

Twice Blessed

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Part Three

Chapter V

Hard unkindness mocks the tear it forced to flow.

It should not have come as quite so great a surprise to Olórin when he saw the Maia who had once been a handmaid of Varda here in the house of Nienna, for he had known that the punishment for cruelty that had been leveled against Aránayel ages before had been expulsion from the service of the Vala King and Queen. He even knew that she had been instructed to serve both Nienna and her brother Námo, as service was needed, but in all the years he had come to Nienna's house as both a student and a friend, never had he crossed paths with Aránayel, whom he had loved in youthful foolishness and who had mercilessly broken his heart. He had once supposed that their failure to meet again was not a coincidence, that Nienna in particular made certain she was never about when Olórin visited, and now, the mixed emotions that stirred upon the very sight of her disturbed him. He had forgiven Aránayel long ago, and that was no lie; thus he had expected that when they did inevitably meet again, he would be able to accept it with calm and complete detachment.

It was rather disturbing to find that he did not.

He did, however, manage to react outwardly in the fashion he intended. The smile that had frozen at the sight of her finally manifested, with genuine sincerity. He was not angered by her presence, nor did he continue to feel upset over what had happened between them so long ago, yet for a moment, he felt as if time had leapt back to the instant in which he had first beheld her. Much had changed, it was true, especially in the wizard himself, but the memory was as sharp and clear — and unexpected — as it had been on the day they had met. He made a conscious effort to bring his thoughts back to the here and now, so that he might respond properly. He bowed slightly but graciously.

"It is an unexpected pleasure to see you again, Aránayel," he said in greeting, confident that his words were also not a lie, or an exaggeration. "It has been far too long since last we met."

She did not return his polite gestures. "Long enough," was all she said in answer.

That terse response answered several questions Olórin had been pondering, the strongest of which was whether or not Aránayel had been aware of his involvement in the matter concerning the twins. Her demeanor said that she had, though the news had come but recently, and had not been received with much liking. Well, he had more than half-expected that when it came, his meeting with Aránayel would not be entirely pleasant; that he had been right made him all the more determined not to lower himself to the same level of impoliteness, though he had to wonder at Nienna's choice.

His glance flicked toward the Vala, who did not so much as blink under his questioning gaze. "Aránayel has been aiding Helyanwë in tutoring the children, since they regained their voices," she said. "She has assisted many who have come forth from the Halls of Waiting during the years of her service here, and her skills have been of great use in helping the twins. Since she has been as eager as they to be away from this cold part of Aman, I thought it a logical assignment to send her with them. They will all have their wish to leave my house fulfilled, and the young ones will be able to continue their tutelage with her, sparing you that portion of their care."

Aránayel did not react in the least to Nienna's blunt comment about her desire to leave this bleak region, but the twins had the grace to wince and flush at her words. The Lady smiled at them before they had a chance to protest with some feeble half-truth. "I have been mindful of your feelings, my little friends," she told them, sympathetically, "and had I been able to find a better place for you, I would have sent you there much sooner. But in the end, I think you need to be with your blood kin, and it would have been more unkind to send you off to complete strangers, who might not have the proper compassion for what you have suffered. So long as Olórin is willing to allow you into his house, I shall have no fear for your well-being."

"But couldn't Helyanwë come, too?" Melui asked, her tone such that it was plain she would rather have asked if Aránayel might stay behind.

Nienna shook her head, still smiling softly. "I'm afraid not. I have no one else to send who might carry out my errands in Alqualondë as well as she. If it is any consolation to you, she would have gladly gone with you to Lórien. She may yet join you there, if her work goes well, but for now, you shall have the pleasure of Aránayel's company on your journey. She came to help you prepare for it, so the sooner you begin that task, the sooner you will be able to leave."

From the face Lére made as his eyes slipped toward her, he did not consider Aránayel's company any kind of pleasure. He began to say something, but his sister nudged him to still it, knowing his thought all too well. "Thank you, Lady Nienna," he said instead, dragging his feet with a very unElven lack of grace as they followed their tutor into the house.

Aránayel said nothing, not even sparing Olórin the coolest of glances as she passed by. He watched them go, making no mention of her demeanor until the doors were closed behind them. Even then, he said nothing for a very long moment, weighing his own reactions and whether he should say anything at all. At length, when Nienna did not depart, he removed his gaze from the closed portal to regard her instead. She also said nothing for several moments, then smiled crookedly.

“I do not need to read your thoughts, Olórin, to interpret that expression,” she chuckled. “Did you not say only a short time ago that I have never given you advice that was not to your benefit?”

His nose twitched. “I may need to reconsider that, in light of what has just occurred. My lady, I know you would do nothing to deliberately harm me, and it is true that I have long since put the matter of my youthful relationship — or lack thereof — with Aránayel behind me. I harbor no anger toward her for what she did, nor do I object to her presence, if she has indeed been tutoring these children. I would never have expected her to be capable of such patience, and that she has won even a measure of it speaks well for how she grown during the years since we last met. But might you not have at least given me some small warning that it was she you had in mind to lend assistance? When last I saw her, it was to flee from her rejection and her mocking laughter. Seeing her again so abruptly woke those memories more strongly than I had anticipated, and I might have been better prepared had you at least warned me that this would be the day on which I would at last see her again.”

Nienna’s smile softened to one of sympathy. “I know,” she said simply, “and if you were too unpleasantly surprised, then I ask your forgiveness. But though forewarning might have allowed you to prepare for the event, there is sometimes truth to be found in the unexpected that can be of greater benefit. You had not imagined your reaction to this meeting, had you?”

