliding along the path with the easy grace of a swan on water, her raven hair now unbraided and wafting in the gentle breeze. She was clad in a blue and silver mantle, and bore above her brows a fine circlet studded with sparkling white gems. Upon reaching the clearing she shed her slippers, spread her arms wide and twirled round and round upon the turf like a child's toy top, barefoot and laughing.

Again, words cannot convey the bliss this evoked in me. I've heard mortals say that the sheer beauty of some Elves is so overwhelming, it does their hearts good just to look at them. With Arwen I could understand what they meant, for simply watching her filled me through and through with warm well-being. It was as if she were a living fireside, near whose glowing coals my spirit found a cosy haven.

But my rapture was disturbed abruptly by a tramping amidst the trees behind me, accompanied by some horrid wailing. Then a figure appeared, plodding along off the path and through the undergrowth in my direction: it was Aragorn! As he approached I realised that the awful noise he was making was meant to be singing. With some difficulty I recognised the piece as *The Lay of Luthien*, an ancient and very long poem about ill-starred Beren and Luthien. He was at the part where they by chance first met, when Beren called her Tinuviel — 'nightingale' — because he beheld her dark-haired beauty and heard her heart-piercing song in the twilight.

Meanwhile Aragorn drew so near that I was sure he must see me, but he didn't: maybe someday he'll learn a little woodcraft. He did spy Arwen though, just ahead on the greensward: he stopped dead with an expression of dumb amazement, mouth hanging open. Of course I could understand this reaction to her loveliness, especially as it would have been his first-ever sight of her: she'd been away from Rivendell far longer than he'd been alive.

For a few moments he stood there frozen, and all else was still except for Arwen, out on the grass. Surely he'd have the sense now to stay silent and not spoil this beautiful, tranquil scene. She, amazingly, hadn't heard his prior clamour — the wind being against

her — and was now walking through the grass slowly looking serene.

Then, suddenly, Aragorn lurched forward with a great rustling of leaves and cracking of twigs, and rushed at her headlong with outstretched arms, crying: 'Tinuviel, Tinuviel!'

Aghast, I nearly shouted: Shut up you bloody oaf! Instead I merely cursed him inwardly, watching in mute horror as he sped toward her. I could only wonder: was he drunk, or mad, or just making a bad joke? For though Arwen is said indeed to be the spitting image of Luthien, the latter beauty has been cold in her grave for millennia, so no one in their right mind could believe her to be walking around Rivendell. I tensed, ready to spring forward myself and throttle the idiot should he threaten my dear one.

Aragorn ran up to her, reached her. She turned to him ever so calmly and . . . smiled. Was this perhaps a smile of pity, of kindly indulgence toward a dimwit madman? No: even from this distance I could see otherwise. It was a friendly smile, and she spoke to him briefly in like manner, though I couldn't hear the words.

Then he was talking, and from his gestures I could tell he was introducing himself and proudly explaining his heritage. Which to a Man would sound grand and ancient; but as Arwen is descended from far more renowned ancestors herself, and was born during the reign of Aragorn's 36th great-grandfather, she was unlikely to be impressed.

When he'd finally finished, she did actually laugh; for a hopeful instant I thought she was amused at his shameless cheek. But no, the laughter was light and merry, and she spoke to him even more warmly than before.

This was looking ominous. The two of them were chatting easily now, getting on like old chums. I feared that at any moment his hand would 'accidentally' brush against hers, that she might allow this or even — perish the thought! — welcome it. Soon, I feverishly imagined, they'd be walking hand in hand, whispering intimacies and laughing gaily. My heart waxed with panic while my head spun in confusion. What should I do to stop this farce? What could I do?

But then all at once it was over. With a slight bow Aragorn bade her a polite but swift good-bye, and hurried back toward our homely house looking abashed. Arwen gazed at his retreating figure with a thoughtful, frowning expression. What had happened? Something very welcome and timely was all I knew. Yet I'd have felt more relief at the outcome, had she not kept staring for so long after he'd disappeared.

I spent the next days in turmoil, trying to come to grips with the incident. I soon learned that I wasn't alone. Aragorn had gone

all silent — a great blessing of course, but so uncharacteristic that everyone noticed. The cause of the change was equally obvious as he now began shadowing Arwen everywhere, constantly watching her with lost-puppy eyes.

'It's disgraceful!' spat Horneth several days later during a tea break.

'Inexcusable behaviour,' I agreed. 'What can he be thinking?'

'No, I mean her, you ninny!' she returned heatedly. 'All those years away, then Arwen just saunters in here and hooks Rivendell's most eligible catch.'

I was taken aback. Now that I was no longer avoiding Horneth she was proving to be an excellent source of reliable gossip; but in her jealousy she had this the wrong way round. 'I have it on good authority,' said I judiciously, 'that he approached her. But somehow it didn't end well. Perhaps he was rebuffed?' I suggested.

'Hardly!' replied Horneth with a cynical laugh. She leaned closer, spoke softly. 'I overheard Aragorn's mother talking with him about it, and she was not at all pleased. Apparently he'd never even heard of Arwen before — how can that be? — so didn't know who she was when he saw her. Somehow he actually imagined it was Luthien herself! So yes, of course he ran and threw himself at her. Then she, naturally, was all sweet smiles and soft words.' Horneth sipped her tea with a sour look, as if the brew were bad. 'No doubt that tramp engineered everything, and lured him in with her come-hither looks.'

I stifled a cry of protest at this slur on my cherished and — I felt certain — entirely innocent Arwen. Instead I just sipped my own tea fiercely, hands shaking.

Horneth didn't notice. She nibbled the remnants of a scone and muttered: 'The boy is so young and easily led.'

Which was a far cry from her kingly-Manhood description of a few days earlier, but I ignored this. 'Then why did he flee?' I asked sceptically before adding: 'I mean, in the story that I heard.'

'He was embarrassed, poor thing! Once he understood that she wasn't some vision, he reckoned from her appearance that she must be around his own age. So Aragorn explained who he is — very proud of course — then Arwen said who she is. That's when he grasped that she's actually thousands of years older, and not so young as she looks and he assumed.'

A foolish assumption to make, for someone who lived among ageless Elves. But this was after all a Man capable of believing that a long-dead figure from ancient history was traipsing through our woods. 'Well, he seems to be beyond embarrassment now, the way he's taken to following Arwen around. So the only question is: what can be done about it?' Or at least that's what I kept asking myself.

Horneth shook her head while buttering a fresh scone forlornly. 'The vixen already has her claws in deep. I'm afraid all we can do for now is watch and wait, and hope that our dear Aragorn realises his mistake in time.'

A shudder ran through me at what those words might imply: 'in time'. Not that I credited Horneth's version of things of course — far from it. Clearly it was Aragorn who was the instigator here, and Arwen who should beware. Though Elrond's daughter is a person of intelligence and insight, our history shows how even the wisest can have the most terrible lapses of judgement.

Might I warn her? Dare I even approach her? But if I did, there was no reason to think she'd listen to me, the mere homely housekeeper. And though it sounds harsh, saving people from themselves is generally a hopeless task: for we each choose our own path, and no matter how manifestly unwise the way may be, who of us really wants it pointed out? So day after day, for weeks, I did just watch and wait — and hope.

Meanwhile, Aragorn kept following Arwen around everywhere. At mealtimes he always contrived to sit at a neighbouring table. At concerts and celebrations he'd find a vantage where she was in view. Whenever she went out, he ended up wandering in the same direction. All of which was maddening, especially as it often got in the way of my own innocent desire to behold her myself.

The final straw came just the day before yesterday, a late summer's evening when I walked into the birch-woods to take my customary perch near the greensward. I hadn't seen Arwen there since that lamentable occasion when Aragorn first met and pestered her; I assumed she wanted to avoid a repeat performance. But I often still went myself because it's a lovely spot that reminds me of her.

As I trod that track through the trees, the setting sun's last rays lit their leaves bright green, and dappled the forest floor. A faint bubbling melody carried from the River Bruinen in the distance. A mild wind wafted, bearing just a hint of the autumn freshness to come.

I followed my softly padding feet, silently drinking in the beauty of it all, until I was close to that familiar place among the birches. Only at the last moment did I glance up — and there sitting on my old stump was Aragorn! The sight of him struck me like a physical blow; I gasped from the shock. But the Man was as usual oblivious, being totally focussed on the greensward opposite.

I looked that way and there she was: Arwen Evenstar, treading the turf in bare feet and not much else. By which I mean she was clad in a green silken dress so diaphanous as to leave little to the imagination. It was as if she'd been doused with tinted water that

clung to and revealed her every delightful curve. The overall effect was quite, well, stimulating. It was some time before I remembered to breathe again.

Then she began to dance. Ever so gracefully she swayed and stepped and dipped and turned, but with each movement incredibly slow, as if these were her final motions in a world where time itself was winding to a halt. The wind stilled, even the sun seemed frozen in the sky, and the only sound was silence. I'd never seen the like of it; I was completely captivated.

But Aragorn stirred then: he sat up a bit straighter and sighed softly. That's what broke the spell for me. My head suddenly cleared, and in that instant I perceived that Arwen's dance was no spontaneous expression but a calculated act, whose intended audience was — had to be — him. Because she must know perfectly well that he'd followed her out there and would be closely watching her every move. Whereas she was almost certainly unaware of my presence — perhaps even of my existence. She was performing this, here and now, precisely because she thought none but Aragorn would see it.

So she did want him after all. Or at the very least she wanted him to want her which was almost as bad. Was Horneth right, then: had Arwen engineered everything from the start? It beggared belief yet here she was, cavorting as shamelessly as a wood-nymph. I now had to face the danger, the terrible threat, that this fairest Elf alive — my beloved! — would actually lay with that awful Man. And perhaps even more than that? Soon they might be plighting their troth all over the place.

A sudden tightness gripped my chest, so that I struggled to gulp in enough air. I went all dizzy and nauseous, and broke out in a cold sweat. My vision darkened; everything closed in. Could this be what dying was like? It was deeply alarming.

I knew only that I had to get away — to escape — and fast. So I fled from that spot headlong, heedless of the way, ran and ran until I found myself suddenly right at the edge of the river's steep bank. Beneath me its dark waters raced along the rocky bed and plunged down its falls, crashing so powerfully that the roar filled my ears and shook the great boulder on which I stood. As I teetered there on the very brink, I was tempted to lean forward ever so slightly, plunge into those wild churning rapids, and make all my cares disappear for good.

But no. Instead I spread my arms wide, squeezed my eyelids shut, and allowed the river's endless tumult to shudder through my body and mind, drowning out the rest of the world and rocking me slowly to quietude. When finally I opened my eyes again it was full night, with only the stars and the sliver of a crescent moon shining

above me and sparkling on the sleepless waters below.

After that I was myself again, and knew what had to be done. First thing the following day — yesterday — I called on Lord Elrond.

'Tiron, what a pleasant surprise,' he said, displaying neither pleasure nor surprise as he stood up from his desk to greet me. 'Some years have passed since last we spoke.' It was quite early, and aside from a formal morning-robe of soft grey wool and matching slippers he wore only his usual stern demeanour. I wondered fleetingly: when had I last seen him smile, really smile, let alone laugh? 'But I discern that you come to me with a matter of some urgency.'

'I do indeed, my Lord,' I replied, striving to appear candid while staying inwardly cautious. Elrond is no fool: it's safest to approach him with words — and yes even thoughts — that are as honest as possible. 'Only it is also a highly delicate matter, of which I hardly dare to speak for fear of consequences.'

A slight flash in his cool grey eyes told me that I now had his interest. 'You may proceed,' he allowed quietly.

'Lord Elrond . . .' I began then trailed off, my hesitation unfeigned. Though naturally I'd pondered about what to say, there was no good way to say it. 'I believe that a . . . well, a sort of threat hangs over us, over all Rivendell — an unexpected danger.'

He raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'And what is the nature of this threat? We Elves are always threatened, forever in danger,' he intoned. 'Our foes are strong, and they are legion, and they never rest. Yet evil things do not enter this valley.' As if challenging me to prove otherwise, he waved a hand toward the open window next to him, the fresh morning air bearing in the peaceful sounds of nature. His manner was proud but with good cause, for in the 4700 years and many wars since Rivendell's founding — including two long sieges of our enclave — not a single Orc, Troll, Giant, or other such unsavoury creature has actually set foot on our soil.

'Evil does not come here, my Lord,' I agreed. 'Except for that which some may carry concealed within them.'

That surprised him: he started, glaring. I now had not just his interest but his complete and acute attention. 'Speak then,' Elrond commanded.

So I told him. Not the whole tale of course — not the bit about being in love with his daughter for over 2500 years — but the relevant parts regarding what I'd seen of Aragorn and Arwen in the woods and elsewhere. He listened silently, giving no sign of how he took my words. But all the while his keen eyes bored into me mercilessly, so that I had to concentrate to keep my mind clear and my story straight.

When I finished, he remained silent for a long moment before

remarking evenly: 'It would seem, Tiron, that you spend a good deal of your free time wandering alone out amongst the trees.'

'I find it settles the mind and soothes the spirit.' Which was true enough, as far as that went.

With a gesture Elrond invited me to sit — that was a first — then did so himself. Among the books, papers, inkwells, and writing-quills on his desk stood a crystal decanter of dark liquid. He removed the stopper, then with my nodded consent poured out two large tumblerfuls. 'These tidings of yours are little news to me,' he confided, pushing a glass in my direction.

I was taken aback. 'But how could you—'

'Because I am not blind,' he interjected sharply and with angry aspect, 'nor entirely witless.' Then he sipped his drink, composing himself. I followed suit: it was a fortified wine of some sort, sweet and strong with an aftertaste of cherries. 'For weeks now,' Elrond expanded more calmly, 'I myself have witnessed Aragorn ogling Arwen and moping like a lovelorn boy.' He paused. 'His mother is aware of it as well.'

I feigned surprise: 'Gilraen?'

'Is as concerned as I am.'

'She has spoken to you of this, Lord Elrond?'

'No. But I see many things and read many hearts,' he asserted with a self-satisfied air. I must have made a face though, because he added dryly: 'Also as ruler of Rivendell I do of course have my sources.'

