

Dedication:

To Birte and true friendship

To Maike and true love

The Last Homely Housekeeper

diary excerpts of a long-suffering Elf of Rivendell

by Rolf Luchs

with affection and apologies to JRRT

(All dates are Third Age. For simplicity's sake Westron — the Common Speech — is used throughout, aside from some proper names.)

February 23, 2941: Gandalf stayed again last night. Just breezed in without warning or by-your-leave, the way he always does: standing there in that weatherworn grey cloak and battered, pointy blue 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 pages. 'I see it's . . . hmm . . . ninety-one years since we last enjoyed your company in Rivendell.' But then I saw the comments he'd scribbled in the book back then: 'Service could be better. Also, towels musty, room draughty.' Critiques of this kind always put my back up, implying as they do that our blessed valley and homely house are just a public way station, to be reviewed by travellers like some country inn. Not one of the last strongholds of the proud and ancient race of Elves in Middle-earth.

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

It was not until I left the protection of my counter to lead him to his room, that I actually smelled Gandalf. Ugh! That awful array of odours must have come from many months of roughing it in the wild: fetid sweat and bodily grime and stale campfire smoke, layered with crusted mud 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 else 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 wearily he kicked off his big black boots — mucky of course, aside from the 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 spotless 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 would care very much indeed for some pipe-weed.'

'Pardon?'

'Pipe-weed! Also called Sweet Galenas, Westmansweed or Halflings' 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, who was merely clothed in human form 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. This reminded me suddenly that meddling with wizards is unwise, for they can be unsubtle and quick to anger. Within Gandalf a veiled power was coiled, a hidden fire ready to burst forth. Don't get burnt old boy, I told myself.

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

'Lembas, lembas . . .' he muttered, scanning the heaped foodstuffs. 'Ah yes — lembas!' 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, 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 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,' Lomdir continued. '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 golden leaf. He removed that and began nibbling the delicate brown wafer within. A delightful, 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 smiled and nodded, swallowing. 'Just in from Lorien. They say a single piece will sustain you for a long day's march.' And he handed me one.

Having missed breakfast as usual, I accepted it eagerly, ripping away the pale Mallorn-leaf and 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 had grown pale and plump from long years spent indoors handling the stores. 'Now about that pipe-weed . . .'
He extricated himself from the pile of provisions and began nosing into obscure corners of the cellar.

Meanwhile my mind wandered, 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 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 had never imagined, before I first saw her. Since then all other Elf-maidens have paled by comparison.

I have loved Arwen for well over 2500 years now. Secretly of course: how could one of my standing ever hope to taste this fairest fruit of the great houses, held to be the very likeness 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 chance moments when the light of her eyes might fall on 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!' called Lomdir, 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 were dried and shredded leaves, 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 perverse and ghastly habit that has 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 task reluctantly. 'I don't get many callers down here.' I last glimpsed Lomdir disappearing into that pile of provisions again like a 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 working? Yet it's much the same everywhere in Rivendell:

endless chores 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 does not mean invulnerable: we die from mischance just like other living beings. Old age won't kill us but a sword-thrust in the stomach will.

For example I'm told the original housekeepers here were a large and happy crew. Until, that is, the entire lot were slaughtered by a horde of Hill-trolls during the three-year siege of Rivendell back in the Second Age — long before I was even born. Because there was nobody to replace them, everyone just made do for more than seven centuries until I appeared, came of age and was able to take over the duties.

After that things went fairly well in the housekeeping department for a couple of millennia. Over time 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 bits by the Witch-king of Angmar himself. That was some 1600 years ago; since then I've had to do the whole job alone.

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

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

Not exactly. Many Elves are quite . . . shall we say socially active? There being little else to do here apart from work, at least after you tire of the equally endless singing, storytelling and — may the Valar protect us — poetry. Yet few of us desire 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 sprang out of the shadows and bowled me over. 'Have at thee!' I cried, an archaic phrase summoned from some deep well of memory, my fists raised 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 clearly of good Dunedain lineage — the so-called Rangers of the North — and therefore distantly related to our Lord who has Man-blood on both sides. Yet methinks it has more to do with the mother being 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 temper when I finally reached Gandalf's room, only to find that the wizard was in fact lying in bed, draped atop its priceless coverlet in his travel-stained clothes. His stench now permeated the place, though the candle's perfume helped 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. 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 rummaged around in his cloak and produced a purse. He drew out a silver coin, stepped over and slapped it in my waiting palm. 'For your trouble,' he growled.

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

He snatched it away, clutched claw-like in hands that I was shocked to see now 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. '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. Turning to the bed, he reached into his bag and pulled out a very long-stemmed 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 using the guttering candle.

I should have left then. But I had 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 — and made me cough. His eyes popped open as he became aware of me again.

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

He erupted in a deep cackling laugh, which alarmed me 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 old conjurer, I thought. But I just kept watching as he began blowing rings of smoke, each perfectly round but of various sizes and colours. They drifted

wherever he directed in the room before finally joining together to fly out the window as one great ring. I found myself disturbed that this strange craving could so captivate Gandalf. For the entire scene reminded me of the renowned Rings of Power — those awful artefacts of old — which in the end always possessed those who thought to possess them.

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

'Pardon?'

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

I replied without thinking. 'What, again?' I blurted.

His face flushed and his eyes glinted dangerously. 'Meaning?'

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 is forever a shadow rising somewhere or other. Over time one, 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, until his shadow 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 snowy ground, until the cold was too much and I had to sneak back inside.

After that I steered clear of the wizard until he was safely gone the next morning. In the guest book I saw that he had written: 'Surly staff. Also, pipe-weed supply stale — 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 numerous companions arrived out of the wild, riding a line of ponies down into our valley. He probably didn't even know he'd muttered the words, 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 price of being the Firstborn children of Middle-earth, that the younger races have such odd ideas about us? Or are we only 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 in bed exhausted and ill, with only a package of lembas for comfort, and reflect on all that has befallen these past weeks.

They arrived near the end of May: tired, hungry, bedraggled. Uninvited of course. Thirteen — I rubbed my eyes — Dwarves with none other than dear old Gandalf at their head, and a Hobbit of all things trailing along. We hadn't seen the like in Rivendell for a long age. I had to pack them two, three, even four to a room, squeezing in extra beds to accommodate them.

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 were unhelpfully teasing the Dwarves, singing silly songs about their long beards and other nonsense. This had much to do with the visitors arriving amid a wine-tasting party, and many of my people already in jolly mood. But it also arose from our reputation as Elves, part of which holds that we are 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 the lads laid it on a bit thick.

Yet paradoxically we are 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, and to pronounce platitudes designed 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 are

themselves too practical to bother very much about appearances. (Aside from their beards, of which they are 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.

Which was why I ended up leading an impromptu tour of Rivendell as soon as they were fed. Not for them though the wonders that leave other guests spellbound: the rich paintings and tapestries, the lush groves and gardens, the fine fountains and statuary. Instead the Dwarves wanted to go 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 have them down in the commissary, and to show off his inventory-keeping and storage secrets to the inquisitive visitors.

Following that the second-oldest Dwarf, Balin, began this exchange:

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

'The reception halls and 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 are not 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 your 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 outdoor compost toilets, as well as the indoor lavatories in which waste is deposited and channelled away. Then on to the greenhouses where our sewage is sent through a series of pools filled with algae, plants, trees, snails,

fish and so forth: broken down 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 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 are some things even magic can't fix.'

For several heartbeats his bright blue eyes stared hard into mine. Then suddenly and surprisingly he burst out laughing: a deep rolling sound like thunder. 'Aye, that's true!' he guffawed, clapping me on the 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 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. I believe this involved toilets flushed by gravity-fed water that was then piped into sealed tanks. 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 procured: the air quickly filled with enormous 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. I noted vaguely that the weed had a peculiar effect, different from 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 are actually 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 those of the flesh for example. (Though that may also have much to do with how Dwarf women 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. 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 could not 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 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 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 the little pirate Estel playing with them as if they were his toys. He was actually standing atop the display, waving the hilt 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 swiftness that surprised even me. Though he scrambled to get down and away, I managed to grab the rascal by his collar ere he escaped. 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 yet 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 held him to her breast. He broke out sobbing on cue, bewailing his cruel and unwarranted treatment.

