

Twice Blessed

© 2002 Mary Jean Holmes
disclaimers in Part One

Part Two

Chapter III

*The silence that is the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.*

On the farthest of the western shores of Aman, along the endless strand of the Ekkaia and not far from the very Doors of Night, Nienna had come after the shaping of Valinor and there built her home, away from the other residents of the Blessed Realm. It was a desolate land and thus had always been, not lush with green as the plains and forests, nor towering and majestic as the mountains of the Pelóri, nor as vast and unsleeping as the great seas. It was a place where the clouds often lowered over the land below, which itself was bleak, giving sustenance to the unimpressive growing things that perched upon the rocky bluffs against the sea, or found ways to root themselves in the sands and broken stones where the surf pounded in ceaseless rhythms of the tide and the wind. Few of the *kelvar* made their homes here, for there were many more places in Aman for them to live and thrive with greater ease. It was a place of deep quiet, interrupted only by the constant voices of wind and sea that battered the shores and stony hills.

Most people looked upon this land and wondered how anyone could choose to make it their home. Surely, some thought, only a cold and heartless person would make such a choice, for only an unfeeling heart could find anything of worth in grim desolation. Olórin had thought much the same thing, the first time he had come to Nienna's house, but later, when he had come in terrible need of isolation, wanting nothing more than to hide his shame and numb the pain he had felt after Aránayel's cruelty, he had learned much about the Weeper and her home that he had not grasped before. He had spent considerable time alone during those days when he had resided here at Manwë's instruction, wandering the seemingly empty lands that were Nienna's domain; in time, he came to realize why she had let him do so. There was wisdom in the stillness, understanding to be found in silence away from the clamor of others' thoughts and feelings. Like all of his kind, he perceived the presence of his fellow Ainur as a wordless sound, forever pressing against him like a noise that increased with the numbers of others around him, and diminished the farther he went into solitude.

Only once had he ever known total silence, both physically and mentally: during the time after his death in Moria, when he had become untethered from any physical existence and was set adrift outside the circles of time and space. He had been nowhere, then, and nowhen; he could not perceive anything but himself, not the presence of a world about him, material or immaterial, nor even the

passage of time. It had been the Void in its uttermost sense, and if that had been what Melkor experienced every time he went into that nothingness to seek the Flame Imperishable, then Olórin did not wonder that at length he had been driven to an utter madness that would have destroyed everything, had he been able to achieve his goals.

The quiet of Nienna's realm was not so disturbing to the wizard, and had not been for a very long time. He knew why she had come here, and what benefit she derived from such a dwelling place, and now that he appreciated it, he enjoyed the times he spent here as ones of peace in which he could find focus for his spirit and greater understanding of all the facets of Arda and those who inhabited it, Ainur and Eruhíni alike. When he and Helyanwë arrived, using the swift movement of their kind rather than the longer physical journey across the land between the western shores and Lórien, they came to a place that was the accustomed point of arrival, a broad area atop a stone bluff that overlooked the sea on one hand, and looked up to Nienna's dwellings on the other.

As they gazed upon it, an errant shaft of sunlight played across the dark slates of the large granite and glass structure that was called Nienna's house. Only among the Valar would such a place be thought of thus; anywhere else in Arda, even among the Maiar and the most noble of the Elves, it would be considered a mansion. Yet for all its size, it was more simple than most other dwellings of the Valar; its only embellishment was the drama of the world about it, and that needed no enhancement to steal one's breath away. The skies above them were thick with leaden clouds, pierced through in places with searing patches of blue and shot with ribbons of white; the spray of the heavy surf that roared against the dark stone bluffs filled the air, both in dampness and in scent. The wind blew down from the north, along the strand, chill after the pleasant warmth of Lórien, stirring the raiment of the Maiar, driving the clouds ever on, bending low the dry sea grass that here and there sprang up between the rocks.

It was on just such a day that Olórin had come here many years ago, arriving in this very spot. He remembered how he had felt, then, pitifully young and ignorant and in pain he could not understand. He had made the journey only because it had afforded him the excuse he desired to flee Ilmarin, and the unbearable circumstances that had caused his pain. He felt a very human thickness gather in his throat as he recalled the last time he had been in this land, again flying from the halls atop Taniquetil to escape the pain of another unexpected betrayal. On the first of those days, long ago, Manwë had risen to his servant's aid, and had bid him remain with Nienna to find the healing he had so desperately needed. But when Olórin had come here but a few months ago, fleeing Manwë himself, the king of Valar had not come in search of him, or asked after him; he had left that task to Ulmo and Nienna.

Was that, Olórin wondered, perhaps a facet of why he was finding it so difficult to fully forgive his lord and master? Did he harbor some lingering perception that Manwë had not cared enough? If so, it was a misperception, and Olórin knew it, for he had deliberately hidden himself from Manwë, and in the days that had followed, the Lord of the Air had done all he could to help find a way to undo the harm he had wrought. He would have done anything to make right the wrong he had caused — so why could Olórin not find it in him to say the simple words that would end this tension between them?

The sound of a voice nearby reminded him that he was not alone. "You are thinking too much, Olórin, and that has never boded well," Helyanwë said, her tone light enough to let him know that she was not pressing for information that was none of her business, but grave enough to make him aware that she was able to sense more than perhaps he intended to project. "You did not say as much before we made ready to leave your home, but I cannot know you and not know when something is troubling you. I will not ask what, since that information is yours to keep or to share as you choose, but I will say that I could not help but feel that this journey might have benefit for more than those of the Eldar I seek to help."

Olórin's eyes slipped away from his study of Nienna's house and the play of light upon it to regard his companion with a wry smile. "I shan't ask if this conclusion was reached on your own or with the help of others, since I know you need no help to read the hearts of those for whom you care. A skill you learned well from Lady Nienna, long before I first made your acquaintance. I do wish to help Lindarinë and his kin as much as I am able, for I owe him greatly, yet there is a personal matter I desire very much to discuss with the Lady, if she will. But I will postpone my business until after I have done what I can for you, if you wish."

