

# Twice Blessed

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## Part One

*The quality of mercy is not strained,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*

*Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, scene 1*

### I

Until that evening, Frodo had wondered if it ever rained in Valinor.

Common sense told him that it must; the air was not overly heavy with moisture from day to day, and when he woke near the dawn, he saw dew on the trees and flowers and other growth that surrounded Olórin's little house in Lórien, which he had shared with the Maia for most of the almost nine months he had now lived in Aman. And all those plants, from the greatest of the trees to the smallest blade of grass were green and strong, all the pools and streams and fountains of Lórien forever flowing with clear water. But since his last night aboard the ship that had borne the Ring-bearers from Middle-earth, when he had fallen asleep to the gentle sound of rain on the decks above, he could not recall a single day without sunshine, nor an evening in which the clouds thickened and let loose showers that lulled the world into peaceful slumber.

Yet whenever he thought to mention this peculiarity, all the locals who heard him chuckled softly and said of course it rained. Even here in the Blessed Realm, growing things had certain requirements which needed to be met so that they might live and thrive, just as he and the Bilbo and the Elves needed food and drink to sustain them. Their nearest neighbor, Ványalos — a Maia who served as a messenger

for Lord Irmo and Lady Estë — regaled him with amusing tales of remembered rainstorms that Frodo was certain were, if not wholly a product of the red-haired Maia's abundantly active and impish imagination, at least quite heavily embellished for both the halfling's sake and his entertainment. Frodo might not have believed him had Olórin not confirmed his claim that yes, it did indeed rain in the Undying Lands.

He had been further supported by Eäron, a Maia servant of Ulmo, the Vala Lord of the Waters. Eäron made his home in Lórien to serve his master by helping attend its many waters, and Frodo supposed that if anyone would know such a thing for certain, it would be one Ulmo's people. It did indeed rain, Eäron had told him, for all living things of Arda needed water, and Ulmo took great joy in the beauty of rain and snow. But depending on the needs of the land and the whims of both Ulmo and Manwë, who was master of the winds and the skies, it fell at odd intervals. Sometimes, for many days, the rains would come at different hours, in the morning or afternoon or night; at other times, it would fall without stop for several days, then not at all for several more; and at still other times, for months at a stretch it would fall briefly but at the same hour each day. Since Frodo's arrival, Lórien's rains had fallen briefly, for but an hour or two in the deep of night, swallowed up quickly by the soil and plants and streams so that come morning, only a glistening sheen of dew remained in the dawn sunshine to tell of its passing.

Politely, Frodo had said that he believed the Sea Lord's servant, but privately, he continued to wonder. On several nights, he had tried to sit up as late as was necessary to see the proof for himself, but even focusing on the sounds of the local residents who gathered somewhere in the area each evening to share food and song and story was not enough to keep him awake. Sooner or later, the healing peace of Lórien crept over him, and he surrendered to the lure of sleep.

When, by the nearest he was able to reckon, the truly magnificent blossoming of spring passed and the month of June came in, he began to think all the folk of Aman were having some little joke at his expense. Both spring and summer without at least a few days of rain seemed utterly unnatural to him, no matter what the various Maiar and Elves insisted — and then, as Eäron had told him, something in the air changed. Several weeks before midsummer, on the afternoon of a day as pleasant as every other day he had spent in Valinor, Frodo and Olórin were tending the vegetable and herb patch behind the little house when the halfling felt a shadow fall upon them. For a moment, he remembered the last time such a thing had occurred when they were at work in the garden; the shadow had been caused by the passage of a Great Eagle who had brought Manwë's herald, Eönwë, to ask if they would come with him to Ilmarin. Shivering faintly, for the later events of that day had not been pleasant, he looked up, saw that it was only a passing cloud, and noticed that those to the west were thickening. As he took a deep breath of relief, he realized that he could catch just the barest scent of moisture on the air.

He glanced at Olórin, who had been deftly bundling up some of the overgrowth of herbs he had just trimmed from the plants edging the garden. As he watched him work, Frodo was once again amazed to realize how quickly he had grown accustomed to his friend's markedly changed appearance, which seemed much more that of an ageless, fair-haired half-Elf of unremarkable height than the old gray Man he had seemed to be when he had dwelt in Middle-earth as Gandalf. As in all his Maia people, he

possessed a kind of unassuming grace and beauty that was less lofty than that of the Valar, but far more than the fairest of Elves or Men. Yet Olórin had chosen no part of his current appearance, save his simple pale blue and white clothing; his fana manifested simply as an expression of what he was in the truest essence of his being. He was proud neither at heart nor in his outer manifestation, the single exception being the narrow circlet of twined crystal threads that ceaselessly graced his head. A gift from Lord Eru, it was also the means by which the Maia was slowly being healed of the unexpectedly serious hurts his spirit had suffered from two thousand years of life bound to mortal flesh in the lands most poisoned by the hate of Melkor. For a time after he had been told to wear it always until he was otherwise instructed, the Istar had felt self-conscious about it, and had gone so far as to attempt to conceal it under his hair. But the effort had been wasted, for the more he tried to hide it, the more it seemed to catch every glimmer of light and shine even more brightly and noticeably. So he had given up and taken to wearing it openly, as the One clearly wished, which somehow made it far less obvious, little more than a thin line of flickering white light against the brightness of his pale hair.

Perhaps, Frodo often thought, it was this simplicity and Olórin's attempts to maintain it that had allowed him to so swiftly grow accustomed to the wizard's appearance here in the land that was his home. He gave and shared what he had and what he was without thought for personal cost or personal gain. It was all so much the very essence of Gandalf as Frodo had known him, how he looked no longer mattered. The hobbit saw the same friend in his heart, and always would, no matter what his outer appearance.

If he noticed that Frodo was staring at him, Olórin showed no sign of it. Relieved, the hobbit scanned the skies again, then made a small, curious sound. "Is it my imagination," he wondered aloud, "or is actually going to rain?"

Olórin took the bundle of sage leaves he had finished tying and set it into a gathering basket as he spared a glance to the west. After taking his own measure of what he saw, he nodded. "Not soon, but by this evening. Eäron mentioned it to me this morning, when you were off collecting your daily provender from Ványalos. He thought you might like to know."

Frodo sniffed. "Then why didn't you tell me? I won't believe you forgot...."

The wizard smiled as he returned to his task with the herbs. "No, but I thought you might enjoy the surprise of discovering it for yourself, after so many months spent wondering if such things ever happen here."

Color rose faintly in the hobbit's cheeks, yet he laughed. "I do suppose I was being rather thick-headed about it," he admitted, adding the young leafy greens he had collected to the other things in the basket. "But truly, I never saw or heard as much as a single drop, not in all this time! Though I do grant I wouldn't have noticed if a storm had come and ripped the house down about my ears during the months when you were sick. I'm so glad you're well again."

“As I am pleased to see you whole once more,” Olórin replied, meaning both his small friend’s wounded spirit, which time and care had healed, as well as his injured body, which the skills of Estë and the power of Eru Ilúvatar had fully restored, from his pierced shoulder to his lost finger. Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Eäron also mentioned that the rain would arrive before sunset.”

What more was implied by that statement struck Frodo after a moment or two. “We won’t be able to share the evening meal with the others, then? I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve come to look forward to that part of the day more than any other. It’s not the same as sitting down to a big hobbit supper, but there’s so much more to it than just the food. I think I’m finally beginning to tolerate the sound of Valarin, you know, and I’m afraid that if I spend too many days without hearing it at all, I might backslide and have to start over again.”

Eyes glittering with mischief, the wizard said something Frodo could not understand, but immediately recognized as being in the ancient tongue of the Ainur. The halfling immediately winced at the sound, which was not precisely unpleasant, but fell so strangely upon the ears of any of the Eruhíni, its alien beauty pierced one straight to the heart. When he hissed softly, Olórin relented, and laughed. “Is that enough to fulfill your daily requirement?” he asked.

Frodo knew well that he was teasing, and so answered in kind. “More than enough, thank you. I can quite understand why the Elves preferred to fashion their own language rather than attempt to use yours. I cannot believe that the throat of any living creature was ever meant to make such sounds! What did you say, anyway?”

