

# Twice Blessed

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## Chapter XII

*Patience makes lighter what sorrow may not heal.*

The twins were so fascinated by their first meeting with a hobbit, they scarcely noticed the passing time. They seemed to have a unending stream of questions for him, from everything concerning where the hobbits had come from to why they wore nothing on their oddly furry feet. Frodo happily indulged their curiosity, for it seemed that Aránayel shared it. She listened to their conversation quite raptly, and occasionally joined it with questions of her own. Not wanting to give her a reason to turn her interest where it might cause trouble, he was reluctant to end their chat to clear away the remains of tea and see to other preparations for the evening. Fortunately, Olórin and Ványalos had joined them well before Frodo felt it was time to clean up, and when he would have risen to tend to such matters, the two Maiar anticipated him and offered to take care of such things so that he could continue entertaining their guests.

Preparing for the evening was not an issue, as Frodo had taken the liberty of inviting the closest of their neighbors to come welcome the new arrivals as he himself had been welcomed on his first day in Lórien. Over the past two days, all was made ready, and now that the time had come, he had but to wait for those invited to arrive, each bringing with them some portion of the evening meal or refreshment as their gifts to the newcomers. Frodo had gone out of his way to make certain there would be things especially favored by young Elves, and had extended invitations those of the local Eldar he knew best, who could provide Elven delicacies for the twins, items with which Frodo was not terribly familiar. Ványalos had seen to the matter of inviting those of the local Maiar who were curious enough to meet Aránayel and either might somehow appeal to her or were willing to risk exposing themselves to her noted tempers for the sake of their friends.

“I still don’t quite understand where Hobbits came from,” Lére said after Frodo had indicated that they should remove themselves from the kitchen so that the others could clean up the remains of tea and ready things for the evening ahead. “Father and Mother taught us about the beginnings of the world even before we left Lindon, and since we went to stay in Lady Nienna’s house, Helyanwë and Aránayel have taught us things I don’t think any of the Elves in Middle-earth really knew — not with so many details, at least. They’re Maiar, you know, so they were *there* when all the tales happened, and didn’t have to hear about them in other ways.”

Frodo chuckled at the boy's still rather wide-eyed awe over the notion of what so many of the people in Aman really were, much more than they appeared to be on the surface. "Yes, I know, and some days, I have a bit of trouble grasping that, too — probably even more than you, since I'm a mortal. But I've told you as much as anyone in the Shire knows about where our people came from. It wasn't until quite recently that they started keeping records about such things, so all we know about the history of our people is what's left in a few very old stories and songs."

Lére frowned. "But the oldest stories — like the one about the Great Music — they talk about where the Elves and Men and even the Dwarves came from. Why don't they say anything about the Hobbits? Were they made like Lord Aulë made the Dwarves? Weren't they part of the Music, too?"

Frodo abruptly understood what the boy was asking. He realized that he did actually know the answer, but he also realized that he had no idea if this particular little detail of how Hobbits had come to be was something Aránayel knew. If she did not, he doubted it would be wise to mention it, at least now, when there might not be time for a full explanation. Surreptitiously, he glanced into the kitchen, and saw Olórin looking back at them, his expression dark. With a querulous look, Frodo asked the question on his mind, and the wizard shook his head, a quick but clear answer. The hobbit inclined his head ever so slightly, taking the hint. "I should think they were, somewhere," he said smoothly, with such amused confidence that Aránayel did not notice his moment of hesitance. "But we're a very small people, and since it seems that great benefit came from the fact that no one really noticed our presence for a very long time, I suspect Lord Eru may have wanted us to stay a sort of secret. Going unnoticed by the Big Folk for many, many years turned out to be a good thing, especially when it led some dreadfully evil people to think that because we were small and insignificant, we couldn't possibly do anything they considered important. And they were wrong."

Lére didn't seem entirely appeased by that answer, but it was more than enough for Melui. "Oh, yes, that *is* true. We'd heard horrible stories about the Dark Lord in Mordor and how he wanted to rule all of Middle-earth, even when we were very small. Lord Círdan had fought him and his people in great wars, and even though some folk thought we shouldn't hear such stories, he said it was better for us to know about that kind of evil, so we couldn't be tricked by it and could learn to resist it and defend ourselves against it. You learned that, too, didn't you? Mithrandir told us you'd gone to Mordor on a great journey, almost all by yourself, to destroy the Dark Lord's Ring. That's terribly brave," she added, with considerable awe.

Frodo smiled wryly as he straightened the cushions on one of the most comfortable chairs near the central hearth in the large great room, and gestured for Aránayel to sit herself there. "So many people have said. I suppose it was, but I have to admit, I didn't feel very brave when I was doing it. If I hadn't been so afraid failing, spoiling the world for everyone else and disappointing all the folk who had put their trust in me, I don't think I would have made it beyond Lothlórien. It was very difficult to go even that far, after..."

The halfling felt his throat suddenly close, stealing his voice. During the first months of his residence in Aman, he had thought a great deal about the war and the quest and all that had happened afterward. At first, his memories had centered largely on his own wounds and suffering, but when he had

realized that he was not the only former Ring-bearer in Valinor who had taken great and lasting harm from the evils that had besieged Middle-earth — indeed, that the worst of his own injury was in the past, while that of the last of the Istari had only then been discovered — his worries had turned elsewhere. He had then thought a great deal about all Olórin had suffered during his many years in Middle-earth, forgetting in his worry his own troubles, and that profound concern for his old friend had in turn allowed his own wounds to heal. In the weeks since Olórin had regained his life and his strength through the grace of Lord Eru — a blessing he had been given twice now, the hobbit realized — Frodo had been grateful to put all of those terrible memories behind him. Yet just now, thinking of the quest and the land where he had stopped for a time after escaping Moria, once the home of the twins' father, he could not help but recall his days there, and how all the peace and healing Lothlórien had to offer had not been able to take away the grief he had felt. There was no reason for him to experience it again, since the friend he had lost in Moria was now quite alive and well, but he hadn't realized how much he remembered Lothlórien not as a place of beauty and rest, but of sorrow. And of a sudden, he realized that he did not want the children to know of those unhappy memories.