Helyanwë shook her head, a momentary gleam of sun glittering on the silver beads of her netted hair. "There is no need for such haste," she assured him. "Indeed, I think it would be better if you saw to your own needs first, if you are able, for it would doubtless clear your mind and allow you to focus better upon the matters for which I asked you to come. And do you truly question whether or not the Lady would speak with you any time you asked?"

He conceded the point and they started the walk along a path set with flags of slate and granite that led from the seaside bluff to the entrance of Nienna's home. "No. Others may call her the Weeper, but I have long been aware that Lady Nienna is not as cold and grim as many think. Perhaps that was why she was so willing to teach me, because *I* was willing to see her as she is and not as her reputation paints her. Pity is something greatly misunderstood, both here and in Endor. Pride so often blinds one to its true nature, prompts those who would not be seen as weak to scorn it as an unneeded prop for those not stern enough to weather the storms of life. I have been rash and impatient and foolish, far too many times, but that manner of pride is not in my nature, nor in Lady Nienna's. And yet the Eruhíni are so vulnerable to it...!" He shook his head, remembering the many people not of his own kind he had met over the years, especially during his most recent sojourn in Middle-earth.

Though she had not participated in that venture, and knew little of the Atani, Helyanwë nonetheless understood. "It brought doom upon the Noldor, and upon far too many of our own folk. I have heard what became of your fellow Istari, and although I am saddened to hear that *all* of them fell away from your mission, the manner in which all but Aiwendil appear to have done so does not surprise me. Curumo and Alatar in particular knew this kind of pride far too well long before this embassy began, and they learned it from others who demonstrated what they saw to be its more pleasurable aspects. Melkor was not the only one of the Valar who knew such arrogance, though he was far greater a master of it than anyone else."

Olórin chuckled softly as he clicked his tongue. "Such disloyalty does not become you, old friend. Surely you would not count your own mistress in this...."

She made a delicate sound that was nonetheless clearly a snort. "Perhaps not, though she will be the first to admit that she has had her own moments of ill-chosen pride. Others would not be so honest. Is it a matter of pride that is troubling you? I will not believe you if you say you have been guilty of such a thing."

"I would not tend to believe it, either," the wizard admitted as they reached the broad steps of polished dark marble that led to the main entrance of the great house. "But perhaps I have been and cannot see it, and thus am the cause of my own worries. Do not concern yourself overmuch on my account, Helyanwë, please. This is very much a personal matter, and from what you have told me of the youngsters in your charge, you have more than enough to keep you occupied."

"But never so much that I cannot also care for a troubled friend. I will do as you request, of course, but should you change your mind and wish for any help I can give, you have but to ask."

He smiled as they came to the burnished silver and glass doors that opened with only a thought as they approached. "Of that I have no doubt. Yet allow me a chance to deal with this on my own. I cannot help but feel that having spent two thousand years bearing the burden of care and worry for all of Endor has left me a bit out of practice when it comes to handling such affairs of my own. I need the exercise, I think."

Helyanwë laughed, kindly. "Perhaps so. Then I will continue on to see how the young ones are faring. I did not argue with Lady Nienna when she asked if I would undertake the task of investigating their origins and family connections, but I do admit that I did not wish to leave them with other caretakers."

The wizard's eyes glittered even as they passed into the dimmer light beyond the doorway. "What you are experiencing sounds to me very much like the trait the Eruhíni, especially the mortals, call 'maternal protectiveness.' A very interesting phenomenon, Helyanwë, and one I think suits you admirably. You may wish to discuss it with Melian, someday, as only she of our people has any great and direct experience with it."

"I may do that, when the twins are properly settled. For now, they are residing in the little house where the Eldar who occasionally come to visit Lady Nienna are quartered. You will find me there, when you have finished." With that and a gracious gesture, she headed off down the corridor that headed north out of the entranceway.

She did not tell Olórin where he might find Nienna herself, and the wizard did not ask; he knew. Unless she was occupied with matters that demanded her presence elsewhere, the Vala could ever be found in the great hall that was the entire western portion of the house. There, facing the sea and the Doors of Night, were many wide windows that afforded a clear view of the world beyond, stone terraces

that overlooked the towering bluffs and open skies and pounding surf. Nienna went there not to weep, but to ever contemplate matters of the heart and its ways that brought understanding and wisdom and compassion for all that lived. There had Olórin learned from her, many times since they had come to Arda, and he could sense her familiar presence in that place with scarcely an effort.

As he went down the corridors that led to the hall, he noticed that as always, the house was quiet — not silent like a tomb, but merely quiet. The echoes of voices and the distant roar of the sea and wind could be heard, if one paid heed to know them for what they were. They were the sounds of the living world, and he wondered at them no more than he wondered at the fact that so many of his people chose to live in it in the forms of the Eruhíni, when it was not essential to their being. He himself had spent many years in Arda without a visible fana, at work studying and helping the Eldar before the emergence of Men. Yet in this realm of substance and hue and shape, it had always seemed to him to be a way of hiding, moving through it and among its inhabitants, unseen. Many of the Ainur understood this, and though some preferred to remain without a body visible, most of even the greatest maintained a form able to be seen by all, even when they were not among the Eruhíni. Thus they built themselves mansions and halls and homes, and therein dwelt to share also in that part of incarnate life.

Olórin generally did not reflect upon this, for elsewhere in Aman, incarnate life abounded and their imitation of its form seemed quite natural; but here, in a land many considered desolate, few saw the point of it. That they also saw only the lonely sadness of the place explained their attitudes, but he had long since seen past such illusions to the beauty beneath. Others would walk down this same passage, hear the distant echoes of sound and call them mournful; he listened to them and heard but another part of the Great Song that was needed to bridge between the dark notes of a lament to the bright song of rejoicing. It seemed so simple to him, as the rainbow cannot be without first the rain, that what truly made him wonder was how others who were certainly more intelligent and perceptive than he could not see this.

Of course, he had his own areas of blindness; if he hadn't, he would not be here now, seeking the Lady of the house. In his heart he felt the touch of a wordless but warm welcome, and knew that he was on the right path. He lengthened his stride to cover the distance more swiftly, and at last came to the nearest entrance to Nienna's great hall.

