

Twice Blessed

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Part Four

Chapter VII

Thus we live, for ever taking leave.

Dawn in Aman was one of the most beautiful times of day, even on the desolate western shores which so many thought of as grim and colorless. Helyanwë had left for Alqualondë well before daybreak, not wishing to face another sad goodbye with the twins, so Olórin had taken it upon himself to see to it that the horses they had chosen the day before were properly readied for the journey. Several of Nienna's servants who had been tending the beasts in the absence of their normal keeper were there to assist, and they took direction quite well, so he was able spare a moment from their tasks to watch the sun rise over the distant northern reaches of the Pelóri. A light mist had embraced the land before the dawn broke; it vanished quickly under the sun's bright rays, showing the sky as clear blue and cloudless, an unusual state for this part of the West, but not unwelcome for the trip ahead.

Is this your doing, Lord Manwë? the wizard wondered as he noted the abnormally fair weather, which would doubtless add some greater warmth to the chill winds from the north; summer winds carried some softness to the air even in colder climes. Olórin had no doubt that his master was aware of events currently transpiring in Nienna's realm, and it would have been typical of Manwë to do what he might to make the trip more pleasant for those involved. If it was the Wind Lord's doing and not merely a fortunate coincidence, he was grateful for it, yet made somewhat ill at ease by it as well. It reminded him of the personal problems that had made it so easy for him to agree to come to Nienna's house, and prodded him to realize that the issue was not yet resolved. He did not think Manwë would have done this solely as a small reflection of an apology to the servant he had grievously wronged, but that he *might* have sharpened Olórin's regret over the troubles between them. Perhaps, he thought as he watched the sun slowly climb into the eastern skies, all that was needed was time for them to sit down and discuss the situation, alone and without the distractions of other troubles and tragedies weighing upon them and pushing them apart.

After all was said and done, it might be that simple. For all they had both done and experienced over the years of their residence in Arda, neither of them were so complex at heart that they held hidden motives and buried grudges deep inside. There was no question that Olórin still respected and loved his master, and he knew for certain that his feelings were returned. But there had been so little time

since the discovery of the truth behind his illness, between the inflicting of the hurt and his healing, so little chance to do more than allow his strength to return and the darkness to lift from his heart and soul.

It could well be that both he and Frodo had been wrong. There were no unresolved issues within Olórin concerning the betrayal of Saruman; he had spent much of the night meditating upon that very matter, since Aránayel's mention of the fallen Istar had stirred his thoughts in that regard. If any emotion lingered on that account, it was pity, the sorrow that Curumo had gone so badly astray, and Olórin had not been able to see the changes in him soon enough to even attempt to help him, had the proud leader of their Order deigned to allow it. Olórin had never wanted that position, much less to be the bearer of the Valar's judgement against his predecessor. He did not shirk such duties when they were required of him, but he never took pleasure of any kind in their execution. He was still saddened by the knowledge that Saruman had turned against him, but every time he had offered him kindness and forgiveness, he had offered it sincerely, and it had been just as sincerely rejected. Saruman's choice was not his fault; he knew it well, and thus had let go of any anger he had felt toward his brother wizard's deeds in Middle-earth long before he had returned home. Curumo had paid a terrible price for what he had done, his spirit rejected from Endor, exiled from Aman, unable to rest anywhere. And the harm he had done in his search for power and for vengeance had come to naught, the lands he had despoiled restored to even greater beauty, the peoples he had tried to subjugate or eradicate now flourishing and prospering. There was nothing left unresolved so far as Saruman was concerned, and deep meditation during the night had fully convinced Olórin that it was not the source of his inability to forgive Manwë.

No, if there was any cause for his hesitance, he knew it was something strictly within himself. There was something he needed to let go from his heart and mind, some lingering shadow that cast doubts between him and his master that should not have been. After all, if he could manage to arrange a truce between himself and Aránayel after so many years of estrangement and bitterness, surely what lay between him and Manwë could be dispelled as easily as the brisk morning winds blew away the last mists of night.

Reflecting upon the fact that he *had* somehow managed to come to an agreement, however strained, to keep the peace with Aránayel during their journey to Lórien, Olórin laughed, suddenly feeling hope that the matter of his relationship with Manwë was not beyond repair, and that Lady Nienna had known precisely what she was doing when she had chosen Aránayel for the task ahead. Those who had been assisting with the horses looked at him, puzzled by his sudden laughter, but he merely smiled and resumed his work. Wherever this beautiful dawn had its origins, it seemed to him a positive portent for the future.

The horses he had selected from Nienna's stables were all dappled grays, smaller than Shadowfax and not as strong or intelligent, but sturdy beasts who were well familiar with the uneven lands of western Aman, with good temperaments that would be well suited to a journey with several marginally experienced riders. He had no doubt that Helyanwë had accurately judged the twins' skills, but they were still young and even the best Elven riders grew restless and uncomfortable and impatient during long rides at so tender an age. Aránayel, he had been told, did not enjoy such a mode of transportation

at all, considering it a waste of time and a general nuisance; she much preferred the swift travel of their kind, and did not even care for the long walk between Nienna's house and the Halls of her brother to the north. Olórin had chosen the most gentle-natured of the beasts for her, to spare both her and the horse any undue trouble, but he would have preferred to send her on ahead, or tell her to wait and come to Lórien only after he and the children had arrived. He was certain he could manage the journey with the twins without assistance, but neither option was truly feasible. Frodo had never before met Aránayel, and although many of the Maiar in Lórien knew of her, few were actually acquainted with her. He did not think it wise to send her on without him, so that he might at least have a chance to forestall any unpleasanties that might arise because of her often haughty and abrasive nature. Moreover, there was the matter of the children's tutelage to consider, and though he was certain seven days without it would not cause them to forget all they had learned, he was also aware that this was a part of the test that would determine whether or not Aránayel had earned the right to have her long punishment ended. And, he supposed, it would do him good to see how well he dealt with her presence after so many years, before he brought her into the house that was currently as much Frodo's as his own.

He had no more than imagined the potential repercussions of sending Aránayel into the keeping of Frodo and Ványalos before he decided it was a bad idea, all around. He had learned patience from Nienna, in most things, and one lesson he had learned very well was not to rush to meet the future. It would come soon enough, and even well prepared for it, one often found one's self still not quite ready for it when it arrived. He dismissed such thoughts and focused instead on the immediate task at hand, and the prospect of a pleasant day in which to begin the journey home.

Feeling much lighter in spirit than he had been upon his arrival less than a day ago, he sang softly to himself while he went about his work, a very ancient tune he had known even before he had first entered Arda. Frodo would doubtless have found it unsettling, since the words that had eventually been fitted to the melody were in Valarin, but there was something unusually reassuring and uplifting about the air, and few of his people did not take pleasure and comfort from it. It wove in its sounds memories of a time before time, and beauties beyond beauty that were a part of every Ainu who did not reject the light and embrace the darkness. He had kept his voice low, but before long, he noticed the others singing with him, and chuckled. This was one part of his life as a Maia he had terribly missed during his life in Endor, not just the music that was as blood to his people, but the sense of joy and belonging that was woven between them in moments such as this. They had no kinship in the same sense as the Eruhíni, but all the Ainur were a great family, not of flesh and blood, but in their shared being as the children of Eru's thought. More than anything else he had left behind, it was this simple yet profound feeling he had missed most keenly.

"You seem in an unusually good mood this morning, Olórin," said one of Nienna's servants who had been helping him fit the riding gear onto the horse that was to be Aránayel's. He was tall and slender, dark of eye and hair and distinctly Elven in appearance, though he was not of that kindred. Many of Nienna's people adopted forms closely akin to the Eldar, since much of their work was with them, assisting those emerging from the Halls of Waiting, or dealing with their kin. "I would not have thought it possible, with the prospect of a journey in Aránayel's company before you."