The wizard was silent for a time before he shook his head. “No. Truthfully, I had thought that when next I saw her, I would feel nothing for Aránayel, save pity. Yet there was more to it than that, though I cannot tell you precisely what. This will require greater examination before I can fully understand it. But if I am to help Melui and Lére, is this the proper time for such a distraction?”

“I believe so. There are many persons who have been a part of your life who are now in need of help that is long overdue — yourself included. Months ago, I did not assign the task of tutoring the children to Aránayel with the expectation that you would eventually become involved in their difficulties, yet I deem that my choice was most fortuitous. One cannot untangle a net by straightening only one or two strands around the knots; the whole must be dealt with, so that it can function freely once again.”

Olórin nodded, understanding. “And Aránayel is beyond doubt one of the largest knots in my life that has been left untended for far too long. I see your point, my lady, and I will try to make the most of this situation, to learn from it what I may.”

His eyes slipped back to the doors through which Aránayel and the children had left. He sighed. “But this time, I fear you may have at last devised a lesson too difficult for me to master.”

As it was not possible for the twins to journey from Nienna’s house to Lórien in the way of the Ainur, the preparation took the remainder of the day, and it was decided long before its end that they would depart in the morning. Helyanwë was relieved by this decision, since she wanted some time to

spend with the children before going off on her own mission, and she was determined to make certain nothing they would need was forgotten. Olórin was somewhat less pleased by the situation, not because he was impatient, but because the delay gave him too much time to ponder what might turn out to be a rather unpleasant ride back to Lórien. Fortunately, it did not take long for him to realize the folly of dwelling upon it, and rather than brood or wander about, he decided to begin getting used to the situation by not avoiding it. After he had been informed of their plans and had had more than enough time to contemplate the near future, he went to offer his assistance to those making the preparations.

When he arrived in the twins' quarters, where they and Aránayel and Helyanwë were at work, he had done no more than utter the words, "Is there aught I can do to help?" before he realized his mistake. Aránayel, bent over a chest while folding the children's clothing to be packed, heard him speak and stopped what she was doing. She stood straight, like a pillar of stone in the Dwarrowdelf, her posture making her seem far taller than the Istar, who was already the shorter of the two. She favored him with a glare as cold and sharp as the edge of a newly honed steel blade in the frozen wastes, her air of disapproval strong enough to taste. Though he hid his reaction well, he regretted his failure to consider his words before offering them, for it had been such innocent requests — spoken in thoughtless generosity and taken with heartless selfishness — that had entangled their lives so long ago, and ultimately led to bitter unhappiness for both. Olórin wished he could snatch back the words, but once spoken, the damage was done. Aránayel took a breath to speak, and he prepared himself to receive her scorn, but before she had more than stood straight and moved her lips, Helyanwë interrupted.

"Indeed there is," she said with such sunny cheer, the wizard knew she was deliberately attempting to counter Aránayel's iciness. "Lére and Melui are both excellent riders, and they will do well on your journey to Lórien, but as I have heard you learned a great deal about horsemanship during your recent sojourn in Middle-earth, I think it would be wise if we made use of your expertise in selecting the beasts from Lady Nienna's stables. There are none of Lord Oromë's people in this house, at the moment, and your knowledge would greatly appreciated."

Though she did not seem at all deceived by Helyanwë's tactics, Aránayel remained silent. She returned to her tasks, though not before she gave Olórin another frosty glance, her nose wrinkling in distaste that might have been caused by either his words, Helyanwë's interruption, or both. The twins, fortunately, were involved in selecting which things to take with them, and did not notice what had happened. Before they could, Helyanwë gestured for Olórin to follow her to the stables, and they were gone.

"I don't believe I have made so incredibly foolish a mistake in at least ten thousand years," the wizard muttered softly once they were well beyond the keenest earshot, headed for the stables.

Helyanwë's soft smile was compassionate. "It has been longer than that since you last saw Aránayel," she pointed out. "I have worked with her now and again for far shorter a time, and already I know that once out of her presence, one tends to quickly forget her abrasive nature. Do not fret over this, Olórin. If it was an error, it was opportune, for I wished to have a chance to speak with you before I must depart, and I had feared there would not be time."

He let loose his breath in a remorseful sigh. "Then I will let it go, and try not to think of it again. I had thought you might wish to instruct me about the children's care...."

But the silver-haired head shook. "No, I have no concern for your abilities in that regard, especially not after seeing how you spoke with them in the garden. What your mind does not yet perceive about caring for young ones, your heart already knows, and knows well indeed. It is Aránayel of whom I wished to speak."

Sadness dimmed Olórin's face. "There would not appear to be much left to be said on that account," he admitted. "I harbor no ill will toward her, truly, and any hurt she may have caused me in the past has long since been forgiven, for she acted after her own nature even as I did. Yet it would seem that for all the years since last we met, we remain very much the same. She has no feeling for me, and I cannot seem to stop myself from foolishly offering her my help even when I know that it was the cause of the problems between us. She took what I offered out of convenience, not love, and I misinterpreted her acceptance as a reflection of my own infatuation. I do know better now, Helyanwë, and you may rest assured that having slipped once, I will try my best to not slip again."

Her smile brightening, she took the nearer of his arms and lightly wrapped her fingers about it in a gesture of affectionate support. "I am pleased to hear that you are wise enough not to say that you will *never* slip again!"

He snorted softly, one corner of his mouth lifting with humor. "Well, even the greatest of the Wise do not know all ends, and as I am far from the greatest, I at least know myself well enough to realize that with even the best of intentions, I still make mistakes. With some effort, I hope they will be few, and of little consequence."