The sun had broken through the clouds and now poured through the wide walls and roof of glass like water filling a clear vessel. The chamber was all aglow with it, and in such radiance, the true colors of Nienna's home were revealed in all their simple splendor. The polished stone of the floors gleamed as brightly as the silver of the plain but finely wrought furnishings; the carpets that lay upon them and the hangings of the wall were not elaborate, but their fibers that seemed dark and dull in the shadows showed many vibrant colors in the sunlight. Tall doors of silver and crystal opened onto a terrace that gave a magnificent view of the sea and sky; before them was Nienna's chair, carved of stone, washed with silver, and set with cushions of fine woven cloth the blue of midnight.

The Lady herself sat upon it in a gown of the same deep hue, gazing out upon the world as her thoughts and her heart wandered its vastness, ever in search of greater understanding. She did not stir

when Olórin entered, for she knew without seeing that he was there, but when he paid his wordless respects by kneeling before her, the student ever willing and ready to learn, she smiled, her eyes shining, but not with tears. She spoke no word at first, either aloud or in thought, but bent forward and gently kissed the top of his lowered head. He looked up and smiled in return as she leaned back in her chair.

“It gladdens my heart to see you again, Olórin,” said she, gesturing for him to find a more comfortable seat. He did, though he remained on the softly carpeted floor before her, a place from which he had learned much about compassion and wisdom. “Not so long ago, I had nearly lost all hope for you, and it brings me great joy to see you restored to health and strength once again.”

“Thanks to Lord Eru,” he agreed. “I am not yet wholly restored, though I know it is but a matter of time and patience. Any improvement is a blessing, and each day I find new reasons to be thankful. Did I remember to thank *you*, my lady, for rescuing me when I so foolishly exhausted myself into all but nothing, practically upon your doorstep?”

Nienna’s eyes gleamed as a shaft of brighter sunlight pierced the clouds above and fell upon her. “I cannot recall if you spoke the precise words, but it matters not. Our friendship is old enough so that none are necessary. I have long known your heart, whether you wish it or no, and I knew from the moment I lifted you up from the shore that for all you were broken and weak and in despair, you were grateful for my aid. And I know what brings you here now, even though you have yet to speak of it.”

The Maia laughed, and though the stone and glass of the walls and floors made the sound ring more loudly, it did not seem at all out of place. “I knew there would be no need for me to say anything at all to you. Indeed, it has never been necessary for me to inform you of such matters; you always seem to know before I can even form the thoughts of what I might wish to say.”

“And does this offend you?”

He shook his head; the same sunlight that shone in Nienna’s eyes glinted off the circle of crystal threads all but lost against the brightness of his pale hair. “You already know the answer to that as well. No, my lady, it does not offend me. Truthfully, it makes the situation easier for me, for it means that I need not find ways to say aloud what I either cannot say or have said too often, to no avail. Do you have any notion at all why I cannot find it in me to forgive Lord Manwë, even though I very much wish to do so?”

One corner of the Vala’s smile quirked wryly. “I have many notions as to why this might be so, but only one which I believe to be the truth. I have watched you from afar these past months, and I have felt your inner struggle with this difficult question. You are near to the answer, I think, but perhaps too near to see it clearly.”

Olórin grunted softly. “I suspected as much. And what might this answer be?”

Nienna favored him with a mildly amused sidelong glance. "If I told you, you still would not see it, I fear. I look into your mind and your heart, and I perceive that it is already there, but in pieces you are trying so hard to join together, you do not know that you are attempting to do so in the wrong fashion. If I said to you, no, do it this way, you would try, but you would fail, for you had not found the truth by yourself, and there is much to be learned in so doing."

The wizard's smile faded; as he turned his head away, distress settled upon his fair features. "If you will not help me, then what am I to do? I cannot continue to stumble blindly, searching for an answer that if it does not come may forever estrange me from Lord Manwë. I am his servant, and I entered that service gladly and willingly; I do not wish for it to end because I have not learned your lessons of compassion and forgiveness well enough."

The Lady leaned forward and with one slender hand touched Olórin's face and turned it back toward her. When she had caught his eyes with her own, she smiled compassionately. "You have learned every lesson I ever set you well enough, and more. Not a one of my own people can make that claim, for they tend to concern themselves with one aspect of our duties here in Arda and not many, as you have done. You are not blind, dear Olórin, only weary and confused after too many long years toiling in the Darkness and amid the poisons of the Enemy. Did you hear what Lord Eru told your young friend, the halfling, of the healing of his own wounded heart?"

Again, he nodded. "He told Frodo that he had done much on his own by forgetting his troubles for a time and turning the focus of his mind and heart to the welfare of another. If what happened to me served no other purpose, then that alone would have more than made it worth whatever cost I paid, to help hasten Frodo's recovery from all the hurts he took from the Enemy."

"And if the advice of the One was good for your small friend, it is also good for you. To find the answers you require, you must turn away from them for a time and occupy yourself with the welfare of others. In so doing, you will see what now eludes you, and in the end profit not only those whom you will aid, but yourself as well."

Olórin considered her words for several long moments. "And I suspect that what Lord Eru said to Frodo was not meant for his ears alone. Nothing He ever does is mere coincidence, and He could not have failed to see what was doubtless already troubling me, though I knew it not at the time. But are you guessing what might be, my lady, or do you foretell with greater certainty?"

She chuckled softly. "You know as well as I that so long as all of Eru Ilúvatar's children of thought and of flesh have wills of their own, there is no certainty for the future, only speculation. But some guesses are more educated than others, and founded on a solid basis of knowledge and understanding and fact. I know you, I know the problem you wish to resolve, I see the root of it, and I see how it may be plucked out — but you must see it for yourself, else like the weed that grows deep roots, you will attempt to remove it in the wrong way, leave behind the most vigorous part, and in time, the weed will come forth again. What I suggest is what seems to me to be the best way for you to learn

what is needed to uproot the whole of the problem, and put an end to the trouble once and for all. Are you willing to make the attempt?"