“That those things in life which are most worth having and experiencing can only be properly appreciated if one must devote some effort to attain them. But you need not be deprived entirely of those daily customs. Eäron also came to ask if we might enjoy the company of some of those who would also miss the nightly sharing of song and story. There have been many visitors to this house since I returned home, but there has never been such a gathering under this new roof. Perhaps it is well past time for it, and with the rain due, tonight would indeed seem appropriate.”

As he added another handful of tender greens to the basket, the hobbit’s whole face lit with delight. “That would be splendid! I’d wondered if you would ever think of entertaining guests here, since your friends made you this lovely home with that in mind, but thus far, the most who have ever been here at once for pleasant reasons was when Elrond and Celebrián brought Bilbo to stay for a time. But I wish the weather had changed a week sooner, then, so Bilbo might have been here to enjoy it as well.”

“I’m sure Bilbo will be back to visit again,” Olórin said as he tied up the last of the cooking herbs, twigs of thyme and savory and mint that had escaped from larger cuttings. “And there will be other opportunities. For now, I think he will be much happier settling in to his rooms in Elrond’s house in Tirion and becoming acquainted with all the good people there. You should have more chances to do the same with those who live here in Lórien, since you made the choice to live here rather than with

Bilbo. I fear that thus far, too much of your time in Aman has been spent entangled with my problems rather than seeing to your own happiness.”

Frodo dismissed that with an easy wave of one hand. “I doubt that I could have been happy if I hadn’t done what I could to help you. But that’s over and done with, thank goodness.”

“For the most part,” the wizard agreed.

Frodo looked up from his work, frowning at the peculiarly flat tone of those words. He knew what Olórin meant, and as with the question of rain, he wondered how long this matter would linger before seeing resolution. As he reflected upon how and if he should react, he tugged up one of the larger root vegetables to see how well the crop was faring. It was on the smallish side for one that might be considered fully mature, but for the apparent time of year, it was quite respectably grown, so he added it to the other things in the basket. He continued to think while he selected two more likely-looking roots, then exhaled in a sigh.

“Do you ever plan to accept his apology?” he asked in the best nonchalant manner he could affect, knowing that Olórin would be well aware of what he was speaking.

The Maia shrugged with an equally casual mein, picking up the roots as Frodo put them in the basket, to brush off the heavier soil. “I already have.”

The hobbit snorted “Really? When? I don’t recall hearing it....”

“And do you hear every word I utter or thought I think?”

“Of course not, but I know he hasn’t been here since... well, since the day you finally got better, and I *know* you haven’t been to see him, summoned or otherwise. I suppose you might have other ways of communicating with each other that I couldn’t possibly be aware of, but something tells me neither of you have availed yourselves of them. So if you’ve given him the forgiveness he asked for, you must have posted him a letter. And so far as I can tell, Valinor doesn’t have such things, unless you sent it with Ványalos when he went off on one of his errands. You haven’t left the hill-country to go farther than the edge of the plains since that day in March.”

Olórin made a disgruntled noise, then chuckled at Frodo’s very astute observations. He was indeed aware of the subject under discussion without any names being mentioned: the state of affairs between the Maia and his master, Manwë, the king of the Valar. They both remembered all too clearly the day in late January when they had been summoned to Ilmarin so that Olórin could hear the truth about why he had been suffering from a strange yet increasingly debilitating weakness since his return to Aman — the truth being that the circumstances leading to his deteriorating condition had been caused by Manwë himself when he had ignored the direct advice of Eru Ilúvatar in ordering his servant to go on the errand to Middle-earth as one of the Istari, rather than explain himself openly to garner Olórin’s willing cooperation. Frodo had never seen his friend so furious and upset, but then, he had never before

seen him at the moment he perceived that he had been betrayed by one he had long served and admired and loved. Manwë had asked for the wizard's forgiveness that day, but Olórin had not given it, nor had a word been spoken between them in all the days of his illness, nor since the Maia's recovery. The latter had come on the twenty-fifth of March, by Shire reckoning. It was now full summer, approaching the Hobbit mid-year festival, and still, there had been no communication between the two of which Frodo was aware.

And he was aware of quite a bit. Ványalos had told the halfling that there had indeed been no word passed between Ilmarin and the little glade in Lórien which held Olórin's home, not since the day the latter had been blessed by a semblance of the presence of Lord Eru Himself. The red-haired Maia did not know if this was deliberate or merely a coincidence, but he was not the only person who suspected it was no accident. Olórin was of Manwë's people, and though the Vala King did not often call upon his services, in the past he had been in frequent contact with Olórin, who was often out and about the land, and was able to provide his master with information about the state of Aman's inhabitants which Manwë could not perceive as clearly from his mansions atop Taniquetil. But those around them who would be aware of such exchanges, if not what was said, had felt nothing but silence between the two.

Given how much time had passed, Frodo had begun to feel that something was not right, but he had not been able to think of a way to broach his concerns subtly, so he availed himself of any opportunity his host provided to at least attempt to discuss the matter. "I don't mean to meddle, Olórin, truly," he told his friend "But I can't help but feel that this isn't a good thing, especially for you. I've never known you to be spiteful or vindictive or the sort to carry grudges, even back in Middle-earth. Snappish sometimes, yes, a bit brusque and impatient, especially with foolishness, but always much quicker to forgive than most people. Did Lord Manwë really hurt you so badly that you cannot let go of it?"

Again the wizard shrugged, setting aside the semi-cleaned roots as he nibbled on one of the tender mint leaves that had fallen during the cutting and gathering process. As ever, he had no actual physical need to eat or drink, but he enjoyed some of the little reminders of his life as a mortal, especially when it was something he did by choice, not by painful necessity. "If you want an honest answer, I don't know. Of all the pains I have endured throughout my life, none felt as terrible as this. I respected and admired and loved him, Frodo, not just as my master but as someone I had long felt was truly a friend. I trusted him and his leadership, and never opposed him because I knew there was no reason. My relationship with him was not like that which I shared with any of the others who have betrayed me over the years; I was not close to them as I was close to him. Discovering that he had not trusted and respected me in such an important matter was a dreadful blow. In time, I am sure I will find it in me to forgive him, but for now, the wounds are still too new, too deep."

He had been staring at the greenery in the basket as he spoke; he now looked up, directly into Frodo's eyes, and the hobbit was struck anew by how brilliant a blue those of the wizard could be when they caught the light just so, not dark as they often appeared, but luminous and intense as blue fire. There was a slight glitter like a haze over them at the moment, bright as sharp points of clear sunlight

on the ripples of a pond. He spoke again, softly. “I *would* forgive him, if only I knew how in such a situation. Forgiveness means nothing to either the one who gives it or the one who receives it if it is naught but rote words, spoken as a ritual without sincere thought for what is being said and offered. I have no doubt that Manwë genuinely regrets what he did, but I still do not know if he fully understands the nature of it. He knows the evil results of his action, but does he truly grasp the evil in the act itself? I do not think he quite comprehends *why* I became so angry and felt so deeply hurt. He knows that I was harmed, but it seems to me that he does not see how his ill-made choice shook the very foundations of trust between us. When he made it, he did not even think to say to me, ‘Olórin, I know you do not wish to go, but these are the reasons I believe it is necessary.’ I told him why I did not want the task of being his messenger; I was honest with him out of respect for him. Yet he made little of my reasons, and then laid upon me one of the most terrible burdens ever faced by any of our people, all the while in disobedience to the counsel of Lord Eru. Yet even so, I would have endured that onus willingly, had Manwë but spoken plainly to me — but he did not. He hid the truth from me out of fear, did not trust me to understand and take pity on his concerns, he forgot all he ever supposedly knew of me, and reduced me to a faithless lackey to be ordered about because his pride would not suffer me to know that he, too, was frightened. My worries and feelings were not so important; they were dismissible. He made a jest of them, and of me.

“Can you not imagine how this hurt me? How would you have felt in similar circumstances? From the beginning, I told you all I knew and could tell you of the Ring and its perils, and the dangers of the road ahead of you. I did not deliberately keep anything from you once I knew the truth; I did not lie and tell you it would be an easy task when I knew it would not, nor did I ignore your concerns. I did not say, ‘You *will* go, Frodo, no matter what you fear, because I command it, and because your worries are of no consequence.’ I allowed you to choose for yourself, even though I would much sooner have said, ‘Stay at home, my dear friend, in peace and safety, and let others take up this burden.’ Had I done that, you would have known no peace or safety anywhere, I would have broken faith with the promise I had made not to force the decisions and acts of the Eruhíni, and I would not have been at all a good and true friend and teacher to you. I would have tarnished our friendship and the respect between us; indeed, I would have destroyed it. Would you have found it so easy to forgive me, especially if after ordering you to undertake this quest, I had remained someplace safe and distant and did little or nothing to offer you any assistance in accomplishing your mission, even from afar, and knew long before the end that the tragedy I had set in motion would be borne by you alone?”