"As do I. You have grown a great deal since first you came to Nienna's house, my old friend, far more than anyone had anticipated, even the Lady. Your pride has not grown along with your knowledge and understanding, and I think that will help you greatly in the days to come. For Aránayel has changed as well, but not, I fear, in the same ways. She has learned new skills, how to be of assistance to a different master and mistress than those she knew in Ilmarin, how to aid those who are newly come from the Halls of Waiting, how to guide those who are bound for them to their destination. Yet she thinks little of these tasks, and what regret she bears is for the life she once knew as a handmaid of the Queen and a servant of the Lord of the Winds. She yearns for the notice and acclaim of others, as ever she did, but even when she is praised by our mistress for jobs well done, she scorns it as being nothing beside the honor she had as a servant of Manwë. And for that loss, she blames you."

"Which comes as no surprise to me," Olórin said, not without regret. "It was never her nature to accept responsibility when that meant admitting fault. Yet has she heard nothing of how I reacted to her rejection of me? Never once did I blame her for it. It was my error that led me to believe she might return my feelings, and my foolishness that prompted me to reveal them to her when I had been warned and knew well that she would not. It was my mistake, not hers, and though she might have treated me with greater kindness, I do not harbor any resentment toward her for what happened. I have never

attempted to hide these truths, and since they were a ripe source for gossip among our people for many years, I cannot believe she is unaware of them.”

“She is not,” Helyanwë confirmed. “She knows only too well that you have spoken not a single ill word against her — and because she spoke so many against you, she believes you are deliberately concealing your true feelings so as to be avenged, leaving her to appear the heartless villain and yourself the unjustly wounded but noble victim.”

The sound the wizard made was a cross between a snort of disbelief and a laugh. “If such a picture has been painted by idle talk and speculation, I was not the one who wielded the brush. Truth speaks for itself; it does not need my help to be made clear. If doing nothing against her is a crime, then I freely admit, I am guilty. But has she not made *any* attempt to let go of the past and allow it to fade?”

Helyanwë favored him with a sidelong glance. “Have *you*?”

He answered first with a droll expression. “You know the answer to that; you have already said as much. Of course I have. If I had not, I would doubtless still be trapped in a miserable existence of doubt and self-recrimination. I do regret what happened between myself and Aránayel, for no one takes delight in such unhappy experiences, but in ways, I am also grateful for it. I would still be the same naive person I was in my youth if not for all that came about as a result of that hurt. I have not forgotten the lessons I learned, and I never shall, but I *have* let go of the pain and unhappiness. If I am hesitant to embark on this endeavor with Aránayel, it is because I do not know her feelings on the matter, and from what little I have seen thus far, I fear she is not at all in favor of it.”

His companion acknowledged it with a sigh. “You are right, alas. If there is any way in which she looks at this assignment in a positive light, it is in the fact that by accepting it, she will at last be able to leave this desolate part of Aman and return to the more sociable areas she has missed. If it must be borne, she looks upon your company as a necessary evil. She has nurtured her hatred of you for more than three ages, Olórin, and it burns hot within her. If you look to achieve some kind of reconciliation with her through this joint venture, you will be disappointed.”

“I had no such plan,” he assured her. “Yet it seems strange to me that Lady Nienna would have chosen her for this task if there was naught to be gained from it, for either of us.”

“I have thought the same thing. My Lady does not make such choices lightly, for her understanding of us is often greater than we know, but I cannot see any purpose behind her selection of Aránayel. She is not the only one of the Lady’s servants who has tutored the twins these past months, and though she carries out her duties with them quite well, any of the others are as competent, and are better liked by the children than she. All I can imagine is that mayhap this is a test for Aránayel, to see how she fares away from the immediate attention of those she serves.”

Olórin considered this possibility as they came to the outer door nearest the stables where the steeds used by Nienna's servants and the visitors were sheltered. "Has she never been free from service since she was sent into the keeping of Lord Námo and Lady Nienna?"

"Very seldom," Helyanwë replied, "and even then, always with others in attendance. It seems a stern punishment, I agree," she added when the Istar's eyes widened in shock, "but it is not unwarranted. You know that she was first sent to serve Lord Námo in the Halls of Waiting. She chafed in such isolated conditions, and was quite bitter to have been deprived of not only her status as a servant of Lord Manwë, but also of the attention she was used to receiving from her many admirers in more openly active and populous regions."

"I am aware of that," the wizard said, following his companion across the open stretch of stony pasture between the guest house and the stables. "Aránayel always craved the companionship and admiration of others. I would not have erred so badly in judging her heart, had it been otherwise."

"So I have long suspected. But I think you do not know what occurred not long after you were sent into Lady Nienna's care, and Aránayel was banished from Ilmarin. Several months after she came to Mandos, there was a time of festival in Valmar, and she asked if she might be permitted to go, even though she was still in Lord Manwë's disfavor. As she had carried out her tasks to Lord Námo's satisfaction, he allowed it."

He nodded, remembering the time. "She had always enjoyed such gatherings, but as I recall, that was one I did not attend. Lady Nienna had decided to remain at home during that feast, and I was so involved in the studies I had just begun with her, I did not even realize there had been such an event until it was over. I doubt I would have been interested in participating, even had I known."