Horneth! Or so I assumed. Still angling for that transfer, no doubt, and very keen to see this budding romance wilt.

Elrond continued: 'Gilraen fears that Elendil's long line will be broken. Such a match would be fitting for neither Men nor Elves.' He took on a lecturing tone. 'Our two peoples should each strive to preserve what measure of our former separate virtues we still possess, and not further diminish ourselves through' — he mouthed the word reluctantly — 'intermarriage.'

I nodded agreement, ignoring the irony of Elrond being of mixed blood himself. Due to which he has sometimes, not quite correctly, been given the epithet 'Half-elven'. Instead I said: 'My Lord, this is why I knew I must come to you. Ever since Aragorn learned he is Chieftain of the Dunedain' — purposely using the least of his titles — 'he has seemed set on raising himself up. I fear he may do so at our expense.' Which was probably even true, though his more immediate interest was clearly carnal. Left unsaid was what Arwen might want from 'such a match': nothing permanent surely, just a bit of Manly fun? But it suited my purpose to play up the danger of betrothal, plainly the main thing on the mind of the Lord of Rivendell.

Elrond sighed. 'Perhaps I should not have told him so soon,' he admitted, again to my wonder. I'd never seen the Lord of Rivendell so unguarded. 'He is still young and untried.' He quaffed more wine with a pensive expression, then stood up again to gaze out the window — a habit that always seemed to help calm him. 'Aragorn had been out hunting with my sons,' he recalled. 'They have been endeavouring with great patience to teach him woodcraft,' he added, shaking his head. 'That morning I spied them from up here as they arrived, so went down myself to greet the three of them.' Then more softly: 'I am always relieved when they return home unharmed.' Which brought to mind his wife's mischance while travelling through the wilds. Though Rivendell itself is a safe haven, the lands all round are hazardous.

Elrond continued, 'As soon as Aragorn beheld me, he cried out: "Look, father! Look what I've killed!" And he held up for my inspection a great grisly Orc-head, still streaming its foul black blood. How the lad's face shone with pride! At that moment he seemed as fair and noble as Elendil himself.' Elrond actually smiled wistfully, remembering. 'So I called him then for the first time by his true name, and revealed his long-hidden heritage.'

I remained respectfully silent. The sentiments between parents and their children/foster-children have always mystified me. I have no offspring — my own experience of physical intimacy being limited to a couple of pre-Arwen flings — and was myself the unexpected product of the one-time coupling of a Rivendell maiden with some visiting woodland Elf. Then my mother died when I was still a toddler, while taking an ill-advised dip in the River Bruinen during an all-night party. My only recollection of her is that she smelled faintly of lavender.

Apart from which I did at one time keep a cat, but I gather that's a different sort of relationship.

Elrond turned to scrutinise me once more, bringing me back to the business at hand. 'As for your latest observation of the two of them in the woods yesterday: you are quite sure of what you saw?'

'I am afraid so, my Lord.' I took a large swig of wine at the memory of Arwen's brazen cavorting.

He nodded thoughtfully and looked away, examining the wood-grain of the window frame. 'My daughter has certain . . . proclivities . . . of an intimate social nature,' he revealed quietly. 'She at least attempts to be discreet about it, unlike some. Yet with her room so near mine I could hardly fail to notice.'

At those words I choked on my drink, which turned into a hacking cough as I struggled to clear my airways.

He glanced at me with knitted brows. 'Is the wine not to your taste?' he enquired archly.

'P—pardon me . . . Lord Elrond,' I gasped before finding my voice again. 'On the contrary your wine is delicious. In fact it has woken in me an overindulging thirst.' Ignoring my now sore throat, I drained the remainder to prove my enjoyment. But of course I actually hungered to know: just what sort of 'proclivities' did he mean? What exactly couldn't he fail to notice?

Ignoring my sophistry, Elrond returned to his seat across from mine. 'It would appear,' he continued dispassionately, refilling my glass then his own half-empty one, 'that these tendencies only became more pronounced during Arwen's recent sojourn amongst our Lothlorien brethren. I understand that in certain key respects their social mores and behaviours have diverged greatly from ours in recent centuries.'

Which again raised questions that I dared not ask. 'Today's youth . . . ' I managed to murmur supportively with a rueful shake of my head. But meanwhile I felt the foundations of my world trembling. Who was this lady that I loved? How much did I actually know about her? Had I, all this time, been a complete fool?

'I perceive that these disclosures are upsetting to you,' Elrond noted with concern. Stupidly I'd let my mind wander in his presence; he was studying my face again. 'Have I perhaps spoken too freely, Tiron?'

'I trust not, my Lord,' I swiftly replied. My eyes lit on the silver circlet, his symbol of office, which I now realised had been down on his desktop all the while and not perched on his head. It occurred to me only then that the master of Rivendell might want — might need — a confidant. After all, whom else could he talk with openly about such delicate personal topics, in the absence of his wife? Surely not the other Elf-lords, nor even Gilraen, whatever their relationship. This might explain his sudden and shocking frankness with me, the humble housekeeper, having come to him about the very thing that lay heavily on his heart.

'Yet it is true, Lord Elrond,' I continued, 'that your . . . information has only increased my misgivings. Now I must fear for Arwen's own well-being, as well as for your house and for us all. Who will carry on your line, and secure Rivendell's future, if not her?'

So there it was: the crux of the matter, officially speaking at least. It neatly avoided my real interest which was simply to keep Arwen away from Aragorn and for myself if at all possible. It also tacitly acknowledged that neither of Elrond's sons, Elladan and Elrohir, are Lord-of-Rivendell material, nor are they ever likely to provide him any heirs. They're otherwise inclined: they have no time for Elf-maidens, being forever away on 'errantry', which in practice actually means slaughtering as many Orcs as they can.

While that's a laudable avocation, and just revenge for their mother's torment in Orcish hands, still there's much whispering about them.

Elrond was long silent. He sat there drinking deeply, staring down at his desk, absorbed in his own thoughts. When finally he spoke it was in a low, distant tone: 'Though she is my own flesh and blood, as close to me as my right arm, I am loath to approach Arwen about this. Yet in my heart I have often hoped for her to seek a suitable mate amongst the better Elf-houses.'

Aha! Was this a possible opening? I strove to suppress my excitement and present a cool front. 'I wonder,' I offered carefully, 'if my Lord's wish could still come true, at least in part. Assuming of course that a worthy suitor can swiftly be found. One perhaps who is unwaveringly loyal and steadfast, even if unrenowned and of less noble blood.' I awaited his reply, pulse racing.

But he shook his head firmly while filling both our tumblers again. 'My daughter would never accept any such arrangement, whomever the suppliant. She is as independent and strong-willed as . . . as her mother.' And a look of such pain filled his face that I had to avert my eyes. He swallowed another goodly gulp from his glass. 'Arwen will always have her own way,' he went on resignedly, 'regardless of my wishes, or of propriety, or even I fear the well-being of our people.'

'Oh — I see,' I muttered crestfallen, and downed a long draught myself to dull the disappointment. I could feel the wine at work inside me now, as warm and heavy as a thick woolen blanket. Then less hopefully: 'And is there no chance that Aragorn himself might be made to see reason?'

Elrond snorted with disdain; the constant flow of alcohol was clearly affecting him too. 'He is a Man. They are much akin to our Elven infants: eager, impatient, selfish — only they do not grow out of it.' Which sounded rather like what he'd just said about his own daughter. 'Men are not reasonable,' he continued, slapping down his glass so decisively that the drink splashed, 'they are weak and foolish.'

Well, so much for that tack.

'I have raised that lad as a son of my own,' he concluded bitterly. 'But now he would repay me by betraying my trust.'

Which was of course music to my ears. Yet I reflected that Aragorn had apparently been brought up in our homely house without ever once hearing of Arwen's existence: a strange sort of trust, that. Had the Lord of Rivendell always secretly feared, and tried to head off, exactly what was now occurring? Then I sipped some more wine, and another thought floated up. 'Could you — forgive my presumption, Lord Elrond — could you not simply forbid

this match?'

Clearly he'd considered this already, for he dismissed it immediately with a wave of his hand. 'And so succeed merely in making it more tempting to them both? Is not the forbidden fruit the one most desired?' He downed his wine, then took the decanter and poured what remained into our two tumblers. As the last drops fell he regarded the empty vessel with dismay. 'It seems that no matter what I do, or do not, the likely result is the same: I will lose Arwen. It is like a trap laid by the Dark Lord himself, in which all paths are false and every choice cursed.'

He set down the decanter. 'Aragorn would steal away my only beloved daughter,' he declared stonily. 'What will become of us — not just my house, or even Rivendell, but all Elves — if Men in their overweening hubris deem that they can simply take what we hold dearest?' Again he sat silent and grim-faced, until a kind of growl rumbled up in his throat.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet and began pacing the room. 'This is not what I have struggled for these long ages, what our people have bled and died for, that mere Men can usurp us. We are Elves, the Firstborn children of Middle-earth!' Here was an Elrond that no one I think had ever seen: agitated, angry, all semblance of gravitas gone.

'It was we,' he went on fiercely, 'who woke before all others under the new-made stars, who first trod the fresh grass of this world, who invented words and music, poetry and song! It was we who taught the trees to speak and named every living thing!' As he declaimed he stalked back and forth like a caged beast. I could only watch the spectacle in amazement.

'Then when shadow rose to loom over us, and threaten not only our existence but our very sense of self — did we shirk? No! We fought to save both our lives and our Elven ways. We survived while holding true to the hallowed heritage and proud traditions which define us.' His grey eyes were shining now, his hands and fingers fiddling compulsively as he strode about. 'We preserved our ancient culture and ensured that it would never fade. It is precious to us. Precious!'

Some background is needed here . . . It's a closely held secret that the Lord of Rivendell bears one of the Great Rings: dread artefacts forged long ago by both the Dark Lord and the Elves, which confer on those who wield them immense power. Then Sauron made the One Ring to rule over all the others, and to ensnare and enslave those who wore them. Only the Elves hid theirs and escaped that fate. But ever since the One was lost forever, the three great Elven Rings have again been worn and used actively to protect and preserve our remaining lands and people.

Now, when I call Elrond's ring 'secret', what I mean is that everyone in Rivendell knows about it but speaks of it only in whispers. This is because, like him, we're all neither blind nor entirely witless. Ours is a small, isolated enclave of limited resources and declining population, beset by mighty enemies. In the natural course of things we should long ago have been crushed like a rotten walnut. That we haven't yet, is in itself proof of something more at work besides just Elven valour and Elrond's native powers. But in addition he will sometimes unconsciously rub and turn his ring at stressful moments: strange to witness because when worn it's actually invisible to normal sight. This is what I'd just seen him doing, rubbing the middle finger of his right hand where he wears it.

Anyway, watching him do that had set me off on a wandering, tipsy train of thought about famous rings and those who wore them. Above all the Rings of Power of course: the One, the three Elven Rings, the seven Dwarvish ones such as the renowned Ring of Thrór, the nine that were given to Men . . . Then suddenly through that fog shone a bright light of inspiration. 'His ring,' I said aloud, half to myself. Then cried: 'I have it!'

Elrond froze mid-stride. 'Whose ring?' he demanded, and stopped his fiddling to clasp his hands out of view behind his back. He stepped closer to me, looming, face dark with suspicion. 'What ring do you have, Tiron?'

'None, my Lord,' I quickly corrected, once again regretting my loose tongue. 'But,' I went on excitedly, 'I think I may have a solution to this quandary! Please bear with me . . .' Taking a deep breath, and striving to marshal what mental prowess I still had, I ventured forth. 'The Ring of Barahir: you delivered it to Aragorn, along with the shards of Narsil, when you revealed his true identity.'

'What of it?' came the brusque retort. His high language had turned remarkably plain. 'Those age-old heirlooms are tokens of his inheritance.'

'Yet you withheld from him the Sceptre of Annuminas?'

'I did,' Elrond affirmed, a bit defensively. 'For he has not come of the right to it.'

'He has not,' I elaborated, 'because it is the emblem of the former Kings of Arnor. Therefore it is an heirloom — a treasure — too great to bestow on anyone less than a renewed King of that lost realm.'

'Yes, yes,' he agreed, patience clearly wearing thin. 'Your point?'

'Lord Elrond . . . is not your daughter a treasure much greater than that?'

'Well of course—' he began irritably, then stopped short as he grasped my full meaning. 'Why . . . yes she is,' he whispered, eyes widening in understanding. 'My beloved Arwen is a treasure fit for a King — and only a King.'

He sat down again and leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful finger across his lips. Already he appeared to be his usual, composed self again. 'Yet I deem that a King of Arnor alone will not suffice,' he expanded, 'for that is but half of Aragorn's bequest. Gondor also awaits its long-absent King. Those two realms together form his full inheritance.' Elrond considered for a moment longer, nodded to himself with satisfaction, then proclaimed: 'No less than the recrowned High King of all Men in Middle-earth might be worthy to seek the hand of my daughter.'

'That would seem only right and just, my Lord,' I allowed gravely. Oh, how my heart sang! Now, in order for Aragorn to win Arwen he'd first have to reclaim and reunite two ancient kingdoms. One of which — Arnor — no longer existed except on old maps, while the other — Gondor — was but a shadow of its former glory, and had been run during the long lack of any King by jealous Men who would surely resist the return of the rightful heir. Not to mention that to accomplish those objectives he'd also have to defeat Sauron, the most powerful overlord in Middle-earth, absolute master of vast armies of evil minions. In short it was a completely hopeless quest.

'This I foresee is the great fate that awaits Aragorn,' Elrond continued in stentorian tone, 'either to rise above the height of all his fathers since the days of Elendil, or' — a moment's hesitation — 'to fall into darkness.'

To either succeed or die trying, he meant. Which had little to do with foresight or fate, but was more in the nature of a death sentence. Assuming that our Ranger stripling actually took on this patently impossible task, something I very much doubted. Surely even he wasn't so rash and stupid!

But what if he was? In the unlikely event that Isildur's heir did in fact try to reclaim the throne, only to perish in the attempt: could I bear it on my conscience that this whole scheme had been my idea? I searched within myself, consulting my moral compass, which indicated: yes. I could indeed live with that burden.