The Maia did not hesitate before nodding. "Of course, my lady. You have never advised me in any way that was not to my benefit in the end, and I will not begin to doubt you now. And is your advice now to help Helyanwë find a way to unite the orphaned Eldar twins with their cousin?"

"Or whatever way will be to the greatest benefit of all involved. Do whatever you are able to help them, and their cousin in Alqualondë, and you will certainly be rewarded in ways that are now beyond your perception. Such was the case after you returned to us from your recent difficult mission in Endor, was it not?"

He smiled crookedly. "In the end, yes, but it certainly did not seem so at first. Lord Eru's wisdom is as infinite as His humors, and ever He finds new ways to remind us that there is no evil that cannot in time be undone by His will. Then I will do as you bid, my lady, and set aside my own troubles to see to those of these orphaned children. I will be glad if there is indeed something I can do to help them, and Lindarinë, for he did much to bring light back into my life. I would do the same for him and his kin, if I am able."

"Of that I am certain," Nienna said as she stood and held out her hands to help the wizard from the floor. The assistance was not necessary, but the friendly gesture was well-meant, and therefore much appreciated. "Perhaps someday, I shall ask my brother Námo to consider allowing you into his Halls to discuss matters of patience and wisdom with Fëanor. He has nursed his grievances and defiance almost as long as you have waited for the chance to give recompense for a debt to one whose life would not have been ruined had Fëanor not led his ill-considered revolt."

When he was on his feet again, Olórin laughed, the sound as bright as the sunshine. "My lady, you honor me with your high opinion of my value as a counselor, but I fear this effort would be utterly wasted, unless Fëanor's heart has greatly changed during my recent sojourn in Endor. I greatly admire his skills as a craftsman and the quickness of his mind; this he knows, but there are certain issues about which we have never seen eye-to-eye. He and I were once acquainted, and he was greatly flattered by my admiration of his work in fashioning the palantíri, but when I did not support him in his desire to regain the Silmarilli, seeing it clearly for the unhealthy obsession it was, it put an end to what favorable relations there were between us. I have a reputation for stubbornness, and I know it, but he is far more stubborn than I. My difficulty in forgiving Lord Manwë is naught but a child's tantrum compared to his resolute anger toward any who opposed him in the matter of the Silmarils. If you sent me to try to persuade him to change his mind over a matter about which he has remained obstinate for three ages, you will be sending one rock to beat upon another. It would serve no purpose at all — which I am sure you know quite well indeed. Never let anyone tell you that you do not have a sense of humor, my lady. It may not be to the liking of all, but it is uniquely your own."

She chuckled. "And I am pleased to see that you have recovered from your illness and weariness well enough to appreciate it, once again. For indeed I did not mean for you to take my suggestion

seriously, as I know too well that Fëanor is unrepentant in his all-consuming obstinacy. I grieve that those things he might yet do for the sake of Arda will remain undone, so long as he will not bend his stiff neck — as others have also done, to their own loss, most of all.”

The Maia knew she was referring to Saruman, who, like Fëanor, had fallen to evil out of pride, had refused to repent of the wickedness he had brought upon himself and others, and had rejected forgiveness when it was offered, for to accept would mean to admit his own fault. He saw also why she had mentioned Fëanor: it caused the wizard to remember that sometimes, betrayal took root in another’s madness, a folly for which no one but they themselves were to blame.

He bowed to her, graciously acknowledging her gentle reminder. “Thank you, my lady, for your wise counsel, as well as your concern. By your leave, I will go now and join Helyanwë and your young guests. I do not know what help I might be able to give, but any that is mine to offer, I will. My debt to Lindarinë is old indeed, and it is well past time that I found a way to repay it.”

Chapter IV

*We find delight in the beauty and happiness of children
that makes the heart too big for the body.*

The guest house in which the twins were currently residing was a short distance north of the main hall, slightly downslope toward the sea along the line of granite cliffs. It was not as small as the cottages in which many of the humans lived in Middle-earth, but in comparison to Nienna's personal dwelling, it was vastly more cosy, about the size of Butterbur's inn in Bree. Nienna did not often have many guests, but frequently those of the Eldar who had just been released from the Halls of Mandos came first to her house for several days, to settle back into life in the incarnate world before moving on to rejoin their kin elsewhere in the Blessed Realm. There were no such guests about now, only the two little ones who were awaiting their own release of sorts, hopefully into the care of their cousin in Alqualondë. Nienna accompanied Olórin on his errand there, not because he required direction, but because she wanted to confer with Helyanwë, now that she had returned from her mission of inquiry.

The house was not entirely quiet when they arrived; the sound of a childish voice singing could be clearly heard, along with the notes of silver pipe. Nienna smiled softly as they entered and the music became more easily heard. "If there has been one thing that has helped these children through their difficulties, it is their surprising love of music. As you can hear, Melui is an excellent singer, and Lére is quite skilled with the little pipe. When they were first brought to us by Ulmo, they were taken to Valmar, where they discovered how very much music is a part of the lives of all our people. Their parents had shared that love, and it gave the little ones considerable comfort to find that the people with whom they had been forced to live at least would provide them with that familiarity."

Thought creased Olórin's brow as they headed toward the source of the sounds. "I wonder if this will prove to be useful or a hindrance," he admitted. "Lindarinë was once tremendously fond of music, but from what I know, he abandoned it utterly after his return from the Halls of Waiting. Introducing him to two youngsters who have such a passion could either revive his own or cause him to reject them all the more, as a reminder of what he has lost."

"I have considered this," Nienna said, gesturing for the wizard to precede her down a corridor that led to a small courtyard at the center of the house. "Yet once, you were also persuaded to give up sorrow and sadness and return to a life of joy. Might some of your own experiences of the distant past provide the insight to help you solve this new riddle?"

He sighed. "Possibly. I'm flattered by your faith in my abilities, Lady Nienna, and I hope that I am able to justify it. My experience with ones so young is not as extensive as might be required. I have never avoided them, neither here nor when I was in Middle-earth, and I very much enjoy their company, but my work has seldom allowed me to indulge in the pleasures of sharing time with them, more than briefly. I would not want to jeopardize their future happiness by erring out of ignorance."