'My poor baby,' she cooed consolingly, drying his tears with her golden locks. I was just thinking I should perhaps get back to work, when 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 gently sent him away — 'Run along now my precious' — in order to give me her full attention. The imp limped off as if my paddling had crippled him.

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

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

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

Hearing which I simply couldn't hold back. 'That boy is no flower,' I objected most unwisely.

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

I had 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 I had just delivered the laundry when 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? Possibly 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 is the secret?

Aside from all that 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 a 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, enjoying 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: 'May 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 shirt, stiff and high-collared. At that moment I noticed how much, with those pale eyes and skin framed by dark hair, he looked like Estel. An infinitely more venerable version mind you, yet now that I saw it the resemblance was striking.

Except 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?' 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 my precipitate actions have not caused offence.'

Instead of replying he stepped over to a small serving-table and poured himself something clear, whether water or a more

fortifying refreshment I couldn't tell. 'This is not the first such incident involving Estel,' he said soberly, staring into the glass. 'Far from it: this is but the latest of many.' Then he actually sighed, and took a swig of his drink.

I almost sighed myself, understanding then 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. Then in a low tone added: 'Would that he were in spirit more alike to my own offspring.'

Which of course instantly brought to my mind Arwen. This is agony: constantly missing her, hungering for her presence, wishing I could get away — even just for a few years — to go glimpse 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,' I now heard Elrond saying, 'none was caused to me — though I do care for the boy — but to Gilraen, whose protector I am. Our homely house has become for her and for Estel not only a place of refuge but a home. We must needs make them welcome, and honour their wishes to the best of our ability.' I nodded my agreement, though it sounded as if he were talking to himself more than to me.

I studied Elrond's visage, wondering how his wife's absence must weigh on him. Elves are not meant to age outwardly, yet the tale his face told was a lengthy one full of cares. He had 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 own sons, 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 suddenly 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 pinned me with his most penetrating gaze ever, and took his time in replying. 'It would be well for you not to delve into the matter,' 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. But I am surely not the first to enquire into this, nor will I be the last. Over time people will speak of it increasingly, and speculate.'

'There are some who would not deem that wise,' he warned. Then he took a long swig from his glass, and when he continued it was in a more philosophical tone: 'Yet we must each in the end choose our own path, according to conscience, come what will.'

Which to me signalled the conversation's imminent end, so I prepared to be dismissed. But not quite . . .

Elrond went on: 'While speaking of possible futures, a query of my own.' His manner had now turned strangely light, almost cheery by his standards. 'I understand you have displayed a great interest in our waste treatment and disposal 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 actually enjoying this! 'I ask therefore if we might consider an exchange: your position for hers? But of course only if your current occupation should prove too dull or burdensome, Tiron.'

Which goes to show that it was not his good and kindly ways that made Elrond master of the Elves of Rivendell. I have since then assiduously avoided everything that smells of waste management.

After that the remainder of the Dwarf company's stay was less eventful though no less exhausting. Between seeing to their special needs and my daily duties 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 sort — kind, thoughtful, 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 sitting around doing nothing much. Or eating of course: it's amazing, come mealtimes, what the little fellow can put away. Anyway, I daresay there is much to commend here.

Yet this selfsame trait also leads him to gush endlessly about all things Elven. And while we never completely tire of hearing how wonderful we are, such hopeless romanticism can sometimes be a bit much.

'Rivendell is fabulous! I would gladly stay here for ever and ever!' he confided once while playing darts. This after he'd attended yet another interminable evening of songs, stories and poetry — all of it by, for and about Elves. He kept humming the tune *A Elbereth Gilthoniel*, a hymn to that divine Vala who made the stars and constellations and 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 would likely weary of it here,' I demurred, missing my third shot. I think the 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: you have a beautiful setting and temperate climate' — he threw and hit the 20-point field — 'comfortable lodgings, delightful entertainment, convivial company' — a nod to me, then the next dart struck a double-20 ring — 'and above all, regular meals of fine quality and 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 to me less a paradise than a prison: one we built ourselves, out of our own history. Yes it's a comfortable coop with all the amenities anyone could ask; but a cage is still a cage even if golden. Because we are a folk with no future, only a very long past: we live in it, are trapped there, can never escape.

Elves came into Middle-earth ages ago — the famous Firstborn — and for a brief thousand years or so, enjoyed a flowering that has been unequalled since. In nearly every craft, in all the arts, in

the acquiring of knowledge, in comprehending the very fabric of which the world is woven, we reached our heights then. In those Elder Days our people had, so the histories say, an insatiable thirst for discovery, for learning, for growth — for life.

What changed this? Various things, not least mistakes born of our own vanity. For none is so apt to foolishness as those who think themselves wise.

But mainly we were worn down by the ceaseless struggle against our evil Enemy and his teeming minions and allies: Balrogs, Dragons, Giants, various Monsters and Beasts, Orcs and Goblins, Spiders, Trolls, Wargs, Wights, Wolves and Werewolves, Wraiths and of course very many Men. In war after war we fought them to protect ourselves and all we had wrought in the world. If we lost, that often meant the destruction of entire Elven kingdoms and their wondrous works. Yet even when winning we anyway found the things for which we'd bled, slipping from our weakened grasp. And win or lose, our countless dead were always 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 growing, 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 craft and art and knowledge was now bent that way, toward the past. We mostly stopped creating new things, striving instead to save, recreate and relive familiar old ones. Yet try as we might, somehow we could not 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 people who had achieved such greatness, and would from now on have to live in their shadow. Ironically our best efforts to preserve what was dearest to us, succeeded only in ensuring our slow fading and its eventual loss.

It was with happy thoughts like these in the back of 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 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 appeared to be a larger leaf sprouting out of the hilt. It was absolutely gorgeous. Though I am no weapons expert, I guessed that this masterful melding of form and function was Elven work from the Elder Days.

'This was actually 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 Troll it would be a tiny knife but for me it serves as a short-sword.' He twirled the blade before him a bit; I could see how well it suited him. But then he stopped to eye 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 feel it. That's quite a sting you have!'

He gave me a hopeful, somewhat shy glance. 'Do you think this might be . . . well, a magic blade?'

I had to laugh, though not unkindly. Mortal folk are forever asking if this or that thing is 'magic'. Most Elves don't even know what is meant by it: items simply have their properties, some more uncommon than others, depending on their makers' skills. 'It might be,' I allowed, 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 guess was correct and Bilbo's blade actually was crafted in an Elven kingdom of old, then it would certainly have special attributes such as shining coldly 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 forces and materials 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 have 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 is

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 finally set out again this morning after more than three weeks' stay 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 but the Hobbit went all teary and sentimental, promising repeatedly to return. As for Gandalf — well, who knows anything about wizards.

I was by then feeling sickly, yet went to the arduous effort of crawling 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 with mortals. The lembas helps 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 has been squatting there for some time, and thereby lay claim to an immense treasure which said beast has hoarded. It makes my heart heavy to think of them all being roasted by dragon-fire and devoured, especially cheerful little Bilbo. Yet he seems an extraordinarily lucky chap, so perhaps .

. .

I also managed to look at the guest book before collapsing into bed again. The Dwarves had merely scrawled a few crude drawings and jokes which I will 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 will do my best to erase from memory. Gandalf's only comment was: 'Not enough hot water!'

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

'No!' I cried as my eyes darted around searching for potential witnesses. 'I swear I never breathed a word!' Then realising how suspicious that sounded: 'That is—I meant to say . . . I don't know anything about him!'

She gave me a puzzled look. 'Tiron, whatever is the matter?' Horneth is our director of waste management, so I had striven to stay away from her during the ten years since my little chat with Elrond. Only that day — months ago now — she had cornered me behind the counter at reception. Horneth is a nice enough person, very attractive too, yet I sometimes detect on her a slight 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 will listen.'

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

'That his real name is Aragorn. That aside from 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? Then Horneth's earnest expression made me freeze, open-mouthed, and my mind reeled. As the horrible reality slowly sank in, I buried my head in my hands. 'But . . . but how?' I moaned weakly. By which I meant: how could this travesty be possible?

She took me literally though, and dutifully trotted out his long lineage: 'Well, he's the son of Arathorn, and he was the son of Arador, who was the son of Argonui, who was the son of' But 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 would have imagined?' I agreed sardonically, beginning to recover my wits. It occurred 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 version 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! Elrond and Gilraen kept it hidden from everyone, even him.' She sidled nearer to whisper: 'Because the Nameless One must not learn that an heir of Elendil is alive in

Rivendell.' Which made sense: I shuddered to think of our relentless Enemy having yet further grounds to destroy us. She went on: 'Only this morning did Elrond decide that Estel — Aragorn I mean — was old enough to be told the truth.'