Elrond then pronounced, as if it had just been revealed to him: 'Meanwhile, I forbode that Aragorn shall neither have wife, nor bind to him any woman, until this doom is fulfilled and he is found worthy.'

'Destiny must be his only consort,' I affirmed soberly, struggling to conceal my delight. So if he chose this already arduous path, the eager 20-year-old would also have to forsake all

feminine pleasures during the journey. It occurred to me that I was perhaps lucky not to have Elrond as a prospective father-in-law.

He now reached for the silver circlet on his desk. 'Well, Tiron, this has been a most useful and productive little chat,' he said lightly. 'Yet I am afraid that I do have many pressing duties to attend to.'

'Lord Elrond,' I replied, standing and then bowing slightly, 'it has been my great honour and pleasure.' But my head swam as I did this: the wine again.

'Needless to say,' Elrond added as he crowned himself with the circlet, 'everything that was discussed here must be held in the strictest confidence.' He cast a warning glance up at me.

'You can rely on my complete and utter discretion, my Lord,' I avowed.

'I would expect no less.' He also stood now, looking steadier on his ancient feet than me on mine. 'Allow me to show you out,' he offered, then led me to his antechamber and pushed wide its massive wooden door. 'We ought to do this more often, Tiron,' he averred as I stepped through it into the passage beyond. 'My door is always open to you.' And with that he firmly pulled the portal shut behind me, sending a deep sepulchral boom rolling down the hallway.

I stood there quietly for a while, feeling dizzy and disoriented as well as overwhelmed by all that had just transpired. There was a lot to take in! But after a moment I began to hear a faint staccato sound emanating from Elrond's chambers. What was that? It was somehow unsettling.

I turned back toward the great door and leaned closer to it, still unable to identify the noise. So very cautiously I put an ear right up against the timbers; now I could finally make out what it was. Laughter! Or rather an awful kind of cackling, which pulsed through the solid wood like a muffled drumbeat, echoing hollowly. It chilled my blood. So I hurried away down the passage, fleeing the sinister sound.

I think there's more evil in our valley than people realise.

Then late yesterday, Aragorn was summoned to see Lord Elrond. Horneth told me they were long closeted together, and that the Man emerged looking pale and shaken.

'My poor one!' she lamented. 'I so wanted to lay his sweet head in my lap and . . . and comfort him.' Then a puzzled look. 'But whatever could have happened up there between those two?'

'No doubt we'll find out soon enough,' I predicted.

We did. This morning Aragorn suddenly took his leave of everyone and departed Rivendell.

There were many teary-eyed fare-thee-wells. Horneth clung to

him like a sailor to a mast in a storm; I feared she might swoon. Arwen's parting was more decorous, but the look they exchanged was still far too lingering and meaningful for my taste. Elrond embraced him briefly: foster-fatherly, restrained. From me he got a perfunctory handshake and noncommittal nod.

Then he left us for the wild, in pursuit — he revealed with far-seeing gaze — of his appointed destiny. Perhaps in the fullness of time he'll meet it, in one form or another: say a Troll's club or Orc's scimitar. Fate can be such an uncertain business.

Meanwhile we in Rivendell must learn to live without him. Horneth is inconsolable at his absence. Arwen betrays no outward sign but is more subdued and solemn than usual. Elrond remains, well, Elrond. For me though it's as if a dark fog has lifted: my heart lighter, my step jauntier, my outlook rosier. The future feels full of possibility: who knows what might happen?

Will Arwen really miss the Ranger all that much? And even if she does now, will she continue pining and waiting faithfully forever? Or will she tire eventually of the long lonely nights, come to her senses, and look for opportunities closer to hand?

That at least is my personal 'hope'. For I'll be here as always, biding my time, trying to learn the secrets of this lady I've so long adored. Maybe I'll even find out what those 'certain proclivities' are that Elrond spoke of. My heart beats faster at the prospect.

December 26, 3018: Tension is in the air, as palpable as the frigid winds blowing down from the Misty Mountains. My eyes and thoughts keep turning toward those bleak snow-capped peaks, and beyond. I sense a dire portent, of cataclysmic forces long pent up and straining to burst forth. Soon, surely, the dam will break.

It began over two months ago when word reached us of a thing unprecedented: four Hobbits astray in the wild, bearing some great burden, being hunted by the Enemy. Elves were sent out to search for the wanderers, and found them nearly on our doorstep, closely pursued — by all the Ringwraiths!

Those nine (called 'Nazgul' in the Black Speech of Mordor) are the Dark Lord's most terrible servants. They were once Men, mighty kings and sorcerers of old; but Sauron gave them each a Ring of Power, and so enslaved them, then over time they became unliving, undying wraiths. It's long since they were all last gathered, and never before west of the River Anduin. What then could have drawn them so far afield, chasing some harmless little halflings?

One of the latter, their leader Frodo, was gravely wounded by the chief Nazgul. For days the lad lay abed here, fading toward death — or worse — until Elrond's healing prowess pulled him back from the brink.

Meanwhile Rivendell was abuzz with rumours. Because apart from the Hobbits, Gandalf too had come here, as well as various Elves and Dwarves and Men, arriving separately yet almost simultaneously, though unplanned by any of us. Something momentous was afoot — but what? No one seemed to know anything, except perhaps Elrond who said nothing.

Alarmingly, Aragorn had also returned, after many decades spent roaming the wilds. Not only had he failed to get killed during all that time, he'd grown mighty in stature and strength. He'd applied himself with a will and had even managed (to everyone's amazement) to master woodcraft so fully, in the course of his many perilous journeys, that folk were now calling him the greatest woodsman of the age! It was he who'd guided the halflings most of the way here and kept them from the Ringwraiths, and so was being acclaimed a hero.

'Look! Isn't he rugged?' Horneth enthused, the night their exhausted little company reached Rivendell.

I suppressed a snort. 'Rather ragged I'd say.' But my heart fell as the Ranger stepped into the light of our homely house, for I saw that beneath his shaggy hair, grimy skin, and travel-stained cloak was a powerful figure of stern aspect, tall, dark, and lean. This wasn't the callow youth we'd once known; the long years of rough living had transformed him. He was now nearly 90, yet being of the Dunedain he appeared to be a Man half that age, albeit dour and

weather-beaten. His bearing was feral, his manner forceful, his glance fierce. He practically oozed animal magnetism.

'Oh my!' breathed Horneth, putting a hand to her chest. 'How his eyes smoulder.'

She wasn't alone in her admiration: a goodly number of Elf-maidens — and more than a few Elf-lads too — had contrived to witness his arrival and were now watching and whispering.

'I wonder if he'll be . . . visiting Arwen tonight,' Horneth murmured pensively, leaning against me for comfort.

An awful question that I was also asking myself. But I opined, with more hope than conviction: 'He wouldn't dare, before his quest is achieved.' Like nearly all secrets here, Elrond's ban on feminine intimacy for the Man had soon become common knowledge — and therefore the fodder for endless gossip.

Arwen wasn't present to welcome him, but as things stood that was scant reassurance. During Aragorn's long exile I'd had no luck at all with her. Oh, she was always gracious enough, and her occasional kind word boosted my spirits and hopes. Yet I never actually got to know her better, or find what if any truth there was in the tales Horneth told. Instead I watched from afar, helplessly, as over the years my beloved sank ever deeper into silent brooding.

Then she'd gone to visit Lothlorien once more, and so encountered the wandering Ranger who just happened to be there too, recovering from some mighty deed or other. The story was that they again met by chance in the woods — if disbelief can plausibly be suspended that far — whereupon seeing what a magnificent specimen he'd become, she finally fell for the Man completely. Whatever the truth of it, by the time she returned here Arwen was openly professing her devotion to that rascal.

Still I kept clinging desperately to hope. Perhaps some fluke of fortune might yet change things? After all, there remained that little matter of reclaiming his Kingship, before Aragorn could formally claim Elrond's daughter . . .

Until that night when he stalked back into Rivendell, and I saw for myself what I was up against. As his towering, muscular form disappeared into the depths of our homely house, an audible sigh rose from the collected admirers. I could feel the spirit within me crushing beneath the unbearable weight of undeniable fact. For at that moment I understood that, King or no, I'd already lost to him.

I was utterly bereft. Having no better idea, I simply retreated to my room in despondent mood, bearing a bottle of wine, to set about getting thoroughly soused. Sometime during the night, having drained the drink, I opened a box of pipe-weed from fresh supplies that I'd prudently laid in. Then I smoked away furiously — coughing and crying and occasionally giggling — until oblivion

came. Daybreak found me sprawled across a bed littered with discarded Mallorn leaves: the only remains of an entire package of lembas that I'd somehow managed to devour.

I wished nothing else than to wallow in my misery forever. But duty called, literally and loudly, in the form of the Dwarves mentioned earlier, who arrived just then. They stood at reception — down the hall from my room — banging on the counter and bellowing for service in typically emphatic fashion, until finally I roused myself and went to see what was up.

Before me I found a richly-dressed elderly Dwarf with a very long white forked beard. It was Gloin! He being one of Thorin's thirteen, who had passed through here so many years before on their way to the Lonely Mountain. They hadn't after all got burnt and eaten by that treasure-hoarding dragon, who was somehow slain. But unfortunately Thorin and two of his kin did die during a fierce battle that ensued over the spoils, in which our Mirkwood cousins were also involved.

'Welcome and well met!' I exclaimed, for despite my sad state it was very good to see him again. 'You've done well for yourself, my dear Dwarf,' I said, gesturing at the fine belt of silver and chain of diamonds he sported.

'Aye, good Elf, I can't complain,' Gloin allowed amiably. 'We've prospered in our Kingdom under the Mountain. This by the way is my son,' he added, nodding toward the stout-looking youngster beside him, who bore a long-handled axe like a walking staff.

'Gimli at your service,' said the lad gruffly with a slight bow.

'Tiron at your service and your family's,' I replied correctly. With the niceties now past, I was about to ask what had brought them so far from home so late in the year. I thought Gloin might reveal what no one else could or would: the reason these various folk were all suddenly converging on Rivendell. But I was interrupted, for that very moment a party of Elves from the Grey Havens turned up, so I quickly showed the Dwarves their room and gave them the remaining pipe-weed.

Though my heart remained heavy as lead, I had little time to reflect on my sorrows. I was kept on my feet all that day and the next as ever more visitors appeared out of the blue, until the available accommodation filled and I was forced to put people up in hastily-converted store rooms and cellars.

The many arrivals were crowned by a large delegation from King Thranduil of the Woodland Realm. These Mirkwood Elves were led by none other than the King's own golden-haired son, Legolas.

At dinner that evening our Elf-maidens and -lads again flocked to see this new guest, for it was an unprecedented treat to have a visit from Thranduil's heir: suave, smart, single, and not yet 2000

years old. But the fair young prince was strangely unmoved by their admiring and inviting attentions. His own glance wandered elsewhere, and even seemed to linger — or did I imagine it? — on Gloin's son Gimli.

Otherwise the general mood was subdued, as the halfling Frodo was at that point still abed, feverish and fighting for life. But on the fourth day after his arrival he finally awoke and arose, and being a Hobbit then ate prodigiously at a feast celebrating his own recovery.

That's when I sought out Bilbo. He, just like most of Thorin's Dwarves, had also survived the encounter with that dragon, and returned much changed and wiser. Since settling in Rivendell a few years ago the furry-footed adventurer has become a fast friend; I'd missed his company these past days. But he'd spent that time in a vigil by Frodo's bed, for the younger Hobbit happens to be his cousin and adopted heir, whom he loves dearly.

As expected I found Bilbo far from the feasting, in the Hall of Fire where he often goes to sit and think — and sometimes nap. Its enormous fireplace was blazing, awaiting the throng that would descend after dinner to listen to all the songs and stories and other nonsense. But right then only a solitary soul was there: a small dark figure on a stool not far from the fire, leaning back against a carven pillar, head sunk deep and face concealed in his cloak.

'Bilbo, am I disturbing you?' I enquired quietly.

He raised his head and looked up. Though his wrinkled visage and shock of white hair were those of a Hobbit now 128 years old, his bright eyes betrayed no sleepiness. 'Hullo, Tiron!' he said, sitting straighter. 'Well frankly, yes you are, a bit. I was working out a song, if you must know, and got stuck over some of the lines.' He grinned knowingly. 'I'd ask for your help, but I understand you don't care much for this sort of thing.'

'I'm not so musically inclined as some,' I excused myself modestly, pulling up another stool. Despite what he'd just said, I knew he was always up for a good natter, only he tended these days to avoid crowds. 'Have you seen the Dwarves yet?'

'Dear old Gloin!' cried Bilbo. 'I've been busy, and have spoken only briefly with him, in passing. But he appears to have become a very important Dwarf! And a very aged one,' he added with a laugh. 'We poor mortals don't have the luck of the Elves. You'll never know the joys of fading sight or a creaky back.'

I nodded with what I hoped was an ironic smile. Yet in truth it's awful to watch my elderly friend falling apart — dying, really — right before my eyes, over the span of a few short years. How can people stand to just wither away like that? This horrid death by ageing is supposedly a 'gift' from the Father of All to Men and other

mortals, enabling their natural and inevitable liberation from the bounds of this world. But if so then it's a present I'm happy not to receive.

'Frodo is doing well?' I asked. Looking after him was of course what had kept Bilbo 'busy'.

'Yes, thanks to Elrond — and to the curative powers of youth.' Then his sunny aspect darkened and he shook his head soberly. 'But I'm not sure the lad will ever recover completely. I fear his wound goes far deeper than mere flesh.'

I didn't try to fill the awkward silence that followed. Frodo had, I'd heard, been stabbed with a deadly Morgul-blade, so it was astonishing that he was even alive. These Hobbits are made of sterner stuff than anyone would guess.

'It ought to have been me,' Bilbo murmured in self-reproach. 'I started this whole affair. That burden was mine to bear.'

'Yours?' I asked amazed. Then: 'Whatever is that great burden?' For the question had baffled many of us. If the mysterious thing is so heavy, why did halflings haul it around and not some bigger, stronger people? And how could old Bilbo possibly have become involved?

He appraised me doubtfully. The golden firelight played across his careworn face, leaving it half in shadow. 'I really shouldn't speak of it,' he replied softly. 'It's too . . . too precious.' There was a catch in his voice; he turned away suddenly. 'Anyhow it has passed on from me, or so they say.'