The Lady smiled. "I have considered this as well," she assured him, "and I suspect that whatever may betide with the young ones, you are not as ill-prepared to deal with it as you think. Yet I understand your concern, and I will see to it that you shall not be required to shoulder this particular task alone. Come now, I am eager to hear Helyanwë's news, and I should not be at all surprised if she has already informed the twins that you are coming to meet them. They are ever eager for the company of others."

The double doors at the end of the hallway opened onto a small but attractive inner courtyard that surprised many who saw it for the first time. Though the land all about seemed quite bleak and inhospitable, here it was lush with growing things, such small trees and shrubs and flowers that could grow well in the somewhat limited light. The Elves who came to this house after their release from the Halls of Waiting were always glad to find such familiar and comforting beauty in the midst of their temporary lodgings, and they contributed much to tending the garden and encouraging it to flourish in all the seasons of the year. When none of the Eldar were about, one of Yavanna's people who resided in Nienna's house saw to its care, and it took but a glance to see that no plot of land was more lovingly tended anywhere in Arda. The fragrance of the sun-warmed blossoms met the new arrivals the moment the doors were opened, wafting to them along with the notes of the children's song.

The pair were at the center of the garden along with Helyanwë, who had seated herself on a comfortable bench to listen. The tune was a welcoming song of the Teleri of Lindon, often used to greet ships that sailed up the firth of Lhûn to the ports at the Havens. Olórin recognized it; the notes of that same song had greeted the ship which had brought him to Middle-earth as the last-comer of the Istari. The sound of it brought a smile to his face which remained as the last of the notes faded and the others turned to greet them. As Helyanwë rose to welcome her mistress, the twins made small respectful bows to Nienna, then turned curious eyes to her unfamiliar companion.

Helyanwë moved gracefully toward the newcomers. "Greetings, my lady," she said as she made her small obeisance to Nienna. "And thank you for allowing me to spend a few moments with the twins before tendering my news to you."

"No thanks are needed," Nienna replied, favoring the children with a smile, which widened when she noticed that their attention was not upon her. "I knew you would wish to reassure yourself that all is well with them. Have you warned them that there was a visitor here to see them?"

"Indeed yes, and they are quite intrigued." She glanced back at the youngsters, who were still in the process of appraising Nienna's companion.

Olórin noted that they had changed very little in the years since he had last seen them, perhaps a year before their unfortunate departure from Middle-earth. They would be about twelve, now, he reckoned, yet they appeared as human youngsters of perhaps eight or nine. That was typical of the Eldar, he knew, for though they learned speech and other basic skills much sooner than human infants, their physical maturation was slower, and would not reach full adulthood until they were about fifty. Although they were small, perhaps the same height as Frodo, they were clearly Elven, slender and fair

of face, with unusually thick golden hair that was the legacy of their father. The girl's was long and had been pulled back into an intricate plait that fell to her waist; the boy's had been cropped so that it fell not quite to his shoulders, a more manageable length for an active youth who was still in a childish stage where he did not want to in any way resemble his twin sister. Their garb was simple, of fashions suitable for their age and their people, and their dark eyes studied the wizard intently. He smiled, well aware that they were watching, and though they looked away for a moment, their scrutiny soon returned to him, clearly attempting to take some inscrutable child's measure of whether or not he was acceptable.

Helyanwë called for them to come meet their visitor, and though they responded politely enough, they continued to stare. The girl, Melui, wore an oddly puzzled expression, as if she was trying to see something she thought should be there but could not quite bring into focus; her brother, Lére's face crinkled into a frown. "You're not an Elf," he said, a declaration without the slightest hint of doubt.

Though Helyanwë appeared perplexed by this odd reaction, Olórin was amused, though he did not allow it to show until he knew how the child would accept it. "Were you told that I was?" he wondered, curious rather than accusing. He glanced from Lére to Helyanwë, one eyebrow lifting querulously.

"Not by me," she assured the Istar. "I scarcely had time enough to mention that a guest would be coming soon before they presented me with the song they had practiced for me. Why do you say that, Lére?" she wondered. "Did I say something to give you that impression?"

The boy shook his head. "No. But I thought he was when I saw him come into the room. For a moment, he looked like Father, but he's too short, and his ears look strange."

Melui nudged him with one toe. "No they don't," she scolded, clearly exasperated, even though the three Ainur were amused. "And he doesn't look at all like Father. You're just imagining things because everyone here has dark hair, like mother, and he doesn't."

Lére sniffed. "I suppose — but he's still too short. Mother told us all the people in the West were tall and fair, not short. She's taller than he is. Why are you so short?" he asked the wizard with the bluntness only a child can use without reproach.

Olórin was having difficulty suppressing his laughter, so he decided to say something before he lost his composure. "Why are *you* so short?" he countered, his amusement restrained in his eyes.

"Because I'm just a boy!" Lére answered, rather indignantly, as if the question was completely absurd and therefore a mean joke. "I'm supposed to be short because I'm young!"

"Well, so am I, in a manner of speaking. I am the youngest of all my people, so does it not make sense that I also would not be as tall as the others?"

It was a very reasonable answer; some of the lad's indignation faded in its enlightenment. "I suppose it would," he allowed after taking a moment to digest it. "But that can't be why your ears look funny. They aren't like ours, or like theirs." He gestured to the two Ainu women. "Why not?"

Olórin's glance flicked briefly toward Helyanwë, clearly asking, *Is he always this inquisitive?* But he remained amused, and provided an answer as he took a seat on the bench she had vacated, near the twins. "Because I am the way I am, just as you are the way you are. I have been reliably informed that they look rather like those of hobbits, not Elves, so that would explain the difference, wouldn't it?"

"What's a hobbit?" Melui asked despite her efforts to be more polite than her nosy brother.

"Ah, you probably call them halflings, if you have heard of them."