Yesterday, the wizard might have agreed with the sentiment; today, he laughed, the sound of it as bright as the morning sun. "You forget, Séretur, that until yesterday, I had been deliberately steered away from any encounter with her by Lady Nienna and other well-meaning friends, while you have had the pleasure of living and working in her presence for nearly as many years."

The taller Maia's expression twisted in a way echoed by the others who heard that remark. "I would not call it a pleasure, by any stretch of the imagination. We are not so well acquainted as I know you are with others of the Lady's servants, but I believe I know you well enough to understand that your reputation for wisdom has been well earned. And so it astonishes me all the more that you could ever have loved one such as Aránayel."

The humor remained in Olórin's voice. "We all make mistakes, no matter how great our wisdom, and mine was all but non-existent, back then. What I thought I felt was as unreal as the illusion of warmth Aránayel gives to others when it pleases her to use them. That I was stupid enough to actually tell her of my fantasies when I had been warned by those wiser than myself is proof enough that I had much to learn, about myself and the rest of creation. Yet I do not blame Aránayel for it, Séretur, and it would be well if you remembered this. She has been sent into a kind of exile that is very difficult for one of her nature to bear, for having done nothing more than speak the truth, bitter though it may have been for me to swallow. For whatever unkindness she inflicted upon me, she has more than paid the penalty, and I hope this journey at last convinces those who have the authority to release her from this life she was not meant to live."

Séretur snorted softly, a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "If I did not know better, I would think you were still smitten with her. You are being more gracious than she deserves, you know. Her treatment of you long ago was but the beginning of a long history of infractions, of which I'm sure you know little or nothing, having been otherwise occupied in the service of the Valar. I will do as you ask, of course, if you will accept one morsel of advice: Be wary of her. She has not often spoken of you since Lady Varda placed greater restrictions upon her freedom, but when she has, it has always been with venomous words. She will try to hurt you again, if she can, to be avenged for her own mistakes."

The Istar nodded as they finished preparing the horse. "Helyanwë has already mentioned this to me, and I have given her my word that I will take care. And I thank you for your concern, but I think perhaps it will not be needed. Much as she may despise me, Aránayel hates her life in these remote lands even more. She has always been gifted in seeing to her own welfare, and she cannot help but know that anything she does against me, directly or indirectly, will not bode well for the freedom she seeks. If I can survive the journey between here and Lórien, she will have lost any opportunity she might have had to attempt to act against me. Ever since my illness, my friends there seem intent on watching over me, and even if she somehow managed to slip past my guard, she will not get 'round theirs so easily."

"And Lord Irmo not least among them, I suspect. I am glad to hear it. Aránayel is too sly for her own good, and many of us had fears that we were setting loose a serpent whose venom had but grown stronger since last she had struck."

Olórin laughed, clasping Séretur's shoulder as he came around the horse to make certain the packs had been properly secured. "From all the concern I have heard on this matter over the past day, I am beginning to think Aránayel must have grown into something far more deadly to me than the poisons of Melkor and Sauron that very nearly ended my life in this world. Worry not! I suspect her desire to be free again is greater than her hatred toward me, and even if it is not, I am not without protection. She will not attempt anything that would harm the children or even prejudice them against her, since word of it would certainly reach the ears of Lady Nienna. I have never understood persons with acquisitive natures," he added as he eyed the packs that Aránayel had sent as her luggage. "Especially among our people. What possible reason is there for hoarding *things* when we have little need of tools and other implements, and can refashion what we already have to the needs of the moment?"

One of the other Maiar grunted, the sound threaded with humor. "You have never been a gatherer, Olórin, and everyone in Aman knows it. When Eönwë and Melian and others suggested we rebuild your house in preparation for your return, there were those among us who saw no reason for it, since we suspected you would either reject it utterly, or accept it out of politeness and then let it fall to wrack and ruin. There is no one in all of Arda to whom it is more difficult to offer a gift, be it large or small. If we had not been told that you would likely be returning with mortals who might wish to remain in your company for a time, we would have thought the effort quite pointless."

"Whereas Aránayel is completely the opposite," Séretur continued. "Andon has a very good point. You are not preoccupied with possessions, but Aránayel has a fascination with things, and counts them as a measure of her worth. Did Curumo not have a similar obsession?"

The wizard sighed. "After a fashion. That is one of the weaknesses of many of Lord Aulë's servants, I'm afraid. His was a mastery of the physical world, and those he drew to him as servants and followers shared in his love of such things. I have never quite understood why Aránayel did not become one of his people rather than Lord Manwë's; she would have been better suited to his service, it seems."

The Maia who had grunted, Andon, now snorted rather loudly. "And how long did you work beside her, without seeing that if she must serve, she would settle for no less a master and mistress than the king and queen of Arda?"

Olórin conceded the point with a good-natured chuckle. "Not long enough to avoid making a fool of myself, I'm afraid. Well, it matters little, if at all. She will do what she will do, and I will make the best of things. After the last two thousand years in Endor, commissioned with the task of uniting peoples who would just as soon go to war with each other than unite against an obvious common enemy, I cannot imagine there is anything Aránayel could do during a seven day journey that would seem even mildly intolerable."

Andon's nose twitched, but not at the scent of the horses as they led them from the stables to the place where they were to meet the others who were departing. "Then you do not have as active an

imagination as your reputation claims. I can think of several dozen, and that is without half-trying. Shall I enlighten you?"

"No need," he was swiftly assured. "My imagination is quite alive and well, thank you. If I were to begin making lists of all the ways in which this coming journey may turn unpleasant, I will certainly find it so, and by my own making. I am not as naive as I was in my youth, and among the many things I have learned since then is that dwelling upon potential troubles will only make them worse when and if they do arrive."

"I still suspect you are being more generous than she deserves," Séretur remarked. "But not, perhaps, more than is your nature. Nonetheless, I wish you good fortune with her, Olórin. She is a bitter person, and it would be easier to remove all Melkor's poison from Arda than to sweeten her disposition."

The wizard laughed softly. "It is not necessary that she be sweet, merely civil. And that much I believe she will manage, if for no other reason than to be freed from her service here."

The others did not contest that notion, for they knew it was likely true. They continued along a path that curved around the eastern side of the guest house, to the place before its southern entrance where they were to meet Aránayel and the twins. The children were seated on the bottommost step before the doors, playing some game involving a piece of string intricately twisted by their nimble fingers; Aránayel waited at the top near the doors, clearly seeking shelter from the chill morning wind. From the way she was attired, she was anticipating the onset of winter, not summer.

Olórin was mildly amused by that, though he hid it. None of their people ever needed feel the discomforts of weather, unless they chose to experience that part of incarnate life, yet Aránayel had always appeared quite sensitive to it. Charitably, he had once supposed she did so to better understand the world in which they lived; wiser now, he knew she did so as a kind of vanity, to attract sympathy and attention. It was a habit so old, she likely had forgotten how to shift her perceptions of such things, and would not take kindly any instruction he might have to offer, however gently it was worded. She would be more apt to complain, and thus provide one of the many ways in which Andon had predicted she might make the journey intolerable. Well, he had lived with worse during the past two millennia in Middle-earth, and he could certainly live with this for a mere seven days.

As they led the horses to the appointed place, Olórin caught the movement of someone coming toward them from the Great House itself. He did not need to look to recognize Nienna's presence; the children noted it a few moments later, and ended their game to rise to meet her. Even Aránayel reacted with deference, coming down from her sheltered place to join the others who were gathering at the foot of the steps.