"I believe Lord Námo knew this, and that it was a part of why he was willing to allow Aránayel to go. Yet even he had misjudged her. She met many of her friends and admirers in Valmar, and she apparently had been greatly concerned that her standing among them had been seriously tarnished by her expulsion from Ilmarin. So she did all she could to make certain she appeared totally blameless. They had, of course, heard what tales had been spread by those who had been in the halls atop Taniquetil when she had been summoned by Lord Manwë to account for what she had done to you, and she concocted many elaborate tales of things you had supposedly done which completely justified her treatment of you. By her accounts, Lord Manwë punished her to cover your guilt, shifting the blame from you to her when she was, of course, completely innocent of even the slightest wrongdoing."

Helyanwë's scowl held dark shadows of outrage toward such injustice. "Her claims were utterly despicable. Few believed them at all; many more rejected them outright, seeing them for the falsehoods they were. Even then, you were well known among all our people, for your generosity and humility, if naught else. What she said you had done during the times you worked together were so clearly lies to any who knew of you even casually, long before the end of the day, the game she was playing came to the attention of those she would not have chosen to hear of it. Before Lord Manwë discovered it, it came to Lady Varda's ears, and she herself rose to your defense. She took Aránayel aside to deal with

her quietly, for she did not wish her husband's anger to be kindled once again. Yet it could not be done privately enough for Aránayel's liking, and it was Lady Varda's command that she not be permitted the freedom to attend any such gatherings unsupervised until she had learned to hold her lying tongue and show greater respect toward those who had never done her harm. Lady Nienna took up the task of making the decision as to Aránayel's progress in these matters, and sadly, though she has seen some small improvements in her, the Lady has not yet seen enough to declare that she has met Lady Varda's requirements. Indeed, the incident did little but give Aránayel further cause to despise you, even though it was her own deceit and no doing of yours that brought about this added punishment."

Olórin groaned, sounding almost like the hinges on the stable door as he opened it. "I cannot imagine she would have reacted otherwise! Lady Varda's defense may have been well meant, but there are some things it is best to simply ignore — and I have long since realized that Aránayel's temper is one of them. How is it I never heard of this? Such incidents at festivals often become common knowledge all through Aman before the end of the day. And yet I have heard not even one word of this in thousands of years!"

"Through very diligent effort on the part of those who consider you their friend," Helyanwë said graciously as they entered the building, which was currently lit by slanting rays of the late afternoon sun. "The lies she spoke that day were unconscionably cruel and unwarranted, and none who heard them and knew them for what they were could bear repeating them. She had already hurt you more than you could have possibly deserved, no matter what errors in judgement you might have made. As much as Lady Varda did not wish for Lord Manwë to hear of it, we of the Maiar wanted to be certain you heard nothing as well. Can you tell me that if such lies and terrible accusations had reached you then, you would not have been wounded by them?"

For a moment, he was silent; then he shook his head. "No. I would be dishonest if I said otherwise. As I was then, I doubt that I could have borne yet another humiliation from Aránayel's lips. What I cannot understand is how it has managed to remain secret for so very long."

Helyanwë smiled impishly. "For the same reasons, I suspect, that your friend Ványalos reacted with such trepidation when we finally met face to face, yesterday. You may not be the greatest and most powerful of our people, Olórin, but I think it is not unfair to say that you may well be the most loved, perhaps because you have become the wisest of us. As you care for others, others care for you — save those like Aránayel, and even among them, you have in time made many friends of those who were once your enemies. As Ványalos will defend you for the sake of your friendship, so would I. Back then, even those of us who did not know you well could see the unfairness of her deceits, and though it was not actually discussed, it was somehow agreed among us that we would not let you be hurt by her words, then or ever again. You did not hear of it because we chose to never discuss it. But what you did not know, we did, and after a time, it required no effort to keep the knowledge to ourselves. There was no danger that Aránayel would tell you herself; even if you had happened to meet by chance, after that incident, she blamed you all the more for her unhappiness and would not have spoken to you unless commanded to do so by one of the Valar."

“That would explain her terseness in the garden. With Lady Nienna standing beside her, she doubtless felt constrained to answer me, however briefly, so as not to prompt the Lady to change her mind and force her to remain here where she does not wish to be.”

“No doubt.” Helyanwë stopped before they reached the stalls in which the horses were currently feeding, then turned so that she could look at him directly as she spoke. “Olórin, I do not think you truly understand how much Aránayel has come to despise you,” she said intently, lightly settling her hands upon his shoulders. “I do not know what she might do once you have gone beyond Lady Nienna’s lands, but I beg you, be careful. I have felt the depths of her hatred toward you, and it chills me to the very heart. If she cannot be free again, as she was before you spoke to her of a love she would not return, she may well try to find her revenge by doing what she can to be certain you will never again know joyful freedom, either. I know not how she would attempt to accomplish this, but somehow, she will try.”

“Then she will fail,” he said simply, no trace of doubt in his voice. “She cannot harm me any longer, not in my heart or my spirit or even in this incarnate veil. I felt the strength of her spite the moment I set eyes upon her in the garden, and powerful as it may be, it is naught compared to that which I have endured from Melkor and Sauron and Curumo. I was never put to a direct trial of strength with either Melkor or his lieutenant, but Curumo I faced, and I survived.”

“For which I am glad, but he was fettered and she is not.”

“True, but I was also fettered then, and am no longer.”

“Yet you may be fettered still. You have never loved Curumo as you once loved her.”

He conceded the point. “Quite so, but it is far from the same. I know my peril in regards to Aránayel, and I promise you, my dear friend, that I shall not close my eyes to it. There is more at stake here than my own safety, for where’er we go there will be the children and at length other friends whose well-being is very much my concern. For their sake if not my own, I will be cautious.”