Old enough at twenty years? That's young 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 world under his evil dominion. Since there may 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 query her sanity, one of Horneth's waste colleagues ran up, breathless, and called her away to deal with some sewage emergency.

All that day I pondered these things while I worked. Though Aragorn's ancestry was a shocking revelation, it was Horneth's last comments that kept coming back to me. As baffling as I found her attraction to him, this was actually nothing new: there is a 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 ended up losing her immortality, and so alone of all Elves, died of old age. My people have been mourning the loss ever since. Despite this instructive example — or perversely, because of it? — other Elf-maidens have 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 the place where the shards of Narsil are displayed, and saw Aragorn standing there. Though wearing Elven raiment — a mantle of grey and silver — he could not be mistaken for one of us. I think this has to do with his graceless bearing and overall unfinished appearance, topped off by the ragged beard and moustache he is beginning to grow. Yet he is at least no child now

but a Man in stature and strength, and I'll grant that he is not completely ugly.

He had his hand on the 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 in disappointment.

'Congratulations,' I offered.

He 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. '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 heritage.'

'Why yes, of course,' I said, suddenly understanding, 'as Isildur's heir that must belong to you.' 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. 'But is that really advisable, to haul around a broken blade? 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. It consisted of intertwined silver serpents with gleaming emerald eyes, whose heads met beneath a crown of golden flowers. I had never seen this before yet knew it immediately: 'The Ring of Barahir!' I breathed. It was given by Finrod, a mighty Elf-lord of old, to Barahir, a great warrior Man who saved his life in battle. 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 is 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.

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 . . .'

I soon put Elendil's heir out of my mind, though, due to something infinitely more important: Arwen Evenstar returned! She arrived late that same night, unheralded, with a small escort from far Lothlorien. I was for once delighted to be roused out of 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 eternal moment we 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 had been living, partly of the wilds she had travelled, but mostly of her lovely self. With furiously beating heart I dared to look into her shining grey eyes. This was like gazing at the first bright stars in the evening heavens; my head swam with vertigo.

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

She smiled! I can hardly begin to describe that wonder or its effect on me, for words are tools too dull for the task. I can only compare it to the joy my forbears must have known, back when the new-wrought moon and sun set sail to light and warm the world. In that instant all the cares of my long years of pining for 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 stayed 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 vast treasure, knows always that it sleeps safe in deep vaults.

Returning to my room afterward, with the visitors all bedded down and no one else about, my heart was so overflowing with childlike glee that I actually skipped down the hallway 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 such a taxing journey. Yet I began already to imagine the chance and not-so-chance meetings we would be having in the years ahead, savouring them in advance like a meal that is 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 among the trees, where one might sit in comfort and out of the way while enjoying the view.

I had 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 like a top upon the turf, barefoot and laughing.

Again, words cannot convey the bliss this produced in me. I've heard mortals say that the 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 watching her filled me through and through with warm well-being. It was as if she were a living hearth, near whose glowing coals my spirit found a cosy haven.

But my rapture was disturbed abruptly by a tramping amid the trees, like an ox run loose, accompanied by some horrid wailing. Then a figure appeared, plodding off the path and through the undergrowth in my direction: it was Aragorn. As he approached I realised that the strange sound he was making was singing. I recognised it with some difficulty as *The Lay of Leithian*, an ancient

and very long poem about ill-starred Beren and Luthien. He was at the part where they met, when Beren called her Tinuviel — 'nightingale' — because he first 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 one day he'll learn a little woodcraft. He did spy Arwen though, just ahead on the greensward, and 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 must be his first-ever sight of her: she'd been away far longer than he'd been alive.

For a few heartbeats he stood there frozen, and all else was still except for Arwen. I hoped he'd have the sense now to stay silent and not spoil this tranquil scene. She, amazingly, hadn't heard his prior clamour — the wind being against her — and was now walking slowly through the grass 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 almost shouted: Shut up you bloody oaf! Instead I only cursed him inwardly, watching in mute horror as he ran toward Arwen. I wondered: was he drunk, or mad, or merely making a bad joke? For though she is said indeed to be the spitting image of Luthien, the latter 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 appear to threaten my dear one.

Aragorn ran up to her, reached her. She turned to him calmly and . . . smiled. Was this perhaps a smile of pity, of kindly indulgence toward a drunken 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 must sound grand and ancient, but as Arwen is descended from more renowned ancestors herself, and was born during the reign of Aragorn's 36th great-grandfather, she might not be impressed.

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

than before.

This was looking ominous. The two of them were chatting easily now, getting on like old chums it seemed. I feared that at any moment his hand would 'accidentally' brush against her, 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 with confusion. What should I do to stop this farce? What could I do?

But then suddenly 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 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, always 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 back and hooks Rivendell's most eligible catch.'

I was taken aback. Now that I was no longer avoiding Horneth she was proving a 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. 'I overheard Aragorn's mother talking to him about it. He'd never even heard of Arwen before, so didn't know who she was when he first saw her. He actually imagined it was Luthien herself! Then yes, he ran and threw himself at her. She, naturally, was all innocent 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 of my sweet and — I was sure — entirely chaste Arwen. Instead I sipped my own tea fiercely, hand 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 skeptically before adding: 'I mean, in the story that I heard.'

'He was embarrassed, poor thing! Once he understood that she wasn't some vision, Aragorn explained who he is — so proud of course — and Arwen said who she is. Then he grasped that she's thousands of years older, and not just a girl his own age as she appears 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 figure from ancient history was traipsing through our woods. 'Well, he seems to be beyond embarrassment now, the way he's taken to chasing 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 that 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 would listen to a 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 however unwise the way may be, who really wants it pointed out? So day after day, week after week, I did just watch and wait — and hope.

Meanwhile Aragorn kept following Arwen everywhere. At mealtimes he always contrived to sit at a neighbouring table. At concerts and celebrations he would 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 wished to avoid a repeat performance. But I often still went there myself because it's a lovely spot which 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 gurgling 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 look up — and there sitting on my old stump was Aragorn! The sight of him hit 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 glanced 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 had 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 dipped and stepped and turned, yet each movement incredibly slow, as if these were her final actions in a world where time itself was winding to a halt. I had never seen the like of it; I was captivated. The wind stilled, even the sun seemed frozen in the sky, and the only sound was silence.

But Aragorn stirred then: he sat up a bit straighter and sighed softly. That's what broke the spell for me. My head cleared, and in that instant I perceived that Arwen's dance was no spontaneous expression but an 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 watching every move. Whereas she was almost certainly unaware of my presence — perhaps even of my existence.

So she did want him after all. Or at the very least she wanted

him to want her which was nearly as bad. Was Horneth right, then: had Arwen engineered everything from the start? It begged 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 pair with that awful Man. Soon they might be plighting their troth all over the place.

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

I knew only that I had to escape, and fast. So I ran from that spot headlong, heedless of the way, until I found myself suddenly at the edge of the steep river 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 very stone on which I stood. As I teetered on the brink I was tempted to lean forward ever so slightly, plunge into those wild churning rapids and make all my cares disappear for good.

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 world and rocking me slowly to quietude. When finally I opened my eyes again it was dark, 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. 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. 'Long 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 remaining inwardly cautious. Elrond is no fool: it is safest to approach him with words — and yes even thoughts — that are as honest as possible. 'Only this 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 broke off, my hesitation unfeigned. Though naturally I had pondered what to say, there was no good way to say it. 'I believe that a . . . well, a kind of threat hangs over us, over all Rivendell — an unexpected danger.'

He raised a skeptical eyebrow. 'What is the nature of this threat?' he enquired, and turned to look out the window as if to confirm nothing was there. 'We Elves are always threatened, forever in danger,' he intoned. 'Our foes are legion, and they are strong, and they never rest. Yet evil things do not enter this valley.' His manner was proud but with good cause, for in the 4700 years and many wars since Rivendell's founding 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 what people bear inside them.'

That did surprise him: he started, and wheeled back around to face me, glaring. I now had not just his interest but his most 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 concerning Aragorn and Arwen in the woods and elsewhere. He listened quietly and with apparent calm, 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 thoughts clear and my story straight.