Nienna smiled as she and those leading the readied horses arrived at almost the same moment. She looked up at the sunny skies, then turned her smile to the waiting travelers. "A most beautiful day to begin a journey. I think you will enjoy the leagues between here and Lórien, my little friends," she

said to the twins, “and also the land in which my younger brother dwells. If you have reconsidered your desire to visit Lórien, you will of course be welcome here, but I am sure you will be happier there. To all things there is a time, and the time has come for you to move away from my house and closer to your own people.”

Melui and Lére exchanged glances; he nodded, and she spoke for both of them. “We thank you, Lady Nienna, for your kindness and hospitality. We will never forget it, and someday, if we can, we would like to repay you.”

The Vala’s smile brightened. “That is not necessary, but should the time come when that is the proper thing to do, then I will welcome it, as I will welcome you. For now, let your hearts find peace and joy again, and that will be payment enough.”

She held out her hands to the youngsters, and on her open palms they saw matched wristlets made of fine plaited sea grasses tinted a deep blue that held twined amid the strands fourteen small polished stones of a kind common to the western shores beyond her house. “I know you collected many pebbles from the sea strand when you were taken to visit it, Lére, and that you, Melui, fashioned many lovely weavings from the grasses you found on those long walks. These are but a small parting gift, a token in remembrance of my home for you to take with you on your journey. I will not forget either of you, though you be far away, and I hope these will bring to you more pleasant memories of my House, where you will ever be welcome.”

Wide-eyed, for they had not expected any gift from the Lady, they accepted them, as well as her help in fastening them about their wrists. They were beautiful things, for all their simplicity, and would indeed kindle memories of their more pleasant days in Nienna’s house. “Thank you, my Lady,” they both said softly, Melui adding, “but we don’t have anything to give you in return.”

“And nothing is needed,” Nienna assured her. “You have given me the joy of your presence in my home, and the gift of your laughter and song last evening. I will treasure all of those things, until the end of days, and when the world renewed.”

When she was finished speaking with the twins, Séretur and Andon came and helped them onto their steeds while Nienna turned to Aránayel. “I give to you a parting gift of words, Aránayel: my hope that when we meet again, it will be in a time and place that will bring you greater happiness than you have known while in my service. You have learned much, and now the time is come for your final test. Continue as you have begun, and success will carry you to all which you so sorely crave.”

Aránayel inclined her head in deference, careful not to disturb the lay of her cloak about her neck and shoulders, which would allow the chill morning wind past her defenses. “Thank you, my lady,” she said, her tone completely proper — almost too much so, to Olórin’s ears, as if she refused to let go of the slightest bit of warmth or real gratitude. “I shall do my best.”

Nienna, undisturbed by her attitudes, remained cordial, her pale smile undimmed. "Then I will look to see you again in the autumn, when we gather in Valmar for the festival."

The tall Vala turned then to Olórin, her smile warmer. "Your visit was too brief, Olórin, but as you came for the sake of my young guests and not for other purposes, I do not begrudge it. It was enough for me to see how you are indeed recovering from your long and difficult labors, more than sufficient to be of help to others yet again. I am glad of it."

"As am I, my lady," the wizard answered with a gracious bow. "I grew accustomed to such activity during my recent time in Endor, and I will admit I had feared returning to a life without clear purpose. I know that will not happen now, and I thank you for allowing me to be of service."

Nienna chuckled. "Even were there naught left for the rest of us to do in tending Arda, I cannot help but suspect you would somehow find a way to serve. Lord Eru has some greater purpose for you in His music, I think, though none of us can yet perceive it. But we will all know soon enough, in the fullness of His time. You shall ever be welcome in my house, but return now to your own and take with you my greetings to my brother Irmo and his lady, as well as my blessings."

As he acknowledged her kind words, he heard a sound from the twins, one that could only be described as a hastily smothered giggle. He noted that they were both grinning when he turned to mount his own steed, as he also noted the peculiar expression on Aránayel's face. The coldness in it was only to be expected, but there was a strange hint of envy to it as well. Undoubtedly because Nienna had asked him to carry greetings to her brother, not Aránayel. Inwardly, the wizard sighed, but let loose no discernable trace of it. Aránayel had agreed to a truce, and though he did not expect it to be a comfortable one, he did not believe she had lied. Séretur aided her onto her horse, and when they were mounted and ready, they set off, heading south and east into the ever-brightening day.

They rode in silence until the great house was in the distance behind them; the twins then giggled openly. From the glances they were exchanging, Olórin knew they were sharing some kind of private communication, though he noticed that their eyes occasionally flicked toward him. "I'm pleased to see the two of you in such merry spirits this morning," he said, his placid tone belying his curiosity. "Would you care to share the reason with us, and perhaps brighten our day as well?"

Melui's cheeks suddenly flushed with chagrin, but Lére chuckled. "I think she likes you, Mithrandir," he said, as if stating a fact so obvious, even a blind man could have seen it.

The wizard's brow furrowed with puzzlement, his own eyes looking toward Aránayel for a moment, wondering how the two could have missed her frostiness toward him. A glance proved that he was not in error; she appeared no more pleased with him or anything in the world than she had before they had left Nienna's house. If anything, she seemed marginally more disgruntled, her mood soured by the wind, the cold weather, riding on a horse, and the need to do so in his presence. He turned back to the boy. "I beg your pardon?"

“Lady Nienna,” Melui answered, clarifying the mystery, her composure regained. “We think she likes you.”

“I’m certain she does,” the Istar said, glad that there had been no potentially troublesome misunderstanding concerning Aránayel. “She is a very compassionate and caring person. She has taken many people in need into her house, and I was one of them, many years ago, as you were more recently.”

The boy favored him with a glance that judged him quite the densest person in existence. “Not like that,” he said sententiously. “Like... well, you know. The way Mother likes Father.”

Olórin blinked, genuinely surprised by the remark, largely due to the frequency with which such notions had been brought up to him in recent days. “And why would you think that? She treats me much the same as she does you and your sister, and her other servants and students. I am not one of her people, but I was her pupil for many years, and I return to learn from her when I can. She knows me well, better than I sometimes know myself, but her feelings for me are not of the kind you imagine.”

“Then why did she ask you to take her greetings to her brother?” Melui wanted to know. “Whenever Father sent messages to his family in Lothlórien, he never sent them with just anyone, only very special friends.”

“Whom I am sure he loved and trusted, but *not* in the ways he loved your mother. Lady Nienna was showing me no special favor by making that request. I am Lord Irmo’s counselor, and I speak with him often. I know him and Lady Estë well, likely better than either of you or Aránayel. It would make the most sense to send messages with me then, would it not?”

Melui nodded, rather reluctantly, but Léré was not so easily convinced. “Maybe,” he allowed. “But that doesn’t mean she can’t like you, does it?”

The wizard sighed. “Perhaps not. But if Lady Nienna has a special fondness for me because I have been her pupil, does that also mean that Aránayel has such feelings for *you* because you have been hers?”

It was the boy’s turn to be embarrassed, his face flushing a bright red from his neck to the tips of his ears. His sister giggled, but was content to let the subject drop. “Can we sing a song, Mithrandir?” she asked after Léré had scowled at her for being amused by his discomfort. “We didn’t travel much before we left Middle-earth, but whenever we did, Father would teach us new songs along the way, to shorten the journey, he said. It’s been a long time since we learned a new song.”

Olórin glanced at Aránayel, not wanting to infringe upon an area which she might consider her purview, being an aspect of the twins’ tutelage. She shrugged, huddling more deeply into the cloak wrapped about her. “I am in no mood to sing when I must endure such hardships,” she sniffed. “Do as you like, it matters not to me.”

Again, Olórin sighed silently, wondering how he could ever have believed there was any love between himself and Aránayel, for her behavior was no different now than it had been all those thousands of years before. At least she was only being irritable, not openly hostile. Grateful for that small favor, he turned back to the youngsters. "Since we have met only recently, I do not know which songs you may have already learned, other than those I heard you sing yesterday. Are you familiar with any of the halflings' songs?"