"Of course we have!" Lére said, more intrigued now than insouciant. "Our father came from Lothlórien, and he passed through the land of the halflings whenever he journeyed to Lindon, before he met Mother. He's told us all about it — the halfling land, that is. He said we might go to visit it someday, on our way to see Lórien. But we never had a chance before we sailed West."

The wizard nodded, his expression sober. "So it would seem. I lived in Middle-earth until I too came West again, quite recently, but before I left, I spent a good deal of time in both the Shire and Lothlórien. I even visited Lindon from time to time."

"Did you know our parents?" Melui asked, clearly torn between curiosity and a desire to refrain from asking rude questions.

Olórin smiled softly. "I did indeed, though not as well as I might have wished. There was much to be done, and my work did not often allow me to linger in any one place for long."

The girl's eyes narrowed at that remark, studying him more intently; they suddenly opened wide as she gasped in shocked recognition. "Mithrandir!" she cried, her hands flying to her mouth.

The three elders looked at her with surprise; Lére, however, made a rather sour face. "That's silly," he insisted. "I remember Mithrandir — he was *old*, Melui! Why, he had a beard twice as long as Círdan's, and wrinkles, and he was a *Man!*"

"No, he wasn't!" the girl insisted right back. "Remember the stories Father and Mother told us about him? He had to be at least a thousand years old, and Men can't *do* that — live so long, I mean. Besides, you're not *looking*, Lére, or listening. He *is* Mithrandir, I'm sure of it. Look at his eyes!"

Her twin made it plain that he was doing this only to humor her, but when he did as instructed, a moment later, his skepticism turned to shocked surprise. "He is!" he gasped, doubt vanished, though he then turned his glare on Helyanwë. "Why didn't you tell us?" he wanted to know, a note of hurt in his voice.

She was honest. "Because I did not know you knew him as such, Lére. I had no idea you had met Olórin when he lived in Middle-earth until he told me yesterday, and I knew nothing of his other names until he returned to Aman not so very long ago."

Melui's already pale face turned ghostly. "Did you come to take us back to Middle-earth, Mithrandir?" she asked.

The wizard could clearly sense her distress at such a notion, and could easily guess at the cause, considering the results of their last voyage across the Sundering Sea. He shook his head. "No," he said gently, "there would be no point in it, even were it possible. What kin are left to you reside here in Aman, I am told, and I should think it would be best for you to be with them, until your parents are returned to you."

Lére sniffed, rather unkindly. "There's only one kinsman of ours here," he pointed out, "and he doesn't want us."

Olórin studied the boy carefully before responding. "Are you certain of that? Have you met him?"

"No," Lére grunted, "but I don't have to meet him to know it. If he wanted us, we would be living with him, wouldn't we?"

The Istar glanced at the two women. Nienna was as serene as ever, but he caught Helyanwë's half-hidden wince at that bitter truth. He sighed. "Perhaps, but I have also heard it was only recently that you and your sister were able to speak again, and tell others who you were and where you had come from. I think Lindarinë was likely quite surprised to discover that he *had* kin among the living, and it may well be that he simply has not had enough time to become comfortable with the knowledge. He knows you as little as you know him, after all."

The boy conceded that logic, though not with any great liking for it. Melui stepped a bit closer to their visitor, almost as if she somehow derived comfort from the presence of someone she had known during their life in Middle-earth, even briefly. "Helyanwë told us you came from a place called Lórien," she said quietly. "Our father did, too, and he always told us it was very beautiful. Is your home like Father's home, or do they just have names that sound the same?"

"The names are similar," Olórin agreed, "and a part of the country in which I live is indeed quite similar to Lothlórien. It's not far from my home, but that region is where Lord Irmo and Lady Estë reside, with many of their servants. I live in an area called the hill country, which is quite beautiful in its own way, very much like the Shire, where the halflings live."

This intrigued Lére enough to divert him from other unpleasant thoughts. "Father said the Shire was not very far east of where we lived in Lindon. We never had a chance to visit it, but Mother and Father once took us to see the White Towers. When we climbed to the top of Elostirion, we could see

very far, and Father said that much of what we could see to the east was the land of the halflings. It was very green and pretty, and I thought we should go to visit it straightaway, but Mother said there wasn't time, we had to return home. We had to get ready to leave on the ship that would soon take us to the West." He snuffled softly. "I think I would much rather have gone to see the halflings and their homeland instead."

"Can you tell us about the place where you live, Mithrandir?" Melui asked, an oddly imploring note in her voice. "I would very much like to hear about it."

"So would I," her brother for once agreed. "It's not very green here, you know, except in this garden. I miss the trees that grew near our house back home."

Olórin looked to Nienna and Helyanwë for their opinions on the matter. Helyanwë appeared to support the children, and the Lady smiled. "I see no reason why you should not," said the latter, glancing from the wizard to the twins, then back again. "I still would like a moment with Helyanwë to hear her report, and since you came to become better acquainted with the children, this will give you an opportunity. Other matters can be decided when I return."

He inclined his head in mute acceptance of her suggestion, knowing it for what it was. He was not uncomfortable with youngsters — in truth, he considered their company refreshing, since they tended to be simple, as he was at heart, not yet spoiled by the complexities of life — but he had not wished to seem to be an interloper, not after Helyanwë had mentioned her feelings of protectiveness toward them. When they were gone, before he could ask the pair what they would like to know about Lórien, Lére spoke first.

"Are they going to make us stay here forever if our cousin won't have us, Mithrandir?" he asked, suddenly seeming much less insolent and more vulnerable. Uneasiness had crept into both his face and his voice, making his words slightly uncertain. "I don't want to stay here."

Before the wizard could express his surprise, he was startled even more by Melui's agreement with her twin. "We're glad to have a place to live," she told him, not wanting the Maia to think they were ungrateful. "Lady Nienna has been very kind to us, and I do like Helyanwë — she makes me think of our neighbor Aerlinn in Lindon, who would teach us and sing with us when Mother and Father were very busy. But the others..." Her voice faded on a tremulous note, as if the words she had thought to speak tasted too bitter to let past her tongue.