I felt terrible. 'I'm sorry!' I avowed contritely. 'I shouldn't have pried.'

He took a deep breath, then glanced at me again, smiling weakly. 'Not to worry, my friend. Of course you're curious: who wouldn't be?' Then he gave me an odd look that I couldn't decipher. 'Anyway I think everyone bears some sort of burden, so it's only natural to compare and wonder whose is heavier. I carry one and you yours.'

'Mine?' I asked blankly.

Bilbo cocked an eye at me with a meaningful expression. 'The Lady Arwen?'

This hit me like a blow to the head. I was stunned, and could only sit there dumbstruck.

'Oh dear,' he exclaimed with dismay, 'you look absolutely stricken! Now I'm the one who must apologise. Forgive me!'

'It—it's all right,' I managed. 'I just . . . I didn't . . .'

He put a comforting hand on my arm. 'Good Tiron,' he said kindly, 'did you truly think I would never notice? That you were so very clever at concealing your feelings for her?'

His gentle chiding quickly soothed my shock. 'Yes I did,

actually,' I admitted, rather embarrassed. 'I fancied that I was altogether canny and discreet about it.' I chuckled ruefully. 'Only it seems your sight isn't quite so faded as advertised.'

At that he fell back laughing: a joyous, melodious sound that rang through the empty hall like music. 'No, I'm not blind yet!' he exulted. 'I can still see a thing or two!' When he'd finished, he leaned close again to whisper conspiratorially: 'But your dark secret is safe with me.'

I knew that already. The question was, had anyone else learned it? 'Well, aren't you at least going to lecture me about having ideas above my station?' Because Bilbo is someone who likes everything in its place, including people. (He's a great fan of genealogies.) Friendship notwithstanding, I was sure he wouldn't approve of my pursuit of Arwen.

'I won't waste the time!' he retorted with mock tartness. 'You'd never listen to such sound counsel.' Then he turned thoughtful. 'At any rate,' he went on, 'I've no right to scold, having once fallen into a similar trap myself.'

I raised an enquiring eyebrow. 'Oh?'

'My cousin Amaranth: the sister of Frodo's mother. Such a beautiful girl.' His old eyes lit up at the memory. 'There was something about her, a liveliness that set her apart from all the rest. I absolutely adored her!'

This was a side of Bilbo completely new to me; I was all agog. 'Did you court her?'

'Good heavens, no!' he replied aghast. 'At least not openly. She was much younger than me, and anyway I was far too shy. Also her father was a very important Hobbit: Master of Buckland! But we did spend a good deal of time together.' He shrugged. 'There was never anyone else; I've been a confirmed bachelor ever since. And considered very respectable,' he added archly, 'until I started taking up with Dwarves and Elves and other dubious folk.'

I hardly dared ask: 'What became of your cousin?'

His face fell and he sighed so sadly that I instantly regretted the question. 'She never married either. She died some twenty years ago now, aged ninety-four. Not long after that I left the Shire and came here to live.'

Bilbo and I sat quietly for a while, watching the bright fire roar and listening to its logs crackle. Finally he stirred and said: 'Well, dear Tiron, I should get back to composing this little ditty of mine. It must be finished before the feast is, and the crowds come to drive all the ideas clean out of my head.'

So I left him then. Exiting the Hall of Fire, I turned to look back. Almost lost in that vast space, his diminutive form could just be made out in the flickering light, slumped against the pillar, face

buried in his dark cloak.

I made my way toward my room, slowly and in sombre mood. It was dispiriting to learn that even as sweet a soul as Bilbo had been unsuccessful in love. What hope then was there ever going to be for me? My personal virtues are too subtle, especially absent more obvious attractions such as a fine pedigree and rippling muscles. What would I have to be, or do, to ever stand a chance?

As I trudged along the passages, pondering this, I began to make out ahead a great clattering of cutlery and the happy hum of many voices conversing. This was of course the ongoing feast, so my first impulse was to hurry past in order to avoid all the gaiety. But on second thought I stopped at a side-door, then after a moment's hesitation, stepped through it into the main kitchen.

This was like entering another world. It was a hive of frenetic activity: numerous chefs and their assistants buzzing around the various stoves and hobs and fires, tending to cook-pots and casseroles and roasting-spits, adding spices, making sauces, dressing dishes to be served. They called out to one another over the hubbub with brusque commands, questions, and epithets:

'Keep a sharp eye on that veal — don't let it burn!'

'Where's the sodding parsley?'

'Take your filthy paws off that pot!'

I carefully weaved through that maze of boiling kettles and angry cooks until I came to the kitchen's far end, where large double doors led into the dining hall. The head waiter, Costor, was there propping one door partly open so he could keep an eye on the feast, while the other swung back and forth as a constant stream of servers came and went.

'The Hobbits want more candied parsnips!' cried a harried-looking waitress overloaded with empty serving bowls.

'Those little scroungers,' Costor griped. 'That's four helpings already! Well, go see if the scullery can scrape some together,' he directed, tossing his head that way.

I stood just behind him, peering into the hall through the same narrow gap. I could make out three ruddy-cheeked halflings — Frodo's travelling companions — away at a side-table, stuffing themselves industriously while the servers struggled to keep their plates full. 'Couldn't you seat them a bit nearer the kitchen?' I suggested.

Costor wheeled around with a sour look, which softened when he saw me. 'Oh, it's you, Tiron.' He waved a hand toward the Hobbits and growled: 'I should seat them in the bloody kitchen!' Huge dark eyebrows loomed like storm clouds over his wide florid face, which loured perpetually when he was on duty. Yet over drinks, after hours, he could be a cordial companion. 'Can you tell

me how long all this lot will be staying with us?'

'I've no idea,' I admitted. 'I don't even know why they came here in the first place.'

'Well, they came mostly to stuff their faces, by the look of it,' Costor retorted with a grim laugh. He deftly snatched two canapés from a not-quite-empty tray being returned to the galley, handed me one and swiftly downed the other. 'Elrond only ordered the feast late this morning,' he said, smacking his lips and shaking his head. 'Unbelievable! One hundred forty guests, five courses, all the trimmings: what a nightmare.'

From the depths of the kitchen a voice bellowed: 'The veal's nearly ready to go out!'

'Right — got it!' Costor yelled back. Just then Horneth of all people was pushing through the other door into the dining hall, bearing a massive tureen of roast potatoes. She flashed me a smile. Costor slowed her with a hand on the arm. 'Tell everyone I want them back in here straight away,' he ordered; she nodded and disappeared within.

'You brought on lots of extra staff,' I noted.

'Had to draft them in from all around Rivendell,' he explained. 'Over a dozen just to serve, plus more for the kitchen. The bookkeeping department hung the decorations,' he added, pointing out the oft-used, tired-looking bunting and streamers, as well as a string of large multi-coloured letters stretched along beneath the ceiling that read: 'Hooray Frodo!'

'Very festive.' I leaned over a bit so as to be able to glimpse part of the high table, which lay to my blind side beyond the doors, raised upon a dais. I saw Elrond seated as always at its head, along with Gandalf and other notables. Frodo was there too of course, deep in conversation with Gloom. The Hobbit seemed in fine fettle, a remarkable transformation from a few days before when I'd seen him carried in, unconscious and half-dead, to the rooms I'd prepared for the halflings and their Ranger guide. The latter, thankfully, appeared to be absent this evening.

'After the feast and cleanup,' said Costor, 'we'll be having a party for the whole crew. You're welcome to come along.'

'Thanks,' I replied, 'but I don't think I'm up for it tonight.'

'Suit yourself.' He went off to corral the serving staff, now trickling back into the kitchen, and prepare for the next course.

I took his place at the door, propping it wider to survey the whole head table. My heart leapt as I finally spotted Arwen, sitting right in the middle, up against the wall tapestries under a canopy.

She looked absolutely lovely: her flawless face glowed as if from an inner light, which was too bright to be contained, and so spilled out through her lustrous eyes. A star falling to earth couldn't

have been more radiant. Yet she was queenly too: her glance thoughtful and wise, her black braids crowned by an exquisite silver-lace cap glittering with gemstones, a silver-leaf belt girdling her gorgeous grey dress. It was a tonic to my ailing spirit simply to behold her; I felt I was right to have come here.

'What are you looking at?' asked Costor, suddenly standing beside me again. His people were busy collecting great trayfuls of veal from the cooks.

'Arwen,' I answered, still watching her.

'Arwen? Why?'

Why not just admit it? Bilbo had seen through me, so no doubt others had or would. 'Because I'm in love with her.'

'Oh.' He eyed me uncertainly. 'Seriously?'

'For more than two and a half thousand years now.'

Costor studied me a moment longer, then followed my gaze out the door at her. 'Hmm,' he hummed, considering. 'Yes,' he allowed judiciously, 'Arwen's all right, I guess. Not really my type though. Too . . . pretty.'

I glanced at him sharply but he didn't even notice, having turned away to get his servers, now loaded up with veal, all ready to go out.

Costor addressed the assembled team: 'Listen here, lads and lasses! Keep your heads up and your backs straight. Don't dare drop any trays,' he warned, 'or the cooks will serve you up for the next course.' Scattered chuckles at that. 'And make sure those greedy Hobbits don't grab more than their share!' Then he got everyone in line, and took his place at the front bearing a tray of his own.

But before heading off, he leaned over to swiftly whisper: 'Anyway, Tiron, I think you're aiming too high. Arwen's way above your station! Doesn't Aragorn have dibs on her?'

I saw nothing immediately to hand with which I could strike Costor a mortal blow. At any rate he was already gone, passing through the doorway, leading his procession into the dining hall with the final admonition: 'And remember to bloody well smile this time!'

As I stared after him, I slowly shook off my anger at his obtuse comments. Costor isn't known for his tact or sensitivity, but in his own uncouth way he no doubt meant well.

So I turned my attention back to Arwen, this time in reflective mood. Yes, of course she's above my station: I'm acutely aware of it. Only I'd always imagined she might somehow see past that — and my chronic shyness around her — to finally recognise what a worthy and devoted consort I could be. But instead she'd fallen for awful Aragorn, purely on account of his Kingly heritage, wide

renown, and brawny ability to lop off Orcs' heads.

Or was there more to it than that? Had some insidious influence or malady twisted Arwen's better judgement? For there's really no sense at all — no future — in an Elf-maiden pursuing a mortal Man, who like an annual plant is fated to flower for just a single season, then quickly decay and die.

It suddenly struck me: could that very mortality actually appeal to Arwen? To love the Ranger is clearly hopeless, since whatever else may happen, soon enough he'll anyway be dust. Might the feminine mind, dark and mysterious as it often is, somehow find that tragic reality romantic?

I gazed at my dear one and wondered. If this were true, then for her a key attraction of their liaison is that it cannot last, but from the outset is doomed. Could this then mean that by waiting patiently for nature to take its course, I might still aspire to swoop in once Aragorn is good and dead, and pick up the pieces? Excitement flared in me at the idea.

Until I remembered, with a realisation which shook me to the core, that there'd be nothing left to salvage. Because if Arwen does officially bind herself to him, then she too must die. That's the price of her being one of the so-called Half-elven, a bitter truth I'd so far managed to forget . . .

After the Elder Days, it was decided that the offspring of such mixed-race unions would each have to face a fateful choice. They could either elect to be Elves, and immortal, or else Men, and mortal. They were allowed to delay that decision but not forever: at some point it had to be made. Of course nearly all, preferring long life to short, decided to be Elves. Only Elrond's twin brother Elros opted for Manhood, and so was already feeding the worms 6000 years ago, whereas his sibling is still ruling Rivendell today.

None of Elrond's children has yet chosen: there's been no immediate need and therefore no hurry. But if Arwen does actually wed Aragorn, she must perforce become mortal just like him. She will be making an irrevocable choice to live out her numbered days as a human woman, and suffer that same slide into decay and death. Which again made me question her mental state, that she could even contemplate taking such a path: for what person of sound mind arranges their own demise?

I'd long pushed all of this to the back of my mind, assuming it could never actually happen. Something would surely intervene: Arwen would either balk or simply lose interest in Aragorn, or he would perish in the wilderness, or else fail in the near-impossible bid to reclaim his Kingship and so not qualify to claim her hand. But in fact she did still want him, and he still lived, and unlikely as it was he might conceivably still become King. I could no longer

blithely assume otherwise.

Watching my beloved now as she chatted charmingly over plates of veal with some lucky woodland Elves, it was like a knife in my heart to envision her withering away like dear old Bilbo. Or for that matter like Aragorn's mother Gilraen, who as she'd begun to grow grey had felt Elrond's warm welcome grow cool, and so decades ago left Rivendell for the wilds, where she died hopeless and alone at the tender age of 100.

How could such perfect, timeless beauty as Arwen's be allowed to fade and vanish from the earth like that? It was bad enough losing her to Aragorn. But to lose her altogether and forever?

My eyes blurred with sudden tears. A sharp pain shot across my chest, and my body trembled. I felt lightheaded; I clung to the door for support. The sights and sounds around me dimmed until I was left alone in a numb emptiness. The only sensation remaining was the rhythmic pounding of my own heart: it was like the drumbeat of approaching doom.

I remember almost nothing after that. At some point someone helped me back to my room. After which a long deep darkness fell, beset by disturbing dreams.

* * *

A single clear bell rang out. I half-woke to find myself lying in my bed in the morning light. So I swiftly squeezed my eyelids shut again, and heaped the bedclothes atop me in order to block out the unwelcome day. But all in vain, for I still heard a distant voice cry: 'That is the warning bell for the Council of Elrond!' Soon followed by the noise of many padding feet in the corridor outside my door.

Those words sparked a vague memory that my sluggish mind struggled to summon. Then I recalled: a notice that I'd happened to see in the kitchen the previous evening, tacked to the dining hall doors where I'd been standing. The first part of which read:

Schedule of meals and events for October 25, 3018

8 am Breakfast, Dining Hall: buffet style

9 am Council of Elrond (secret), East Porch: no refreshments requested

12 noon Lunch, Dining Hall: feast leftovers

My reluctant eyes creaked open again. Undoubtedly, the purpose of that 'secret' council must be to discuss whatever had brought all these strange folk flocking to Rivendell. Did I still wish

to find out? Searching inside myself again I found that, right that moment, most of me emphatically didn't give a toss.