Both fair heads shook as one. "We've never met a halfling," Melui explained, "and I'm not sure Mother or Father ever did, either. Are their songs terribly long or difficult?"

The wizard laughed. "Not as a rule. One of the halflings who came with me when I returned from Middle-earth has written some that are quite lengthy, but his songs are the exceptions — and not all of his are long. There is one I learned from him long ago, well before you were born, that I think would be quite suitable."

"Can it be played on a pipe?" Lére wondered, looking to make certain his was still safely stowed in the pocket where he had placed it.

"I'm sure it can, though you must know the tune first before you can play it."

"I learn quickly," the boy assured him.

Olórin smiled. "Then no doubt you'll soon have it mastered." As they continued on their course, moving at a steady but gentle pace, following the strand of a small river inland, he sang and the children listened attentively. Aránayel appeared not to notice them, although her glance would occasionally touch them, as if she was trying to solve some inexplicable riddle to which her companions were not privy. When they stopped briefly to let the horses drink from the stream and graze for a bit before moving on, Lére brought out his pipe to try the newly learned tune, and its lilting notes sang through the riverside glen, heedless of Aránayel's inscrutable glare:

*The road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.*

Chapter VIII

What's a joy to the one is a nightmare to the other.

By the hour before sunset, they had moved well inland, still following the dwindling river, but as yet well removed from the nearest settlement. The weather was warmer than it had been along the damp and stony seashore, though a chill lingered in the air that spoke of coming night and the summer season that had yet to arrive in these desolate parts of Aman. There was also a hint of moisture on the breeze that had nothing to do with the river or the sea. Olórin knew it for what it was, a sign of rains that would arrive with the sunset, and so they stopped to prepare for the coming night.

Aránayel had been told by others that they would likely spend the first two nights of their journey making camp in the wilds, both because their course would not take them into more inhabited regions, and because the children, though Elven, still needed rest and refreshment for their young bodies. She was not pleased by these necessities, and wanted no part of erecting the small shelter that had been provided for their use; fortunately, the twins were both fascinated by it, and were more than willing to assist the wizard. Olórin made no comment about Aránayel's attitude, nor that she settled herself to wait for them to finish without lifting a finger. When the tent had been erected and the twins had gone off to collect some fallen wood for a fire, he at last turned to his fellow Maia and spoke softly.

"I know that these chores are neither within your experience or your liking," he said as impartially as possible, "but there are things about Eruhíni children which you may not realize. Even those of the Eldar are small and seemingly weak and inexperienced at this tender age, but they see and hear more than we often are aware. They also are not inclined to forget easily, and what they know, they may repeat to others if it seems proper to them. I will not judge your behavior on this mission, Aránayel, and even were you to treat me badly, I would say nothing of it so as not to influence the choices of those who are to decide your fate. But Lére and Melui have no truce with you, nor any particular desire to see that you are freed from your long punishment. Neither I nor you can control what they might say if they are asked their opinion concerning how you acted on this journey. I have not been their tutor as you have been, but I have seen enough in our brief time together to sense that they have a clear preference for elders who treat them with kindness, if not actual affection. If you do nothing at all, and too often speak only to teach, or to express discomfort or displeasure, they may have uncomplimentary things to say about you, in the end."

She sniffed, clutching at the throat of her cloak to close it against the rising wind. "And do you know them well enough to be so certain what they will say?"

He shook his head, pushing aside strands of his pale gold hair that the same gust of wind had blown into his eyes; his long fingers twisted the strands together and tucked them more securely behind one ear. "Of course not. But I was acquainted with many children in Endor. Even though I could not spend as much time with them as I wished, I came to understand some of their more remarkable habits. If these two were not so observant, would they have noticed enough to remark upon the gracious manner in which Lady Nienna treats me? I was in her house for but a day, and the twins and I spent

little time together in the Lady's presence. They did not perceive the nature of our relationship *correctly*, but they did indeed note that we *have* one, and that it is not quite the same as her relation with most others of our people. Would you risk them mistaking your actions, or lack of them, for something they are not?"

Aránayel's lovely brow creased for several moments before she made a sound of resignation. "No. You have made your point — but rather too late, I think. Why did you not mention this to me *before* the work of preparing our camp was completed? To deliberately prejudice them against me?"

"No," the wizard answered simply. "Because they would have heard that conversation as well, and likely misjudged it. But this need not work in your disfavor. Though you and I do not require food to sustain us, they *do*, and the preparation of the evening meal has not begun, nor is it difficult. Among the Eruhíni, I have noted that the offering of food is often viewed as a gesture of great kindness. I must see that the horses are readied for the night, and if you would care to prepare the meal for the children, it can easily be done in the comfort of our shelter, out of the wind where it is warmer."

Again, there was a pause before the auburn-haired Maia responded, but this time, there was less bitter displeasure in her tone. "And you do not think this skill beyond me?"

"Why should I?" he asked honestly. "Many of our people merely assume the visible forms of the Eruhíni without taking upon themselves any of the limitations or discomforts of incarnate existence. I would have expected you to be one such person, yet I admit that I have known little of your life since our ways parted in the days before the Eldar first awakened. I know what it is to feel the bite of cold and the weariness of long journeys, as well as the pleasure of a meal after long labor; it was a necessary part of my life these past two millennia in Endor, and I can see clearly that you are not feigning your own discomfort. Such feelings are inconvenient, it is true, but they are also a very important part of life in Arda. For whatever reasons you first fell into these habits, they do you credit now. They have better prepared you to show compassion toward our young charges."

Aránayel studied the Istar closely, searching for any hint of condescension or mockery; finding none, she accepted his assessment, though warily. "Perhaps so," was all she would allow. "Have the supplies been moved into the shelter?"

"Whatever was needed for the night. I will see to it that the rest is removed when I attend to the horses."

"Take care with my things," she said primly. "I do not want them ruined by mishandling."

She moved on into the tent without waiting for a reply, a queen expecting her orders to be obeyed without question. Secretly, Olórin had to admit he was glad to see her go. He did not bear any ill will toward Aránayel, but the cold demeanor she had displayed ever since their departure convinced him that those who wondered how he had ever imagined he loved her were more observant than he had been in his youth. He was amazed to see how blind he had truly been. Even so, he did not regret this

enlightenment, for in ways, it was apt to make their journey less uncomfortable. He no longer held any doubts whatsoever about his feelings toward her, but had she changed during the intervening years, he might have found this enforced companionship more difficult and confusing. He knew now that at best, he could expect Aránayel to cooperate when it was in her own self-interest, and he would not hope for more than that from her.

While the wizard went to unsaddle the horses and remove the packs they still carried, he heard Aránayel at work preparing the meal. The sounds were not particularly encouraging. If he had not felt pity for her situation, so woefully prepared for anything of this sort, he might have found her dilemma over such simple matters amusing. Though she had worked long in the service of Nienna and Námo, her duties had apparently seldom involved these mundane aspects of incarnate life. In some ways, Olórin supposed this was just as well, for she certainly would have viewed such work as drudgery and yet more unjust punishment heaped upon her. Even so, from what he had witnessed during the farewell meal the night before, she enjoyed partaking of food and drink more than just for the sake of hospitality. She remained as ever a bundle of contradictions and vanity, desiring the pleasure of certain things but not wishing to make any effort to attain them. For her sake, he hoped that she was capable of managing this without producing food the twins might find unpalatable, for she would certainly be offended if her work received anything but praise.

The pair returned perhaps half an hour after they had gone, arriving just as Olórin finished attending the horses and seeing to it that they had adequate shelter between the tent and a copse of trees along the riverbank. He had spoken to them to make certain they did not wander farther than was needed to graze or drink from the cool waters during the night, thanking once again the circumstances that had led him to become so well acquainted with the speech of their kind. He was in the process of making sure the tack and other packs were also sheltered from the coming rain when the twins approached him.