When I finished he remained silent for a moment before remarking evenly: 'It would seem, Tiron, that you spend a good deal of your time wandering 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, and 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. 'Your tidings are no 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 to compose himself. I followed suit: it was a fortified wine of some sort, sweet and strong with an aftertaste of cherries. 'For months,' he

expanded more calmly, 'I have witnessed Aragorn ogling Arwen and moping like a lovelorn boy. And even had I not: his mother has spoken to me of this.'

Also unexpected. 'Gilraen?'

'Is as concerned as I am. She fears that Elendil's line will be broken. Such a match would be fitting for neither Men nor Elves.' He took on a lecturing tone. 'Our peoples should each strive to maintain what measure of our former virtue we still have, and not further diminish ourselves through' — he mouthed the word reluctantly — 'intermarriage.'

I nodded agreement, and did not point out the irony of Elrond being of mixed blood himself. Due to which he has sometimes, quite incorrectly, been given the epithet 'Half-elven'. Instead I said: 'My Lord, this is why I felt I must come to you. Ever since Aragorn learned he is Chieftain of the Dunedain' — purposely using his least title — 'he has seemed set on raising himself up. I fear he may do so at our expense.'

Elrond sighed. 'Perhaps I should not have told him so soon,' he admitted, again to my wonder. I had never seen the Lord of Rivendell so unguarded. 'The lad is still young and untried.' He quaffed more wine with a pensive expression, then stood to gaze out the window again. 'Aragorn had been out hunting with my sons,' he recalled. 'They are endeavoring to teach him woodcraft,' he added, shaking his head. 'That morning I spied them from up here as they returned, so went down to greet them.' Then more softly: 'I am always relieved when they come home unharmed.'

He went on. '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 his face shone with pride! He appeared at that moment 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 hidden heritage.'

I remained respectfully silent. The sentiments between parents and their children — foster-child in this case — have always mystified me. I have no offspring, and was myself the product of the single 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 of lavender.

Apart from which I did at one time keep a cat, but I gather

that is 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.

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

At these words I first choked on my drink, then drained the remainder in order to soothe my suddenly sore throat.

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

'P—pardon me . . . Lord Elrond,' I gasped before finding my voice again. 'On the contrary your wine is delicious. Only I'm afraid it has woken in me a dreadful, overindulging thirst.' But really I was hungering to know: which tendencies was he referring to? What exactly did he notice?

He returned to his seat across from mine. 'It would appear,' he continued dispassionately, refilling my glass then his own half-empty one, 'that Arwen's condition only became more pronounced during her sojourn amongst our Lothlorien brethren. I understand that in key respects their social habits have diverged from ours in recent years.'

Which again raised questions 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 woman that I loved? How much did I really know about her? Had I, all this time, been a fool?

'I perceive that these disclosures are upsetting to you,' Elrond noted with concern. Stupidly I had 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 realised had been down on his desk all the while and not perched on his head. It occurred to me only then that the master of Rivendell might want a confidant. After all, whom else could he talk with openly about such delicate personal topics? Surely not the other Elf-lords, nor even Gilraen,

whatever their relationship. This would 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,' I continued, 'that your . . . information has served to increase my misgivings. Now I must also fear for Arwen herself, 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 possible. It also tacitly acknowledged that Elrond's twin sons Elladan and Elrohir are unlikely ever to provide him any heirs. They are otherwise inclined: they have no time for Elf-maidens, being forever away on 'errantry', which in practice simply means slaughtering as many Orcs as they can. While that is a laudable avocation, and a just revenge for their mother's torment in Orcish hands, still there is much whispering about them.

Elrond was long silent. He sat drinking deeply, staring at nothing particular, absorbed in his 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 in part still come true. Assuming naturally that a worthy suitor can swiftly be found. One perhaps who is unwaveringly loyal and steadfast, even if unrenowned.' 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 supplicant. 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: 'Is there no chance that Aragorn himself might

be made to see reason?'

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

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.'

This was of course music to my ears. Yet I reflected that Aragorn had apparently been brought up from childhood without ever hearing of Arwen's existence: a strange sort of trust. Then I sipped more wine, and another thought floated up. 'Could you — forgive my presumption, Lord Elrond — could you not simply forbid this match?'

Clearly he had considered this, for he dismissed it immediately with a wave of his hand. 'And so succeed merely in making it more attractive to them? Is not the forbidden fruit the one most desired?' He drained 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 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 doomed.'

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 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 seen: agitated, angry, all semblance of gravitas and wisdom gone.

'It was we,' he went on fiercely, 'who woke before all others under the new 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 was declaiming he strode back and forth, compulsively, 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. 'We preserved our ancient culture and ensured that it would never fade.' I noticed him fiddling with his ring-finger as he stalked about. 'It is precious to us. Precious!'

Some background is needed here . . . It is a closely held secret that the Lord of Rivendell wears 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 Elven Rings have been used actively to protect and preserve our remaining lands and people.

Now, when I call Elrond's ring 'secret' I mean that everyone in Rivendell knows about it but speaks of it only in whispers. This is because, like him, we are all neither blind nor entirely witless. Ours is a small and isolated enclave of limited resources and declining population, beset by mighty enemies. In the natural course of things we should ages ago have been crushed like a rotten walnut. That we haven't, 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 is actually invisible to normal sight.

Anyway, seeing him do this set off in me a hazy, tipsy train of thought about famous rings and those who wore them. 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 behind him out of view. He stepped closer to me, looming, face dark with suspicion. 'What ring do you have?'

'None, my Lord,' I quickly corrected, once again regretting my loose tongue. 'But,' I went on excitedly, 'I may have a solution!'

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. The 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 I thought. '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 even 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 Arwen is a treasure fit for a king — and only a king.'

He sat back down and leaned in the chair with a thoughtful finger across his lip. Already he seemed his usual 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 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 appear only right and just, my Lord,' I allowed gravely. How my heart sang! Now, in order for Aragorn to win Arwen he would 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 absence of any King by jealous Men who would resist the return of a rightful heir. Not to mention that to accomplish those deeds he would also need 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 Aragorn's fate,' Elrond continued in stentorian tone, 'to either succeed in this great trial and so rise above all his forefathers since Elendil, or' — a split-second hesitation — 'to fail and so fall into darkness.'

To either succeed or die trying, he meant. Which had nothing 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 impossible task, something I very much doubted. Surely even he was not 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 told me: yes. I could indeed live with that burden.

Elrond then pronounced, as if it had just been revealed to him: 'Meanwhile, I forebode, Aragorn cannot have or bind to him any woman, until this doom is fulfilled.'

'Destiny must be his only bride,' I affirmed. 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 perhaps I was lucky not to have Elrond as a prospective father-in-law.

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

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

'Needless to say,' Elrond added for clarity's sake as he crowned himself with the circlet, 'all that was discussed here shall be held in the strictest confidence.' He cast a warning eye 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 I on mine. 'Allow me to show you out,' he offered, then led me to his antechamber and swung wide its massive wooden door. 'We must do this more often,' he averred as I stepped through it into the passage beyond. 'My door is always open to you, Tiron.' And with that he shut the portal behind me firmly, sending a deep sepulchral boom rolling down the hallway.

I stood there quietly for a while, still feeling a bit dizzy and disoriented as well as overwhelmed by all that had just transpired. Then after a moment I began to hear a strange staccato sound emanating from Elrond's chambers. What was that? It was somehow unsettling.

The noise continued and grew louder until it became recognisable: laughter! Or rather a horrid kind of cackling, which first pulsed through that heavy door and then along the passage ahead, only to come echoing back at me all hollow and sinister-seeming. It chilled my blood. So I hurried away, fleeing the fearful din.

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

Later 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 guessed.

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, fatherly yet restrained. From me he got a perfunctory handshake and noncommittal nod.

Then he left for the wild, in pursuit — he revealed with far-seeing gaze — of his appointed destiny. Perhaps in the fullness of time he will meet it in one form or another: say a Troll's club or Orc's scimitar. Fate is 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 is 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?

Does Arwen really miss the Ranger 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 more of this woman I've so long adored. Maybe I'll even find out what those 'certain tendencies' 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 wind blowing down from the mountains. My eyes keep turning toward those bleak snow-capped peaks, and beyond. I sense a dire portent, as 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 to search for the wanderers and found them nearly on our doorstep, closely pursued — by the Nazgul.