Fortunately, he was saved from the need to devise a diversion by a rather loud snort from Léré, who plopped himself down on the bench beneath the window overlooking the garden. "I think everyone in the whole world has been to Lothlórien, except us!" he declared, annoyed.

Frodo was grateful to him for the interruption, although he did glance once more into the kitchen, simply to reassure himself that the friend he had almost lost twice was indeed very much alive. He was, in fact, spared the need to answer at all by a mildly petulant voice from that same direction. "Not everyone," Ványalos told the boy. "I haven't once been permitted to leave Aman in all the years since it was made, and there is naught in Middle-earth that I have seen with my own eyes. Others have told me that this land of Lórien is much like that of Endor, but they have also said that the resemblance is but slight, and that Lórien is more closely akin to other parts of the eastern lands. And still others have said that both are true, and neither. Who am I to believe?"

"All of them," Frodo said with a laugh. "I have not seen much of Aman yet, but I am at least familiar with Lórien, now, and I saw more of Middle-earth than I ever thought I would, in the years before I left. I have been to both the woods of Lothlórien and those around Lake Lórellin; I have walked through all the hills and dales of the Shire, and those of the Hill Country; I have crossed many rivers of Middle-earth, and ridden beside all the streams of Lórien; and I have looked across both the great grasslands to the south, and the plains of Rohan. All the things that are here are also in Middle-earth, but not in one place, nor even in places very near to each other. Although I do admit, I'm glad I have had a chance to see *all* of them. I could not have appreciated how very beautiful the Blessed Realm is if I had never seen more than just a tiny corner of Middle-earth."

"I wish we had been able to go traveling, before we sailed West," Melui said with a sigh. "Father promised we would, but we never had a chance to go farther than the White Towers, not even into the land of the halflings — the Shire," she corrected herself, smiling apologetically at their small host. "I don't ever remember hearing anyone in Lindon call it that, Master Frodo. Do you know why?"

The hobbit shrugged. "I don't know for certain, but it doesn't seem that many of the Big Folk called it that, save for those in Bree, or people like Olórin, who visited from time to time and stayed long enough to get to know us. To be honest, I don't believe I'd ever heard of anyone who knew we existed who hadn't at least met a hobbit once or twice, as Lord Elrond met Bilbo when he traveled east with the Dwarves. We only saw Elves passing through on their way to the Havens, and Dwarves and Men would go by on their way to other destinations, but Olórin was really the only Big Person I'd ever heard of who was interested enough to want to know more about us, and stayed to learn."

"He has always been intrigued by small things that interest few others," Aránayel said in a tone that for her was meant to be good-humored. "I have never understood why, but it does seem that from time to time, his interest gleans things of some value that went overlooked."

Even though he understood that she did not intend her words to be taken negatively, Frodo felt the prickle of irritation on his friend's behalf, and his own. Somehow, he found the wherewithal to remain polite. "As a friend of mine once told me, it is not always a bad thing, to be overlooked. If my people had not been overlooked by Sauron as too small and weak to be a threat to him, I could never have fled the Shire, or taken the Ring into Mordor to be destroyed. He dismissed us as insignificant, an annoyance, at best — but Gandalf — Olórin — did not. I used to wonder why he bothered with us hobbits, but I don't anymore. We're much the same, after all. Sauron overlooked him, too — to his own ruin."

Aránayel's expression was one of skepticism, but the smile she pasted over it artfully concealed her disdain — whether it was for the wizard or Hobbits or both, Frodo could not tell. "So I have heard," she said mildly. "Sauron knew the use of power, but not as much of patience, and I have come to see that in that regard, I have also long underestimated Olórin. Being in the service of Lord Námo and Lady Nienna has taught me more of the value of patience than I grasped, long ago. Swiftiness and efficiency are commendable in many things, but some matters cannot be hurried so, and haste will ruin them, as even the finest wine is harsh and bitter if tasted too soon."

She sounded quite sincere. Frodo was uncertain how he should respond, since he did not know if what seemed earnestly spoken was the truth or a contortion of it designed to beguile those who listened. Once again, interruption spared him, this time the arrival of the first of the evening's guests. Relieved, Frodo glanced out a window and saw that a gray sunset was approaching, along with the rising wind and coming rain. Over the past week, he had begun to notice the signs of it, as the other residents of Lórien somehow seemed to know precisely the right moment, without fail. There was somewhat more than a quarter hour before the time arrived, and those who had been invited were promptly on schedule, neither too soon to make ready, nor too late.

This first group were Elves from nearby, ones whom Frodo knew quite well. They knew their way around the house and needed no assistance, other than to be introduced to the newcomers. The remainder of the guests appeared in a steady stream over the next ten minutes, and shortly before the sun set, all were present, had given greeting to the visitors, and were ready to begin their traditional welcome of the night.

The custom was now familiar to the twins and Aránayel, as they had heard the songs on each of the evenings when they had camped in the wild, but there was a world of difference between hearing it sung

by one voice, and hearing it sung by many. The children were entranced by all the fair voices, blending and weaving together in glorious harmonies that pierced the heart, too caught up in it to take part, even though they knew the tunes and the Elven words. Aránayel also listened, but did not participate. Frodo wondered at this, since she had not been at all chary when it came to speaking of her singing ability in reply to the halfling's inquiries. He had thought that she would surely want to demonstrate how beautifully she could sing, better than all the others assembled, but she did not so much as open her mouth.

He was half-tempted to ask why she had kept silent, but as the song drew to its close, the answer came to him. She would not sing in chorus with others, only alone, so that all attention would be on her singing, and all the praise her own. That was the way of the wind, to sing its own tune above all others, and carry on, heedless of the world about it. He had long known that the tale Ványalos had once told him about Aránayel being the voice of the wind was not meant to be taken literally, but even without having heard her sing one note, the halfling understood how such a comparison had come to be. His curiosity appeased, he turned back to sing with the others, marveling as always how every day could end in such beauty.