“Then promise me that as soon as you reach your home, you will make certain others keep watch over her when you cannot.”

A small smile flickered across Olórin’s face, which brightened as a beam of sunlight broke through the clouds, pierced a nearby window, and fell upon him. “I did not know you cared so deeply for my safety, Helyanwë. Did Ványalos lay his finger upon some part of the truth when once he teased me about the notion that there might be more to our relationship than I could see?”

She smiled back, but again shook her head, gently. “Not in the way he described it. I have loved you as a good friend for many years, but in the way of spouses... no. I do not think you were meant for that kind of life, Olórin. You care so much for so many that I cannot imagine you are capable of limiting any portion of your heart to the love of but one person, save Lord Eru.”

His smile twitched with wryly amused concession. “You are right — and in that, you know me better than I knew myself in my foolish youth. I saw the devotion between Lord Manwë and Lady Varda, and it seemed so wondrous a thing to me, I felt that this was something I wished to experience for myself, the bond between mates of the heart. I suspect I imagined it existed between myself and Aránayel because I read in her constant acceptance of my help things that simply were not there, but that I *wished* would be there. And now, though I have many friends who are as dear to me as closest kin, I have learned to love all of Lord Eru’s children, both of thought and flesh, far too much to devote myself to one alone in the ways that spouses must be dedicated to one another. I have long since realized that one state is not superior to the other; they are merely different, and each of us is suited to the kind of life that best serves our purpose in Lord Eru’s thought.”

“Just so. I am not yet so certain what sort of life was meant for me, but for now, I am content, and I know that the bond between us is that of friendship only. Yet I care deeply for your welfare because I would see no friend of mine come to harm of any sort, and you have suffered far more kinds of hurt than I could have imagined during these past two thousand years alone. I do not need to love you as I would a mate to wish you would remain safe, and avoid new injuries. If a warning spoken now will help you do so, then I would be a faithless friend if I remained silent. Would you have me do that, simply to prove that Ványalos’ taunts were indeed ill-chosen?”

He chuckled. “Not at all, and I am grateful. For all that I have learned during my time in Arda, my knowledge about Aránayel and how her life has fared since last we parted is meager. I have heard bits of news now and again, mostly that she remained in the service of either Nienna or Námo, with few details. What you have just told me may indeed be of great use. I am capable of protecting myself, but should she choose to hurt me by turning her anger on others who are not as skilled, knowing her mood and that she might make such an attempt could be very much to my benefit, and theirs. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say in Middle-earth. I will be careful, Helyanwë, I promise.”

She briefly closed her eyes and made a sound of relief. “Then I will cease worrying. I will admit, I feared for the children, but so long as you are aware of what dangers they and you might face, I know all of you will be safe. Come now, I will show you the Lady’s steeds and tell you of their natures and habits, and perhaps then you can tell me which of them seem best suited for the seven day journey to Lórien. Their usual caretaker is on a journey for Lord Oromë at the moment, and though we know well enough how to see to their daily needs, none of us who serve Lady Nienna are skilled in understanding the language of the *kelvar*. I saw the horse on which you arrived in Valmar on the day of your return from Endor, and never have I beheld a more noble beast. I have heard that Lord Oromë covets him, though he is much too polite to mention it to you. But do not be overly surprised if some day, he comes to visit unexpectedly, for he very much desires at least an opportunity to ride this lovely creature.”

Olórin laughed, aware that Helyanwë was making idle small talk to lighten the mood. “You seem to know almost as much news of the small things that happen throughout Aman as Ványalos. This is not an insult! Impudent though he may be, his mind is quick, and he misses little. Lord Oromë is welcome to visit my home whenever he wishes, but I cannot promise him that Shadowfax will cooperate in allowing him to ride. He has ever been quite stubborn in that respect, and at the moment, even I am

not in his good graces. In my relief over being restored to health and strength, I fear I made more use of my own abilities to travel swiftly, and did not pause to consider that Shadowfax might regard this as an insult, ignoring him far more than I ought. He is an intelligent and sensitive creature, and I do not care to think how he will take it when I return home on some other steed. I suspect I shall have to find new ways to soothe his irritation and repair our friendship.”

Helyanwë chuckled as she led him to the open stalls. “By then, I have no doubt at all that you will manage to console him. I am certain seven days in the company of Aránayel will teach you ways to deal with another’s ill temper that you have never imagined.”

Chapter VI

*I have loved badly, loved the great
Too soon, withdrawn my words too late;
And eaten in an echoing hall
Alone and from a chipped plate
The words that I withdrew too late.*

Although meals were not necessary for the Ainur, they were for their young Elven guests, and sensitive to their feelings and Helyanwë's, Nienna planned a farewell meal for that evening. The others who had taken part in caring for the twins during their stay in her house had been invited as well, as had Olórin, and he made the most of the time not only to observe the children and come to know them better, but also to watch Aránayel and glean what he could of her current moods and habits that might be of use in dealing with her during the coming weeks. He had no notion at all how long she and the children might remain in Lórien, and because of that, he had sent word to Frodo through Ványalos, warning the halfling of the guests who would be returning with him so that he could prepare in whatever ways he deemed necessary. He had considered going directly back to Lórien to deliver the message, since such a journey was no hindrance to him now that his strength had returned, but it had been less than a day since his departure, and he knew that Frodo did indeed wish to have some time without him always about, to become better settled into the new life he had chosen. If he appeared abruptly on the same evening of the day he had left, it might look as if he was checking on Frodo's progress, and even though Olórin was certain the impression would pass quickly in light of the truth, he saw no need to startle his small friend when it was not necessary. If Frodo had questions or concerns that Ványalos could not answer, then the wizard would return home, but so long as his presence was neither required nor requested, he decided this was the best approach.