Yet somewhere within, a small firm voice whispered: Yes, go! Because I did in fact want to know. I tried to ignore that annoying little voice but it was very insistent. Well, then I really ought to head over there and see what I might manage to overhear. So I told myself anyhow, groaning at the very thought of all that exertion.

Therefore, steeling myself to the ordeal, I forced my unwilling flesh out of bed with a heroic effort. Then I looked around groggily, searching for some lembas to help smooth the harsh transition to wakefulness. But that revitalising waybread was all gone, every last crumb, consumed during my recent wine- and weed-fuelled binge.

So I stumbled from my room, bleary and breakfastless, still wearing the previous day's clothes, and lurched along the various passages and steps leading to the high garden that encloses the open-air East Porch. Luckily I saw no one: the council members must all be there already, and everyone else still recovering from yesterday's festivities. Yet even if discovered I had a ready alibi, for my housekeeper's duties take me all over Rivendell. To which end I clutched in one hand, as camouflage, a large feather duster — because that whole porch area can always use a good cleaning.

As I neared the garden I took care to tread more softly, although the constant running and falling of the river below would mask most stray noises. A clear morning light glowed in the valley, and the scent of trees and flowers wafted in the surprisingly warm autumn air, along with a fine mist that rose from the river. I crept forward cautiously, duster poised, until I could hear the familiar drone of Elrond's voice introducing the council participants: 'Here is Boromir, a Man from the south . . .'

Peeking past an intervening tree trunk, I spied a wide semicircle of chairs in which around a score of people were seated: a mix of Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, and Men. Aside from two of Elrond's own counsellors there were Legolas and several other Elves from Mirkwood and the Grey Havens, along with Gloin and Gimli, Bilbo and Frodo, Aragorn and this new fellow Boromir, plus a few more I didn't recognise. Gandalf too of course, appearing as sour as ever, albeit a bit cleaner than usual.

Soon the council proper got under way, and it was quite the eye-opener. First though came a recitation of the customary old catalogue of woes: our Enemy's waxing strength, his relentless advance on all fronts, the yet-again rising shadow that threatens to engulf all the Free Folk of Middle-earth. Important stuff to be sure, only it's tiresome after a few thousand years to keep hearing the same sky-is-falling stories, about which we seem able to do so

little. But when that chitchat meandered around to the real object of this meeting, a different and fascinating tale unfolded . . .

It began long ago with the making of the Rings of Power, and Sauron's forging of the Ruling Ring in the fires of volcanic Mount Doom, and the ensuing endless strife that culminated in the Dark Lord's defeat in battle by a desperate last alliance of Elves and Men. That much was already known to everyone there, yet what followed was new to most.

For the One Ring was then claimed by victorious Isildur. Only to later be lost, upon his death, in the great River Anduin, apparently forever. And there it did sit for two and a half millennia. Until suddenly found, seemingly by chance, by some fishermen — and taken by one called Gollum. This strange little creature then kept the Ring secretly for a further 500 years, rendered deathless by its powers, before he in turn lost it in the most extraordinary circumstances — to none other than our very own Bilbo!

I won't go into the details of his remarkable chapter. Suffice to say that the Hobbit long bore it himself, as unaware as Gollum had been of what it actually was. But his friend Gandalf began to suspect: it was he who finally persuaded Bilbo to pass the Ring on to the younger and fitter Frodo. Meanwhile a re-risen Sauron learned of its discovery, and Gandalf of its true nature, so in the end everything came down to a race between the searching Nazgul and the fleeing Hobbits. Until Frodo managed — just barely — to reach the safety of Rivendell.

Amazing as all that was, the climax came when Gandalf bade Frodo to reveal the Ring itself. The hush that fell then! The poor halfling's hand shook visibly as he drew it out, on a fine chain hung around his neck. Frustratingly far away, I leaned forward and craned my neck, peering intently. Released from its hiding place, the One caught the rays of the morning sun, gleamed blindingly, then flickered like a living golden flame. How my heart thrilled to the sight! Even at that distance it seemed to me the most beautiful object I'd ever laid eyes on.

When it was put away again I felt an acute pang of disappointment. But after that my mind strayed, while the talking went on, for I thought the key points had nearly all been addressed. The famed One Ring was not only miraculously recovered but was right here in our homely house. What a wonderful stroke of fortune!

In a flash, my dark defeatism was turned to bright new hope. Finally we had the means of beating back the armies of our Enemy, and perhaps even of defeating him once and for all. Because in making the Ruling Ring, Sauron had placed much of his own power into it, doubtless never dreaming he could ever lose it or have it

used against him. Yet now he would face a foe armed with his own awful weapon. Why, this very minute the old sorcerer must be trembling in his tall tower at the prospect!

I thought the only question left — and the most important one — was who would actually bear our terrible trophy into battle. This ought to be a person of great power himself, able to resist the Ring's dark influence and bend it to his own will while leading our triumphant forces. Impatiently I began scanning the circle before me for likely candidates.

Not Elrond I hoped: he has his own mighty Elven Ring and is bad enough already. Surely not Gandalf: too difficult and temperamental for sound leadership. Obviously not Aragorn, although as Isildur's heir he might well crave the hard-won, long-lost prize his ancient forebear had claimed. Not the Dwarves either: I respect them but they tend to go mad over anything golden. The Hobbits, bless them, are simply not cut out for it. As for the remaining visitors, I knew little to nothing about them.

Well, perhaps some other ranking Rivendell Elf? Two were present. Not Erestor: although Elrond's chief counsellor and a worthy enough fellow, he doesn't strike me as overlord material. Glorfindel then: an ancient lord of proven strength and wisdom, also a counsellor of Elrond's yet very much his own Elf. Yes, he'd be ideal . . .

Then my attention returned to the council, and I realised they were all at that very moment debating what to do with the Ring. Only to my shock they spoke not of using it but of hiding or sending it away, or even destroying it: what foolery was this? But as I listened further, they rejected the first two options, on the good grounds that wherever it was put or sent our Enemy would sooner or later root out and reclaim his creation. And as for ruining it, none of us had the means to accomplish that. Yet the nascent sigh of relief died on my lips the next instant.

For Elrond suddenly contended that all was now clear to him. 'We must take a hard road, a road unforeseen,' he announced gravely. 'To walk into peril — to Mordor. We must send the Ring to the fire.' Meaning to Mount Doom in whose magma heart it had long ago been made, in order to unmake it.

I could barely believe my ears, and judging from the stunned silence that followed I wasn't alone. The idea was absolutely insane! One does not simply walk into Mordor. We might as well wrap the Ring as a present for delivery directly to the Dark Lord himself, whose great fortress of Barad-dur lies nearly next door to that fiery volcano of its birth.

But the only one who dared to speak up then was Boromir. As it happens he's the elder son of Denethor, Steward of Gondor, and a

valiant Man of far more noble aspect than Aragorn. 'I do not understand all this,' he admitted, perplexed. 'Why do you speak ever of hiding and destroying? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need?' So he tried to talk some sense into the others, making a passionate plea on behalf of his own embattled people that we wield the One against our common Enemy. 'That is what he most fears, I deem . . . Take it and go forth to victory!'

I'd have cheered, had I not been skulking there secretly with a feather duster. I hoped someone else would. But Elrond swiftly shushed Boromir like an unruly child, calling the Ring 'altogether evil' and insisting that it would inevitably corrupt whomever used it until they became as bad as Sauron himself. 'I will not take the Ring to wield it,' he avowed piously.

'Nor I,' said Gandalf, immediately supporting him, as if pre-arranged. I half-expected Aragorn to jump in at that point and try to claim it for himself, yet he stayed as strangely silent as everyone else. Boromir reluctantly gave way in the face of this seemingly united front, though I saw doubtful looks on others too.

What were Elrond and Gandalf playing at, and why weren't more people challenging them? Was it simply too intimidating to contradict those who were supposed the wisest, who had themselves now sworn off wielding the One?

Gloin did try sparring with them a while then, without success. But it was Erestor of all people who was finally driven to voice what many surely felt, publicly disagreeing with his kinsman the Lord of Rivendell for the first time ever. 'That is the path of despair,' he said of taking the Ring to Mordor. 'Of folly I would say,' he opined, before appending respectfully, 'if the long wisdom of Elrond did not forbid me.'

Gandalf replied to that forthwith, stamping out this dissent. 'Despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt,' he argued. 'We do not.' He went on to call it wisdom to take whatever path is deemed to be necessary, then added tartly, 'though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope.' He even promoted the patent absurdity of this new plan as being the one thing Sauron would never expect: 'If we seek this, we shall put him out of reckoning.'

By which logic any sort of lunacy could be defended. For no matter how daft the undertaking, you can't truly know it will fail until it actually does. And just imagine the surprise of your unwitting adversary, when he learns that you've made the most reckless choice imaginable!

Yet Elrond quickly agreed with the wizard; evidently they must have planned all this. To what end? Was this apparent madness

actually some subtle stratagem, whose opaque purpose would become clear only in hindsight? I was baffled, but had no time to ponder it because Elrond started speaking then about the road ahead.

'Neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it,' he maintained. 'This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong.' Whatever was he on about now? His next words made it more explicit. 'Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.'

Again, I could hardly believe I'd heard aright. So, someone small and weak should attempt this mighty task, since there's little hope for it anyway, and the strong and wise will somehow be otherwise engaged? Which made it sound as if wisdom is the better part of valour.

And that 'small hands' remark revealed just who they wanted to bear the Ring to Mordor. In this company it could mean only one person. As the awful significance of the phrase sank in, I felt a dead darkness fill my heart. I regarded the Lord of Rivendell with new-found revulsion: you wicked old Elf! You cold-blooded conniver! Then in fearful anticipation I turned my eyes toward the Hobbits.

Bilbo spoke up first, gamely taking the bait himself in an attempt to spare his young cousin and heir. 'Very well, very well, Master Elrond!' he piped up. 'Say no more! It is plain enough what you are pointing at. Bilbo the silly Hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself . . .' And so he continued, bravely offering under cover of jest to take up the impossible quest that 'the great' had laid before us. Bless his soul!

Gandalf answered him, and with more kindness than I knew he had. While praising the old halfling's valour, he pointed out that Bilbo hadn't in fact 'started' all this, and hadn't the strength any longer to carry it through. 'You cannot take the thing back. It has passed on,' the wizard said meaningfully. They chatted a bit longer, then again silence fell. The noon-bell rang and still nobody said a word.

My gaze was now fixed irresistibly on the younger Hobbit. Frodo glanced around the circle at the others, only to see that their faces were all averted. They knew what was being asked of him — what was expected — and didn't dare to look him in the eye. He was as good as alone, though he sat there surrounded by mighty folk.

The poor little fellow had a dreadful demeanour. I pitied him for the incredibly cruel position in which he'd been put, and yearned to cry out: Don't take it, Frodo! You've done enough already! Don't listen to those shameless old scoundrels! But instead I just shook

my head from side to side while urgently, uselessly whispering: 'Don't! Don't! Don't! . . .'

At last he raised his small clear voice, struggling over the words as if someone else were speaking through him. 'I will take the Ring to Mordor,' Frodo said. He went on haltingly, with a heartbreakingly lost look. 'Though . . . I do not know the way.'

* * *

Afterward I strove to comprehend what had taken place. I concluded that both Elrond and Gandalf must truly believe the Ring too evil to use, for either of them could have simply taken it there and then, and no one I expect would've seriously objected.

But it wasn't enough just to refuse it themselves: they also had to keep anyone else from claiming it. So they ensured that it stayed in the same hands that had proved safe thus far. The small hands of someone strong enough to bear the thing yet too weak to wield it. That this task would surely spell doom for the innocent one involved, was apparently considered an acceptable sacrifice.

Still, I couldn't understand their refusing the Ring in the first place. Too evil to use: what does that even mean? If you're locked in mortal combat and your foe drops his sword, won't you snatch it up and turn it against him? Does it matter who forged the blade, so long as it's strong and sharp? Or is it better to just leave it — perhaps even hand it back — and seek some more virtuous means of killing him? What: you say the weapon in question is altogether evil? Well then, please show me one that's altogether good. No one was ever healed with a sword.

I find it tricky to untangle the knotty moral weaving of Gandalf, Elrond, and others of their ilk. They imagine themselves purely as agents of good, a somewhat understandable illusion if the Enemy is seen as evil personified. In fact they sometimes define evil simply as the absence of good, or as a moving hole within good. Yet Sauron himself was once, literally, a perfect angel; while Gandalf who supposedly still is one, is sending a halfling on a suicide mission — and Elrond is definitely no angel at all.

Yet despite such contradictions — or perhaps because of them — Elrond and company insist that they are opposite in every way to the Dark Lord. By extension this means they cannot countenance using anything he's made, in order to avoid being the least bit like him. For they morbidly fear the attraction of evil, in both themselves and others, as if it were some irresistible dark force of nature that inexorably draws all beings to it like moths to a flame.

So they reject the one thing that might realistically save us, solely on account of its origin. And not just for themselves: they believe that their much-ballyhooed wisdom and all-round greatness

give them the right to decide this matter for all of Middle-earth. They who have never so much as tried on the Ruling Ring, even once, to assay its actual evilness, and to find whether it fits.

Ruminations like these occupied me for days, stretching into weeks, while preparations were made for the Ring's departure. Of course within hours of the 'secret' council's ending, all Rivendell knew exactly what had happened, so every conversation was full of gossip and argument about it. I hoped this ongoing debate might encourage someone important, Glorfindel perhaps, to mount a belated challenge to the foolhardy plan. But no: it merely gained momentum over time, so that soon all the talk was not about what ought to be done but only of who should accompany Frodo.

My own thoughts bent increasingly toward the Ring itself, and especially to that singular moment when the young Hobbit had revealed it, blazing forth like a pocket golden sun. How glorious that had been! I kept replaying those few brief seconds in my mind, trying to recall precisely how the lovely thing had captured the morning light, the lively way it had sparkled and shimmered.