The hobbit shook his head, able to imagine what Olórin was describing. “No. Whenever I was feeling sorry for myself over what had happened during the journey to Mordor, I had only to remember that I hadn’t been the only one who had been hurt to stop feeling quite so much self-pity. Sam went through a terrible time, both Merry and Pippin were badly injured, Boromir died, everyone lost friends and family.... You might have been sent back stronger than you had been before, but you still had to suffer before that, and still you never stood back and let other people take the risks for you if there was any way you could take them yourself. I know you *would* have gone with me to Mordor, and you would have taken the Ring there yourself, if it had been possible. You wouldn’t’ve let anyone else be hurt if you could’ve done something to prevent it. But if you’d ordered me to go when you knew I was afraid, and had yourself stayed behind in Rivendell, safe and sound, I would’ve resented it, I’m sure. And I

would have wondered if all your talk about the Ring being a danger to you was only a way to avoid an unpleasant job you simply didn't want to do. I don't think I could have been your friend anymore if you'd done that. And if you'd told me that you had a notion of the precise dangers I needed to avoid but hadn't mentioned them to me because you thought it would make you look bad, I would've felt that you considered me ignorant and untrustworthy. I *do* understand."

He sighed, rubbing away the dirt from the last of the roots before placing it in the basket and climbing to his feet. "But I'm not you, Olórin, nor are you Lord Manwë. You've told me that he is great and powerful and knows many things, but though he seems very kind and wise, I don't think it's mere flattery when he says that he considers you the wisest of both your people. I have a feeling he honestly believes that you can be wiser than he is, because he doesn't understand evil as well as you do. Whenever I've spoken to him, he strikes me as a very great person, but one who is also naive in some ways, more naive than I ever was. And he isn't perfect; he makes mistakes, as you did when you lived in Middle-earth. Some of your mistakes affected me, and I forgave you for them. I can see that your situation is something more difficult to come to terms with, for even though I was hurt because of your errors, I never felt betrayed by you. But won't you at least try to forgive him? It would be one less unhappiness you'd have to carry with you."

It was the Maia's turn to sigh as he picked up the now-full basket to carry it into the house. "I do want to," he admitted at length, when Frodo moved ahead to hold open the door for him. "And I have truly tried to find the appropriate words within me. But for some reason, I cannot. Never have I had such difficulty doing this, and I am at a loss to understand why it eludes me now. It almost feels like..." His voice trailed off to nothing.

Frodo, however, did not let the silence linger. "Like what?" he prompted, not even attempting to offer a speculation of his own. In the months that he had resided here in Aman, he had come to know Olórin better than he could have known him when he lived in Middle-earth as the wizard Gandalf, but he had also come to know that there were some things about the Maia that he would never fully comprehend. There was a fundamental difference between their peoples more profound than the differences between the small and mortal hobbits and the tall and immortal Elves. There were some things that he, a naturally incarnate being, looked at and thought about differently than any of the Maiar or Valar, who were by their own natures only temporarily self-incarnate, beings of spirit rather than of true flesh. Having lived as a mortal Man for two thousand years, Olórin had a far deeper understanding of what it meant to live a genuinely mortal life than any other of his people, but he still was what he was at heart, and at times, Frodo had difficulty grasping how and why he reacted to certain things in certain ways. The hobbit was quite certain that this was due to his greater range of experience, parts of which Frodo could scarcely begin to imagine, and though he could not truly understand, he did at least try to show acceptance of their differences, and compassion toward those that brought his friend distress.

This was without a doubt the most distressing matter left unresolved in Olórin's life, at the moment, for in spite of all that had happened, he still loved the Vala he had faithfully served since before the beginning of Time. Frodo could see that, but he could not see why Olórin was having such difficulty forgiving him a betrayal that had been intentional yet accidental. The wizard moved into the cool shade

of the inner house, taking his burden into the kitchen where its contents could be sorted and prepared for storage. He exhaled softly as he set the basket on the board beside the sink. "Like the shadow that had fallen on me and brought me to such great harm before Lord Eru acted to help save me from it," he finally answered the prompt. "I have seen enough of spite and vengeance and malice during all the years I opposed both Sauron and Melkor and even Saruman; I know the signs of it only too well. I do not think that I feel any of those things toward Lord Manwë, but perhaps I am wrong. It was the poisons of evil that injured me during my incarnate life in Middle-earth, and I know I am not yet fully healed of those wounds upon my spirit. I fear that I have been poisoned so badly, my inability to find forgiveness in my heart is because the scars left behind by evil have changed it, as the shadow stole away my life."

Frodo abruptly understood what the Maia was trying to say, and answered at once, quite firmly. "You are *not* evil, Olórin."

The wizard snorted. "Nor am I perfect. And Lord Eru did say that my life as a mortal had left me irrevocably changed. Perhaps this was what He meant, that some things I was once able to do with comparative ease have now become strangely more... complicated."

The hobbit disagreed. "Perhaps, but *changed* by evil things that were done to you does not mean you yourself *became* evil. You were *touched* by it, yes, as I was, for both of us had tasks to fulfill that would not allow us to run from it, but because a cup is touched and even stained by the tea it is required to hold does not mean it *is* the tea, and even stains can be removed, in time. I think that all those years you spent living as a Man left you more *confused* than changed, at least in this way. Could anyone have really prepared you for all you would encounter and experience as a mortal? No, because no one in Aman had any greater understanding of all that it meant than you did. How many mortals had come here, before you left? Two? And who of them knew what it was like to be both a human *and* an Ainu?"

He shook his head. "It seems to me as if you didn't become evil in any way; instead, you lost some of the perspective you had before you were sent on a mission that took many turns no one could have predicted, some very dark and tragic. I don't mean to be presumptuous, and I beg your pardon if you find this so, but do you think that perhaps the reason you cannot find it in you to forgive Lord Manwë's betrayal is because you still have not come to terms with Saruman's?"

For some moments, the Istar contemplated this, his eyes focused on the things they were removing from the basket; when it was empty and its contents sorted atop the sideboard, he looked at Frodo. "I must confess, that had not occurred to me," he said, his tone showing not the slightest hint of offense. "Betrayal is not something I have often had cause to deal with. Before Saruman turned against me and all Middle-earth, it had been more years than you can imagine since I had needed to deal with such treatment from one I had trusted. Aránayel had been my first experience with it, and before Saruman's my last, of any true significance. Through Nienna's teachings I learned how to contend with the ways I reacted to treachery, a skill I had never had cause to develop before Aránayel turned on me."

He shook his head at the memories of that time long ago, his pale bright hair brushing against his shoulders with the motion. "I was dreadfully naive when I told Aránayel I loved her, so utterly foolish and blind to the less noble aspects of the world that even Pippin was more mature in such ways than I. Never think that we Ainur are immune to or above such things! Mortals quickly learn to protect themselves from the harshness of the world in which they live, but ours began as a very sheltered life, first brought into existence in the presence of Lord Eru, where no evil can endure. I myself was thence taken into the service of Lord Manwë, who was himself unblemished by darkness. He and the other Valar were extraordinarily kind to me, for whatever reasons they had, and though I knew of Melkor and the existence of evil, I had never confronted it directly, nor personally. Until the day when I spoke my heart and Aránayel broke it, I had not truly understood what it meant to be *hurt*. I was like a babe who had never before felt pain, never pricked a finger or scraped a knee or suffered the smallest of bruises."

A frown darkened his fair features as he thought back to times now long gone, but not forgotten. "I learned of such things that day in a lesson that was hard and harsh, and it so distressed me, it took much help and instruction from both Lady Nienna and Lord Irmo before I was able to deal with what had happened and put my life back in order again. Even Lord Manwë was exceptionally kind to me then, for he might have insisted I carry out my duties as his servant and find ways to cope with my pain alone, bereft of help. He gave me as much time as I needed to heal, for which I have always been grateful. I have not been so naive since. Which is also why my current situation disturbs me so. Then, I only knew of betrayal as something that happens in the world, but not as something I had ever experienced; now, I have been betrayed many times, though few as grievous and intimate as these three. Because of that, there may be truth in what you say. I had little time to assimilate the full scope of Saruman's treachery before I was required to deal with it, and since the remainder of my time in Middle-earth was quite busy, I suppose I simply pushed away the more personal aspects of it because I truly had no opportunity to reflect upon them. It may have been sitting in some dim corner of my mind like a spider in a web, and when I learned of what Manwë had done, I stumbled into it, set it loose, and now have not been able to properly deal with either."