Lére was less reticent. "They make me think of the wind in winter, when it blows from the north along the sea. It whistles so strangely, and it smells very clean, but..." He shrugged, also unable to continue.

"It's cold," Olórin provided, able to sense what they could not say. "I'm afraid that has always been something of a problem with some of Lady Nienna's servants. To protect themselves from being hurt overmuch by feeling the pain of those whom they help, they maintain a distance that is sometimes

difficult for those who do are not familiar with their ways to understand. And there are so few children in Aman these days, I fear some of my people, even Lady Nienna's folk, may have forgotten how to deal with them. Especially here, where most of the Eldar who come are full-grown and have spent many years in the Halls of Waiting. The skills needed to help them apparently do not work quite so well with those still new to the world."

Lére wrinkled his nose. "We're not babes," he grumbled. "But I think I miss more than just the trees." His sniff sounded as if it came from more than mere disdain; its source was likely the same as the mist in his sister's eyes.

Olórin closed his eyes briefly, nodding in sympathy. "I understand. It is not easy to be apart from those who have been your family, especially when you do not know when or if you shall ever be with them again. I had been in Middle-earth a very long time before I first met the two of you, and there were few of my people about. I seldom saw them, and I could not come home to my friends and those who have been like kin to me until my work was done — over two thousand years. There were many things I missed during that time, and it would have been a comfort to have had some place in Middle-earth which I could call home for a while, but that was not to be. It is difficult, forever feeling like an unwanted stranger."

Melui blinked rapidly, trying to hold back her tears, but one slipped down her cheek despite her efforts. Irritably, she brushed the traitorous moisture away, and sniffled hard to prevent more from escaping. "That's how we feel here," she confessed softly, lest Nienna be close by and overhear her ingratitude. "I like Helyanwë, and some of the others treat us well, but often, I feel as if the rest would rather we were sent off to Eldamar, where the other Elves could decide what to do with us. When we heard that Helyanwë was returning with someone who was coming to see us, we were both afraid that it would be someone from Tirion or one of the other cities in Eldamar, come to take us away and make us live with people who aren't our family because we weren't welcome here, anymore."

The wizard wiped another tear from her cheek with a light touch of his fingers. "Nonsense. I may not be one of her servants, but I have been a student of Lady Nienna's since long before your parent's parents came into this world, and I assure you, she would turn away no one in need, not even if Lord Manwë himself commanded it. She and Helyanwë and many others, I am sure, are concerned for your welfare, more than I think you can see. You've said you are not truly happy here, and she can tell this, whether you speak of it openly or not. You wish to live in a happier place, where people go about life with more open cheer than they do here. Am I mistaken?"

The two shook their heads as one. "Ever since we were brought here, Helyanwë and some of the others have taken us to the spring and autumn festivals in Valmar," Lére said after rubbing away the dampness in one eye. "And sometimes, in midsummer, she'd take us to the festival in Tirion. She was trying to make us feel better, I think, when we still couldn't talk."

“It was a little frightening, at first,” Melui admitted. “We’d never seen so many people in one place, not even in Lindon, and in Tirion, we saw people who looked like they might be our kin — but none were.”

“In a way, perhaps you did,” Olórin speculated with a wan smile. “There are many Teleri and Noldor Elves living in Tirion, and doubtless there are some who would remind you of both your mother and your father. Not close kin, perhaps, but more distant ones. Did seeing them make you wish to live among them rather than here?”

Both youngsters squirmed. “No,” Lére finally confessed. “It hurt to see people who reminded us of Mother and Father. We wanted to be with *them*, not with strangers.”

“But they said we couldn’t,” his sister added. “We didn’t understand why not. People told us they were in the Halls of Waiting, and that they aren’t far from here, but we couldn’t go to them.”

The Maia sighed. “And rightly so. The Halls of Waiting are no place for the living, especially not youngsters with all of life still before them.”

Lére nodded sagely. “We understand that, now — and that’s why we don’t want to stay here, anymore. It’s too cold, and I don’t think Lady Nienna will let Helyanwë do nothing but take care of us until Mother and Father are allowed to leave the Halls.”

Olórin knew without asking that the boy did not mean cold in the sense of physical climate alone, but also emotional. He noted that both of the children had subtly moved closer to him, and he did not have to ponder the matter for long to see why. When they had arrived in Aman, they had known no one. Not a person in the Blessed Realm was familiar to them in the slightest, save in some unhappy resemblances that reminded them of their terrible loss; even the place in which they now lived was strange to them. Lindon and the western shores of Endor were not always the most hospitable of places but neither were they as bleak as this land between the Halls of Mandos and the Doors of Night. The chill in the air that was normal for this region was little felt by the Ainur who inhabited it, but it cut both to the bone and the heart of these young ones. He could not help but feel compassion for them, all the more so because they were *not* complete strangers. As he felt his own heart go out to them, pitying their unhappy situation and all they had lost, he perceived that they sought more of him than tales that might distract their minds and give them a moment’s comfort.

He gazed at them long and deep, taking a hand of each in his own; they flinched from neither his touch nor his scrutiny. At length, he inhaled deeply, then released it slowly. “You are trying very hard not to ask something of me,” he said without any hint of accusation. “You would like to return with me, to Lórien. Perhaps that is not such a terrible thought, but though it may give you some relief from your sadness for a time, I fear it is not the lasting answer you need. You remember me from before your journey across the Sea — which truly amazes me, I must confess, for others far older and more experienced have not been so perceptive — yet you have known persons here far longer and better than you ever knew me. Helyanwë, for one, has done much for you. She cares for you in ways I cannot, for

she knows you far better. For five years she has seen to your welfare, whereas I was a visitor you once knew for a handful of days, when your parents were still alive. Would you forget all she and others here have done for you to grasp at memories of a time no power in this world can ever bring back again?"

He had spoken softly and kindly, mindful of what he was able to sense weighing down their already overburdened spirits. When he asked his question, their eyes dropped, and both looked away, clearly feeling some degree of shame. "No," said Melui after a time, in a small voice. "I *am* very grateful to Helyanwë, Mithrandir, and to Lady Nienna, truly. She took us into her house to help us when we were both sick and frightened, and Helyanwë looked after us as if we were her own. But when she left on errands for the Lady and was gone for weeks, we realized she can't stay with us forever, or even until Mother and Father come back again. She has her own work to do."