Since he received no frantic response to his message, the Istar did his best to enjoy the evening meal. He knew all the other Maiar who were in attendance, and having a chance to converse with them and the children was quite pleasant. Aránayel was notably quiet, speaking only in answer to direct questions and then briefly. Olórin was not foolish enough to try to engage in her in even the lightest conversation, but he noted quickly that her manner was unusually reserved. Clearly, she was trying her best to avoid doing anything that might result in her assignment being revoked, thus forcing her to remain here in the desolate wilds of the western shores. He respected her attempts at self-restraint, and did not interfere with them.

Yet as the meal continued, he became aware that she was not entirely ignoring him. Subliminally at first, he sensed that she was watching him from time to time. Knowing what he did of her, he carefully looked elsewhere whenever she glanced toward him, lest she take offense or feel embarrassed by having her notice be noted. It was clear to him that there was no real warmth in her regard, but the fact that she was bothering to look at him at all made him wonder what purpose might lie behind it. That she was having a change of heart was a notion that he dismissed as quickly as the thought arose. He had spoken the truth to Helyanwë: Aránayel remained what she was, even as he did in heart. There was no reason whatsoever for her feelings toward him to alter in a positive direction; at best, she might

be searching for some way to endure his presence during this coming assignment so that she could prove that she had changed, and had at last earned the right to resume a lifestyle she preferred.

After the meal was over, the children asked if they might present a song or two for the friends they would be leaving behind, the only gift they had to give. Nienna graciously granted it, though she knew it as a youthful ploy to delay going to their rest for the evening. Mature Elves needed remarkably little sleep, but their young required it almost as much as human children, to help provide energy for their growing bodies. While he listened to their song and felt Aránayel's glance upon him yet again, it occurred to Olórin that there was something he might be able to do to help his companion-to-be accept the necessary evil of his presence. When the first song was finished and she asked leave to go and make her own preparations for the morrow's journey, he excused himself and followed her out of the hall. He caught up with her in a quiet corridor well away from any who might accidentally overhear, and called to her, softly.

"Aránayel?"

She continued on for several paces before slowing her step; after several paces more, she stopped, but did not immediately turn toward the wizard. He knew why without asking: she was deciding whether or not she wanted to acknowledge his presence, much less his attempt at communication. Finally, without turning, she sighed. "Is it not enough that I must participate in this... farce? I know it for what it is, a poor attempt of Nienna's to make a jest at my expense, to prove that I am fit only to endure age after long age of exile in these barren lands. What other mockery must you add to my unending misery?"

"None," he replied, a note of faint puzzlement in his voice. "I have never mocked you, Aránayel, intentionally or otherwise, for any reason. What compelled Lady Nienna to choose you for this task I cannot say, but I promise you, I had naught to do with it."

She snorted, a sound somewhere between derision and amusement. "No, I daresay you would not. Have you ever in your life been less than a model of perfect patience and tolerance, Olórin?"

He knew that she meant it less kindly than it sounded, but he answered with honesty. "Oh, yes, quite often. If you do not believe me, you have only to ask my friends and neighbors once we reach Lórien. There are many things I do not bear well, nor tolerate without chafing. I am far from a model of any kind of perfection, and I know it. Which is why I wished to speak with you now. During the meal, it occurred to me that I have been remiss in certain matters, and since I am aware that this particular mission is important to you — if for no other reason than to prove that you have more than earned an end to the judgements that were lowered upon you long ago — I want to make certain there is as little friction between us as possible before we set out tomorrow."

Her head turned slightly, but not enough so that Olórin could see her face. "And did you come to offer me forgiveness?"

“No,” he said simply. “What is there to forgive? Long ago, I might have felt that you were to blame for the upset I felt over what happened between us, but through many years of difficult experience, I have come to realize that if any apology needs to be offered, it is mine. You never lied to me, telling me untruths to coerce my assistance when I did not wish to give it. I offered it of my own free will, and if I received no consideration for my deeds, I have no one to blame but myself for asking naught in return. Had I done so, I’m certain you would have been equally honest with me, and put an end to the illusions and fantasies I had allowed to flourish in my mind. You did not put them there, nor did you encourage their growth; both deeds were mine. If they were ill-considered, then the fault is also mine, for not opening my eyes to the truth. *I am* sorry, Aránayel, for all you have suffered because of my mistake. I have never spoken a single word against you, and if I had but known how severely you had been restricted all these years, I would have done whatever I could to persuade those who imposed those bonds to remove them. I know that you are far more social a creature than I, and it is not fair that you should have been made to endure such a cheerless exile on my account.”

Again, there was a long silence. At length, Aránayel turned halfway about, her face swiveling toward the wizard, eyes narrowed. “And I suppose you will also tell me that you know nothing of the incident that occurred somewhat after our... misunderstanding which led to my imprisonment in these forsaken regions.”

“If you are referring to what happened during the festival several months later, then the answer is both yes and no. I know of it, but until earlier today, I had never heard of it. That I should remain ignorant for so long is as difficult for me to believe as it is for you, I swear. Yet it is the truth. There was apparently some sort of unspoken agreement among our people to keep this matter from ever reaching my ears, and I would not have known of it at all had I not been informed today.”

Aránayel’s expression tightened, as one will upon smelling a bitter odor. “And so they told you... for what reason? To prejudice you against me so that I cannot help but fail on this mission?”