He sighed yet again, taking the roots and leafy vegetables Frodo gave him and setting them in the sink while the hobbit went to fetch a bowl to hold the greens they would eat with their supper. "But Saruman truly is no longer an issue. He is so diminished that even were he permitted to return hither, his presence would be of no consequence to me, or anyone else."

"But Lord Manwë *is* of consequence," Frodo pointed out while he rummaged through one of the lower cupboards. "He is here, and he is *not* diminished, and you are still in his service. Or have you considered leaving it?"

Olórin shrugged, lifting the lever over the basin to fill the sink with cold water. "I have considered it," he admitted, "but I don't believe I could do it. It would not solve the problem, only push it away again. I have known no other master save Lord Eru, for though I have given service to others of the Valar, that has ever been done simply because I cannot refuse to help when help is needed. I am loyal to all of them, and I have great respect for them, but it has always been different with Manwë. And I imagine that is why I am having such difficulty finding the proper way to forgive him. I know the facts

as they stand, but I simply cannot comprehend how he could have ever believed it was right to go against the will of Lord Eru. To me, such a thing is inconceivable.”

Frodo smiled crookedly as he brought a carved wooden bowl and set it on the board. “I used to think that there was nothing in the world that you couldn’t do or understand better than I, but I can see now that I was wrong. From all you’ve told me about how you reacted to these betrayals, it seems to me that what puzzles you so terribly about them is that you cannot see how or why someone could give their trust to another, and then willfully break it. You never did give your trust to anyone lightly, probably because all those years ago, you gave it to someone you loved who did not love you in return, and instead hurt you for having done so.”

“And would you not do the same thing? Is it not prudent to be cautious of fire after you have been badly burned by it?”

“Oh, yes, indeed it is. But we mortals get singed and scorched and burned so often by such things, we learn to develop a thick skin just to protect ourselves. You never really did, or so it seems to me. You once told me that many people in whom you had placed your trust failed you, but none, I think, did so as personally as these three of your own people. With us lesser beings, disloyalty might sting and hurt, but it isn’t the same as being treated so badly by those who are essentially your own kin. I know that was always true for me. Hurts I was given by strangers or people I only knew casually were much easier to brush aside than those I received from family and close friends. Perhaps you could dismiss what Saruman did more easily than the others because you were not so close to him, despite your common mission, but I should think that your relationship with Lord Manwë was much closer, and therefore the hurt much harder to accept. I know how I would feel if Bilbo had deliberately done something wrong to me, without considering my feelings. I would not be able to put it behind me without considerable difficulty. Which is why I am concerned for you now. If you cannot move past this and let it go in your heart, your relationship with Lord Manwë can never be the same, and losing that would be a terrible thing, I think.”

“It would,” Olórin agreed, rinsing off the greens and settling them on a cloth Frodo had laid out for them to drain upon. Now that he was no longer in danger of fading to nothing the more he used the abilities peculiar to his kind, he might have dealt with this entire cleaning process much more simply and quickly, but he had learned to appreciate the disciplines inherent in the common lifestyles of the Eruhíni, and did not mind attending such little chores in the ways to which Frodo was accustomed. Arda had been made to be the home of the Children of Ilúvatar, and living within it was best appreciated in their ways, even for the Ainur.

The Maia glanced at the hobbit as Frodo set the greens in the bowl, once they had been sufficiently drained. “I know that my heart wishes very much to forgive him, and indeed, I believe I have, save for speaking the words to him. Yet I simply cannot. I have thought time and again of going to Ilmarin for that very purpose, but before I can set out, something always makes me hesitate. I know that if I spoke to him now, the words would not be fully sincere, and I cannot lie merely to have it over and done with, for it would not *be* over and done with. And this does not please me in any way. It either

means that there is some hidden hurt I have yet to discover, or that I have grown so petty that I cannot set aside my own injured feelings to grant forgiveness to a person who has done me far more good than harm.”

“You don’t suppose you’re... well, sort of carrying a grudge on behalf of Lord Eru? You’ve said before that what truly shocked you was the fact that Lord Manwë dared to disobey Him.”

Olórin spent a few moments considering the question while he scrubbed away the now-softened dirt in the deeper creases of the roots that had been soaking in the water. “I don’t believe so. What would Lord Eru need with *my* support? He is the One Who created all that exists; I may be in His favor, but I am only a Maia, and by no means the greatest even of my own people. I would consider it presumptuous to take offense on His behalf when He is far more than capable of defending Himself than I could ever hope to be. No, whatever the root of this trouble, it is something wholly within me. Yet I cannot imagine what that could be.”

“Neither can I,” Frodo said, letting loose a very deep breath while he moved the bowl to the dining table and sorted through some of the herbs to find those he wished to mix with the greens. The sound of his sigh seemed to continue long after he was done exhaling, prompting him to notice a rise in the normally gentle breezes that moved the air through the house. It smelled of distant dampness, and reminded him of events to come later in the day. He looked out the window nearby to see the increased movement of the branches on the trees surrounding the house, and the still thickening clouds in the skies beyond.

“Well, perhaps the change of routine this evening will provide some inspiration for an answer,” he speculated as he finished his task and carried the wooden bowl to a cool storage pantry at the back of the small kitchen. “I’m not the only person in Lórien who has given thought to this, you know. Your other friends here are concerned as well.”

Olórin did not even attempt to deny it. “I know, and I suspect that given time, someone will be able to see the answer I cannot. I had not realized how very much I missed having a home and being a part of a community where I was not considered either an ill-tolerated outsider or an honored but infrequent guest. There is much to be said for *belonging* somewhere, and I had forgotten that during my long stay in Middle-earth. Which is also why I am more than happy to do anything I can to help you find a place to belong here in Aman.”

Frodo smiled as he came to collect the washed roots and take them to their storage place in the same pantry. “For which I am very grateful. I knew that somehow, I would find healing here, but I was never certain if I would also be able to feel at home. I already do, even though I’m still learning about the land and the people who live here. I wish I’d been about when Eäron brought you his news and asked about this evening. I think I would like to have invited some of your friends I still don’t know very well to share the meal with us. A few have asked about hobbit customs, and it would have been a good opportunity to show them a proper hobbit supper.”

Olórin laughed. "Only if you had had the entire day to prepare for it. There will be other times to instruct them in hobbit dining customs; for now, you can prepare them for the full lesson by showing them your less elaborate ways of offering hospitality to visiting guests. Quite enough for one evening's work, I should think."

Frodo could not deny the truth of that observation, and so the weightier questions they had been discussing were set aside so that he could make ready for the evening ahead. But though he was distracted for the time being, he did not forget them.

## II

*Night oft brings news to near kindred.*

*Faramir, The Return of the King, "The Window on the West"*

Before late afternoon, the clouds had rolled in, a beautiful panoply of grays and whites and near-blacks that reminded Frodo of the spring storms and glowering late autumn skies in the Shire — appropriate, he thought, for the place in Aman that reflected that part of Middle-earth. The rain began about an hour or so before sunset, while he and Olórin were preparing the evening meal. It began gently, but at times would come down more heavily, and the changing rhythms of it were a pleasant music Frodo only now realized he had missed. When Ványalos arrived to help them, since most evenings he shared the meal with his neighbors, the hobbit was surprised to notice that he was not the least bit damp, until he remembered how the Ainur could move about from place to place with the ease of a thought, so long as they needed only to move themselves. When all was ready, and they somehow knew that the time of sunset was upon them, the two Maiar sang the benediction Frodo still had not quite learned, though he did join them in the parts with which he was sufficiently familiar. It was pleasant to hear only the two of them for a change, since neither were often inclined to sing alone during the evenings they shared with others who lived nearby. Both of them had the exquisite voices of their people — Ványalos' an agreeably mellow low tenor half an octave above Olórin's more resonant baritone — and Frodo was glad for this unexpected opportunity to enjoy listening to them.