Those nine are the Dark Lord's most terrible servants. They were once Men, mighty kings and sorcerers of old; but Sauron gave them Rings of Power, and so enslaved them, and they became wraiths. It is 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 a few harmless little halflings?

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

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

Alarmingly, Aragorn had also returned, after many decades roaming the wild. Not only had he failed to get killed during all that time, he'd grown much in stature and strength. He'd applied himself with a will and had even — to everyone's amazement — mastered woodcraft so fully that folk were calling him the greatest woodsman of the age. It was he who had guided the halflings most of the way here and kept them from the Ringwraiths, and so was now 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 travel-stained cloak, shaggy hair and grimy skin was a powerful figure of stern aspect, tall, dark and lean. This was not the callow youth we had 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 weatherbeaten. 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 was not alone in her admiration: a goodly number of Elf-maidens had contrived to witness his arrival and were now watching and whispering.

'I wonder if he will 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 would not dare, before his quest is achieved.' Like most secrets here, Elrond's ban on feminine intimacy had soon become common knowledge — and therefore the fodder for endless gossip.

Arwen was not present to welcome him, but in the circumstances that was scant reassurance. During Aragorn's exile I'd had no luck at all with her. Oh, she was gracious enough, and her occasional kind word boosted my spirits and hopes. Yet I never got to know her better, or to find what if any facts might lay behind 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 encountered the 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 credulity can be stretched 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 officially 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 Elf-maidens. 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 had already lost to him.

I was utterly bereft. Having no better idea, I 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 had inexplicably devoured.

I desired nothing else than to wallow in my misery forever. But duty called, literally and loudly, in the form of the Dwarves mentioned before, 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 been eaten by that treasure-hoarding dragon, who was slain. But unfortunately Thorin and two of his kin did die during a smallish 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 solid-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 all these different folk were suddenly converging on Rivendell. But I was interrupted, for that moment a party of Elves from the Grey Havens turned up, so I quickly showed the Dwarves their room and gave them the rest of the 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 up people 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 again flocked to see the 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 was when I sought out Bilbo. Like Thorin's Dwarves, he too had 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 him far from the feasting, in the Hall of Fire where he often goes to sit and think — and sometimes nap. Its enormous hearth was blazing, awaiting the throng that would descend after dinner to listen to all the songs and stories and other nonsense. Yet right then only a solitary soul was there: a small dark figure on a stool near 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 would 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 his words 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 Goin!' 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, in the span of a few short years. How can anyone stand to wither away like that? Some who are accounted wise have called this horrid death by ageing a 'gift': a means for Men and other mortals to permanently free themselves of the bounds of this world. But if so then it's a present that I'm happy not to receive.

'Frodo is doing well?' 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 boy will ever recover completely. I fear his wound goes far deeper than 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 amazing 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 the whole affair. That burden was mine to bear.'

'Yours?' I asked amazed. And 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 been 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 believe we all of us bear some sort of burden, so it's only natural to compare and wonder whose is heavier. I carry this one and you yours.'

'Mine?' I asked blankly. He must be speaking rhetorically.

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

This was 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.' I chuckled ruefully. 'Only it seems your sight isn't quite as 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 eyes lit up at the memory. 'There was something about her 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 I was anyway 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: 'Whatever happened to 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 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 good and kind a soul as Bilbo had been unsuccessful in love. What hope was there ever going to be for me then? My personal virtues are too subtle to compete with more obvious attractions such as a fine pedigree, personal renown 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, and 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 assistants buzzed around the various stoves and hobs and hearths, 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 an eye on that veal — don't let it burn!'

'Where's the sodding parsley?'

'Take your filthy paws off that pot!'

I weaved through that maze of boiling kettles and angry cooks until I came to the kitchen's far end, where large double doors led to 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 servers struggled to keep their plates full. 'Couldn't you seat them 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 when he was on duty perpetually loomed. But over drinks he could be a cordial companion. 'Can you tell me how long all this lot will be staying with us?'

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

'Well, they came mostly to eat, by the look of it,' Costor retorted with a grim laugh. He deftly snatched two canapés from a not-quite-empty tray returning 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.

'You brought on extra staff,' I noted.

'Had to draft them in from all over Rivendell,' he explained. '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 beneath the ceiling that read: 'Hooray Frodo!'

'Very festive.' I leaned over a bit so as to be able to glimpse 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 Glóin. 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 better 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 could not 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 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? '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 notice, having already turned away to get his servers, now loaded 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 your 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 high. Arwen's a bit above your station! Doesn't Aragorn have dibs on her?'

I saw nothing immediately to hand with which I might 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: 'Now remember to bloody well smile this time!'

As I stared after him, I slowly shook off my anger at his obtuse comments. Costor is not known for his tact or sensitivity, and 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 would eventually see past that — and my chronic shyness around her — to recognise what a worthy and devoted consort I could be. But instead she'd fallen for awful Aragorn, simply on account of his kingly heritage, wide fame and brawny ability to lop off Orcs' heads.

Or was there more to it than that? Had some malady or insidious influence twisted her better judgement? For there really is 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 season, then decay and die.

Suddenly it struck me: could that very mortality be what most appeals to Arwen? To love the Ranger is clearly hopeless, since whatever else happens, in a century or so he'll anyway be dust. Might the feminine mind, dark and mysterious as it is, find this somehow romantic?

I gazed at my dear one and wondered. If it were true, then for her a prime attraction of their liaison is that it cannot last, but from the outset is doomed. Did this mean that by waiting patiently for nature to take its course, I could 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 that shook me to the core, that there may be nothing left to salvage. Because if Arwen officially binds herself to him, then she too must die. This is the price of her being one of the so-called Half-elven, and a bitter truth I had so far managed to ignore . . .

After the time of Beren and Luthien it was resolved that the offspring of such mixed-race unions would each 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: it had to be made. Of course most of them, 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 has been no 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, suffering the same slide into decay and death. Again it now made me question her mental state, that she could even contemplate taking that path, for what healthy person arranges their own demise?

I had long pushed all this to the back of my mind, believing it would never really happen. Something must surely intervene: she would balk or lose interest in him, or he would perish in the wilderness, or he would fail 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 seemed he might somehow 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 a knife in my

heart to envision her withering away like dear old Bilbo. Or for that matter like 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 abandoned and hopeless at the tender age of 100.

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

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

After that a long darkness fell, beset by disturbing dreams. At some point a single clear bell rang out; I half-woke to find myself lying in my own bed in the morning light. So I swiftly squeezed my eyelids shut, and heaped the linen high atop me in order to block out the unwelcome world. But 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 all at once I recalled: a note I'd happened to see in the kitchen the previous evening, tacked to the dining room doors. It had read in part:

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. Obviously, the purpose of that 'secret' council must be to discuss whatever had brought all these folk flocking to Rivendell. Did I still wish to learn? Searching inside myself again I found that, right that moment, most of me

emphatically didn't give a toss.

Yet somewhere a small firm voice whispered: yes! Yes I did in fact want to know. Well, then I really should get over there straight away 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 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 various passages and stairways toward the high garden that encloses the East Porch. Luckily I saw no one: the council members must be there already, and everyone else was recovering from the 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 a large feather duster: that porch can always use a good cleaning.

As I neared the garden I took care to tread more softly, though the running and falling of the river below would surely mask such stray noises. A clear morning light was glowing in the valley and the scent of trees and flowers wafted in the cool autumn air. I crept forward cautiously, duster poised, until I could hear the familiar drone of Elrond's voice introducing the 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.

Then the council proper got under way, and it was quite the eye-opener. First though came the customary old catalogue of woes: our Enemy's waxing strength, his relentless advance on all fronts, the rising shadow that threatens to engulf the free folk of Middle-earth. Important stuff no doubt, only it's tiring after a few thousand years to keep hearing the same sky-is-falling stories, about which we seem able to do so little.

But once that chitchat meandered around to the real object of this meeting, a different and fascinating tale unfolded. It began long ago with the Rings of Power, and Sauron's forging of the Ruling Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, and the ensuing endless strife that culminated in the Dark Lord's defeat 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 claimed by victorious Isildur, only to then be lost in the great River Anduin, seemingly forever. And there it did sit for two and a half millennia, until found by some fishermen and taken by one called Gollum. This strange little creature 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 was. But Gandalf began to suspect: it was he who 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 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 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 thing ever.