The pale head shook. “Had that been the intent, it would not have succeeded. I have never judged anyone solely on the reports and opinions of others. I do not know the specifics of whatever it was you said that day; even if I did, it would not make me hate you or seek revenge against you. You acted out of upset, and understandably so, for you had already been punished quite severely for having told me the truth rather than lie and pretend to have feelings you did not in order to manipulate me to your liking.”

She made a sharp sound of disbelief. “So are you saying that you approve of how I treated you when I spoke that truth to you?”

A hint of a wry smile flickered across Olórin’s face. “No, since you might have been kinder in how you expressed yourself, and refrained from making me feel worse than I already felt in my embarrassment and regret. Even so, I do not hold it against you. I was hurt, yes, and you could have spared me some of that pain had you wished, but I never considered it a crime. Had I not been lost to reason because of my own confusion and self-pity, I would have spoken in your defense at the time, and

asked Lord Manwë and Lady Varda not to punish you so sternly over a situation that would not have come to pass but for my blindness. And so I now offer my deepest regrets, for if I had not been such an ignorant fool, none of this would have happened.”

Aránayel finally turned to face him, her arms folded across her chest even as she lowered a piercing glance upon him. “And are you telling me this now in order to curry my favor, and persuade me to have a change of heart toward you? If the words you spoke those many years ago could not win me, have you decided that a different tactic might succeed where once you failed?”

Olórin’s answer was unhesitant. “I would not dare to be so presumptuous a second time. Whatever unkindness you might have given me then, you did speak truly when you said there was no love between us. I was far too naive for my own good, bedazzled by the beauty of the love between my Lord and his Lady, and tricked by my own overactive imagination into believing you loved me when you did not, and mistaking my own infatuation for something far greater. I may yet be a fool in some ways, but not in this. There is no one for whom my heart holds that kind of singular affection, and I do not believe it is something I was intended to have, not in this life. Perhaps someday, when the world is remade and we are no longer bound to the circles of Arda, I might find it, but I have learned much during the years since I made that mistake. I am content with my life as it has grown, and as I have grown. I am offering my apologies because I believe it is a debt I owe you, and for no other reason. As it is Lady Nienna’s wish that we undertake the care of these orphaned children together, I wish only to do what I can to mend the broken bridges between us so that we need not do this constantly at odds or avoiding one another. I am sorry if my attempt has offended you, but I truly meant no harm.”

She sniffed. “You never do. If this was your entire purpose in speaking to me now, apologizing for the errors *you* made so many years ago, why did you not simply say it plainly back in the hall, where others might hear it?”

The wryness in his expression became more pronounced. “Because *I am* somewhat less of a fool than I was in my youth. Had I attempted to speak with you in the presence of others, you would have rebuffed me, or ignored me, as has been your habit since we met again in the garden. And if by some miracle you had not, I had no way of knowing if you would take what I had to say well or poorly. For all I could know, because there were others about, you might have chosen to interpret it as an attempt at persuasion, not penitence, and there we would have been again, trapped once more in a sorry situation where my words offended you, and angered you. I already bear enough guilt for my part in all the unpleasantry that happened ages ago, Aránayel. I did not want to add to it the guilt of provoking your anger in the presence of Lady Nienna, who would certainly have looked upon it as an indication that you are *not* ready to be released from your bonds of service to her. I will admit that I was thinking somewhat of my own feelings as well, for I do not enjoy having them bruised, but I was far more concerned for yours. If I was to receive an angry response, I wanted there to be no risk that you would suffer for having shown it before the wrong persons. And if this attempt to be considerate offends you, then I’m afraid I have no defense for it. It was your welfare I had in mind, not my own.”

Her nose twitched again, with perhaps a fraction less bitterness than before. Olórin was not ignorant enough to take it as a sure sign that perhaps she might be ready to allow her frostiness toward him to thaw, if not into friendship then at least into a better tolerance than she had showed him in thousands of years. "And yet my welfare would have been better served, I think, if others were made aware of this."

He shrugged. "I will go back to the hall and repeat what I have said to them, if that will please you, but I suspect it would not, in the end. Lady Nienna is quite well aware of my attitudes and opinions on this particular subject, and has been since before you came here in her service. If I were to make such a public apology to appease you, she would likely view it as evidence that you have *not* grown in the ways Lady Varda wishes, for it would seem that you are giving more thought to your personal image than to the apology itself. Such things are better made in private, especially where matters of the heart are concerned."

Aránayel's blue-green eyes narrowed for a moment; then she finally sighed, heavily, with a clear trace of exasperation. "Perhaps so. I have often heard it said that you have grown quite wise, Olórin, and I suppose I must acknowledge that the rumors appear to have been not entirely groundless. I would indeed prefer that others hear this from you and not from me, so that they might cease to think ill of me and know that this was not something I fabricated, but in the wrong ears, such words are as apt to turn against me, no matter who speaks them."

"Just so. I'm sure there will come a time when I may do so with impunity, but first, I think it would be best if you gave them such proofs in ways that none will be able to deny were your achievement, not my less meaningful attempt at assistance."

"True. I shall not lie and say that I am looking forward to this journey, but at least I will admit that you are not the same naive person I knew in ages past. I do not know if I find it a change for the better or not, but that you were willing to admit that the error was yours and not mine gives me some hope that this task before me will not be as intolerable as I had feared."

The wizard's smile shifted from wryness to one more genuine. "I would expect no more than that. You have changed as well, Aránayel, and from what I have seen and heard, it *is* for the better. For your sake, I am glad, for I know well what it feels like to be an exile from lands and friends you love. I was not made to endure it as long as you, but I learned much from the experience."