I would sometimes get so lost in contemplation of its dazzling lustrousness that I'd come to with a start, and find myself in the middle of sweeping a floor or changing a bed. Before long the One even began to inhabit my sleep: I'd wake up in a cold sweat, breathless, with the receding image of a great glowing corona, just beyond reach.

Then one evening on the edge of winter it suddenly struck me that, ever since the council, I'd hardly thought at all about Arwen. She who for millennia had been my daily obsession and the object of my nightly dreams — who had been my main reason for living. She who I was in mortal danger of losing forever. Yet instead of her, I was now focussed always on the Ring. How could that be?

Instantly I was wracked by guilt, as though I'd been unfaithful. And had I? If in my heart I belonged to Arwen — had in fact come to define myself by my love for her — then why these days was my attention centred elsewhere? Was the One Ring taking her place in my esteem and admiration? The question troubled me that whole evening and through a sleepless night. But by the next morning my reflections finally culminated in the realisation that there's really no conflict, for the two of them are bound together inextricably . . .

The fate of the Ring rules all our futures: it will decide the doom not just of Frodo but of Aragorn, and so also of Arwen and myself, as well as every other person in Middle-earth. Therefore it's only natural that I should take such a strong interest in the One, and might in these circumstances even feel a kind of personal attachment to it. Which in no way diminishes my deep affection for Arwen — far from it. If anything the two of them actually

complement one another, for both are precious to me. What a relief it was to see through this quandary!

Still, that didn't help with the larger problem of our inevitable downfall and destruction, if the Master Ring continued on its currently set course toward Mount Doom. With war brewing from all quarters, and defeat looming on every horizon, it was hard to maintain my usual sturdy equanimity. I had to restrain myself from running down Rivendell's corridors shouting: 'Can't you see, fools? What happens when Sauron takes back what is his? We're all going to die!' Instead I forced myself to make small talk about that coming onslaught and the Ring-bearer's quest, like everyone else, as if these were no more than topics of polite conversation and not harbingers of the end of the world as we knew it.

I felt a crying need to do something, yet couldn't for the life of me envisage what. I was sure though that everything would become clearer if only I could have another look at the Ring — a proper one this time, not a mere peek like before. Of course I couldn't come right out and ask Frodo to show it to me, but perhaps if I sought his company the question might eventually arise of its own accord.

So I had Bilbo introduce us, and the rest of the Hobbits as well: Merry, Pippin, and Sam. They're good lads, all of them, and we passed some pleasant times together: chatting and joking, playing cards and darts, walking in the woods and whatnot. Though they share some of the same traits I like so well in Bilbo, each is also different. Sam for example is an admirably trusty fellow, only a bit stolid for my taste. Pippin is great fun but lacks common sense, perhaps because he's youngest. Merry is my favourite of the four, being as energetic and playful as any halfling, yet perceptive and practical with it.

Frodo is something of an enigma. While on the surface he seems a typical Hobbit — curly brown hair, red cheeks, bright eyes, perky persona — beneath the cheery manner is a spirit tinged with melancholy. Though he's friendly enough, he lacks Bilbo's easy charm and affability, and left to himself is given to quiet contemplation, or even brooding introspection. He'll take part in whatever childish frivolity, then the next minute say something so sagacious that it could have come from the mouth of an oldster. At mealtimes his greedy appetite does credit to his kind, yet I also sense an ethereal quality about him, as if he were a glass filled with a clear light.

In short, Frodo is at once gay and sad, young and old, earthy and otherworldly: very Elf-like in fact. Which I found made him, paradoxically, less approachable than the other Hobbits. So although I think I understand him a bit, I never really got to know

him. I wonder whether possessing Middle-earth's most potent artefact these past 17 years may have altered his innate character, making him deeper, darker, and more secret.

Speaking of that original object of our association: the subject of the Ring never once came up, nor Frodo's mission. I felt it would've been bad form to mention them myself, although I constantly wished to, for the Hobbits clearly wanted to avoid thinking about the future, and were content simply to enjoy the peace and safety of Rivendell for as long as they could. But I did think of the One a great deal myself, and of the nightmare journey Frodo would soon face, along with his faithful friend Sam who'd begged to come along, and would be allowed to.

Allowed by Elrond I mean, who naturally had taken upon himself — who else? — the task of choosing all of Frodo's companions for that trek. As the passing weeks became months, everyone was asking when he'd make an announcement about this, for winter was almost upon us and the first snows had long since fallen in the high mountains to the east and south. With each day the road ahead only became colder and harder.

Not until after mid-December — just over a week ago now — did the Lord of Rivendell finally proclaim that nine companions in all would be travelling with the Ring. These were meant to be an analogue of Sauron's nine Nazgul riders, only on foot and not evil.

The parts of the two Hobbits were already arranged, plus one representative each of the Elves and the Dwarves would accompany them: Legolas and Gimli. Representing Men would be Boromir and Aragorn: hardy warriors both of them, but problematic in that the former is openly keen to use the Ring, and the latter might secretly be. Therefore Gandalf would go as well, so that at least one of the great wouldn't after all have his eyes elsewhere while small hands did 'deeds that move the wheels of the world'.

Which left two places to fill. Yet rather than sending along a couple of Elf-lords, or at least some stout champions, Elrond in the end chose the remaining Hobbits: Merry and Pippin. This being at their own insistence, and apparently with Gandalf's full support!

Now, I'm very fond of these Shire-folk, and cannot imagine better comrades for a relaxing ramble through the countryside. But I definitely wouldn't want them as companions on a highly hazardous expedition. Because they have very little martial ability, few wilderness skills, they know next to nothing of the wider world, and although they're quite small, each one eats as much as two Men. They do have surprising stamina and endurance, and perhaps further strengths that are hidden. But to ship the four of them off to Mordor is like sending lambs to the slaughter.

That Gandalf favoured it was only mildly surprising, since I

now know all too well how pipe-weed can cloud the mind. Yet I generally expect better sense from Elrond. It's bad enough choosing someone small and weak as the Ring-bearer, but for several of his companions to be as well?

And besides being packed with halflings, the whole Company of the Ring is a mixed bag of conflicting personalities and interests that looks likely to fly apart. Its make-up is meant to demonstrate that this quest is inclusive, yet it makes me ask how serious Elrond is about its success. Or does he truly think the best path forward is to throw together deep-rooted rivals: Elf with Dwarf, heir of Kings with heir of Stewards, plus a wild Wizard watching over the lot of them, and several hapless Hobbits looking on?

Questions, I had nothing but questions. The ultimate answers to them all must, I thought, lie with the cryptic, ever-hidden Ring. That's the tiny wheel around which all our fortunes turn. What a strange fate that we should suffer so much fear and doubt over so small a thing — such a little thing! But that was in fact our plight, and the time to act was fast running out.

On the final evening before their departure I followed the Hobbits to the Hall of Fire for a bout of singing, storytelling, and — yes — poetry. It was the first such session I'd attended in several centuries; I went only because it was my last chance to be with Frodo and his friends. We came early and settled into comfortable seats as close as possible to the great fireplace, bearing with us a goodly supply of wine.

Horneth — clad for the occasion in a fetching short silk dress in deep plum — saw and joined us. She expressed surprise at my presence, and said she must bear witness to the unusual event. She ended up sitting a bit to the left of Frodo, who occupied a large armchair, with me close by on his other side, Sam next to me on my right, and Merry and Pippin sharing a settee behind us. Before us was an open space, an extension of the hearth in front of the blazing fire, that served as the stage. Around us many more Elves kept arriving until there must have been over a hundred all told, scattered through the room, the flickering firelight shining golden on their long hair and in their clear eyes.

The evening's programme began innocently enough, with a little harp music then some brief cantatas, followed by a romantic ballad — all in Elvish but the Hobbits didn't seem to mind. The atmosphere was warm and relaxed, and we were able to enjoy a bit of conversation between the pieces. In fact everything was so unexpectedly agreeable that I began to wonder if I'd been wrong to avoid entertainments like this for so long.

Only that changed all of a sudden when a thin pallid Elf stood up front and began in the Common Speech to introduce the next

item:

'Among the tales of sorrow and of ruin that come down to us from the darkest days of yore, there are yet some in which amid weeping there is joy and under the shadow of death light that endures. And of these histories most fair still in the ears of the Elves is the tale of Beren and Luthien. Of their lives was made a poem, *The Lay of Luthien*, also called *The Lay of Leithian* which means release from bondage . . .'

Those words froze my heart. For while the heroic story of Beren and Luthien is a grand one, well worth hearing or reading in prose form, when told as an epic poem consisting of 4223 verses of rhyming couplets in iambic tetrameter it becomes an unendurable ordeal — in the ears of this Elf at least.

But the Hobbits were instantly excited: this Westron-language version was clearly for their benefit, perhaps even at their request. I knew already from Bilbo what an immense appetite halflings have for all verse, however bad. They glanced at one another, smiling brightly with anticipation, and refilled their wine-cups in preparation for the incredibly lengthy recital.

With mounting panic I quickly downed my own drink and prepared for a hasty departure, intending to claim that I had to use the loo. But it was too late. Because without further ado the pale artiste onstage began in lusty voice to chant the opening lines of the first of the poem's fourteen interminable cantos:

'A king there was in days of old:
ere Men yet walked upon the mould
his power was reared in caverns' shade,
his hand was over glen and glade . . .'

In Rivendell, to just get up and leave during a performance piece is a serious breach of etiquette. That this one dealt with much-revered Luthien would've made it worse. I was trapped: there would be no release from bondage for me. It was some solace that the lay was only being spoken and not sung, but still I doubted how long I could stand it.

'. . . all these he had and counted small,
for dearer than all wealth in hall,
and fairer than are born to Men,
a daughter had he, Luthien . . .'

In desperation I dived for the nearest flagon of wine, hoping that a rapid infusion of alcohol might dull the aesthetic shock. Resisting the urge to guzzle straight from the vessel's spout, I first

sloshed the drink into my cup, for appearances' sake, on its swift way to my mouth. Its warm healing powers had immediate effect, like a tropical wave rolling through me, but couldn't stem the relentless poetic assault.

'... Such lissom limbs no more shall run
on the green earth beneath the sun;
so fair a maid no more shall be
from dawn to dusk, from sun to sea ...'

More than 6500 years dead, and still this insistence on endlessly mourning our dear departed Luthien — and with such atrocious doggerel to boot. Let the poor thing rest in peace! But of course the Hobbits loved it: they sat entranced, their good-natured faces reflecting joy and marvelment, completely unaware of my distress. Horneth caught my eye with a worried look; I just shook my head hopelessly and poured myself another brimming cup. Already the flagon was half-empty — definitely not half-full. Either way I wished I could have some pipe-weed to go with it.

'... Her feet were swift as bird on wing,
her laughter merry as the spring;
the slender willow, the bowing reed,
the fragrance of a flowering mead ...'

I kept quaffing wine while struggling to turn my attention away from the recital, until eventually I was able to reduce the verse to a rhyming background rhythm in my head, like a throbbing headache. Not a pleasant state, yet at least my mind could wander a bit now, blurred by alcohol but otherwise in working order.

I found myself brooding on the truth of all such epic tales, with their larger than life heroes and villains, their great deeds splashed over vast canvasses, their often unlikely plots, and of course their neat division of things into good and evil. In my experience, reality is rarely so dramatic nor so clear. But that's the attraction of these fantasy stories that we persist in telling one another: they're pictures painted in bold black and white and primary colours, when the world's true palette consists chiefly of shades of grey. It's not the most romantic or inspiring hue.

Still, there are also real-life stories as stirring as anyone could wish. Why not simply retell those completely true tales instead of constantly creating fictions? Or are the lies supposedly told in the service of some higher truth? What a slippery slope that is.

Then right in the midst of those musings, without warning, it happened ... The hall had grown rather hot, what with that roaring

blaze and so many people sitting together. Frodo had come clothed in a heavy velvet vest over a long-sleeve linen shirt, which was now too warm for him. I spied him opening the vest and undoing the shirt's top buttons, while his gaze remained fixed on the orator up front. So out from under his shirt it slipped, unseen by the Hobbit, on the chain that still bound it to his neck: the Ring, glowing like a hot coal straight from the fire! Its glistening light seemed to express a fierce glee at this partial escape from captivity.

The sight of it made me gawk, gasping — a noise lost in the loud drone of the ongoing recitation. The One had been compellingly attractive before, when glimpsed fleetingly from far away. With it now shining but a few feet from me, the effect was overwhelming: its luminosity a painful beauty, radiating right through me, alluring and agonizing.

Then I suddenly realised that Horneth was regarding me with a puzzled half-smile. She sat opposite me on the other side of Frodo, so when admiring the Ring I'd been staring in her direction with, no doubt, a look of wild surmise. I turned away embarrassed, and busied myself with getting more drink.

Yet I couldn't keep my eyes off the thing for long: they slunk back, more discreetly now, to feast on its gorgeousness again. I wondered why nobody else had seemingly seen it, exposed as it was. But we were sitting far to the front of the hall where its brightness blended with that of the fireplace. The only ones who might have observed the Ring directly were Horneth, whose view was obscured by the broad left wing of Frodo's chair, Sam to my right, whose line of sight I blocked, and the artiste in front who like the Hobbit was totally absorbed in his performance. It was as if the One Ring had revealed itself for my eyes only.

Then I began to hear something strange, a sort of guttural whispering noise. It was coming from the Ring! Only none apart from me appeared to notice it, not even Frodo. But whether this was really some sort of speech or else an inner communication, I couldn't recognise the harsh-sounding tongue: 'Ash nazg durbatuluk, ash nazg gimbatul . . .' Gibberish maybe, yet I was sure the One was trying to speak to me. I felt I could somehow even understand its meaning. 'Take me, Tiron!' it seemed to be saying. 'Keep me from the fire! Save Frodo, save yourself, save everyone!'

Well, I was quite taken aback by this. Not only because an inanimate metallic object was talking to me, but also because its touching entreaty made such good sense. I'd been desperately hoping that someone would take it upon themselves to claim the Ring and rescue us all. Yet if no one else would, why not me? It was a sin not to keep and use this providential gift to the foes of Mordor. If others more mighty were too hidebound or timid to do what was

needed, then perhaps it was up to the homely housekeeper to save the day!