As ever, Ványalos came with tales to tell, about his activities during the day, things he had heard or learned, rumors that had come to his ears. He had the makings of a terrible gossip, Frodo had long since realized, but also the remarkable discretion to know when to stop just short of it. Today, his news was mostly about visitors who had arrived in Lórien's hill country that afternoon, a small group of Elves and Maiar who had come from various places in Eldamar with business in Lórien, and had chosen to travel together. None of the names he mentioned were familiar to Frodo, but one Ványalos felt should be of interest to Olórin.

"Correct me, please, if I am mistaken," the redhead said to his shorter and much fairer friend and neighbor, "but during all the times you spent under the tutelage of Lady Nienna, you did make the acquaintance of one of her servants, Helyanwë, did you not?"

The wizard smiled softly, nodding as he finished refilling all three teacups from the pot that was now empty. "Helyanwë was one of the first of Lady Nienna's people I met when I went to the Lady's house on an errand for Lord Manwë after... well, I'm sure you know when, because you also know very well that Helyanwë and I are friends. As I recall, after I first came to Lórien and you became aware of my friendship with her, you and several of your cohorts in mischief went out of your way to repeatedly suggest that I attempt to develop a relationship of a different kind with her, to help hasten the recovery of my broken heart."

He snorted, a sound of perfectly humorous derision. “Such utter absurdity. I may have misjudged both Aránayel’s feelings as well as my own in my foolish ignorance, but I knew as well as you do that while our people can have many deep and lasting friendships, each of us has but one true mate of the heart, if indeed we have any at all. Aránayel was not mine, nor was Helyanwë. She, and many others, gave me support and guidance when I sorely needed it, and since then, our tasks for those we serve have brought us to work together again, at times. I know you are perfectly aware of this, Ványalos. Are you preparing to tell some inappropriately sordid — and completely untrue — tale to amuse Frodo and embarrass me?”

The taller Maia clicked his tongue and wrinkled his nose in chiding. “Certainly not! I would never do such a thing to you, *pityandil*...”

This time, Frodo snorted, amused but not fooled by the display of feigned innocence. “You already have, on at least six separate occasions I can recall,” the hobbit pointed out. “If I didn’t know that you are indeed Olórin’s friend, I would suspect you of being his sworn enemy, after some of the outrageous stories you’ve told — or perhaps I should call them *lies*, instead.”

Had he been a child — or more childish rather than childlike — Ványalos might very well have stuck out his tongue at the halfling. “I have never in my life told a lie,” he said indignantly. “Exaggerations, perhaps, and embellishments to improve upon an otherwise dull tale and give the listener greater pleasure, but not lies. But I do grant, Olórin,” he added, relenting, “that this particular attempt to lift your spirits was an ill-chosen one. You spoke well of Helyanwë, with some affection, and I admit that I misinterpreted it as interest of another sort. Even if I had not, the timing of such a thing would have been poor, and I should not have pressed the matter as I did.”

About to drink from his teacup, the wizard set it upon the table instead, leaned back in his chair, and stared at his neighbor, dark eyes wide with disbelief. “In all the thousands of years since that incident, I have never once heard you utter such a sincere apology for it. Is something wrong, old friend? I cannot imagine you have been saving this without considering when it might best be used to your advantage.”

The redhead smiled crookedly. “Now, you are being unfair. I have never been *that* mercenary! The reason I mention it now is quite simple, and not at all a matter of manipulation: Helyanwë is among those who arrived from Eldamar today. She and her company had just reached the commons while I was there on my daily errands. Apparently, someone mentioned to her that I was your friend and neighbor, and had been much involved with the attempts to aid you during your recent difficulties. She asked if you were sufficiently recovered from your injuries to entertain guests you have not seen in many a year. Since to the best of my knowledge, you have always been on good terms with her, I told her I could not see why you would object. I knew Eäron intended to ask you if some of the local folk could gather here after the evening meal, because of the coming rain, and I did not think you would say no. I informed her of this, and she felt it would be an excellent time to visit. She did ask if I might make mention of this to you, however, so that if you felt otherwise, you could contact her beforehand and

forestall any potential unpleasantness. She is indeed a lovely person, *pityandil*, and I regret not having made her acquaintance much sooner. I hope I did not misspeak in extending her this invitation."

"Not at all," he was instantly assured. "I think it is well past time for Frodo to meet a few of my friends who are *not* rogues like you. Had I know she was in Lórien, I would have invited her myself. Did she say what brought her here?"

Ványalos shook his head as he swallowed his last mouthful of his meal, as ever savoring each morsel. All of the Ainur Frodo had met and broken bread with enjoyed sharing this part of the life of the Eruhíni, but none took quite so much pleasure in it as Ványalos. Sometimes, the halfling could not help but feel that when He had fashioned the hobbits, Eru Ilúvatar had also borrowed a few notes from whatever song Ványalos had sung in the Ainulindalë, for he was quite certain it must have at least in part concerned such mundane delights. "She did not mention it, and I did not ask. Whatever prompted her to approach me, I felt it to be a private matter and not my business unless you or she choose to make it so."

He flushed slightly, a rare thing among the Ainur, and even rarer for the generally audacious Ványalos. "I did not wish for her to think I was prying, not after what I did long ago. I have no doubt my ill-considered pressure of you reached her ears, and having now met her face to face, I understand why you were offended. I *am* sorry, Olórin, if I shamed or hurt either of you."

The wizard's eyes glittered as he reclaimed his cup and took a sip of the warm and fragrant tea. "Since apologies so heartfelt are rare gifts from you, I shall accept this one, but I suspect Helyanwë was not offended. Amused, perhaps, because she has had her share of scalawags with which to contend, but not shamed. Had she been, I'm quite sure she would have greeted you with stern words and a chill that could freeze what passes for blood in a Balrog's veins, rather than a polite inquiry about my welfare. I shall enjoy seeing her again, and I will be interested in discovering why she has come so far from Nienna's halls — and via Eldamar, at that."

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*Upon a dark midsummer's eve there came a maiden fair,  
All gowned in blue with golden sheen and blossoms in her hair.  
Around the bright and festive fires, aglow with silver light,  
Beneath the starry summer skies she danced throughout the night.*

*Her hair about her shoulders fell in locks of precious gold,  
Her face shone like an Elven maid in song and lore of old.  
Her step fell light upon the grass, as gentle as a breeze;  
Her laughter glittered in her eyes like starlight on the seas.*

*And as she danced, she sang a song so marvelous to hear  
That all who hearkened to its notes recalled it through the year.*

*It warmed them in the autumn chill, gave comfort in the rain,  
And when the snows of winter flew it brought the spring again.*

*Yet when that soft enchanted eve did fade before the dawn,  
Those who had seen the maiden looked about, and found her gone.  
But ever after, on the wind the echoes of her tune  
Were heard until she came and danced beneath midsummer's moon.*

Although Frodo had a fair singing voice, he had felt very little desire to participate in such activities ever since that dreadful night in Bree when he had allowed himself to get carried away, almost to the loss of all Middle-earth. Since his arrival in Valinor and the security of knowing that no such mishap could be repeated — and that many of the local residents knew nothing of what he had foolishly done at the Prancing Pony — he had been less disturbed by that memory and more self-conscious due to the extraordinarily beautiful voices of the Elves and the Ainur among whom he lived. But those who had not been to Endor in many a long year were hungry for new songs and tales, and their interest in anything Frodo had to offer was keen. He was still reluctant to participate overmuch, but neither did he wholly refuse, as he had at first. With so many guests about this night, he was too busy to do much more than listen, but as some of the Elves also celebrated midsummer and that time was drawing near, he was easily persuaded to share with them one of the briefest hobbit songs pertaining to it.

Complying with such requests was less discomfiting, he had come to realize, because he was never required to perform entirely alone. During his long stay in Middle-earth as Gandalf, Olórin had become familiar with every song written by the hobbits since they moved into the land they named the Shire. Sometimes he would sing with Frodo, if he felt so moved, sometimes he did not, but he knew accompaniment for them all, and was able to render them more than passably well on the great harp he had been given by the one of the Telerin Elves, Lindarinë, many years ago. Frodo loved the sound of it, for it seemed fuller and richer in tone than any of the harps he had heard played in Middle-earth, even in such Elven lands as Rivendell and Lothlórien. It seemed to the halfling as if the instrument had a living voice that was somehow an extension of the Maia who owned it and was able to call forth such beautiful sound from its strings. He never tired of listening to Olórin play it, whether it was during evening gatherings or when he did so for his own pleasure. Hearing it always woke in the hobbit a desire to learn such a delightful skill, at least as well as he, a mere mortal, was able. He had not mentioned that wish aloud, since he doubted he had even half the ability of an Elf, much less one of the Ainur, but someday, perhaps, he would.