As the last notes were sung and the echoes of the voices faded, the rain began to fall, nature's music taking up the song, for the time being. Several of the guests laughed at the appropriate timing of the rain, and all then turned to break bread together.

Though he remained alert for signs of trouble, as the evening progressed, Frodo saw none. He did note that Aránayel's behavior toward Olórin was vastly more congenial than he would have expected, given their past history — which the halfling had no reason to doubt was every bit as bad as he had been told — but the wizard had his own methods of keeping her at a safe distance, largely by using the refuge of his harp. The love of music that was so prevalent in Lórien won immediate approval from the twins, who happily listened and participated in all they could. Lére was eager to demonstrate his skill with his pipe, especially to Failon the baker, who shared his love of such instruments and had cheerfully praised the boy after he had played along with a song he knew. Melui was fascinated by the beautiful voices of all the Maiar, as well as Olórin's harp, which she had been told had somehow come to him through their cousin in Alqualondë. Frodo noted that particular interest with mild amusement.

"I've loved it since the first time I heard it, too," the hobbit admitted some hours later, after she mentioned how much she enjoyed the sound of the tall harp. "I'm sure that someday, you'll be able to master such an instrument, if you like, but I'm afraid I've grown as tall as I ever will, and I could no more learn to play such a thing than I could sprout wings and fly. But I think I'd like to try to learn to use a smaller one. I feel quite useless most evenings here in Lórien, since I haven't much of a voice by local standards, and I never was taught the proper use of any instrument at all. I'd never really seen a harp until I left the Shire, though Bilbo told me all about the ones he'd seen and heard during his travels with the Dwarves. I heard many different sorts when I visited Rivendell and Lothlórien and the great cities of the south, in Gondor and Rohan. I thought they made the most beautiful sounds I'd ever heard, and that is what I would choose to learn to play, if I could."

Olórin, who had overheard his remarks, looked at his old friend with surprise. "I had no idea you were interested in such a thing, Frodo. Why didn't you mention it before?"

Frodo's smile quirked crookedly. "Actually, I *have* mentioned it before, most recently at the gathering here the night before you went to Lady Nienna's house. I suppose you didn't hear — not surprising, since I don't believe I ever spoke of it to you directly. I didn't want you to think I was asking to impose on your kindness for this. You've done so very much for me already."

The wizard dismissed that claim with a soft snort and a broad gesture. "Hardly anything, in my opinion. And this certainly would be no imposition. Other people ask far more difficult things of me, with less claim upon my favor, and if I do not turn them away, I surely wouldn't refuse you, my dear old friend. If this poses any difficulty at all, it might be in finding a suitable instrument for your use, since while I am able to play well enough, I have never crafted such a thing."

"Well, perhaps in time, we'll find something appropriate. There's no need to hurry, after all. I was expressing an interest, not making a demand. I have plenty of other things to keep me occupied, and I'm sure when the time is right, a solution will present itself. It always seems to, doesn't it?"

Olórin laughed at the drollness in his tone. "Yes, it does at that. And when the time comes, I would be more than happy to teach you. But I do admit, I never had the slightest inkling that such things were of interest to you. Were you always inclined this way, or is it more recent development?"

Frodo grinned in return. "More recent, I should say. Singing with my friends in the Shire was one thing; hearing the Elves in Rivendell and Lórien, and the minstrels in Gondor, was quite another. I was content to listen in those places because I knew that I was only a temporary guest, and would soon be going back to my own country. Here, this *is* my country, or it has come to be, and I've begun to feel somewhat backward and inadequate because I *can't* participate in what is such an important part of everyday life as everyone else does, certainly not as well, even as a singer. After giving it some thought, I've decided that I would like to learn the use of *some* instrument, so that even if I can't contribute as beautifully as everyone else in Lórien, I can at least contribute more."

"You have contributed more than your share, Master Frodo," was Failon's opinion, offered as he allowed to more closely inspect his silver flute. "Aside from the gracious hospitality you have shown us, which your people have raised to an art not even the highest of the Elves can match, you've provided us with songs of your people, which are new and a great delight to those of us who have had no chance to meet any of your folk — which, I would say, would be all of Lórien, save Olórin and Glorfindel, and Glorfindel has admitted that his familiarity with hobbits is quite limited. Of course, I suspect that Olórin knew your people well enough before first he met you, seeing how you are, after a fashion, his Song made manifest."

Both wizard and hobbit favored him with sharp looks, disturbed by the casual way he had mentioned that particular matter. It was common knowledge among the residents of Lórien, or had been since not long after Olórin had returned and Frodo had decided to make Lórien his home for now, but they did not know how far it had spread beyond this part of Aman. Before either of them could change the subject, Melui pursued it. "Is that true, Mithrandir?" she asked. "I thought Lord Eru sang about Elves and mortals all by Himself. Did you try to do what Lord Aulë did when he made the Dwarves?"

“Not at all,” Olórin said, glad that it was her inquiry he could answer and not Aránayel’s, for he knew by the burning sensation of her eyes boring into the back of his head that she had heard Failon’s comment. “I have made nothing of my own here in Arda; I certainly could not have dreamed of attempting such a thing as Lord Aulë did. Nor could I have conceived of any of the Eruhíni when I sang my part in the Great Music. I was so young and ignorant, I could barely comprehend any part of my own existence, much less imagine something as wonderful as Lord Eru’s children of Arda. There is something of my song in the *nature* of the Hobbits, for it seemed that Lord Eru wished for them to be a small and humble people who loved a simple life and had strength that could only be seen in times of great difficulty. My song was about such things, not about Hobbits in particular. It was Lord Eru’s choice to use that part of what I sang in fashioning the halflings, and truly, I knew nothing of it until I went to Endor on my mission as one of the Istari. Even then, for many years, my only thought was that I loved the Little Folk because they reminded me of certain aspects of myself, and their home was much like the one I had left behind here in Aman. I didn’t know the truth until Lord Eru Himself told me, when I was sent back after death to finish my work. It is a great delight to me, but no more significant than that. The choice, and the creation, was Lord Eru’s, not mine.”