When it was put away again I felt a keen 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 found but was right here in our homely house. What a wonderful stroke of fortune!

In a flash my helpless defeatism was turned to bright new hope. Finally we had a 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 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 candidates.

Not Elrond I hoped: he has his mighty Elven Ring and is bad enough already. Surely not Gandalf: too difficult and temperamental for sound leadership. Not Aragorn of course, though as Isildur's heir he might well want the hard-won prize his forebear had claimed. Not the Dwarves either: I respect them but they tend to go mad over anything golden. The Hobbits are simply not cut out for it. As for the remaining visitors, they were little more than names to me.

Well, perhaps some other ranking Rivendell Elf? Two were there. 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, a counsellor of Elrond's yet very much his own Elf. Yes, he could be ideal . . .

I realised they were right that moment debating what to do with the Ring. Except to my shock they spoke not of using it but of hiding or sending it away, or even destroying it: what foolery was this? As I listened further though, they rejected the first two options, on the grounds that wherever it was put or sent our Enemy would eventually root out and reclaim his creation. And as for ruining it, none of us had the craft to accomplish that. Yet the nascent sigh of relief died on my lips an instant later.

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 where it was made, in order to unmake it. I could barely believe my ears, and judging from the stunned silence that followed I wasn't alone. This idea was 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, who dwells nearly next door to that fiery chasm of its birth.

But the only one who dared to speak up 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?' He tried to talk some sense into the others, making a passionate plea on behalf of his own embattled people that we wield it 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 illicitly with a feather duster. I hoped someone would. But Elrond swiftly shushed him down like an unruly child, calling the Ring 'altogether evil' and insisting it would inevitably corrupt whomever used it until they became as evil 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 take it, 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 than he.

What were Elrond and Gandalf playing at, and why weren't more people challenging them? Was it simply too intimidating to contradict those 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 Erebor of all people who was finally driven to voice what many surely felt, openly disagreeing with his kinsman the Lord of Rivendell for the first time ever. 'That is the path of despair,' he said of bringing 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 this, stamping out the dissent forthwith. 'Despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt,' he argued. 'We do not.' He went on, calling it wisdom to do whatever is found 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 their 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 lunacy might be defended, for no matter how daft the undertaking, you don't truly know it will fail until it does. And just imagine the surprise of your unwitting adversary!

Elrond quickly agreed with the wizard; obviously they had planned all this. But to what end? Was this apparent madness

actually some subtle stratagem, whose opaque purpose would become clear only in hindsight? I was baffled, and 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 ghastly task, since there's little hope for it anyway, and the strong and wise will be otherwise engaged? Which sounded as though wisdom were 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 thing. 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: why you wicked old Elf! You cold-blooded conniver! Then in fearful anticipation I turned my eyes toward the Hobbits.

Bilbo spoke 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, although he sat there surrounded by mighty folk.

The poor little fellow had a dreadful demeanour. I pitied him

for the 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, and with a heartbreaking lost look. 'Though . . . I do not know the way.'

* * *

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

It wasn't enough though merely to refuse it themselves: they had to keep others from claiming it. So they ensured it stayed in hands that had proven safe thus far. The small hands of someone strong enough to bear the thing yet too weak to actually wield it. That this would likely spell doom for the innocent involved, was apparently an acceptable sacrifice.

Still I couldn't understand their refusing the Ring in the first place. Too evil to use: what does that 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, as long as it's strong and sharp? Or is it better to hand it back and seek some more virtuous means of killing him? What: you say the weapon in question is altogether evil? Well, show me one that's altogether good. Nobody 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 often define evil simply as the absence of good. Yet Sauron himself was once, literally, a perfect angel, while Gandalf who supposedly still is one has sent a halfling on a suicide mission, and Elrond is no angel at all.

Despite such contradictions — or else because of them — Elrond and company insist that they are opposite in every way to the Dark Lord. By extension this also means they cannot countenance using anything he has made, in order to avoid being the least bit like him. For they morbidly fear the attraction of evil,

both in themselves and others, as if it were some mighty force of nature that draws all people to it inexorably like moths to a flame.

So they reject the one thing that could realistically save us, solely on account of its origin. And not just for themselves: they believe 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 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 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 thing had captured the morning light, the lively way it had sparkled and shimmered.

I would sometimes get so lost in contemplation of its lustrousness that I would 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 would wake 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 now instead of her I was focussed always on the Ring. How could that be?

Instantly I was wracked by guilt, almost as though I'd been unfaithful to her. 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 completely centred elsewhere? Could the One Ring somehow be taking her place in my esteem and admiration? The question troubled me that whole evening and

through a sleepless night. But the next morning my reflections finally ended in the realisation that there need be no conflict, for the two things are tied together inextricably . . .

The fate of the Ring rules all our futures: it will decide the doom not just of Frodo but of Aragorn too, and so of Arwen and myself, as well as every other free person in Middle-earth. Therefore it's only natural that I take such a strong interest in it, and might in these circumstances even form a kind of personal attachment to the One. Which in no way diminishes my deep affection for Arwen — far from it. If anything the two of them actually complement each other, 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 near-certain destruction, if the Master Ring continued 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 the end of the world as we knew it.

I felt a pressing need to do something yet couldn't for the life of me decide what. I was sure though that everything would become clearer if only I could have another look at the Ring — a proper one, 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 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 a few 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 yet lacks common sense, no doubt because he's youngest. Merry is my favourite of the four, being as energetic and playful as any halfling, but intelligent and perceptive with it.

Frodo is 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 grave contemplation and brooding introspection. He'll take part in whatever childish frivolity, then the next minute say something sagacious that 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 little, 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 perhaps more secret.

Speaking of that original object of our association: the subject of the Ring never once came up, nor did Frodo's mission. I felt it would have 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 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 had 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 a final announcement about it, for winter was almost upon us and the first snows had long since fallen in the high mountains to the south and east. 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 proclaim that nine people in all would travel with the Ring. The parts of the two Hobbits were already arranged, and 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 would not 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 an Elf-lord or two, or maybe a couple of 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 am very fond these Shire-folk, and cannot imagine better comrades for a simple ramble through the countryside. But I definitely wouldn't want them as escorts on a highly dangerous expedition. They have 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. Still, to ship the four of them off to Mordor seems like sending lambs to the slaughter.

That Gandalf favoured it was only mildly surprising, since I 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 show how inclusive this quest is, yet 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, with a wild Wizard watching over the lot and some Hobbits looking on?

Questions, I had nothing but questions. The ultimate answers to them all must, I thought, lie with the cryptic and hidden Ring. That is the tiny wheel around which 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 indeed our plight, and the time to take action 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 a cluster of large comfy chairs not far from the great hearth, bearing a goodly supply of wine.

Horneth — clad for the occasion in a fetching short 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 to one side of Frodo, with me on the other, Sam next to me on my right, and Merry and Pippin sharing a settee behind us. An open space, well in front of the blazing fireplace, 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 dark 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 *The Lay of Leithian*, meaning release from bondage . . .'

Those words froze my heart. For while the heroic story of Beren and Luthien is truly a great 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.

The Hobbits though 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 lengthy recital.

With mounting panic I quickly downed my own drink and gathered myself together for a hasty departure, intending to announce that I needed 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 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 have 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 hold out.

'. . . 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 into 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 appearance's sake, on its swift way to my mouth. Its warm healing powers had immediate effect, like a tropical wave within me, yet could not 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 gone, and still this insistence on endlessly mourning dead Luthien. 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 — or possibly half-full. Either way I wished I could have had 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 tear my thoughts away from the recital, until eventually I was able to reduce the verse to a rhyming background noise in my head, like a distant throbbing pain. Not a pleasant state yet at least my mind could wander now, a bit blurred by alcohol but otherwise in working order.

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

Then right in the midst of those musings, without warning, it happened. The hall had grown 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. I spied him opening the vest and undoing the shirt's top buttons, while his gaze remained fixed on the poet 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, a light it seemed of fierce glee at this partial escape from captivity.

The sight of it made me gawk, gasping, the sound 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, agonizing and alluring and irresistible.