For now, at the request of one of their guests — the Elven weaver Mirimë, who lived near the meadow to the west of this small community — he sang the short song he had first heard many years ago, on the midsummer after he had come to live with Bilbo at Bag End. His uncle knew many songs most other hobbits had forgotten, and had written quite a number of his own. Frodo more than half-suspected this was one of Bilbo's efforts, but one he had never fully finished, since it seemed more brief than his usual songs and poems. Olórin agreed, although he had no actual proof that Bilbo was in fact the source of the song. He only knew that he, too, had first heard this from his old friend and not elsewhere in the Shire, and that it had come to light not long after Bilbo's adventure with the Dwarves.

“I suspect his head was so full of all he had seen during his travels, he had to find some way to record it all before he forgot it,” the wizard speculated after Frodo had finished the song and received the adulation of their guests, especially of Mirimë, who had asked who had written it. Frodo had turned to Olórin for confirmation of what he had deduced, which the Maia had supported. “No such thing ever happened in the Shire, of course — not during the years of Bilbo’s life, at least — but he saw and heard a good deal during his stays in Rivendell, and even in Mirkwood and Thranduil’s halls. I sometimes think he felt disappointed that the hobbits had none of what he would call ‘magic’ about them, and dearly wished to bring some of what he admired about the Elves to the Shire. By the time he returned home from the trip to Erebor, he had heard the tales of Lúthien and Melian, and had seen some of the fairest of the Fair Folk still residing in Middle-earth. When I first heard this song, I could hear the echoes of those tales and Bilbo’s own experiences in it. He never did claim it was his own, of course, but in a manner of speaking, he has left his mark all over it.”

The weaver — a tall and willowy Elf woman with glossy black hair and pale sea-green eyes — nodded her understanding. “It is a charming song, whoever wrote it. We have heard tales of your people here in Lórien for many years, Master Frodo, but none of my folk who have sailed West brought with them any of your music. I could not believe that it had no merit of its own to make those who have heard it disdain it so — to speak the truth, I have often thought those who came with the tales forgot everything else because they were too concerned about their coming voyage to pay more than half a mind to those they were leaving behind.”

Frodo smiled and bowed to the lady as he accepted the goblet of wine Ványalos offered him. “It’s good to know that we hobbits have not been entirely overlooked by those in the West, nor completely forgotten by the Elves who left Middle-earth, but I would not think so harshly of them. As a rule, my people had little to do with any of the Big Folk, and if anyone could be accused of disdain, I’m afraid it would be the hobbits. Many of us wanted nothing to do with outsiders, and those like my uncle who came to know the Elves and Dwarves and Men — and Wizards,” he added, inclining his head to Olórin to let him know his part in the history of the Shire was not being overlooked, “were usually considered odd, not quite respectable by hobbit standards. I could scarcely blame any of the Fair Folk who passed through the Shire if they did not choose to carry with them any memories of a people who wanted naught to do with them.”

“Yet here *you* are, Master Baggins,” another of the Elves, Failon, remarked, smiling. He was unusually tall even among the local Elves, almost of a height with Ványalos, dark-eyed, dark-haired, but with a cheerfully sunny personality. He was noted locally for two things: his baking talents, which were excellent, even by hobbit standards, and his skill with the flute, which rivaled that of the local Maiar who favored such instruments. Ványalos had introduced him to Frodo not long after the halfling had first come to Lórien, and their mutual enjoyment of cooking arts had led them to become friends as well. “Some have said that you and your uncle came only because Olórin insisted, but it seems to me that you are quite at home here, in your own right. You speak our language well for someone who was not raised among the Eldar, and you know many of our customs. I should not say that you, at least, have wanted little to do with us.”

Frodo laughed after taking a deep draught of the red wine he had been given. “No, I was always fascinated by tales of the Elves, even before I went to live with Bilbo. And if I had had any inkling that the person we all knew as Gandalf was so much more than a wandering old Man, I would have pressed him for far more than the tales we were sometimes able to jolly him into telling! I do miss the Shire, but because of the people I left behind, not the land itself — not anymore. I found it here, all over again, and I think in time, I will find new friends as well — not to replace the old, of course, but to add to the joy I am finding again in life.”

Failon snorted, but with amusement. “And *that* you might have begun to find sooner if Olórin had not waited so long to invite more than one or two guests to this house we built for him.”

The wizard, who had been adjusting one of the harp strings, deliberately struck a very dissonant chord that he knew would make the Elven baker, who was seated nearest him, wince. From beside the softly glowing central hearth, one of the other guests clicked her tongue. She was a small woman, delicate-boned and slender but with a visible inner strength, like the taut strings of the harp. Though her gown was of unassuming dark blue and soft grays, her hair shimmered like moon-washed mithril, caught up in a net of fine dark threads set with silver beads that shone almost as bright as her large gray eyes. She had been introduced to Frodo as Helyanwë, Olórin’s friend of old who was in the service of Nienna. Her appearance had made the hobbit wonder how she had come by her name — which, as he recalled, was the High Elven word for rainbow — but the moment he heard her speak her greeting to him, he understood. The many beautiful colors her name implied came not of her outer aspects, but of her voice and her personality, both of which were as lovely and radiant and as full of the promise of fair days after harsh storms as the rainbow itself. He quickly knew why she served Nienna the Weeper, and why she and Olórin were friends. She was a reflection of the hope that sustains and lightens the hearts of those who have suffered long and bitterly, and he shared that hope in full measure.

She turned now to the defense of their host. “Come now, Failon, you are not being fair. You came to Aman in the first Crossing, and have been here ever since. You have never been ill or injured a single day in your entire life, so do show some compassion toward those who have. Olórin has spent much time away from home on business of the Valar, and if he was especially wearied by his last long journey on their behalf, then he has earned all the peace and rest he wishes. Even Lord Eru has said as much. Are you presuming to argue with Him?”

The baker made a soft grumbly sound; Olórin nodded to his supporter. “Thank you, Helyanwë, you have always been one of the most sensible and gracious of our people. But I fear Failon has recently spent too much of his time loitering about in the company of Ványalos, so I do not wonder at his impertinence.”

Ványalos sniffed with mild indignation as he hesitated to offer his host the cup he had prepared for him. “Impertinent I may be, *pityandil*,” he rebutted, “but it is not a habit I encourage in anyone but myself, and if Failon were my pupil in this, then I would consider him a negligent student, at best. But it seems to me that the coincidence of the rains changing their pattern to come on the evening of the same day as visitors arrive from other parts of Aman is perhaps not a coincidence, after all. It is well past

time you took back some of the more pleasant parts of the life you knew before you went on that perilous mission to Endor.”

Olórin acknowledged the truth of that observation, and was given his wine cup in reward. While the others took the moment to also refresh themselves, the wizard left his harp and joined Helyanwë beside the hearth. The warmth of it was not needed, for this part of Aman seldom grew cold, but the low fire held at bay the cool dampness of the rainy night. “Is this what brings you to Lórien?” he wondered as he settled into the vacant seat nearest hers. “Lady Nienna was greatly concerned for my welfare during the months of my illness, and I know she continues to watch from afar — through her brother Irmo, if not directly. Did she send you so that she might have a detailed report to hear from one of her own people?”

Helyanwë laughed as she tucked back an errant strand of her silver hair that had escaped its proper place in the decorative net. “I have no doubt that she would be pleased by it, but coming here was my choice, not the Lady’s instruction. You are likely not aware of it, since you have had much more vital matters to concern you since your return to Aman, but I and others have had unusual charges in our care, in recent years. There were many of the Eldar who fled Middle-earth when it became clear that war with Sauron was drawing nigh once again, and some of those who had suffered through the last such conflict had no desire to be present for another.”