“Even so, it is a unique circumstance,” Eäron noted. The servant of the lord of the waters had been bringing refreshment to those seated nearby, and had heard the conversation. “The Eruhíni are wholly the One’s creation — but for this single exception. Oh, I know, He did not make the halflings *because* of what you sang, Olórin, but there must have been something in your Song that pleased or delighted Him in a singular fashion, for Him to have used it and no other of our music in the making of His children.”

“I have always thought so,” Eäron’s spouse, Lantara, agreed. “I have heard the jests some have made about Lord Eru having a special fondness for you because you are the youngest of us, Olórin, and though I have laughed with them as you do, in my heart, I believe they are right.”

When he turned his head toward Lantara, the wizard saw from the corner of one eye how intently Aránayel was following the conversation. Though he successfully hid the reaction, inside he winced, wishing this had not come up in her presence. “And I have laughed at such things because I’m quite certain it is no more than a whimsey of my overactive imagination. I don’t deny that I have long felt it to be so, that I was the last of our kind to be born, but Lord Eru has never confirmed it as truth.”

Ványalos, who had missed the early part of the discussion while fetching refreshment for his hosts, clicked his tongue in scolding. “Not so, *pityandil*. I was there when He visited this house to heal you, and you know as well as any of us that He would not have called you His littlest one if this is not what He had meant. For you are far from the smallest of our people in size, even the Eruhíni. We know for a fact that all of us did not spring forth from the One’s thought in the same instant. If Melkor came first, someone had to come last. Melkor knew that he had been the first, so why should you not know that you were the last? For you have always felt this, have you not?”

Olórin did not even try to deny what he knew to be true, but while he was trying to find a way to change the subject, Lantara continued. “Just so,” she said, inclining her head to Ványalos in thanks for his support. “I have watched the offspring of the Eldar who live here in Lórien, and though the parents do not attempt to force the choices of their children, they all hope that their young ones will grow to do great

things. They are disappointed to watch them fail, and take great joy in seeing their successes. And they have a way of sensing potential in them that their children cannot see in themselves. You were a different person before we entered Arda, and you have changed and grown a great deal since, more than most of our folk, who are content to fulfill the one purpose for which they came to Arda. If Lord Eru saw that in you more than in any of the rest of us, and was pleased by it, why should He not wish to give such qualities to His children of this incarnate world? You are what you are, Olórin, as are all of us, and what you are is no more than the potential Lord Eru placed in you when He created you. You did nothing more than live up to it, which seems to be very much the same potential he gave to His halfling children. For you are also humble and simple, but have great strength that lays quiet until needed."

"And what of it?" the wizard said distractedly, appearing to take great interest in tuning his harp. "It is also said that Melian taught the nightingales to sing, yet was she responsible for the beauty of their voices? Of course not. She is their friend, that much is true, but she did not make them as they are. If we are all a part of Lord Eru's thought, each unique unto ourselves, why should we not occasionally see the ways in which the things we are were reflected in His making of Arda?"

"A reasonable point," Eäron agreed. "Forgive us if we have been annoying you with this, Olórin, but since we have had a chance to meet two of the little people, we Maiar of Lórien have felt a certain... pride, I suppose you might say, in seeing with our own eyes and senses the One's hand at work. Much of what Arda is is the handiwork of the Valar, beyond any doubt. The stars, the skies, the seas, the mountains, the birds and beasts and trees and plains and the wind.... These were their parts of the Music, the great themes, for which we Maiar but provided embellishments. Ossë and Uinen stir and calm the tides and storms of the seas, but the waters are still Ulmo's. Arien and Tilion guided the sun and the moon in their courses until the world was bent, but they did not make them; that was the work of Yavanna and Nienna and Aulë. Melian's song is echoed by the nightingales, but she did not give them voices, only a sound to imitate, even as the echo of Aránayel's voice is in the wind. We are servants, assistants to the great artists, not artists ourselves, and not even the Valar had a hand in the making of the Eruhíni, save for what Aulë did by mistake that Lord Eru preserved and gave true life out of pity. Yet here are the halflings, a folk we had never met during the ages in which we walked abroad in Endor, come but lately to the notice of the world to shake the towers of the mighty not with war and battle but with steadfast persistence, and hope. From afar, we marveled at this, and our wonder did but grow all the more once we had met them. Does it not strike you as a splendid irony, Olórin, that of all that has been done in the past three ages to conquer Sauron, the one plan that at last achieved success did not do so through the Eldar who had been tutored by our own people, nor the Atani who had been their students, nor even the Dwarves who came about through the impatience of Aulë? Victory came from the hands of a quiet little people whose nature was drawn from the Song of a mere Maia — and he the youngest of us all, at that. You may dismiss this as a coincidence, but none of the rest of us believe it. It was, as you say, Lord Eru's whim to do this, but it seems to us quite satisfying to know that He gave as much heed to one of *our* Songs as He did to those of the mighty. Does it offend you that others of your people take some pleasure from this?"

Olórin tried not to grimace, unwilling to explain his real reason for wishing this conversation would end: that he did not want such things discussed in front of Aránayel, who was listening intently and far too likely to misinterpret such attention. All this apparent support and approval given him because of what seemed to be special favor on Lord Eru's part would do nothing to discourage her manipulative ways. "No,

it doesn't offend me," he said mildly. "I do realize that much of what our people have done and yet do for Arda goes unnoticed by the Eruhíni. The songs and tales of the Eldar speak much of what the Valar have done, but little of the Maiar, and among the Atani, even the memory of what was done by the greatest of the Ainur has begun to fade. Few of them are even aware that the Maiar exist. I can understand why Lord Eru saw fit to use a part of what I sang in making the hobbits, and I am no less amazed by it than anyone, but His work is what is worthy of notice, not my song, for it was but an echo of the music of His thought within me. Take pleasure in that if you will, but do not give me credit for a vision that was truly His, not mine."