“There wasn’t much wood to be found, Mithrandir,” Lére said as he displayed his armload of dry twigs and bits of fallen branches as evidence. “I shouldn’t want to hurt any of the trees to find more.”

“It won’t be necessary,” he was assured, with a smile of approval for their efforts. “The shelter Lady Nienna provided will allow us to have a fire within, so long as it is small and we take care with it. It will be needed only for your comfort and light, after the rains have come. When you are older, you will not find so great a need for these things, but while you are still young and growing, such comforts are welcome even among the Elves, if you wish to sleep well.”

“We know,” Melui said, shivering slightly. “On nights when it was very windy around Lady Nienna’s house, it would get very cold in our rooms, and Helyanwë always made certain there was a fire to help keep us warm while we slept.” Sadness cast a shadow across her face like the clouds now masking the sun. “I miss her already, Mithrandir. Why couldn’t she have come with us instead? I know she wanted to.”

"I don't doubt it," he agreed, his voice deliberately low, "for she is quite fond of you. But Lady Nienna would not have sent her on the errand to Alqualondë unless her presence was needed there. And in many ways, Aránayel's presence is needed here."

Lére's nose wrinkled at the very thought. "I can't see why. She's not a bad teacher, but she's not a very nice person. She never sings, and she hardly ever smiles or laughs. I don't think she likes us at all, and I *know* she doesn't like you."

One of Olórin's pale brows cocked curiously. "Oh? And how do you know this?"

The boy shrugged. "From listening. We heard about the ship that was coming from Middle-earth, bringing some very important people, long before it arrived. Helyanwë was always very polite around us, but before our voices came back, some of the others acted as if we couldn't hear because we couldn't speak. One day, someone mentioned that you would be coming home on that ship, though we didn't know it was you they meant; we didn't know your real name. Aránayel seemed almost angry about it, and she said many unkind things about you before Lady Nienna came into the room and she stopped. I heard other things later, all quite mean. When Helyanwë realized that we'd heard Aránayel talking this way, she took us aside and told us not to pay any attention to it. It wasn't true, she said, just a lot of angry and bitter talk because something bad had happened between you and Aránayel a very long time ago. Once we could speak again, Aránayel was careful not to say anything when we were near, but I think I heard more than enough."

"I should say so," the Maia said. He sighed as he finished securing the protective cover over the tack and other packs, settling back on his heels to look up at the twins. "I'm sorry you had to hear of it at all, for I know the kinds of things Aránayel has said of me. But try to understand that I bear her no ill will for the unpleasantness that happened between us, or her bitterness over her punishment. I truly believe she was given more harsh a sentence than she deserved, and how well she fares on this journey and in Lórien may well decide whether or not she will be freed from her exile. She and I have agreed to try to let the past remain the past, and not influence our actions now. She is doing her best, I think, and if we can help her to feel that her efforts are not in vain, then she may improve more quickly."

Melui appeared doubtful. "Do you really think that would help? Lére's right, she's done well enough as our tutor, but I don't think I like her very much. She's always so cold and unpleasant...."

Olórin smiled wanly. "And during these past years, since the shipwreck, have you always felt cheerful and kind toward those around you?"

She considered the question for almost a minute before shaking her head. "No, I wasn't always, but that was because I was very upset and frightened. We lost everyone we knew when the ship was wrecked. We felt very alone and out of place, because we didn't really belong here."

"The same can be said of Aránayel. You were taken from your home and the people you had known since you were born, and cast adrift in a strange place. In Nienna's house, you were given help

and kindness, but her people are not your people. So it was with Aránayel. When Lord Manwë sent her from his service and into that of Lady Nienna and Lord Námo, she was cast adrift in a lonely place where she did not belong. The need to be among many people who are more sociable is part of Aránayel's nature, what she has been since the moment she was brought into being. And she has been made to endure this loneliness for thousands of years, since before your people first awoke in Middle-earth. Do you think you could be forced to live under such circumstances for so long, and not feel bitter toward the whole world, especially those who bore some responsibility for your unhappy circumstances?"

It took but a few moments before both twins shook their heads. "I don't think I would like it at all," Lére admitted. "If you want us to try to be nicer to her, Mithrandir, we will. We didn't know these things you just told us."

"Mother was a bit like that, you know," his sister added in a softly confidential tone. "I think that's why we never went to visit Father's kin in Lothlórien. She liked all the friends she had in Lindon, and she was afraid she wouldn't be accepted that way any place else, especially not in Lothlórien. She heard from others that it was... different, not like the other Elf cities in Middle-earth. Colder, she thought, but not like the weather. I heard her say so to one of our neighbors when I was very little, and she thought I was asleep."

"Lothlórien was indeed unique," Olórin confirmed, "but if its people seemed different, it was largely because they lived so close to places where the Enemy had strongholds. In times of peace, it was beautiful and warm and a very pleasant place to be, but by the time the two of you came into the world, it had become a fortress against the Shadow. I think she would have been welcome there, but knowing both the people of the Golden Wood and those of Lindon, I can understand why your mother would have had such fears. You see, then, why Aránayel is not a happy person. She was made to go live in a place where she felt different and outcast for far longer a time than your father and mother were acquainted. I believe she has learned things during her exile that will help her become a better person, but so long as she is made to live in a place where she feels lonely, she will not be able to make proper use of those skills. We can help her by overlooking her bitterness and doing what we are able to make her feel that she is not unwelcome among us. Do you think you can do this — carefully, so that she will not mistake kindness for mockery?"

Lére nodded first. "One of Mother's friends in Lindon was often cross and grumpy, but we always tried to be nice to her, so as not to upset Mother. I wouldn't've thought you'd *want* us to do that with Aránayel, since she's said so many nasty things about you, but if you'd told us this before we left Lady Nienna's house, we would have done it straightaway."

The Maia smiled. "Well, you haven't been impolite to her, so now is soon enough, so long as you remember that she will take it badly if she has any reason to believe you are doing this to make sport of her."

"We would never do that," Melui said, quite seriously. "Father told us to always be polite to Mother's friend, but one time, we made too much of a fuss over her, and she knew we were pretending

to like her. She was very upset, and got angry at Mother because she thought Mother had told us to do this because she really didn't like her. Afterward, we realized that we'd treated her badly, and upset Mother, too. We never did it again, and we won't do it now, Mithrandir. We like you, and we wouldn't want to hurt you by hurting Aránayel. We'll be careful."

Olórin's smile brightened. "I have known so few children of the Eldar in recent years, I had nearly forgotten how wise you can be at so young an age. I have no doubt at all that you will do your best, but take care that she does not learn that I asked this favor of you. She would also look upon that with displeasure, which could make the remainder of our time together most uncomfortable."

As he stood, brushing dust and bits of grass from his knees, he was glad that they had spoken quietly, and that he had been able to hear the sounds of Aránayel at work in the tent some yards away from where the horses were sheltered, clearly disinterested in anything but her current task. "Let us see how your dinner is coming, and if Aránayel would appreciate your help in preparing it," he suggested, collecting the gathered wood from the twins as the first drops of rain began to fall. "I know she will not permit it from me, but perhaps from you, she may take it as a sign that you are growing to accept her, which might sweeten her disposition all around."

Surprisingly enough, Aránayel was indeed willing to accept assistance from the twins. She was not far from finished with the meal preparations when they joined her, and thus she did not look upon their offer as an attempt to step in and do what she could not. She seemed fairly pleased with herself and her success, and was happy to display her handiwork for their praise and approval. Olórin noted with relief that the twins were indeed quite skilled at being polite and deferential without falling into condescension; he himself could not tell if their praise was fully real or partly feigned, for Aránayel *had* done well, no matter that the task was a simple one. He was inclined to believe their behavior was largely sincere, and so much the better.