Until, that is, I suddenly realised Horneth was regarding me with a puzzled half-smile. She sat just opposite me on the other side of Frodo, so when admiring the Ring I'd been staring straight toward her with, I supposed, some look of wild surmise. I turned away embarrassed, and busied myself with getting another 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 yet seen it, exposed as it was. But we were sitting far to the front where its brightness blended with that of the fireplace. The only ones who might have observed it directly were Sam whose line of sight I blocked, Horneth whose view was obscured by the broad back of Frodo's chair, and the artiste who like the Hobbit was totally absorbed in his performance. It was as if the One Ring were revealed for my eyes alone.

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

Well, I was quite taken aback at this. Not just because a metallic object was talking to me, but also because its touching entreaty made surprisingly good sense. I'd been desperately hoping for somebody to save the Ring and us all. Yet if no one else would, why not me? It was a sin not to keep this great gift to the foes of Mordor. If others more mighty were too hidebound or timid to do what was needed, then maybe the homely housekeeper had to save the day.

Anyway we could ask no more of poor Frodo. He had done what he originally set out to do, bringing it safely to Rivendell. He should not have to bear that burden further. But I could help him with it: I could lift his burden. I could 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 crying: 'Take me, Tiron — take me now! Save us all!' And it was so bright and beautiful and so very near to me that I almost sprang from my chair right then 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 heard my thoughts and growled its displeasure. 'Patience, my sweet!' I reassured it with an indulgent chuckle. 'Soon you'll be mine. Quite soon now I promise!'

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

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

The Ring rumbled at me, deep yet plaintive, like a wrongly accused dog that in the past may have bitten, but is long since innocent of such habits. 'Are you a bad old Ring?' I enquired 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 needed defeating, yet as housekeeper I had no knowledge whatsoever of warfare, other than seeing warriors go off to fight and then their broken bodies returning. How was I fit to be an overlord?

But on reflection I realised that my complete inexperience was no bar to martial leadership. I would have many 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 object to my taking the Master Ring, and wielding it to rule over the free peoples of Middle-earth. They might not understand the need for my absolute, uncompromising authority in this grave time of crisis. Although it was unpleasant to contemplate, I could well be forced to use extreme measures in order to overcome their wrong-headed opposition. Yet such, I guessed, must be the typical trials of overlordship: you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette.

And still the Ring's weird whispering went on, but grew by stages louder and louder until it hurt just to hear it, drowning out all other sounds. I glanced toward the stage where instead of *The Lay of Leithian* it now appeared the poet 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 was most fair in my ears, and started rocking back and forth to its rough rhythms. As I gazed over at the shining One again I caught Horneth's amused yet interested eye, observing my antics. I shrugged with a helpless grin and kept moving to the beat.

Until abruptly all the noise stopped: the hall went completely quiet. With bated breath I surveyed the room and saw everyone still watching the performer, who was now standing silently. Then the long applause began, appreciative yet understated as per our custom, and the artiste bowed and finally left the stage. And good riddance!

Looking at Frodo as he clapped, I was distressed to see him suddenly notice how naked the Ring was, and immediately stuff it back under his shirt which he swiftly rebuttoned, along with his vest. He glimpsed me staring at him: an awful antipathy filled his normally cherubic visage.

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

But just as quickly the fiery mood cooled; I passed a hand across my eyes. Whatever had come over me, that I would want to hurt a harmless Hobbit? It dawned on me then for the first time that the Ring might actually be a bit evil.

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, I assumed, on to his room.

Another performer took the stage. I shuddered to think what might be 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, only it was no good: I was too consumed by my

craving for the One. Yet I avoided looking toward it, both to keep from seeing Frodo's face again and for fear of my own possibly renewed fury.

So perhaps the Ring of Power was a little evil after all. Might its badness really rub off with use, making me a little evil and power-hungry? Well, luckily the danger was slight, since I had no innate interest in power personally. Order, yes of course. Cleanliness too. Under my coming regime everything would be kept 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 downfall.

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

Yes, there would be a few much-needed changes around here. Certain people had to be brought low so as to make more room at the top, and let in a little fresh air. And I was exactly the one to do it, for with the Ring none could stand against me. I would become then an overlord of overpowering might and 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 thought it made a good title. When wielding the Ruling Ring I should be able to control all the lesser Rings of Power too. Elrond's for instance, and perhaps — it sent a shiver up my spine — even those of the Nazgul. Yes, especially theirs I'd expect, since they were so closely bound to the One. Hmm . . . those Ringwraiths might be frightening fellows, corrupt to the core, but as my faithful servants they'd surely come in handy maintaining order and generally getting things done. Within myself, I found the prospect of commanding them at once deeply disquieting and darkly thrilling. Was this how evil felt? If so it didn't seem too bad.

A sudden vision unfolded then, unbidden, of a fearsome 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 Arwen the Evenstar, his Mistress: helplessly adoring, passionate for his presence, so unbearably beautiful that folk dropped dead at the very sight of her. All would love us, and fear us, and despair!

But as quickly as it came the phantasm faded, and I saw only my usual self: Tiron of Rivendell, the homely housekeeper, tired and lonely and worried about the future, with no powers and no Arwen. Yet recalling that vanished vision I wondered: if I ever really were so great and terrible, might she finally love me?

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

We both got up, swiftly slipped an arm each under the Hobbit, another behind him, and 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 due to my slightly tipsy state. We got away just as the ovation ended, then paused outside the doors to the Hall of Fire, holding Frodo between us. He went on slumbering soundly: despite their enjoyment of it, Elven entertainment seemed to have a strong soporific effect on the halflings.

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

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

'Carry him. Safely I mean.'

'Oh. Well of course I can,' I reassured her in my most responsible tone. I looked 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, dark for an Elf yet sparkling. 'It's quite a ways to his room. There are some stairs to go up.'

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

She smiled, 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 more turnings and another corridor, then up a high staircase. It was all much harder than I'd expected, what with the floor always swaying under me, and 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 climb them, during which task I glimpsed things inside Horneth's well-cut dress that distracted me badly, not to mention below it where a good deal of shapely leg was exposed and demanding attention.

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

'Yes,' I admitted, panting, no doubt from exertion. 'It's very revealing.'

She giggled like a girl at that, and gave my arms a small squeeze.

Then all at once we were standing outside Frodo's door. Using our feet we managed to push through it into his room. Which is one of our best: vaulted ceiling, carved wooden decor everywhere, and a fine bed with a grand headboard bearing the figure of Este the Vala of rest and healing. I briefly lifted up the Hobbit on my own while Horneth turned down the bed's silk-covered duvet, then I laid him atop the soft feather pillows. Frodo looked both peaceful and a bit funny, lying there snoozing in his calf-length trousers with those big furry feet sticking out.

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

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

With one arm Horneth abruptly pulled me through the doorway, while with the other she closed the door behind, shutting us out of Frodo's room. My initial reaction was shock, followed immediately by anger, but before I could protest she was pressing herself against me and kissing me firmly on the lips. What was this

then?

I put my hands on her hips, intending to push her away roughly. Only she was doing something with her tongue now, alarming at first yet soon it was feeling rather nice. Though I was very eager to get hold of the lovely Ring, I saw no harm in indulging Horneth's weird whims for a moment or two. Investigating a bit, just out of interest, I learned that her hips were not really suited for pushing away, being wonderfully shapely and good to grip.

I then tried that tongue thing myself, purely as an experiment. She answered this so avidly that within seconds our bodies were locked together in a most intimate embrace. Her palpable passion struck a spark within me too, 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 was forced to surface from time to time, gasping for air.

During one of those brief respites I was surprised to hear a faint mewling noise. This sounded as if a distant voice were 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 still needed my help. And it struck me that, as well as things were going now with Horneth, they would doubtless 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 my loose hand then thrust it inside her dress, where despite the tight fit it found some intriguing, yet-unmapped areas. Reconnoitring further, I discovered parts that were delectably round and ripe like fresh fruit. A long-neglected hunger had awoken within me and was waxing fast. In my overpowering fervour I now pinned Horneth to the wall 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. But even in the midst of that I thought with a sharp pang: what of Arwen? Wasn't it wrong of me to be doing these things with someone other than my dearly beloved? Yet how could this be wrong when it felt so very right? And anyway, I knew in my heart, Arwen herself might well be entertaining that Man this instant, on the eve of his leaving on the deadly mission to Mordor. Therefore I cast off my doubts and

applied myself to the task in hand with a renewed will.