Olórin nodded heavily. “I know that feeling all too well, I’m afraid. Had it not been my duty to stand with the Eruhíni and help them oppose him, I might have chosen to flee to the West as well. I was not there during the battles of the Second Age, but I still remember those of the First far too clearly, and my fear of Sauron’s power came of his deeds I had seen when he was still Melkor’s lieutenant. Well did he earn the name Gorthaur the Cruel! But it was responsibility and my duty to the Valar and Lord Eru that kept me to my task, not courage.”

“*And your love of Lord Eru’s Children,*” she reminded him gently. “That has ever been your strongest motivation for giving aid to those in Endor, and I know you well enough to know your heart in this. Courage has many forms and many guises, my dear Olórin, and most often, it stands behind the humble mask of what is done for the sake of love. But I have not come to discomfit you with commentary upon that which all your friends and neighbors know for themselves. Rather, there is a matter concerning several of the Eldar in which I suspect you may be able to provide great assistance. My journey to Eldamar took me to the city of Alqualondë, in search of an Elven sailmaker by the name of Lindarinë. I did not know it when I left Nienna’s house, but I have since discovered that you and he have been friends since well before the time of the Revolt.”

“We are,” the wizard acknowledged, “though we have not been as close in the years after his release from Mandos. He was one of the most joyful persons I knew among the Eldar before those tragic events, and though he has returned to incarnate life, the memories of that time have so dimmed his spirit, he has not been able to find a reason to return to the life of joy he once knew.”

“Until now, that may have been very true,” Helyanwë agreed. “But not long ago, we found that perhaps there *is* a reason for him to live again.” When Olórin regarded her with puzzlement, she explained. “As I said, almost four years ago, by the count of time in Endor, when the conflict with Sauron began to erupt into open conflict, many of the First-Born came hither to escape what they thought might well prove to be the triumph of the Shadow over Middle-earth. As you doubtless know, Círdan and his shipwrights were busy indeed, preparing vessels to carry those who wished to pass into the West.”

“Not only Círdan,” Olórin said with a sigh. “Some who knew such craft still lived in Dol Amroth, and they were also hard pressed to use their skills to build ships, or to teach their craft to those who wished to sail West and were unwilling to wait. Most fled to Lindon and joined Círdan and his people when the Southrons first stirred and began to press the borders of Gondor from the south some years ago, but a few held out until the war opened in earnest along the southern borders. They then either fled to safer regions or took ship themselves. I had heard that several planned to return to the lands that had been their home, should the war end in favor of those who stood against the Shadow, but I do not know if they did.”

“Nor do I, but I *do* know that some of these lesser shipwrights removed themselves to small settlements along the western shores of Endor, near the same gulf where the havens lie. They were not unscrupulous, nor did they deliberately look to profit from the fear of others, but some were unwisely moved by the terror of those who came looking to escape to the West, and if Círdan and his folk did not have a ship ready for their crossing, these others were willing to craft smaller vessels to allow them to leave sooner.”

The Istar’s dark eyes widened, so extremely that they caught the light of the flickering fire and for a moment burned a brilliant blue; the threads of the circlet gleamed bright in answer, as if responding to the thoughts searing through his mind. “I had not heard of this,” he said, “not from Círdan or Elrond or anyone who might have been privy to such information.”

“Mayhap because it was not common knowledge,” Helyanwë assured him, laying a hand on his arm to calm him before he could become needlessly disturbed by the news. “Círdan, I have discovered only recently, did know something of this, but it did not go beyond his jurisdiction. Such incidents were not frequent, and when it became known that they were occurring at all, he made certain they did not continue. He considered this a private matter, to remain and be dealt with by his own people, and I believe his judgement was correct. The craftsmen who acquiesced to the pleas of those desperate to depart were not taking advantage of them to increase their wealth; they were genuinely moved to compassion by the anguish of those who begged for their help. They hurried the building of ships that could go into the West, and did not know the results of their haste. Only three such vessels set out before Círdan intervened. All three made the crossing, but not without incident. Two barely reached the easternmost shore of Tol Eressëa; they landed hard away from any port, but with no loss of life.”

She sighed, her gray eyes dulled with sadness. “The third and last was not so blessed. It foundered in the crossing and would not have come as far as it did if not for the intercession of Uinen,

who saw it, lost and desperate, and came to its aid so that it might reach the waters of Aman. But when he saw what she had done, Ossë her spouse grew angry, as is too often his wont; he felt she had acted improperly, and raised up the waters of the Shadowy Seas, so that the ship she had rescued foundered and was wrecked against the most desolate and rocky shoals of the Enchanted Isles. All on board were drowned, but for two young Elf children, who were saved by Ulmo himself when he heard the cries for help of those aboard the ruined ship. Even he came too late to save them all, but the young ones he took safely to Tirion, where great Elven healers lived and could succor them. They were fair children, even among the offspring of the Eldar, golden-haired and dark-eyed, not babes, though not yet even half-grown, perhaps six or seven years as the mortals count them. None in Tirion recognized them, and the terror through which they had lived — foundering at sea and like as not witnessing the loss of their parents and close kin — had stolen away their voices. They would not speak, or could not, and had closed their minds to any who might commune with them in that fashion.”

“I have seen such things before,” Olórin said, his tone heavy with compassion for the orphaned children. “More often among mortals than among the Eldar, but from time to time, one of the Eruhíni who has suffered a terrible and sudden loss will shut themselves off from others in this way. Some recover their voices in time, others do not. Children seem more apt to do so, but only when the fear has passed and they are able to feel safe again. If they are not known to any of the Eldar here in Aman, it may be long before they can find such security.”

Helyanwë agreed. “Which is why they were brought to the house of my mistress. Lord Irmo and Lady Estë both agreed that the hurt which had stolen their voices was not a physical injury, nor one of the mind that he could heal through his skills. It needed the compassion of his sister Nienna instead, and so they were brought to live in her house. I have been much involved in their lives since they were found, and it has been time well spent, for it has at last borne fruit. Only a few weeks ago, they began to speak again, with those of us who have been as family and teachers to them, and we finally learned their names: the boy is Lére, and the girl is his twin sister Melui.”

This time, an audible gasp escaped the wizard. “I know of them! Indeed, I have met them, when they still resided in Middle-earth. Their mother, Lassea, is one of the Teleri of Lindon and has lived in that land all her life. Her spouse, Runel, was one of the Galadhrim of Lothlórien, a boat crafter who came to learn from Círdan, as he was the most skilled of the Eldar in such things. He fell in love with both Lassea and the Sea, but agreed to stay in Middle-earth until such time as she was ready to cross and perhaps rejoin her parents and other kin who had gone to the West long ago, by choice or by death. They had wanted children for many years, yet they came later than is typical for the offspring of the Eldar. Lassea took this as a sign that the time for their departure to the West was drawing near, yet when I last saw them, perhaps five years ago, I saw no indication that she was in such haste to leave Endor that she would risk the lives of her very precious children in anything less than a ship from Círdan’s own hands.”

The silver-haired Maia sighed softly. “Perhaps, but it would seem that she did just that. The children, of course, cannot tell us what their parents had meant to do or how they reached the decision about their departure from Middle-earth, but Círdan himself knew more — a great deal more. Not only

does he recognize the twins, but he knows the full tale behind this tragedy. During the time of the Great Crossing, there were twin brothers among the Teleri who waited for the second crossing, Nolvo and Rávo. The elder of the two, Nolvo, stayed in the Falas as part of the group Ulmo had asked to remain behind; Rávo and his spouse went on to Aman at the urging of his brother, who desired that the first generation of at least one of their families be born in the Blessed Realm. There was no bitterness at their parting, for Rávo was going to a land of great bliss, and for Nolvo to be asked to remain in Endor by the Lord of the Seas himself was a great honor. Toward the end of the First Age, Nolvo took a wife, Inwitári, and they had but one child, Lassea. During the Great Battle that destroyed and changed Beleriand and much of western Middle-earth, Inwitári was captured by the minions of the Enemy and killed. Nolvo, still faithful to his promise to remain in Endor, raised his daughter on his own, and himself was slain during the Second Age in the battle with the Witch King of Angmar. Thereafter Círdan saw to Lassea's welfare, though she had been well-prepared by her father to live and thrive on her own. As you said, when her twin children were born after so many years spent childless, she took it as a sign that it would soon be time for her to leave Middle-earth. When she heard news that the Nine were abroad and Sauron was once again stirring, she felt certain the moment had arrived, and convinced her husband of such.