"A very sensible suggestion," Frodo agreed, favoring Eäron in particular with a scolding glance. "I must say, if we were back in Hobbiton and I was the master of this house, I would have to ask you to leave straightaway. Is it customary in Aman for guests to badger their host about matters that clearly are not comfortable subjects for public discussion? We call such things 'airing the dirty laundry,' and while this could hardly be called dirty, we consider it simple politeness to abide with our host's wishes."

Both Eäron and his spouse accepted the just rebuke, as did Failon. "Then I beg your pardon for being the one to bring it up," he said to both the halfling and the wizard. "I'm afraid that I *have* been spending rather too much time in the company of Ványalos of late, and have acquired bad habits that would likely have kept me here in the West, even if I had wished to return to Endor."

Ványalos snorted indignantly. "If you acquire bad habits, blame them on yourself and not the company you choose to keep, Failon. Your choices are your own, not mine. And I have lately done my best to improve my behavior, so I can scarcely be held accountable for such a thing."

Frodo laughed. "He *is* telling the truth, you know," he told the Elven baker. "I thought he was quite the most terrible rogue I had ever met when I first came to Lórien, but ever since the day Lord Eru appeared looking like *him*, Ványalos has been more... I hesitate to say dignified, since I don't believe he knows the meaning of the word, but definitely better mannered. Which is undoubtedly for the best, since he spends as much time here of late than he does in his own house or in service to Lord Irmo. I for one wouldn't want to see him teaching such things to two youngsters."

"There are indeed more important things for them to learn," Aránayel said, speaking for the first time since the conversation had begun. "The hour grows late, the day has been long, and even the children of the Eldar require proper rest. I was sent to be of assistance in caring for them, and I think perhaps they have had enough merriment for one evening."

Melui made a face of disappointment, while her brother grimaced outright. "It's not *that* late," he protested. "And Mithrandir promised he would teach us a new song that I could play on my pipe and Melui can sing, without needing weeks of practice. Everything I've heard tonight is either too hard to learn so quickly, or I've known it since I was a babe."

"There will be time for that another day," Aránayel said, unmoved by his words.

The boy frowned at her. "There's *always* time for everything 'another day'," he grumbled, making it quite clear that this was something he had heard from Aránayel before, never to his liking, and often with the promise conveniently forgotten.

Olórin sighed, understanding both sides. Aránayel had never taken well to having her authority questioned, but he sympathized with Lére's feelings of betrayal, receiving promises that were never kept, or easily forgotten or broken. "I shouldn't wish to go back on my word," he told both of them, "and I gave it in good faith. If I do this now and not another day, Lére, will you go along to bed, without further fuss? Both of you?" he added, his glance including Melui.

The twins nodded solemnly. Aránayel's expression grew tight, and an unpleasant light gleamed in her eyes, but she said nothing. The wizard was content with that reaction, since he knew far better how to deal with her ill temper than her solicitousness.

He put her out of his mind and focused on the children instead. "This is a song I'm quite sure you don't know, as I believe it has never been sung outside the Blessed Realm, and even here, not often outside Lórien. The tune is simple enough, and there are sufficient verses so that you should be able to learn it quickly. There's no reason you need have it mastered and memorized tonight, so once you've heard it, you may go over it in your dreams and work on it again in the morning."

They accepted his stipulations without protest, causing Frodo to marvel at their apparent maturity. Hobbit children of a similar age could be much less cooperative, from what he had seen of the youngsters in both Buckland and in Hobbiton, and from what he recalled of himself as a child. Not that hobbit lads and lasses were ill-mannered; quite the opposite, in general. But most were high-spirited, full of a rather un-Elven kind of energy. Also, perhaps because bargaining in the marketplace was something many hobbits enjoyed almost as a kind of game or sport, their children often learned the skill at quite a young age. They were likely to attempt it upon their elders, cajoling or complaining until they were allowed whatever the adults about them had not wanted to permit. Of course, Frodo had been told that while Elven children grew more slowly in body, their minds did so much more quickly, and he supposed that this pair had also experienced quite enough in their short lives to make them more mature and better behaved than most.

As Frodo reflected on this intriguing difference between the two races, the twins disposed themselves to listen, eagerly, as Olórin began to sing. He sang at first without accompaniment, his baritone resonant and clear, so that the youngsters could hear the melody alone and thus learn it more easily. Soon, after the children had picked up enough to hum or play with the tune, he had all manner of accompaniment, as the other guests who had been listening joined in, creating intricate harmonies of voice and instrument to a song they all knew, both well and with fondness:

*Before the light of Sun or Moon  
Or silver star-shine gleamed on high,  
Before the Firstborn children woke,  
And ere the eldest of them spoke,  
Two Lamps did grace the sky.*

*The ancient Smith put forth his craft  
To fashion orbs of wondrous sight  
That She who lit the stars would bless  
And take their crystal comeliness  
To fill with radiant light.*

*Two pillars tall the Smith then raised  
Amid the deep and boundless sea  
So that the Lamps, once settled there,  
Would shine throughout the lofty air  
Upon the world still free.*

*The Elder King spoke clear the words  
To hallow both ere they were placed.  
Thus lifted high upon the stone  
Both Illuin and Ormal shone  
And all of Arda graced.*

*Yet as the springtime blossomed bright,  
Not all who saw the Lamps were gay.  
The anger of the Dark One grew;  
His heart burned hot, until he knew:  
That light he must betray.*

*Then from the shadows where he hid,  
He crept forth so to bend his might  
To topple both the pillars high,  
To hurl the Lamps down from the sky,  
To quench their sacred light.*

*Thus came the Spring of Arda's end,  
As darkness swallowed all the land.  
The broken orbs lay shattered, still,  
Their beauty marred by Evil's will.  
The Lamps no more would stand.*

*Yet in the shadow hope survived,  
In greater works yet to be made.  
In time, the Kindler stood on high  
To cast her blossoms o'er the sky;  
New netted stars she laid.*

*And when the Firstborn stirred at last,  
They saw not darkness, but the glow  
Of brightest stars. Their light did fall  
Upon the Eldar, fair and tall;  
Such beauty did they know.*

*Now in these days of Sun and Moon,  
The mem'ries of that time we keep  
When lamps we kindle in the night  
To guide us home with gentle light,  
To guard us as we sleep.*

"Very appropriate," Aránayel said with a small, inscrutable smile as the last of the music faded. Again, she had not participated, though she had listened. "Since sleep is what you two youngsters promised to do when the song was finished. I take it a place has been prepared." She looked to Olórin for an answer.