While they finished readying the meal, he saw to it that the place in which they would sit was properly arranged, the ground cloths spread and any offending stones or twigs that might lie beneath them removed. Near the center of the tent, he set the stones for the fire that would keep the space inside warm and dry through the night. The rain was now falling in earnest; gusts of wind whistled about their shelter from time to time. He set the gathered wood into the ring of stones, and when it was arranged just so, the twigs and branches set above a layer of dry leaves and smaller sticks, he held his hands above it and spoke softly. Flame caught on the leaves and spread rapidly to the larger kindling, then licked up to embrace the firewood itself. Under his command, it burned only so quickly, enough to give warmth and light, yet not consume all its meager fuel before the night was spent. Melui and Lére watched, fascinated, as they and Aránayel brought the meal.

"Father said you know more about fire than anyone else in Middle-earth," Lére said, still staring until his sister nudged him back to work. They set the things they carried on the cloth before settling themselves on the ground as well. "Do you, Mithrandir?"

“In some ways, perhaps,” the wizard replied, accepting the plate Melui offered him with a gracious smile. “I know much of how it can be used for beneficial purposes, but Sauron was far more familiar with its destructive ends. I am quite glad that he will no longer trouble the people of Endor, so perhaps they might learn again how such things can be used for good rather than for evil. But I was not to remain to teach them. The customs of Lady Nienna’s house are somewhat different from those in Lórien,” he added, deliberately changing the subject, as the thought of what he had not been able to accomplish in Middle-earth saddened him. “Both peoples give thanks before they break bread at the evening meal, but in Lórien, the manner is not the same. Since you will likely be guests in Lord Irmo’s land for some time, would you like to begin to learn its ways before you arrive?”

Both children nodded enthusiastically, and when they were all settled — Aránayel seated atop the bundle of bedding they would use later in the evening, disliking the thought of sitting so near the chilly ground — Olórin sang the songs with which the inhabitants of Lórien, both Eldar and Ainu, gave thanks at the close of day. The twins listened closely, enchanted by the songs and delighted to know the words of the Elvish hymn, though they did not yet know the unusual tune. Aránayel also listened but did not participate, for in Nienna’s house such thanks were spoken rather than sung, and the words offered were not quite the same. Olórin pointedly focused his attention on the twins, so as not to discomfit his fellow Maia, but he could feel her eyes upon him all the while he sang. He could not tell if she watched with approval or disdain, but as she made no comment when he was finished, he knew at least that he had not accidentally angered her.

It was also clear to him that the children’s praise of their meal was not feigned or exaggerated; Aránayel had done well, and to have it noticed definitely pleased her. She did not make any great effort to join in their conversation — which was largely the children questioning the wizard about the part of Aman that was his home — but neither did she make ill-tempered remarks or attempt to change the subject. She was gathering information, Olórin realized at length, attempting to learn as much as she could about the country to which they were headed and its people without asking any direct questions that might make her appear ignorant. For her sake as well as the twins’, he answered the latter as thoroughly as he could.

When they finished their meal, the children hurried to collect the utensils from their elders. “You were kind enough to prepare everything,” Lére explained to Aránayel, “and we did press you to tell us tales of your home, Mithrandir. We can take care of this. It’s only fair, after all.”

Neither of the Maiar argued with them. Aránayel, however, cast a puzzled frown at the Istar. “Why do they call you that?” she asked while the twins wiped the dishes clean and returned them to the pack in which they had been stored. “Has no one told them your proper name?”

Olórin laughed, hastening to explain his mirth before she could think he was laughing at her. “Do any of us truly have proper names? Those we bear here in Aman were given to us by the Eldar long ago; few of us Maiar had any spoken names at all before then, and those we had for the Valar were descriptions of their purposes and powers, not names in the way the Quendi made them. Mithrandir was the name the Elves of Middle-earth gave to me when I first arrived there as one of the Istari, and it

is the name Melui and Lére first knew for me. To be honest, at the moment, I am more used to hearing it than Olórin, since no one in Endor knew me by that name. Mithrandir and Gandalf were the names I heard most often over the past two thousand years, and I see no reason to be reject them now. It seems suitable enough, even now, as I appear to be destined to continue wandering, for a time."

"But you don't look at all like you did in Middle-earth," Lére said, returning to the center of the tent now that their tasks were done. "You were *very* gray there, and very old, for a Man. Though if you're of the same people as Helyanwë and Aránayel and the others, I suppose you're really much older than we thought you were."

The wizard chuckled. "Yes, I'm afraid so, though I hope I wear my age better, here in the West."

Melui eyed him critically. "You look younger than Father, I think, even though you must be much older. But you aren't quite like the other Ainur we've met. Most of them look like our people, or like the humans, or sometimes like not much of anything at all. If your ears are like the halflings', does that mean the rest of you looks the way they do?"

Aránayel made a sound that said she felt this line of inquiry to be inappropriate, but Olórin laughed once again, kindly. "No, I'm afraid not. I grant that I'm not terribly tall, as my people are wont to be, but the hobbits are *much* smaller than I, and generally quite a bit rounder. You'll see what I mean when we reach Lórien. At the moment, I am sharing my house with one of the two halflings who came across the Sea with me. And I suspect he will be pleased to have a few people about who are his size rather than mine."

"I didn't know halflings sailed West, like the Elves," Lére noted settling near the fire in a comfortable sprawl. "I haven't seen anyone that small since we arrived, not even other children."

"Not many are born here," Olórin confirmed, "but hobbits ordinarily do not come to the West. The two who accompanied me are extraordinary, and since they gave so much of their own lives to help defeat Sauron, the Valar agreed to allow them to come here, to rest and be healed."

"Then they must be very special," Melui agreed, rather distractedly. She was standing near the fire, not far from where Olórin was still seated upon the ground. She had continued to study him while he spoke about halflings. "I've never seen anything quite like that," she said, pointing to the narrow fillet of crystal about his head. "It's lovely. May I see it?" She reached out as if to take it from his head, and the wizard involuntarily recoiled from her touch.

Seeing the dismay in the child's face, he hastened to clarify his unexpected behavior. "I'm sorry, Melui, I didn't mean to startle you. I was told by Lord Eru not to remove it until He Himself instructed me to do so. I think no harm would come of it if I did so for only a moment, but I do not wish to disobey Him in even the smallest way."

Lére's eyes widened. "Eru Ilúvatar?" he said, amazed. "He gave it to you? Why?"

More than just the twins were interested in hearing his answer; Aránayel appeared keen to know it, though she hid it more cleverly. Olórin smiled, wistfully. “For many reasons, I suspect, but one in particular. Your people do not become ill as the mortals do, but have either of you ever been injured?”

Both golden heads nodded as one. “Oh, yes,” Melui said. “We were both hurt in the shipwreck — not as badly as Mother and Father and the others, but it was many days before we recovered. My leg and my arm were broken, and I think Lére was bruised all over. It was perfectly dreadful, because it hurt so much and we were both so scared.”