In any event we could ask no more of poor Frodo. He'd done what he originally set out to do, bringing it safely to Rivendell, against all odds and at great personal cost. He shouldn't have to bear that burden any further. And I could help him with that, by lifting his burden. I would save him by freeing him of the Ring.

Meanwhile the lovely little thing kept up that same chant-like whispering: '... ash nazg thrakatuluk, agh burzum-ishi krimpatul!' The One seemed to be softly crying: 'You must take me, Tiron — take me now! Save us all!' And it was so unbearably bright and beautiful and temptingly near to me that I almost sprang from my chair right then and there to rip it from Frodo's neck.

But no! I restrained myself with a supreme effort. No . . . not here in front of all these people. That would be foolish. Dangerous. Better to take it in secret, later, at a more opportune moment.

The Ring must have heard these thoughts, because it growled its displeasure. 'Patience, my sweet!' I reassured it in my mind, chuckling indulgently. 'Soon you'll be mine. Quite soon now my precious!'

Then I saw Horneth looking at me again, smiling uncertainly at my apparently renewed attentions, which of course were actually focussed elsewhere. I smiled back in friendly fashion, poured yet another cupful of wine, and continued surreptitiously watching the One, slantwise.

I'd wait for the evening to end, follow Frodo out, then do the deed quietly and privately. It might well take some time to master the Ring's mighty powers, time I needed to spend all alone with it, undisturbed. An exciting prospect! But naturally I must also beware of its seductive influence. There might be a grain of truth in Elrond's dire warnings; due caution was required. Only as I beheld its delightfully glistening goldenness now, I felt sure it couldn't really be as evil as claimed. After all, Bilbo bore that pretty bauble for 60 years, and seems little the worse for wear.

The Ring rumbled at me in a deep yet plaintive tone, like a wrongly accused dog that in the past may have bitten, but is long since innocent of such bad habits. 'Are you a bad old Ring?' I asked teasingly. 'Are you a very very evil One?' It growled again, angrier.

Yes, taming it could be quite a task. And after that, what? Sauron had to be defeated, yet I knew nothing whatsoever about warfare, other than seeing warriors go off to fight and then, occasionally, their broken bodies returning. How was I fit to be an overlord?

But on reflection I realised that my complete inexperience was really no bar to martial leadership. Because when wielding the Ring

I'd have countless others at my command, valorous captains and champions of proven ability. All that was wanted was to issue firm orders, then urge my brave troops into battle from the safety of my throne. The way wise beings do.

Of course a few misguided souls would no doubt object to my taking the Master Ring, and using it to rule over the Free Peoples of Middle-earth. They might not understand the need for my having absolute, uncompromising authority in this grave time of crisis. Although it was unpleasant to contemplate, I could well be forced to resort to extreme measures in order to overcome such wrong-headed opposition. I guessed that bothersome issues like this must be part and parcel of the trials of overlordship. Because you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.

And still the Ring's weird whispering went on, slowly growing louder and louder until in the end it filled my mind, drowning out all other thoughts and sounds. I looked toward the stage where instead of *The Lay of Leithian* it now appeared to me that the bard was lustily chanting, over and over:

'Ash nazg durbatuluk, ash nazg gimbatul,
ash nazg thrakatuluk, agh burzum-ishi krimpatul!'

I chortled at the refreshing change of text, which sounded most fair in my ears, and began rocking back and forth to its rough but catchy rhythms. As I gazed over at the shining One again I caught Horneth's amused, curious eye, observing my antics. I shrugged with a helpless grin and kept moving to the beat.

I lost all track of time, completely immersed in this delightful private concert. Only afterward did I realise to my amazement that hours had passed this way, with the public recital droning on and on while I enjoyed my own personal version of it. Until abruptly all the noise stopped: the hall went completely quiet, as did the Ring. With bated breath I surveyed the room and saw everyone fixed on the performer, now standing there silently, his recital finally finished. Then the long applause began, appreciative yet understated as per our custom. The artiste bowed multiple times and left the stage.

Glancing at Frodo as he clapped, I was distressed to see him suddenly notice how exposed the Ring was. He immediately stuffed it back under his shirt, which he swiftly rebuttoned, along with his vest. Then he saw me watching him: an awful antipathy instantly filled his normally cherubic visage.

I turned away, feeling my own face flush with anger, thinking: How dare he hide away the Ring — my Ring? The cheek of that miserable little hole-dweller! Why, I could almost strangle him! My hungry hands gripped the arms of my chair, claw-like, and I shook

with rage.

But just as quickly the fiery mood cooled; I passed a hand across my eyes. What had come over me, that I could even imagine hurting a harmless little Hobbit? Only then did I finally grasp that the Ring must truly be quite evil. I could no longer deny it.

Movement nearby brought me back to my surroundings. On my right I saw Sam fast asleep in his plush chair, with Merry and Pippin now standing to either side of it, struggling to lift him up and away before the next piece began. A helpful Elf-maiden lent a hand, then with whispered good-byes the three of them carried the still-dozing Hobbit out of the hall and off to his room.

Another performer took the stage. I shuddered to think what might come next: a singalong? But Frodo was staying on so I did as well, and was relieved to hear the sweet sound of a tin whistle warbling a slow lament. I closed my eyes and tried listening to the sad, lulling melody, but it was no good: I was too consumed by my craving for the One. Yet I avoided looking in that direction, both to keep from seeing Frodo's face again and for fear of my own possibly renewed fury.

So the Ruling Ring was after all really evil. Once I possessed and wielded it, might some of its badness rub off on me long-term, making me a bit evil too — maybe even megalomaniac like crazy old Sauron? Well, luckily that danger was slight, since I wasn't a particularly bad person to begin with and had no innate interest in power.

Order: yes of course. So important! And cleanliness, obviously. Under my coming benevolent regime the entire world would be made exceptionally neat and tidy. Because it's all very well to wage and win a war, but what about the incredible mess that makes? Good housekeeping, I resolved, must during my reign be a priority second only to Sauron's defeat.

Then it occurred to me that, so long as we were cleaning house, some other things should also be swept away. Across Middle-earth, most people and places have nearly always been governed by rigid hierarchies of kings and queens, lords and ladies, and other such high-class folk — a trend so prevalent that it appears almost divinely ordained. For example we Elves have had for ages a barely-changing clique of rulers who take it as their manifest right to lord it over the rest of us. It's a stifling system that leaves little room for individual expression, innovation, or advancement. Why have we passively accepted this outrageous state of affairs for so long?

Yes, there'd be a few much-needed changes. Certain people had to be brought low so as to make more room at the top — to let in a little fresh air. And I was just the one to do that, for when

wielding the Ring no naysayers could stand against me. I'd be an overlord of overpowering justice, cruel but fair, reshaping the world with vigorous axe-strokes in order to make it a better place.

Only I'd be not just an but the overlord: The Lord of the Rings! I rolled that around in my mind a bit, and felt it made an excellent title. Because when bearing the Ruling Ring I ought to be able to control all the lesser Rings of Power too. Elrond's for instance: oh, that should be fun! And perhaps — it sent a shiver up my spine — even those of the nine Nazgul. Yes, especially theirs I'd expect, since they all were so closely bound to the One.

Hmm . . . what to do about those Ringwraiths? They might be frightening fellows, corrupt to the core, but as my faithful servants they'd surely come in handy maintaining order and accomplishing various disagreeable but necessary tasks. Looking within myself, I found the prospect of commanding them both deeply disquieting and darkly thrilling. Was this how evil felt? If so, it wasn't quite as uncomfortable as I'd imagined.

A sudden vision unfolded before me then, unbidden, of an awesome figure robed in glory, his eyes dazzling as twin suns, his will unbending as adamant, and in his hand a fiery wheel of doom. He would be called Tiron the Terrible, The Lord of the Rings, Master of Middle-earth: his strength a soaring mountain, his power an endless earthquake, his wrath a raging hurricane.

And beside him his consort, Arwen the Evenstar: helplessly adoring, passionate for his presence, and so unbearably beautiful that mortal folk would sometimes drop dead at the very sight of her. As the world's ruling Couple of Power, all would love us, fear us, and despair!

But as quickly as it had come to me, this alluring phantasm faded. Then I saw again just my usual self: Tiron of Rivendell, the homely housekeeper, lonely, a bit sad, worried about the future, with no powers and no Arwen. Yet recalling that vanished vision I had to wonder: if I ever really were so great and mighty, would she finally love me then?

The lament's last soft note hung in the air then died. Again silence fell, followed by grateful if polite applause. Suddenly Horneth was waving me over, and now I saw why: Frodo had fallen asleep! Instantly my heart began to race: at last, this was my chance!

We both got up, swiftly slipped an arm each under the dozing Hobbit, another behind his back, and by grasping each other's forearms created a makeshift seat. Then whoosh, up in the air and out of the room we bore the little lad, as quick as could be, with only a couple of minor collisions en route due to my tipsy state. We got away just as the next piece was about to begin, then paused

outside the doors to the Hall of Fire, holding Frodo between us. He went on slumbering soundly: Elven entertainment seemed to have a strong soporific effect on the halflings, despite their immense enjoyment of it.

'Tiron, can you manage this?' Horneth enquired earnestly in low voice, to keep from waking him.

'Manage what?' I cautiously returned. Gazing down, I noticed Frodo's vest and shirt still well buttoned, with no sign or sound of the Ring.

'Carrying him. Safely I mean.'

'Oh, that. Well of course I can,' I reassured her, summoning my most responsible tone. I looked meaningfully at our interlocked arms. 'I am in fact doing that even as we speak.'

She eyed me doubtfully — and very nice eyes they were too, I realised, dark for an Elf yet sparkling. 'Remember, it's quite a ways to his room. There are some stairs to go up.'

I snorted dismissively. 'My dear lady,' I replied with injured dignity, 'I've been going up and down stairs for millennia. I have no fear of them.'

She smiled wryly, and bowed her head in charming acquiescence. 'Well then, my dear sir. Shall we?'

So we set off: around a bend, down a long passage, through various turnings and another corridor, then up a high staircase. It was all much harder than I'd expected, what with the floor always swaying to and fro beneath me, so I had to concentrate to keep from crashing into stray walls and such.

But on the stairs I completely lost my focus. We had to huddle closer together in order to safely climb them, during which task I glimpsed things inside Horneth's flatteringly-cut dress that distracted me, not to mention below it where a good deal of shapely leg was exposed and inviting attention.

'Do you like my dress?' she asked me artlessly, the picture of innocence, having marked my appraisal.

'Very much,' I admitted, panting, doubtless from exertion. 'It's quite revealing.'

She giggled like a girl at that, and gave my forearm a squeeze as we moved on.

Until all at once we were standing outside Frodo's door. Somehow we turned the doorknob, then using our feet we managed to push through the doorway into his room. Which is one of our best: vaulted ceiling, carved wooden decor, a fine bed with a grand headboard bearing the figure of Este the Vala of rest and healing. I briefly lifted up the little Hobbit all on my own while Horneth turned down the bed's silk-covered duvet, then I laid him atop the downy pillows. Frodo looked both very peaceful and a bit

funny, lying there snoozing in his calf-length trousers with those furry feet sticking out.

But by now it was difficult to control my excitement at my imminent possession of the Ring: I was trembling through and through! Only I wasn't sure how to manage the next steps . . .

Then Horneth made as if to undress Frodo for bed, reaching toward the buttons of his vest. My own hands instantly shot out to intercept hers, so swiftly that she jumped in surprise, regarding me wide-eyed. I smiled an apology, yet kept holding her hands as I gently led her back toward the door. I'd tell her, nicely, that I could finish this job alone, without her help. 'Let me just—' I began.

Loosing her hands, Horneth used one to abruptly pull me right through the doorway, while with the other she closed the door behind, shutting us both out of Frodo's room. My first reaction was shock, followed immediately by anger; but before I could protest she was pressing herself against me and kissing me forcefully on the lips. What was all this then?

I put my hands on her hips, intending to push her away. Only she was doing something with her tongue now, alarming at first — until I realised that it felt very nice indeed. Though I was of course extremely eager to get hold of the lovely Ring, I saw no harm in indulging Horneth's whims for a moment or two. Investigating further, out of general interest, I found that her hips weren't really suitable for pushing away, being instead wonderfully shapely and good to grip.

I then tried that tongue thing myself, just experimenting. But she answered this so avidly that within seconds our bodies became locked together in an intimate embrace. Her very palpable passion struck a spark within me, and I could only respond in kind. As our ardent kiss continued it went ever deeper, became fiercer, until finally we were gnawing at one another like cannibals. I kept forgetting to breathe, and had to surface from time to time, gasping for air.

During one of those brief respites I was surprised to hear a faint mewling noise. It seemed to be the sound of a distant voice weakly wailing: 'Tiron, where are you? Come save me!' Why, it was the Ring again! Here I was, cruelly ignoring the poor little One when it so desperately needed my help. And it also occurred to me that, as well as things were going now with Horneth, they'd no doubt be even better with the addition of the alluring Ring. Surely the three of us . . .

With an effort I freed an arm and groped blindly for the doorknob, behind Horneth's back. But she quickly seized the loose hand and thrust it inside her dress, where despite the tight fit it encountered exciting new areas. A long-neglected hunger had

woken deep within me and was waxing fast. In my overpowering passion I now pinned Horneth to the door with a strength I didn't know I had, while she clung to and wrapped herself around me. The piteous cries of the Ring faded from my mind as I focussed on more critically pressing matters.

Yet even in the midst of all that I felt a sharp pang: what of Arwen? Wasn't it wrong of me to be doing this with someone other than my dearly beloved? But how could it be wrong when it felt so very right? Anyway, I knew in my heart, Arwen herself might well be entertaining that awful Man this very moment, on the eve of his departure for the deadly mission to Mordor. Therefore I cast my doubts aside and applied myself with a renewed will to the task in hand.

I was now delving deep beneath Horneth's dress, which scanty though it was had become a serious obstacle. So I tried pulling it up, and found that it peeled off easily, exposing much more of her loveliness. She in turn began attacking the fastenings of my clothes, ripping them away recklessly.