I was now delving deep underneath Horneth's dress, which scanty though it was had become a serious obstacle to my explorations. So I tried pulling it up, and found that it peeled away easily, exposing exciting new domains for study. She in turn began attacking the fastenings of my clothes and recklessly tearing them off. By now I was afire with desire for her: my whole being burned with it. In a small corner of my consciousness I was aware that my opportunity to seize the Ring was swiftly fading. But at that moment the golden One seemed so distant and cold compared to the living warmth I had there in my arms. I told myself that the pretty thing might still be there later, tomorrow, whenever — any time but now, when something infinitely more urgent was happening.

Even as we both kept shedding garments, Horneth was trying to coax me down the hall, aiming for her own room I think. 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 noise.

* * *

At dusk yesterday the Company of the Ring finally departed Rivendell. They went under cover of night, secretly, in order to avoid the prying eyes of the Enemy. It was a cheerless 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 had 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 from the windows and through the open front doors glowed softly into the gathering shadows. Elrond was giving the Company some last sage advice, such as not to throw or give away the Ring during their journey. It's a weakness I've noticed in the wise, that they often waste words saying the most obvious things to us lesser folk.

Still, the nine listened patiently enough on the whole, while making final adjustments to their shouldered packs and heavy fur-lined clothes. Spare gear had been loaded onto a stout pony, who with his swishing tail seemed the only happy one there, yet most items each walker would have to bear himself on the long and

arduous trek.

They all wore swords, except Gimli with an axe and Legolas a bow and long knife. Frodo carried Sting, which Bilbo had generously gifted him. Broken old Narsil had been prettily reforged then given by Aragorn a new name, Flame something-or-other. But as that blade is actually of ancient Dwarf make, I'm not sure how good a job our current Elven-smiths did 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 listening to Elrond with the rest of them. Horneth stood nearby, and we shyly 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 so in keeping with the weather.

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

Others of the household spoke their own soft good-byes from the shadows. Yet there were none of the normal Elvish farewell songs, no sign of joy or laughter.

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

I was filled with foreboding. Out there nine motley companions were striding into the night, making their way toward Mordor, attempting to carry out a plan so foolish that Sauron would not dream of it. Yet on their quest hung all our hopes. Those lonely walkers were I felt like a handful of pebbles, set rolling down a steep mountainside, whose passage would unsettle and unleash ever greater rocks and boulders, triggering an awful, overwhelming avalanche. But who would be buried by it?

All I knew for certain was that, whatever happened, I would 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 are caught up in things much larger 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 larger

than me.'

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

May 1, 3019: It was a day in early spring, a day much like any other in Rivendell, as we went about our usual business. Until suddenly the world changed. We all felt it — in the water, the earth, the air — as a subtle difference in the fabric of things. But what?

A mass meeting was called, so we gathered in the dining hall, many hundreds of Elves, waiting and wondering and whispering. Then Elrond rose and without preamble announced: 'The realm of Sauron is ended! The Ring-bearer has fulfilled his quest.' His words met with stunned silence. We had all spent our long lives under a perpetual shadow of fear, and couldn't comprehend at first that it was past. But as the fact of Sauron's downfall slowly sank in there were cries of joy, and tears of relief, and much embracing.

I just thought: so that crazy bastard is finally gone. Then grasped with a sudden ache that the lovely Ring was too.

After allowing a bit of jubilating, Elrond explained how he came to know the news. For millennia, he dramatically revealed, he'd been secretly wielding a Ring of Power, which he'd used to protect and preserve Rivendell. It had also enabled him to perceive the ruin of the One Ring that day. With a flourish he thrust his hand high, flaunting a band of gold set with a sapphire: Vilya, greatest of the Elven Rings. At which we all expressed appropriate surprise, and applauded politely. Then set in motion the biggest celebration our homely house had ever seen.

It was some time before further details of events reached us: the Enemy's unexpected defeat in a huge battle at Minas Tirith, a subsequent march against Mordor by the victorious host, then that same army's nick-of-time delivery from destruction at the gates of the Black Land when Frodo reached Mount Doom and the Ring went into the fire. Amazingly, the four Hobbits had survived their travails, as had all the rest of the Company except for brave Boromir. Well, Gandalf did apparently die at one point, but then somehow returned alive, only clad now in white — a bad colour for him as it's so hard to keep clean. Oh: and Aragorn the heroic war leader, whose shiny sword remained unbroken, would be crowned High King of the Reunited Kingdom of Arnor and Gondor. In other words it was just the sort of unlikely outcome you'd expect in 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 and personified evil but only the dull everyday kind. It will be the time of the dominion of Men, who it is said will inherit the earth, probably because they

breed like rabbits.

As part of this new order, Elrond departed this morning for Minas Tirith, accompanied by all the important people of our household and bearing the Sceptre of Annuminas. Aragorn is due to be crowned today, and is therefore now officially worthy of Arwen's hand in marriage, plus that other trophy too. So the Lord of Rivendell is escorting his only begotten daughter there in order to sacrifice her at the altar of Man, instead of cutting out the heart of the glorious new King as he'd no doubt prefer. One thing you can say for Elrond: he keeps his bets.

It was a bitter pill for me to swallow as well; I couldn't bear to watch them go. Luckily Horneth was here to help me — and I her, for her own heart is heavy over Aragorn. We two 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 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 obvious: when the Great Ring was unmade, the power of his Elven Ring also failed. He'd been using it to keep 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 influence the very elements here for our benefit.

This was the difference we felt that 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 is not 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 eternally in the company of his own kind, and be reunited with his wife in conjugal bliss, and do whatever else people do all day in paradise. I've heard it described as a brighter, more intense, somehow truer version of our world. Like a pipeweed-induced reverie I suppose, but without the smoke or side-effects.

Whereas those who remain are doomed to diminish, and will

dwindle in time 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 accomplishments it now is. Perhaps it can instead serve posterity as a sort of historical reserve or park, with the special theme of Elves. The younger races can come gawk at the decaying ruins of our former realm, and carve their initials in the timbers, and maybe even glimpse one or two of the Firstborn flitting furtively in 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 regardless. Not for me the bright lights of the Blessed Realm: these bones were born of Middle-earth. I am made to its measure, and even if this world's beauties cannot match those of the promised land, they are sufficient to me. I will live and die by them.

A few others will be lingering here too. Horneth, Lomdir and Costor have 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 Kingdom of Arnor.

Alternatively we might make this a spa, where mortal folk weary of the world would come to rest and recover before returning to the fray. They could soak up our homely house's unique Elven atmosphere, and 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, with maybe a little comedy as well, 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 fact it occurs to me that the way it's always been run isn't unlike our own plans for the place, except that until now no one has ever

paid to stay. How did Elrond make ends meet? Unless that was part of the magic too.

His sons are another possible problem. Elladan and Elrohir will we guess not be following him to the Blessed Realm, since in paradise there are no Orcs to slaughter, so their 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 divine right. And if they don't like it they can try finding their own supplies, and making and serving 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 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 finally 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 becoming wiser now. But I think, no — happier maybe. Unless wisdom consists of having to learn the same lessons over and over again. Yet perhaps, given long enough, I'll actually stop missing my former faith and its comely icon, and might even wonder that 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 caught and ground up in its great gears, leaving not so much as a footnote on the long pages of events.

We small and weak 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, sleeping peacefully after a long and difficult day. Her face may not be the fairest of all but is beautiful nonetheless, and always good to see. Her embrace fills me with warm well-being. I find I no longer mind the occasional scent of sewage about her, from the job she does, for I know it's simply one of the smells of life. In short, I believe it's better to have someone real instead of

a fantasy.

Today we worked together in the afternoon as she initiated me into the deeper mysteries of waste management. I'm assisting while her colleagues are away with Elrond, digging field latrines for his large company on its way to 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, although it's really quite a shock after thousands of years spent keeping things clean.

But that doesn't matter. What matters, as I gaze down at the good woman lying 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 still can. First thing tomorrow morning we have a fresh batch of sludge to stir.

Dull But Necessary Disclaimer:

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It was intended only as a confection and then got out of hand. In general I referred to the books but also borrowed a bit from the films. I strove for strict accuracy except when the facts were inconvenient. If you enjoyed this then go read again the great originals that inspired it.

About 'Rolf Luchs':

The author is a man who loves women, cats and ice cream. He lives, mostly happily, in a beautiful corner of the world. His privacy is precious to him.