"More than the others, it would seem," she allowed as graciously as she was able. "That Aiwendil and Pallando failed does not surprise me, nor is it difficult for me to believe that Alatar could not have succeeded. Why Aiwendil was even sent, I cannot fathom, for I cannot imagine anyone could have believed he had the ability to deal with Sauron and not wither under the first assault like a handful of fallen leaves thrown upon a blazing fire. And Alatar and Pallando were always more full of words than deeds, eager to speak of great glories but forever the last to join the attempt. If aught startles me, it is that they were willing to step forward at all."

Olórin snorted softly. “And you would not include me in their number? I was under the impression you considered me to be the worst of cowards.”

“I did,” she said frankly, “and I continued to believe so, until I learned of things you did in the resistance against Melkor. I would not have thought you to have the courage to stand upon the same continent with him, much less do aught in direct opposition to him. Not that I consider actions taken in deepest secrecy to be particularly praiseworthy, but at least you did not wholly shrink from the task, as those three were far too often wont to do.”

“So it may seem to others, but I think you underestimate them. Alatar was ever too proud for his own good, and Pallando too willing to follow his lead out of friendship, but their ambition was considerable — which, perhaps, is what ultimately led to their fall. And for all that they appeared to be stronger and more capable than Aiwendil, they fell away from their mission long before he did, and they succumbed utterly to the Darkness, while he did not. Aiwendil was of great help in our embassy for many years; it was only toward the end that the power of the Enemy grew too great for him to withstand, and even then, he did not surrender to. He ran from it instead, and there he tripped and fell, for to do so successfully, he ran from his own memories of what and who he truly was. I pity all of them, but my heart is most sorely pained for Aiwendil, who fell not because he embraced evil, but because he broke faith with the mission he was sworn to see to its end, be it sweet or bitter.”

An expression of mild boredom and disdain crept across Aránayel’s artfully delicate features as she listened. When he was finished, she dismissed the matter with a gesture. “It was still weakness, no matter what prompted it. I fully expected Aiwendil would never return, and I would have wagered the same for Alatar and Pallando, given what I knew of them and their habits. That Curumo failed *does* surprise me, for he was Sauron’s successor in Lord Aulë’s favor, and no weakling would have been shown such approval by so great a lord of the Valar. But then, perhaps there was no better choice to be had. Curumo never was Sauron’s match in any way, so it may be that his failure was as inevitable as the others’.”

“Perhaps,” was all Olórin would say on the subject. A memory of Frodo’s comments about the former head of the Istari stirred as he listened to her commentary, but he did not feel this was either the time or the place to reflect upon them, silently or aloud. He shifted the subject away from the fallen wizard. “I note that you have expressed no opinion of my participation in this effort.”

She was characteristically blunt. “I did not think you would return, either,” she said without preamble. “If any of the five who were sent had any hope of succeeding, I felt certain it would be Curumo. Do you need to hear me say that I was wrong?”

He answered her bluntness with gentler honesty. “No. I expected you would feel thus. I suppose what I was most curious to know was whether or not my failure to *fail* disappointed you. You need not answer!” he said quickly, holding up his hands to still her before she spoke. “In reflection, I find that I do not wish to know. Such matters belong to the past, and are not important to the present. I did return, we both have a task to undertake on the morrow, and if either of us still have old wounds

in need of healing, I think it best to leave them be and concentrate on what must be done now. Can we not at least agree upon this, for the sake of the young ones who will be in our care?"

Aránayel tilted her head in such a way that the subdued light in the corridor struck her eyes and made them glow like those of a hunting cat measuring its prey. Olórin remained impassive, wanting her to see nothing in his expression, neither anxiety nor eagerness, both of which she had been known to take poorly, especially from him. At length, and to his great relief, the hardness in her eyes and face softened — slightly, but positively. "We can. No matter what others may have said of me, or what you might yet recall from your ignorant youth, I am not an unreasonable person. I take my duties and my tasks seriously, and prefer to spare little time for those who would hinder them with foolishness. I had anticipated that this particular task would be intolerable because I would forever be required to avoid you so as to escape such hindrance, but you have indeed changed more than I had realized. If it will enable me to carry out my appointed task well, then I will make such an agreement."

Olórin politely refrained from pointing out her less than altruistic motives, not to mention her possibly unintentional but more likely deliberate insult, and instead answered graciously. "Then I will look forward to beginning our journey in the morning. Thank you, Aránayel, for accepting my terribly belated apology."

She smiled, her mouth tight and the expression crooked rather than warm. "I did not say that I accepted it — but I do, if it will make this task less onerous. You *have* changed, and that is not without merit. Perhaps something beneficial can be made of our relationship, after all."

He did not argue with her evaluation of the situation, and both acknowledged her response and bid her farewell for the night with a small bow. As he turned and headed back to the dining hall, allowing Aránayel to continue on toward her original destination, Olórin felt relief that their conversation had gone as well as it had. Aránayel's attitudes toward him had not altered as greatly as they might have, but that they had done so at all gave him hope that she was ultimately on the right path, bound for a promising new life as she grew into a better person among the citizenry of Aman. For her sake far more than his own, he was pleased, as he would have been for anyone who had wandered too long on unhappy paths of self-destruction, and had at last turned their steps onto a more favorable road.

But he might have felt quite differently if he had only taken a moment to consider *all* the implications of her final remark — and how those words might be not an omen for a brighter future, but a warning that shadows and darkness loomed ahead.

To be continued