By now my whole being was afire, burning with desire for her. In a corner of my consciousness I knew that my opportunity to seize the Ring was swiftly fading. But at that moment the golden One felt so cold and distant compared to the vibrant, living warmth I held right there in my arms. I told myself that the pretty little thing would surely still be there a bit later, afterward, whenever — any time but now, when something infinitely more urgent was happening.

Even as we kept shedding our remaining clothes, Horneth was trying to coax me down the hall, aiming for her own room. But we never made it that far. For there was no mistaking the meaning of the language her body was speaking. It was very clearly crying: 'Take me, Tiron — take me now!' And this time I didn't stop myself.

In the morning, a number of people complained about the ruckus we'd made during the night.

* * *

At dusk yesterday the Company of the Ring finally departed Rivendell. They would travel under cover of night, secretly, in order to avoid the prying eyes of the Enemy. It was a bleak evening: cold and grey, with a winter wind out of the mountains, pushing along dark clouds and whistling through bare trees. The River Bruinen roiled restlessly in its bed of stone below.

We'd mainly made our farewells already in the warmth of the Hall of Fire, and were now standing outside, on and around the doorstep of our homely house. Light shining from its windows and through the open front doors glowed softly into the gathering

gloom. Elrond was giving Frodo and the Company some last sage advice, such as not to throw away the Ring, nor deliver it to any servant of the Enemy. Honestly, he really said that! It's a weakness I've noticed in the wise, that they often waste words saying the most patently obvious things to us lesser folk.

Yet the nine listened patiently enough, while making final adjustments to their heavy fur-lined clothes and shouldered packs. Further gear had been loaded onto a stout pony, who with his swishing tail was the only cheery one there; but most items each walker would have to carry himself on the long and arduous trek.

All of them bore swords, except Gimli an axe and Legolas a bow and long knife. Frodo carried Bilbo's short-sword, now called Sting, which the elderly Hobbit had generously gifted him. Broken old Narsil had been successfully and shinily reforged during their long stay, then given a new name by Aragorn: Flame something-or-other (I don't recall exactly). But as that blade is actually of ancient Dwarf make, I'm not sure how good a job our current Elven-smiths could've done of fixing it. Perhaps the sword will be rebroken?

I was standing on the doorstep beside Bilbo, who huddled in a cloak against the chill. Frodo had been by us but was now off listening to Elrond with the rest of them. Horneth stood nearby, and we pretended not to avoid each other's eyes. Arwen didn't appear: it was probably better for everyone that way.

'May the stars shine upon your faces!' Elrond concluded, well meant although not in keeping with the weather.

'Good—good luck!' Bilbo stuttered, from the cold, then added a few parting words just for Frodo.

Others of the household said their own quiet good-byes in the growing shadows. There were none of the usual Elvish farewell songs, no sign of cheer.

Then the Company all turned away, and walking in single file slowly disappeared into the deepening dark, while the unseen river roared on beneath us. With tears running down her face, Horneth retreated to the house, and nearly everyone else soon followed suit. Only Bilbo and I kept standing outside a while longer.

I was filled with foreboding. Out there, nine motley companions were striding into the night, making their perilous way toward Mordor, attempting to carry out a plan so foolish that Sauron would never conceive of it. Yet on their quest hung all our hopes. Those lonely walkers were I thought like a handful of pebbles, set rolling down a steep mountainside, whose passage would unsettle and unleash ever greater rocks and boulders, finally triggering an awful, overwhelming avalanche. But who would be buried by it?

All I knew for certain was that, whatever happened, I'd never

get to see that fabulous Ring again — much less possess it, nor Arwen either. Those twin pains weighed on my heart. So I sighed deeply and said: 'Bilbo my lad, we're caught up in things much bigger than ourselves.'

The aged halfling was silent for a long moment, shivering in his cloak. Then he turned his wrinkled face up at me, and with a wryly raised eyebrow replied: 'I'm a Hobbit! Everything is bigger than me.'

I laughed into the darkness, and leaned down to hug my dear friend. Carefully, so as not to break any brittle old bones.

May 1, 3019: It was a day in early spring, a cool, sunny March day much like any other in Rivendell, as we went about our usual business. Until all at once our world changed. We Elves could all sense it — in the air, the water, the earth — as a subtle but distinct shift in the fabric of everything. But what was it? What did it mean?

A mass meeting was quickly called, so we gathered in the dining hall, completely packed with Elves, waiting and wondering and whispering to one another. Then Elrond rose and without preamble loudly proclaimed: 'The realm of Sauron is ended! The Ring-bearer has fulfilled his quest!'

But his words merely met with a stunned silence. We had all of us spent our long lives under a perpetual shadow of fear — the present forever fraught, the future doubtful at best — and couldn't comprehend at first that it was suddenly over. Suddenly history. Only gradually, as the fact of Sauron's downfall slowly sank in, were there cries of joy, and tears of relief, and much embracing.

My first coherent thought was: so that crazy bastard's finally gone! Then in the next moment realised, with an ache so acute it made me gasp, that the precious Ring was also gone forever.

After allowing a bit of jubilating, Elrond silenced us briefly to explain how he'd come to know this amazing news. For millennia, he dramatically revealed, he'd been secretly wielding a Ring of Power, which he'd been using to protect and preserve Rivendell. This had also enabled him to perceive the ruin of the One Ring that very day. With a flourish he thrust his right hand high, flaunting a now-visible gleaming band of gold set with a glittering sapphire: Vilya, greatest of the Elven Rings! At which we all expressed appropriate surprise, and applauded politely, except for a few knowing sniggers from some miscreants in the back.

Then we set in motion the biggest celebration our homely house had ever seen.

It was some time before details of the great events reached us: our Enemy's unexpected defeat in a huge battle at Minas Tirith, a subsequent march against Mordor itself by the victorious host, then that same army's nick-of-time delivery from destruction at the very gates of the Black Land, when Frodo finally reached distant Mount Doom and the Ring went into the fire.

Amazingly, the four Hobbits had survived their various travails, as had all the rest of the Company except for brave Boromir. Well, Gandalf did manage to die at one point, but then somehow returned to life, only now clad in white — an unfortunate colour for him as it's so hard to keep clean. Oh: and Aragorn the heroic war leader, whose shiny, flamy sword remained stubbornly unbroken, would now be crowned High King of the Reunited Kingdom of Arnor and Gondor. In other words it was exactly the sort of unlikely

outcome you'd expect from one of those fantasy stories you can hear in the Hall of Fire.

So the impossible was achieved, Sauron is no more, and a new age of the world will begin: one without pure, personified evil, just the dull everyday kind. This age will also mark the beginning of the dominion of Men, who it's said will inherit the earth. Mostly because they breed like rabbits.

As part of that new order, Elrond departed this morning for Gondor, accompanied by all the important people of our household, and bearing the long-withheld Sceptre of Annuminas. Aragorn is due to be crowned in Minas Tirith this very day, so is therefore now officially worthy of Arwen's hand in marriage, plus that other trophy too. So the Lord of Rivendell is escorting away his only begotten daughter in order to sacrifice her at the altar of Man, instead of cutting out the heart of the glorious new King as he'd probably prefer. One thing you can say for Elrond: he pays off his bets.

It was a bitter pill for me to swallow as well; I couldn't bear to watch Arwen go. Luckily Horneth was here to help me through it — and I her, for her own heart is heavy over Aragorn. The two of us have become a bit of an item ever since the prolonged wild party that followed the Dark Lord's fall, when our budding intimacy bloomed. We find that we have a surprising amount in common. Yet we still keep our separate rooms, and the comforting illusion of independence.

Something more that Elrond didn't tell us but quickly became apparent: when the Great Ring was unmade, the power of his own Elven Ring also failed. He'd been using it to shield Rivendell from the shifting sands of fate and time, to slow our changing and fading, to soften the hurts and harshnesses of life. Its potency had allowed him to manipulate the very elements here for our benefit.

That was the sudden change we all felt on the day the One was destroyed. Now we find the air of Rivendell less temperate, the water less refreshing, the earth less fruitful than it was. Sleep isn't as restful, we heal more slowly, get angry more easily. Even the way the light falls is less lovely than before. I have to admit that I'm already missing the magic.

It's also clear, though nothing has yet been said openly, that the Lord of Rivendell will soon be sailing away into the far west, along with most of the others here I expect. For even with our old Enemy vanquished, what future does the proud and ancient race of Elves have in a Middle-earth dominated by Men? In the Blessed Realm on the other hand, Elrond can bask forever in the company of his own kind, and be reunited with his wife in conjugal bliss, and do whatever else people do to pass the time eternally in paradise. I've heard it described as a brighter, more intense, somehow

superior version of our world. Like a pipe-weed induced reverie perhaps, but without the smoke or side-effects.

Whereas those who linger here are surely doomed to diminish, and over time will dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten. Rivendell itself will one day no longer be the enclave of Elven culture and society it now is. Perhaps it can instead serve posterity as a sort of historical reserve, or a park with the special theme of Elves. The younger races can come gawk at the decaying ruins of our former realm, carve their initials in its timbers, maybe even glimpse one or two of the Firstborn flitting furtively through the woods, gathering nuts and berries. And the sign out front can read, as both slogan and epitaph:

WELCOME TO RIVENDELL
Once Were Elves

But that will be a while yet, because I for one am staying on here regardless. Not for me the bright lights of the Blessed Realm: this Elf was born of Middle-earth. I am made to its measure, and though this fallen world's beauties cannot match those of the promised land, they are sufficient unto me. I will live and — no doubt one day — die by them.

A few others will be lingering here too. Horneth, Lomdir, and Costor have all agreed to join with me in a cooperative venture, along with whomever else we can recruit. Once Elrond and the rest have gone west, we plan to run Rivendell as a kind of country inn, taking advantage of the increased travel and trade that should come with peace and the rebuilding of the old Kingdom of Arnor.

Long-term we might even turn it into a spa, where mortal folk weary of the world could come to rest and recover before returning to the fray. They'd soak up our homely house's unique Elven atmosphere, marvel at its fading wonders, and listen spellbound to epic if not entirely true tales on entertainment evenings. All in the Common Speech of course, aside from a song or two in Elvish for authenticity's sake. And to liven it up we could have the occasional dance night, maybe even a little comedy, to keep things from being too stuffy and serious.

Anyhow we hope to make a go of it, one way or another. But the practicalities remain something of a mystery. Casting a beady eye at the bare facts, it looks hard to support even a modest number of people here, what with our physical isolation, limited resources, and lack of arable land. We're at a loss as to the material and economic basis on which Rivendell has subsisted all this time. In truth, the way it's always been run isn't all that different from our own plans for the place, except that until now no guests have

ever paid to stay here. How did Elrond manage to make ends meet? Unless that was also part of the magic.

His sons are another possible problem. Elladan and Elrohir won't, we guess, be accompanying him to the Blessed Realm, since in paradise there are no Orcs to slaughter, so their special talents would be wasted. They're welcome to stay on, as long as they understand that things will be different in future. Because Ring or no Ring, there will after all be a few changes around here. People won't be giving orders based on their title or heritage or supposed divine right. And if they don't like it they can try procuring their own supplies, and making their own meals, and doing their own laundry, and treating their sewage themselves.

Yet in the meantime, until those things happen, we're getting on with our lives as normal — more or less. I was prone at first to bouts of deep depression, which struck suddenly and laid me low, for I'd forever lost both Arwen and the Ring. The One is the newer and lesser pain; maybe someday I'll be free of it. But I'd built my whole world around Arwen: it was awful to no longer have even the slightest hope of making her mine. It was as if I'd spent my entire life with an abiding faith in the Father of All, only to suddenly learn that he was definitely dead.

I've been doing better recently thanks to Horneth. She's helping me to cope with it all, especially the Arwen part. She claims that my heart is slowly becoming wiser now. But I think, no — happier maybe. Unless wisdom consists of repeatedly learning how wrong you are about nearly everything. Yet perhaps, given long enough, I'll finally stop missing my former faith and its comely icon, and may even wonder why I ever needed them.

These are strange times. History experienced first-hand, the stuff of tales yet untold and songs unsung. But seen close-up, history is far more troublesome: nothing but burdens and fears. Little people get ground up in its great gears, earning not even a footnote on the chronicles' long pages.

We small, weak, unimportant folk have only one another, and in this Horneth is a constant comfort. Even as I write these words she lies beside me in bed, finally sleeping peacefully after a long and difficult day. Her face may not be the fairest of all but is nonetheless beautiful, and always good to behold. Her embrace fills me with warm well-being. I no longer mind the occasional scent of sewage about her, from the job she does, for I know it's simply one of life's natural odours. In short, I'm learning that it's better to have a real person to hold and love, instead of clinging to a fantasy.

Today we worked long hours together, well into evening, as she initiated me into the deeper mysteries of waste management. I'm assisting while her colleagues are all away with Elrond, digging

field latrines for his large company as it wends its way toward Gondor. So I'm learning the finer points of sludge, and what's good about algae, and discovering the slimy secrets of snails. I have to smile, thinking about it, though it's all something of a shock after thousands of years spent trying to keep things clean.

But none of that matters much. What really matters, as I gaze down at my dear companion slumbering next to me, is that I realise: Elves may not have a future, but I do.

Now I best be getting some rest while I can. First thing tomorrow morning we have a fresh batch of sludge to stir.

Dull But Necessary Disclaimer:

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About This Work:

It was intended merely as a confection, but in the writing it got completely out of hand to encompass a running commentary and elegy on the Elves, and critiques of Tolkien's creations.

I strove for strict accuracy, except sometimes when the facts were inconvenient and had to be ignored for simplicity's sake (e.g. 'the' Dark Lord). Well, I did also darken and malign the characters of several major figures, and wholly transformed the tale of Aragorn and Arwen to suit my own less lofty story.

In general I stuck to the books but also took useful bits from *The Lord of the Rings* films (not *The Hobbit* ones or TV). Aficionados will recognise various turns of phrase borrowed from both. Most of the 'These are strange times' paragraph, right near the end, is adapted from an April 1945 diary entry in the extraordinary real-life account *A Woman in Berlin*.

If you enjoyed this, then go read again the great originals that inspired and provoked it.

About Rolf Luchs:

The author is a man who loves, among many other things: women, cats, and good-quality ice cream. He lives quietly in a pleasant corner of the world. His privacy is precious to him.