He in turn glanced at Frodo, who nodded. "Yes, of course. I hope it's not inappropriate for them to share a room. There was more than enough space for two beds in the room Bilbo used when he was here, but not enough rooms to provide private quarters for each of them."

"That's all right, Master Frodo," Melui assured him as they climbed to their feet again. "We shared a room in Lady Nienna's house, because we felt more comfortable that way. We did back in Lindon, too. I don't think we've ever had rooms of our own."

"Just as long as we don't have to share the bed," Lére said with a snort. "Melui steals the covers, and she can't stay still."

She wrinkled her nose. "That's because you kick like a mule."

"I do not!"

"You certainly do...!"

Frodo clicked his tongue, interrupting the beginnings of what looked to be a delaying-tactic quarrel. "And here I was just thinking how mature Elven children can be," he chided, rolling his eyes most expressively. "What a disappointment to discover I was wrong!"

A ripple of subdued laughter echoed about the room, coming largely from the various Elven guests, but also from a few who were well acquainted with youngsters of the Eldar. Both of the twins winced and flushed over having so embarrassed themselves; Olórin, smiling, came to their rescue as he set aside his harp and rose to his feet. "No more than the disappointment I felt when a certain hobbit once told me of an intelligent and well-mannered lad who just happened to be his nephew. And the very first time I met him, he had all sorts of rude and impudent questions to ask that were, quite frankly, none of his business.

But I gave him a second chance, because he seemed like a lad with promise, and in the end, I was quite glad I did. Come now," he said to the twins while Frodo's cheeks reddened at the wizard's apt anecdote, "I fulfilled my promise, and it is time for you to fulfill yours. I daresay you needn't worry about missing much, for if I know my friends and neighbors, it won't be long before they start suggesting that I go off to rest as well."

Both reassured and grateful that their potentially rude behavior had been forgiven, the youngsters went in the direction he indicated, toward the side of the house that held the sleeping rooms. As he followed them, Olórin noticed that Aránayel was following him. He threw her a questioning glance over one shoulder.

She provided an answer before he could speak. "I was sent to be the children's tutor as well as to assist in their care, since you told Lady Nienna you felt you would need such help. If I cannot do the tasks for which I was sent, how am I ever to show her that I have done what is required of me?"

For a moment, Olórin said nothing, but merely looked at her with an unreadable expression; then, to Frodo's surprise, he nodded. "You're right, it would be unfair to keep you from the duties you were given. Come, then, I will show all three of you where Melui and Lére are to stay while they are my guests. My house is not large, but none of you have had a chance to become familiar with it."

Aránayel followed the twins. When the wizard happened to look back in his direction, Frodo favored him with a deeply puzzled frown. But Olórin did not answer his unspoken query, his eyes merely flicking to Ványalos for an instant before he continued on after the guests.

When they were gone, and the others had returned to their own conversation or singing, the tall Maia spoke, smiling impishly. "Do not worry, Frodo, he knows what he is doing. What he feared was being left alone with Aránayel, and that he will not be, not with the children present and in so small a house with so many guests. She may have ulterior motives, but they will come to naught, at least for the moment. If there is any real concern still ahead this evening, it will be how Aránayel reacts when she is told that there is no room for her beneath this roof. Had I been Olórin, I would have made certain she knew of this as soon as possible. But then, when we first spoke of such things, he had every reason to believe Aránayel would prefer to stay anywhere but in his house." He snorted softly. "It still puzzles me, how much she has taken on the physical needs of the Eruhíni, and seemingly has forgotten how to set them aside as she sees fit. I should think that she would not want any discomfort or inconvenience to be a part of her life."

Frodo sighed as he settled onto the chair at Olórin's harp, one finger tracing the elaborate leaf designs carved into the highly polished and artfully gilt wood of the gracefully bowed neck. "Oh, I believe I understand that, easily enough. If you have no needs, you receive no attention, and I fear we lesser folk have a whole panoply of needs because of the requirements of our bodies. I have seen very little of what I would call vanity among your people; pride, yes, arrogance and other unpleasant weaknesses of personality, definitely. But most of you place surprisingly little importance on physical things; if you wear beautiful clothes, you do so because they reflect something of your nature, or because you appreciate the beauty of the fabric and the design, not merely because they flatter you. The same seems to hold true of your homes; they reflect your personalities and the things you love in the world more than they display a

need to have people admire you for the elegance or value of it. You can change your appearance — and many other things, it seems — as you like, so why would it be otherwise? No, I understand why she is this way, quite well. I imagine that in all the time she’s spent serving Lady Nienna and Lord Námo by helping the Elves who have come from the Halls of Waiting, Aránayel has seen and learned a good deal about how to use physical need to win sympathy, if nothing else. But I suppose I’m worrying more than I really should. It just seems that in the time since he returned home, Olórin has spent more time managing troubles than getting the rest and pleasure he has earned.”

Failon — who was still sitting nearby, polishing his flute before putting it away in the soft cloth sleeve in which he stored it — overheard Frodo’s remarks, and chuckled. “I do not know how matters went while he was in Middle-earth, but from what I have heard, Olórin’s time there was spent much as it was here. I cannot say that he seeks out trouble, but it certainly seems to find him, whether he wishes it or no. Some say it happens because he enjoys it, but I have always thought it was simply that he has never been able to refuse to help when help is needed, unless he is expressly forbidden to do so. If it is the will of Eru Ilúvatar that he find peace and rest for a time, he will. But perhaps not immediately.”