“And with good reason. You remember how I was in Middle-earth; I was still a Maia in spirit, but I was required to live in the body of a mortal. I did not die or fall ill as they do, but I was able to be injured, in ways that neither they nor your people could be hurt. When I returned to Aman, after all my tasks were done, I was already quite injured and weakened, but I did not know it, because living as a mortal had dimmed my memories and made me forget much of the life I had known before I was sent as one of the Istari. My condition was not at all my fault, and Lord Eru apparently had wished that I never know how badly I had been hurt, so he gave this to Lord Manwë to give to me shortly after I surrendered my mortal body and returned to my life as a Maia. Lord Eru made it to be a means by which I would be strengthened and slowly healed, so subtly that I would never notice the depth of my weakness. But Lord Manwë had not understood this when he gave it to me; he only knew that it was Lord Eru’s gift, a token of His approval for a job well done. I had no notion that I was meant to wear it for a long time, so when I returned to my home in Lórien, I resumed what I thought would be my ordinary life — and a thing such as this, beautiful as it is, was not suitable as everyday wear for one of my station, or so I thought. So I took it off and put it away, and became weaker with each passing day, until I very nearly faded to nothing. It was the cleverness of the halfling with whom I now share my home and the grace of Lord Eru that saved me. Without their help, I would have dwindled to all but nothing, and lost all power and presence in this world.”

Both of the children paled. “You mean, you couldn’t even have been saved like Lord Ulmo saved us?” Lére asked, incredulous and more than a bit horrified. “No one would have helped you?”

“Oh, no,” they were instantly assured, “they did try, all the Valar, but what was wrong with me was something they had never seen before, and had no idea how to help, or heal. Lord Eru would not have let me fade into nothingness — He said as much when He spoke to us about what had happened — but if the answer had not been found in time, I would have been forced to leave Arda, and all that I love here. In the end, all was well, and the Valar learned a valuable lesson from it.”

Aránayel made a softly impolite sound. “And this does not trouble you, that you were made the pawn in some wretched game so that the Valar might learn what they should have learned more than three ages ago?”

Olórin closed his eyes for a moment, sighing softly before replying. “We are all pawns of one sort or another, Aránayel, whether we wish it or not. We of the Maiar serve the Valar here in Arda, and all of us serve Lord Eru in our own fashions. There is no disgrace in doing what we were created to do.

I wish with all my heart that the Valar *had* learned the lessons of looking beyond their immediate goals to what might result from their actions in some more distant future, for if they had done so long ago, many more people than I might have been spared a great deal of suffering. What was not done by them when Melkor first began to wreck havoc with the formation of the world hurt every creature born thereafter, for his works could not be undone, nor the poisons of evil removed from the world. We call Aman the last remnant of Arda Unmarred, but it is not wholly without blemish. Blood has been spilled here, evil has been wrought here, and even the Undying Lands bear the mark of Melkor's malice. I do indeed wish the Valar had realized the dangers he presented when they might have dealt with him without posing a risk to the inhabitants of Endor and its very lands. Lord Eru was right when He said that they should have taken care of Melkor's threat and trusted Him to make certain no lasting harm would come to Arda because of their struggle. Had they done so, the Eldar could have remained in Middle-earth, and it would never have been so deeply saturated by evil that it cannot be removed until the world is remade. Melui and Lére would not have lost their parents and friends in an unfortunate shipwreck, for there would have been no War to drive them from their homes — indeed, there would have been no need at all for them to sail West, for all the Eldar would have remained in Endor, as Lord Eru had intended from the first. They would not have been secluded here, nor would those such as Fëanor have ever found need to revolt against the Valar, chafing under restrictions that would not have been. So yes, Aránayel, it troubles me that the Valar did not learn these things until my own existence in Arda was threatened, but not because I am angry that their short-sightedness brought me harm. It troubles me because of all the people who have suffered and died, and will yet suffer and die, because their blindness made of Arda something it should not have been."

Aránayel favored him with a sidelong glance, her eyes glittering in the firelight. At length, she sniffed. "You are more forgiving than I would have been, but that has always been your way." From her timbre, it was not really a compliment. "I heard the tales of what happened to you, early this spring. It was obvious something had stirred up the Valar when Nienna was not seen in her house for many weeks. I don't care to imagine what such an affliction must feel like, but it seems to me that Lord Eru does not think very highly of you if He used such a feeble means to effect your cure."

Olórin shrugged. "I do not know precisely what He thinks of me, but He did offer to set matters right in an instant. It was I who refused the favor."

One auburn brow lifted. "Why? You spent two millennia in a fettered existence by the command of the Valar, who were told *not* to command anyone to take on that burden. Why continue to live this way when it's not necessary?"

"Because in a way, it is. Every time I speak with any of the Valar and see their glance touch upon Lord Eru's gift, I know they are remembering all the things they have done wrong, and all they have yet to learn. And for myself, every day that I know His gift is there, I remember what it felt like to be so terribly weak and helpless. It not only gives me greater compassion for those less fortunate than I, it also helps me to better appreciate all that I have and all that I am. And it also reminds me to be more patient, for most things worth having do not come swiftly. Is that truly so terrible?"

His eyes were fixed on Aránayel as he asked his question; the light of the softly flickering fire cast a sheen like strangely golden moonlight over their normally vivid blue. The darker Maia's own eyes narrowed, but not from anger or irritation. She clearly did not know how to answer. Fortunately, she was spared the need when Melui spoke instead.

"I shouldn't think so," the girl said, her own queries more than answered. "I think it would be very nice to know that Lord Ilúvatar cares for you enough to not want you to ever know that you were hurt, even if things didn't quite turn out as He'd planned. Thank you for telling us about this, Mithrandir. We'd both wondered why Lady Nienna had been gone for so long late in the winter, and no one ever thought to explain it to us."

"Helyanwë would've," Lére opined around an expansive yawn. "If we hadn't gotten back our voices at the same time Lady Nienna returned. We spent so many days talking to everyone and telling them about ourselves after that, I don't suppose they were much interested in anything else."

"Perhaps so," Olórin agreed. "And now that you have heard that tale, and many others, I think it's time for both of you to sleep. Travel can be very tiring, especially when you have done very little of it. It has been less than a year for me since I last made a long journey in this fashion, and already I feel dreadfully out of practice."

Aránayel surrendered her ersatz couch so that the children could collect their bedding, her face still a picture of almost-concealed puzzlement. Olórin left the ground cloths in place so that they would provide another layer of protection from the damp grass and cold earth; he was checking the fire to make certain it would last through the night when Aránayel made a sharply unpleasant sound. "Were my bedclothes left behind?" she asked, noticing only now that the things she had been using as a seat belonged to the children. "I do not see them or the pack in which I sent them."

Before her temper could rise more than it had, Olórin tendered an answer. "I suspect it is with the others outside, secured under cover with the riding gear. I had no idea what was in your luggage, and since you made no mention of which things you wanted brought inside after we finished setting up the tent, I presumed you would find your rest in ways other than sleep."

She sniffed, as if catching a whiff of a repulsive odor. "I prefer to take my rest in comfort, not on hard ground or in cold rain. I came prepared, since I expected you would not. But I am *not* stepping out into that wretched storm to collect what should have been brought here in the first place."

The wizard closed his eyes for an instant rather than succumb to a whim to make a far more eloquent expression of exasperation in front of the twins, who were pretending not to listen. The rain was coming down heavily and the wind occasionally blew in stiff gusts, but by no means could the weather have been described as a storm. He carefully refrained from sighing. "Since the fault was apparently mine, I shall go fetch your things for you."

Lére made a very soft sound that Olórin knew was his way of saying that he felt Aránayel should fetch her own things, since any blame was truly hers, but he gave no further reaction, and Aránayel did not notice the boy's brief expression of displeasure, being too busy giving her fellow Maia instructions as to which items should be brought inside. When Olórin went to get them, he spared Lére a brief but pointed glance, warning him that sounds as well as words could prod the ill-tempered woman into anger. The boy accepted the reminder as just, then settled down to help his sister with their bedding as Olórin slipped out of the tent, quickly, so as not to let either the chill wind or the rain inside.