“They and others of their acquaintance were impatient to leave and unwilling to wait for Círdan to prepare a ship for them, for they had all been in Middle-earth during the war of the Last Alliance, and they were terrified of seeing another, even more dreadful conflict. Because of what had taken the lives of both her parents, Lassea in particular wanted her children to never know the horrors of such a struggle, so she and others found one of the shipwrights from Amroth who was willing to prepare a vessel for them as quickly as possible. But as always, haste proved its own undoing, even a haste wrought of love. Círdan warned them against this, but Lassea would not heed him.”

Olórin had been listening attentively, not interrupting, but when Helyanwë paused, he spoke, giving voice to connections that had entered his mind. “Lindarinë is Telerin, and if I am not mistaken, his father's name was Rávo. If this is the same person of whom you speak, then here there is tragedy heaped upon tragedy. I know of this family, and there is a reason why Lindarinë has so few kin, and none as close as might be. When Fëanor and his followers came to Alqualondë and used force to take what they had been refused, both Rávo and his wife actively and willfully fought against them. They slew in anger and hate, not in defense of themselves or others as many of the Teleri did, and I know that Lord Manwë will not permit them to leave Mandos, for they remain as unrepentant of what they did as is Fëanor. It is a very large part of why Lindarinë can find no joy in life. He returned in the hope that ere long, his kin would again be with him, but none of them who died that day have yet come forth, either because Manwë forbids it, or because they will not leave so long as others cannot also return.”

Helyanwë let loose a deep breath, full of pity. “And much the same is true of Lassea's parents. Her father, Nolvo, took many lives in battle more cruelly than was necessary because he so hated the orcs who had killed his wife. Yet he slew far more than mere orcs, taking the lives of many men who had fallen to the darkness or were its unwilling slaves. He will not admit that any of what he had done was wrong and is worthy of regret, and thus Lord Manwë will not allow Lord Námo to release him. So long as he remains in Mandos, his wife will not come forth, for she refuses to leave without him. So Lindarinë remains alone, with only some very distant cousins as family. He has no wife, no child to give

him comfort. These children of Lassea are his near cousins, and once that had been discovered, I was sent to Alqualondë to see if he might take them into his house and care for them, until their parents win their own release from the Halls of Waiting. It would do all of them good, I deem, for the children wish very much to have kin of their own kind to guide and watch over them, and I believe it would help Lindarinë find the healing for his own heart as well. Both he and the twins need family to effect their cure, but he does not believe himself fit for such a task."

The wizard grumbled softly. "He is wrong. Long ago, he was able to help me through my own darkness, and with others found ways to lead me back into the light of life again. He could do the same for these children, if he would only let go of his bitterness and grief long enough to see it."

Helyanwë smiled, her eyes glittering. "I knew you would say this, Olórin my friend, which is why I came here when I realized I could not open his eyes, or his heart. But I did not come to ask you to go to Alqualondë and attempt to persuade or force Lindarinë to do what he refuses to do, nor to remind him that it is his duty as their last living kin to look after these young ones. I came to ask if you would consider coming with me to Nienna's house, to see these children and help determine if they might indeed be the remedy Lindarinë needs, and he theirs. You are the greatest of all Nienna's pupils, though you are not of her people, and you are acquainted with all three who are sorely in need of help. Knowing Lindarinë as you already do, perhaps if you have a chance to see the twins as they are now, you might also see the way to do what is best for all of them. Thus far, it has eluded those of us who have been charged with the task, and your assistance would be greatly appreciated."

"I think it's a splendid idea," another voice chimed in, reminding Olórin that they were far from alone. They had an audience, in fact, as the others had been listening to Helyanwë as if she were telling a tale of bygone days. Frodo had been the one who had spoken, and when the wizard looked up at him wearing a profoundly skeptical expression, he continued. "Well, it is, if you think about it. It seems as if there are quite a number of people in need of help at the moment, people who helped you in the past, and this would be returning the favor, wouldn't it?"

The hobbit gave him such a pointed look as he spoke, Olórin wondered for a moment what more he might be implying. It took only a moment more for him to understand. Others had aided him in the past when he was in sore need of it, and perhaps the person who might best be able to help him determine why he was now having such difficulties in his relations with Manwë was Nienna, who understood more of the complex workings of the heart than any other of the Valar. "It might at that," he agreed as he digested these thoughts, nodding slightly as he held Frodo's eye to let the halfling know that he had grasped his tacit meaning. "But it is a fair distance from Lórien to Nienna's house on the western shores, some seven days of travel if one goes by land. I do not know if this would be a good time for such a long journey."

A frown of worry darkened Frodo's expression. "Why not? Are you feeling ill again?" He hardly thought such could be possible, not after Eru Himself had intervened to help the Maia before he had dwindled to nothing.

He, and others, were glad to see Olórin shake his head, without hesitation. “No, of course not. I am not so foolish as to disregard Lord Eru’s advice concerning the use of His gift, especially not after He gave it to me to help heal the harm that had been caused when other advice of His was ignored. I’m fine, but this trouble is mine alone, and I would not have you waste even a day of your time here in Aman on a journey you may not wish to make.”

The halfling dismissed that concern with a casual gesture. “The time is mine to spend as I will,” he reminded his friend, “and since Bilbo and I were told we need not leave this life until we decide we are ready, I will have as much time here as I wish. But I do understand that you might not want me tagging along. Is there some reason why I cannot simply stay here while you go? I’m not a child, in spite of my size, and I’ve grown quite comfortable here — at least since you were made well again. I wouldn’t mind an opportunity to get to know the other people who live hereabouts without feeling as if I am nothing more than your shadow.”

Olórin’s eyes narrowed as he glanced first at the hobbit, then beyond him to their guests, who were listening to their conversation, either openly or with politely veiled interest. “Have you felt this way even since you first came to Lórien? That I have been overprotective? If so, I apologize, for I never intended to cause you discomfort....”

Frodo again waved the matter aside. “And you didn’t. What I felt were my own misconceptions, not your mistreatment. Everyone has been quite kind to me, yourself included — and I have very much appreciated it,” he added, looking about to smile at the guests who were watching him. “But I haven’t been alone for more than a few hours since before I left Middle-earth, and I should like a chance to see how well I fit in here without thinking that someone else must always be responsible for smoothing the path for me, so to speak. It’s not as if I’m in danger, after all, and even if something were to come up in your absence, I’m certain any of your people would happily summon you if there was need.”

“Indeed we would,” Ványalos agreed with an emphatic nod that set his long braid of red hair dancing across his back. “I do not think Frodo needs anyone to look after him, *pityandil*, but if you are concerned that he might become lonely or bored, we will see to it that he does not. Indeed, I believe there are others who would like an opportunity to improve their acquaintance with him. Few of our people here in Lórien have had the experience of interacting with mortals more than briefly, and this is the first opportunity for some to do so at all, since Lord Eru has granted Frodo and his uncle the grace to live and travel safely in Aman. I would gladly see to it that they take care not to intrude on his solitude when he wishes and requires it.”

One of the taller Maiar, Eäron, snorted. “So you would appoint yourself his caretaker instead, Ványalos? Did you not just now say that he needs none?”

Laughter skittered about the room at the way Ványalos both flushed and glared at the sea lord’s servant. Eäron’s own spouse, Lantara, nudged him for making such a brazen remark, though she too was smiling. But Frodo came to his neighbor’s aid. “I do not, Eäron, but neither do I mind the companionship. Ványalos was the first I found here in Lórien, and if he cares for my well-being, then

I am blessed by having such a friend. And you do not know hobbits, if you believe that we do not have ways for ridding ourselves of guests who have overstayed their welcome!”

“That is quite true,” Olórin agreed, far more familiar with the ways of the Endor’s Little People than all the others in the room combined. “Any folk who enjoy the giving and taking of hospitality as much as the hobbits need to develop skills for ousting those who would linger long after even their notions of propriety say the time has come to go home. Small though they might be, the hobbits have many methods for evicting unwanted guests which even you might find surprisingly effective, Eäron. He can deal with Ványalos — or with any of you, for that matter, if needs be.”

The wizard sighed, his decision made. “Very well, then, Frodo, since you have no objections and indeed it seems you would enjoy some time *out* of my company, I shall go with Helyanwë. I do not know how much I will be able to help, but it does indeed seem that there are many matters which could find the beginnings of their resolutions in the house of Nienna.”

*To be continued*