The hobbit sighed, carefully plucking one of the smaller silver strings, just to hear its sweet sound. “Perhaps not. It took several years before I was able to begin to find such things after the war was over, and Olórin wasn’t able to go home as quickly as I. That was a lovely song he taught the children,” he noted, determined to change the subject. “Everyone but they and I seemed to know it. Is it an old tune?”

Ványalos provided the answer. “As you measure such things, yes. After Lindarinë was slain in the rebellion, it was the first thing Olórin ever played upon the harp he had given him. It was a dark and terrible time, when blood was spilled in Eldamar and death came to Aman, both of the Teleri in Alqualondë and of the Two Trees that were poisoned by Melkor and Ungoliant. We Maiar were quite dismayed by the darkness of those days, for we could not see a way in which light could ever again be brought into the world, clear and untainted by evil, but the Valar proved more clever than we had dreamed. The first rising of the Moon and the Sun were a great joy and wonder to us. How they came to be reminded Olórin of the making of the Lamps that lit the world before the Eldar first awoke, and how though Melkor cast them down and destroyed them, he did not destroy hope. Light came again, in the new stars made by Lady Varda. And so it was again with the last fruit and flower of Laurelin and Telperion: hope brought forth new light into the world. Seeing the first rising of the Moon and later the first dawn of the Sun moved him to make that song. He has made no other that I know of, and is content to sing with the rest of us, but that one time, he sang out on his own and delighted us. Lady Varda is especially fond of it, and it is said that whenever it is sung, she pauses to listen, and smiles upon those who sang it.”

Frodo reflected on the tale before answering with a wry smile. “I might be inclined to think this is just another of your colorful and entertaining stories, if I didn’t feel in my heart that you are telling the truth. Somehow, the tune sounds like Olórin, simple and both joyful and sad, but never without hope. I think there is a little of him in my friend Samwise, for he was very much the same, and never gave up hope, no matter how dark the road became.”

Ványalos nodded. “Perhaps you are right, as there seems to be more than a little of Olórin’s Song in you as well. Do you still miss all you left behind?”

The hobbit shrugged. "Sometimes, but not as much as I did when we first set sail. I had so much doubt that I would ever be well again, much less find new friends in a strange and distant land. I truly thought I had been allowed to come here so that I could die peacefully in a place where my friends and kin in Middle-earth could not see me fade and wither before their eyes. I'm happy to have been proved wrong, though I have found so much of wonder here, I do wish I could share it with all of my friends, both new and old. But I encouraged Olórin to go with Helyanwë because I wanted to find out if I could feel at home here on my own, when neither he nor Bilbo nor any of the others I had known in Middle-earth were here. I do, and that eases my heart greatly. And Sam may yet sail to these shores. Until then, I think I will have more than enough to keep myself occupied. Are Lére and Melui typical of Elven children? Really, they seem remarkably intelligent and well-mannered, even when I remember that they are actually older than they look, for children of the Big Folk."

"Oh, they're quite exceptional," Eäron remarked rather diffidently, "if Failon's sons were typical of the young of the Eldar. Be glad you arrived here well after they were grown and gone off to other parts of Aman that better suited their interests, and those of their spouses. Lórien was hard pressed to remain a place of peace and healing when those two rogues were among us. I should say that they were most responsible for the rest of us who live here learning to appreciate that by comparison, Ványalos is quite a charming nuisance."

The tall Elf favored him with an utterly affronted glance, which was also utterly feigned. "Nárello and Aranin are the souls of decorum, beside this rascal. You simply never learned to properly appreciate their high spirits and energy. Of course, what more can be expected of someone who spends half his days moving like a wraith through waters, simply to keep them clean? I understand there are words for the fish and other sea creatures that perform such menial tasks...."

Frodo winced, aware of the uncomplimentary names those who fished the waters of the Brandywine had devised for such creatures, which they considered ugly and quite useless because they were not good eating. He was about to intervene with whatever change of subject first came to mind when he was spared the need by the return of Olórin, Aránayel not far behind. Ványalos, also sensitive to the temper of the conversation, was as eager as Frodo to divert it. "Did they cooperate, or did they try to delay overmuch?" the redhead asked.

"Not overmuch," the wizard replied with a small smile. "The excitement of the day and the long journey has taken a greater toll than they claimed, and I think they were more than half asleep before their heads even touched the pillows. And thank you for preparing the room for them," he said, including both his neighbor and Frodo in his nod of gratitude. "Am I mistaken, or is the extra cot the one you kept tucked away in the room of your house that overlooks the fountain in the flower gardens?"

"Yes," said Ványalos, "I thought it would suit their needs, and as I had it mind to use that place for other purposes, I would have had to move it, in any case. Pardon my impertinence if I am speaking out of turn, *pityandil*, but it looks to my eye as if the young ones are not the only persons who have resisted their needed rest longer than perhaps they should."

Olórin's smile widened, the light of the hearth fire glittering in his eyes. "You are always impertinent, but you *are* telling the truth. I shan't even attempt to deny that I am tired. Lord Eru's gift is slowly healing me, but He designed it to do its work at a pace that I'm quite sure was meant to ensure that I rest as is needed, and do not overtax myself. The rest of you may continue as you will, of course. It certainly is not your fault that I have done too much these past days, and your pleasure should not be cut short simply to accommodate me."

"Nonsense," was Frodo's opinion, offered as he climbed down from the harp stool. "I cannot stay awake from dawn to dusk. I rose with the sun this morning, preparing to receive guests, and as you have pointed out before, we hobbits know perfectly well when it's time to say goodnight to our guests. It's been a very pleasant evening, but more than enough for weary travelers — and hobbits — who need their rest."

As he set about demonstrating how a well-mannered hobbit informed visitors that it was time to leave, Aránayel spoke up. "I would appreciate a time of rest as well, but I have not seen where my things were taken. I trust they were not left out in the rain again."