Although it was quite dark beyond the light of their small fire, the Istar was not troubled by it, nor by the wind and rain. For people to whom incarnate life was merely a temporary convenience rather than a necessity, senses such as sight were able to reach far beyond the ordinary vision of flesh and blood. Even in the guise of a human during his recent mission in Middle-earth, his sight had been keener than that of ordinary Men, though not always as sharp as that of the Elves. Here, even the First Born were blind by comparison, and he had no trouble at all making his way to the place where he had secured the rest of their gear. The weather was a mild nuisance, nothing more, for even if he had not recently experienced two thousand years of living far less comfortably, he had never really minded the mercurial moods of the weather, finding in them different harmonies of the Great Music with which they had begun so long ago. The horses, he noted, had found themselves a sheltered place on the lee side of a stand of hawthorn shrubs between the tent and the river, not far from the place where he had secured the tack and their remaining packs beneath a sturdy cloth designed to provide protection from the rain.

He soon found, however, that their steeds' choice of that particular place had produced one drawback: one of the beasts had accidentally dislodged one of the pegs he had used to secure the cloth, either by striking it heavily with one hoof or stepping upon it in the dark. Whatever the case, an entire corner of the securing rope had come loose, and the wind had pulled back a large section of the cloth, allowing the rain to fall unimpeded upon the gear that lay exposed. Naturally, the packs with Aránayel's things were at the top of that open area, off the muddy ground, but most vulnerable to the drenching rains.

Olórin groaned, not blaming either himself or the horses or even the weather for this turn of fortune, although he knew perfectly well how Aránayel would take it. He removed the items she had requested and then covered the remaining gear as quickly and securely as possible. As predicted, when he returned to the shelter, Aránayel was livid.

"Only a fool would leave his gear out in the elements when he knows a storm is coming," she snapped as soon as she opened the leather satchel and found that the cloth inside had been thoroughly soaked. She divided her furious glances equally between the waterlogged bedding and the equally waterlogged wizard, her expression showing considerably greater concern for the state of the cloth. "I told you to take care with my things, and so you put them where they would be trampled by horses and ruined by the rain?"

Many years ago, Olórin would have been upset by her ire and perhaps blamed himself for it, but as others had observed over the past few days, he was no longer the naive youth he had been in that

distant past. "I did nothing of the sort," he answered bluntly. "I took as much care as was possible with *all* of our gear, and I most certainly did not leave it exposed to the elements, or where the horses would be apt to tread upon it if they sought shelter from the rain. That they went where they did was mere coincidence, and by no means did they trample and ruin *anything*. They dislodged one of the fastenings for the covering cloth completely by accident; what was exposed by the wind is merely wet, not ruined."

Her smoldering glare was wholly for him, this time. "And do you expect me to rest wrapped in blankets that are soaking wet?"

The Istar was generally a patient person, more so than his visible demeanor sometimes belied, but the one thing that could try his patience most quickly was foolishness, and Aránayel was giving a virtuoso performance. "I expect that you would want to set a better example than this!" he snapped back, his voice low for the sake of the children, but nonetheless as intense as the fire reflected in his eyes. "You may enjoy your pretentious manners, and your affectations of helplessness might win you a kind of attention that pleases you, but if you believe for a moment that I should feel great pity for these hardships you imagine you are suffering, you are sorely mistaken. I spent the last two thousand years living as a mortal, Aránayel — not *pretending* to do so, but actually existing from moment to moment and day to day as they do, in a body of true flesh with all the pains and cares and troubles that are a part of their normal life. I was so far diminished from what I truly am that I could only dimly remember what I had been here in Aman. I lived without a home or a permanent shelter of any kind, committed to a seemingly endless task that would not permit me to settle anywhere for more than a few months, at best. I was denied the use of all but the simplest of the abilities our people take for granted here in Aman, and I did not have the luxury of feigning to feel the discomfort of cold and rain and snow and hunger and weariness and injury, simply to invite the pity of others. Any moment you wish, you are free to ignore such things, because an incarnate life is something you have assumed by choice. If you have been foolish enough to revel in it to the point that you have forgotten how to use those powers with which you were gifted in your beginning, then I pity you for that, but not for this. Do not speak to me of such distress until you have spent ten times ten thousand nights sleeping upon the bracken in the wilds because you own no bed and literally have not the strength to take another step. Do not complain to me of mere dampness until you have tried to sleep soaked to the bone in rain so cold it might as well have been ice, because you did not have even the protection of a cloth roof above your head, nor the fuel to make a fire. You know naught of what it feels like to have worn the soles of your feet as thin as tissue from endless days of walking, to have blisters and sores and bruises and wounds inflicted upon your body which you cannot dispel with a thought, nor have you lived with your flesh burned from the sun and wind, or known the pain of true hunger and thirst. You have never felt what it is like to carry in you a heart and spirit weighed down from thousands of years of seeing the full depth of the harm the Enemy visited upon Endor and all who live there. When you *have* experienced all these things, and have at the last made some ordinary *effort* to repair this great tragedy that has befallen you tonight, *then* I will be interested in hearing your complaints — but *not* before!"

He had not planned to give so impassioned a response, but having said it, he did not regret it. Not only was the look of shock and incredulity on Aránayel's face worth it, he had realized that his patience with her selfishness was laudable only up to a point. He would encourage the twins to show

her kindness, and do so himself, but he would no longer stand by silent and allow her to take out her petty annoyance on him when he had done nothing wrong and the problem was not the disaster she was making of it. Forbearance was commendable, but not if it allowed an innocent to be undermined at heart by the selfish posturing of another.

As Aránayel struggled to frame a response — an unusually difficult matter for one so typically glib, for she was greatly angered and genuinely taken aback by his unexpectedly thorough reply — Olórin grasped one corner of the water-heavy cloth over which Aránayel was fretting, lifted it up, and spoke several words under his breath. In answer, heat rose from the ground below them, drawn from some place far below the surface where the blood of the world pulsed thick and hot. It blew like a searing wind across the desert, dry and so intense, the air rippled with it, even as it moved about them in a small but swift whirlwind. It touched all that was wet with rain and drew the dampness from it, sending it back down deep into the earth where it would return to the waters from which the world above drew nourishment. The Istar closed his eyes as he concentrated on his task; the movement of the air wrung the moisture from his own clothes and hair, drawing the folds of cloth more tightly about him and splaying his pale hair into a cloud of fine strands about his head. With his eyes shut, he did not notice the crystal of the circlet begin to glow and grow ever brighter as he worked, but as the others watched, they were forced to look away from the sudden brilliance lest they be blinded.

As abruptly as both heat and light flared, they faded. The air ceased to move, the warmth dissipated, the light dimmed; only the crackle and flicker of the low fire remained; no trace of the rain-soaked wetness lingered. Olórin returned the now dry cloth in his hand to Aránayel as he brushed aside the hair that had fallen across his face and into his eyes. He said nothing more to her, did not even take note of the way in which she stared at him. He turned to the twins, made certain they were properly settled in their bedrolls, then said goodnight to them and left the tent.

The rain was still falling heavily outside the canvas shelter, but Olórin preferred the company of the weather and the horses to that of his fellow Maia. He found a place amid the brush beneath the trees near the river bank, not far from where the four steeds were huddled, but sufficiently distant so that he would not disturb them during the remainder of the night. The rain did not fall so thickly among the sapling hawthorn branches, and their still-young thorns were less prickly than Aránayel's temper.

Sighing, Olórin looked up toward the clouds high above, not minding the fall of rain upon his face. He wondered not when the inclement weather would pass, but how he could defeat a Balrog, face the danger of Sauron's dungeons in Dol Guldur, spend over five hundred years quietly working against the darkness of Melkor, confront so many deadly perils that he had long since lost count of them, and yet be unable to deal with Aránayel. She was a riddle beyond his ability to solve. He prayed instead that he could somehow find the strength to survive the remainder of their journey to Lórien, and weather whatever new storms of her making might lie ahead.

To be continued....