There was an edge to her voice and an emphasis on the last word that spoke volumes, even to those who had not journeyed with her over the past week. The smile fled Olórin's face; Ványalos was about to speak up when the wizard motioned for him to remain quiet for the moment. "Of course not. I know better than to make the same mistake twice. They were taken to Ványalos' home, just to the west of the wood. My house simply does not have the room to accommodate more than a very few guests," he explained when he saw her eyes widen in an expression that might not have been outrage, but was its near kin. "For the time being, this is Frodo's home as well; I will not have him put out for the convenience of someone else, not even if he is willing to go. He is a mortal, and has requirements that we do not. No other place in Lórien is suited to provide for those needs. I invited Melui and Lére before I knew that anyone would be coming with us to assist in their care, and I will not renege on the promise I gave them. And while I could offer you the use of my private room, I have already seen enough evidence to understand that doing so would win me the displeasure of many others, quite possibly Lord Irmo and Lady Estë among them. This house was made with the knowledge that for a time, I would require regular periods of quiet and rest to recover from the injury I sustained during my life in Endor. Ványalos understood this and immediately offered the hospitality of his house — which, I might add, is far more spacious and comfortable than my humble home. It is so near, you will not be overly inconvenienced, and will certainly find it much more to your liking."

One could almost see the frost limning her face, the gleam in her eyes, as of cold winter sunlight upon ice. "Why was I not told of this straightaway?" she asked, her voice low but tight, as chill as her expression. "If this arrangement was made for my benefit, why not speak of it sooner?"

"Because it did not occur to me sooner that it would matter. I have not seen you in thousands of years, Aránayel. Most of our folk do not become so... deeply attached to the forms we adopt to be a visible part of this world. When I knew you last, such matters as rest and refreshment were of small consequence to you, or so I thought. Perhaps this was yet another mistake I made in my foolish youth, but in any case, Ványalos is far better able to provide such things than I. Why would you choose the meager amenities of my little house when you are welcome to share the far greater comforts of another?"

Time seemed to stand still for the long moment in which her face remained frozen, her eyes bright like a sea of ice under which a raging fire was but for a brief time restrained. The intake of her breath seemed unnaturally loud, as if there were no other sound to be heard in all the world. But just as Olórin was sure she was about to lash out and prepared himself to bear the onslaught, she released the breath and the fire behind her eyes went out like a single candle snuffed by the gale of a mighty storm. "There is no reason at all why I should," she said mildly. "If there is not room in this house, I am grateful to your neighbor for opening his doors to me. If someone will show me the way, then I will bid you goodnight, and return in the morning to attend my duties with the children."

Frodo had paused to listen when he heard Aránayel ask her question; now, he was not the only one stunned speechless by her answer to Olórin's response. He had very seldom seen the wizard without some reply at the ready, but Olórin was as dumbstruck as the halfling. Ványalos, in fact, was first to recover his voice. "Of course, if you are ready to retire now, I will happily show you the way, unless my help is still required here...?" His glance flicked from Olórin to Frodo then back, clearly seeking some explanation for this unexpected turn.

There was nothing Frodo could think of to say, but Olórin was at least of a loss. The hobbit could see their eyes meet for an instant, and he was certain some unspoken communication passed swiftly between the two Maiar. "No, you have done more than your share to help, Ványalos, and thank you. I am certainly not so exhausted that I cannot bid farewell to my own guests. Goodnight, then, to both of you."

The sentiment was echoed by others; Frodo was not so shocked that he could not remember his manners in time to bid them good night. The others departed soon after, all taking care to make certain they left behind nothing that their hosts would be required to clean up once they were gone, a custom peculiar to the Maiar, for whom such things were a matter of a few moments' thought. After the last had said their goodbyes and the place was quiet again, Frodo turned back to Olórin, who was looking into the remains of the hearth fire, his mind clearly not involved with the last glowing embers.

"Did something happen that I don't know of?" he asked. "Did you need to scold Aránayel into behaving herself while you were out of the room?"

The Maia shook his head, both his pale hair and the crystal circlet reflecting glints of the firelight. "We said nothing to one another, only to the children. Her response to hearing the news about her lodgings is as much of a surprise to me as it is to you. I have never seen her restrain her temper in that fashion — for I have no doubt she had initially intended to take me to task for such an insult, and the fact that it was announced in front of all our guests. But then again, until a week ago, I had not seen her in well over ten thousand years. Her behavior on our journey would not incline me to think that she has learned much about forbearance, but perhaps I was wrong."

The hobbit wrinkled his nose, a skeptical look in his eye. "I doubt it. You're a better judge of character than that. More likely she grew angry because she didn't like what she was hearing, nor the fact that everyone else was hearing it, too. It occurred to her that treating you badly in front of an audience would win disapproval from your friends, and that she would gain more by going with Ványalos of her own free will, even if she didn't like it."

“And she would also win a point, startling me by doing precisely what I would least expect.” The frown smoothed away from the Maia’s brow as he smiled wryly. “A very good observation, Frodo. You will soon surpass me in measuring the character of others, if you continue to show such excellent judgement.”

Frodo allowed himself a moment to luxuriate in the praise. “So do you think this means we’ve been misinterpreting her motives, because of what we heard from Ornedil?”

Again, Olórin shook his head. “No. That was merely one weight on the scale, hardly enough to have tipped it. Before I left the North, I knew she had it in mind to avenge herself against me, even though she had agreed to set aside our differences. Others who know her far better than Ornedil or even I warned me, and I trust their judgement. No, I think she is simply biding her time, looking for what she considers the right way to go about this. If she cannot harm me or shame me, then she will try to use me to her own ends, as well as those around me. We must be patient. Aránayel can be subtle in her manipulations, but sooner or later, she will grow tired of all the thrust and parry and act more directly. Given what we just witnessed, it is likely to come from an unexpected quarter, so we must be wary. For if she has one true talent that few others possess, it is knowing how to find the place where her enemies are most vulnerable in their hearts, and deftly deliver a lethal strike before her victim realizes the blow is about to fall. Even Sauron could have learned much about battle strategy from her.”

*To be continued....*