"That's why we thought whoever was coming was going to take us away," Lére added, also rather quietly. "Because Helyanwë had been gone for so long. People have said this is no place for children, and that we should really be some place where there are more of our own kind around to take care of us and teach us. That's why I thought you'd be an Elf, like us."

"An understandable mistake," Olórin allowed. "I was asked to come to see if I could find a way to help you because I know your cousin Lindarinë, but I had not thought to take you from this house until some permanent solution was discovered. Have you been here all the time since Lord Ulmo rescued you at sea?"

Melui nodded, Lére shrugged. "Most of it," he said. "We don't remember all of what happened on the ship, or things right after, but I remember we were taken to a big city with domes and bells, where people like Lady Nienna talked to us. We didn't know until Helyanwë took us to the festival that autumn that the city was Valmar, and it wasn't until we could talk again that we found out that the people who had often visited us when we were there were Lady Nienna's brother Irmo and his wife. And we do get to leave during the festivals, but not the rest of the time."

"But I don't think they were trying to keep us shut away," Melui said. "I don't know why we couldn't talk for so long, but they really didn't know anything about us for sure until just a few months ago. That was right before the last spring festival."

"Still, that's quite a long time for any visitor to spend here," the Maia observed as he considered these facts. "Lady Nienna's guests seldom stay for long, as is intended, for this place is meant only as a stopping place for the newly released Eldar on the way to their return to the lands which were meant for them. Yet she could not in good conscience send you to your people without knowing where you truly belonged. I do not doubt that there are many in Eldamar who would gladly give you a home and be as family to you, should Lindarinë remain stubborn; I can think of several who would be delighted to have young ones about them again, and I do not think you would find their company unpleasant. But I think first, we must see if there is a way to bend your cousin's stiff neck."

Lére grunted, frowning again. "He won't. That's why Helyanwë went away, wasn't it? He didn't come back with her, and she didn't say he wanted us to come to him, did he?"

"He did not," Olórin regretfully confirmed. "But I know him better than Helyanwë does. He was once a person very much like your father, as I recall Runel, full of joy and laughter. Lindarinë has been waiting for far too many years to find such happiness again, and though he seems to push it away whenever it comes near him, I believe he truly wishes to be the person he was before tragedy tore apart his life. I have been trying, when I can, to help him find his way back, but thus far, I have not succeeded at all. Would you be willing to give me *your* help in this?"

They considered the request. "Would we have to stay here?" Lére asked after he and his twin exchanged shrugs and glances.

The wizard chuckled. "Not unless Lady Nienna insists. People who are sad and weary of heart seldom are able to help others who suffer from the same afflictions, and I think both of you feel this way, cut off from people and surroundings that might seem more familiar and pleasant to you."

"We do," Melui agreed, nodding so vigorously, her braid danced upon her back like the swishing of a horse's golden tail. "Please, Mithrandir, can't we go back to Lórien with you? I would like to see places that look like the land where our father was born, and the halfling's homeland. Even if we cannot stay there, I would like the chance to see it for even a little while."

"So would I," Lére chimed in enthusiastically. "You don't have to help us *here*, do you?"

Olórin had the sensation that he was being herded into a corner by two very determined shepherds, but he grasped their motives without difficulty. He had never been a child in the way they were, but he knew what it was like to be young and eagerly curious, then unexpectedly brought to great sorrow. The grief alone felt confining, and the need to seek out new experiences, new places, new people simply to know that happiness still existed and could be found was as keen as the thirst of a long and bitter drought. He quickly contemplated the notion. His house was certainly large enough to accommodate them, and he had no doubt that Frodo and all his neighbors, Maia and Elf alike, would welcome the youngsters. He was reasonably certain he could sufficiently see to their welfare, especially if someone who knew the twins better, like Helyanwë, came along to assist. But there was one major point to consider.

"I shouldn't think so," he answered the boy's question. "But we cannot decide this without consulting Lady Nienna. This is her house; it was she who took you in, and she who has directed your care these past five years, though you may not be aware of it. We must seek her opinion and approval of this notion first."

"And you have it." Nienna's voice was heard from the same direction in which she and Helyanwë had departed, so suddenly that it startled the trio in the courtyard, the children because they had been focused on other matters, Olórin because he had not anticipated such a blindingly swift

response to his unasked inquiry. The Lady smiled as she stepped out of the shadows near the walls and into the pool of sunlight, alone. "I have heard sufficient for my needs, both from Helyanwë and the twins, to understand that it is well past time for them to be in those parts of Aman where life flourishes more readily and joy comes to replace grief. Such was the case for you, Olórin, many years ago, and on that occasion I sent you to my brother Irmo and his lady Estë in the healing lands of Lórien. Such a remedy worked wondrously for you, and I believe it will also help my two young guests take another step upon the road to reunion with their people and their kin."

The children could barely restrain their sounds of relief and delight; the wizard's reaction was somewhat more decorous. He smiled at the twins even as he rose to his feet to acknowledge Nienna's presence. "I had begun to have similar thoughts, my lady," he said. "And while I am certain there will be no barrier to their welcome in the hill country, my doubts concerning my own abilities in certain matters remain. I have few skills in seeing to the needs of children of any race, and though Frodo at least has personally experienced that part of existence and shared his home with little Elanor Gamgee before he set sail with us, I do not think he is better prepared for such a challenge than I."

Nienna inclined her head. "Very true, and as I said earlier, I would make certain this task would not be one you would carry alone."

Melui had managed to follow the adults' conversation. "Is Helyanwë coming with us?" she asked, too excited to remember to address the Lady properly.

The Vala was untroubled by her lapse. "No, I wish for her to pursue certain business on your behalf in Alqualondë. In time, perhaps she will join you, but for now, another of my servants will accompany you to Lórien and give Olórin whatever assistance he requires."

She gestured toward the entrance, and someone stepped forward from the deep shadows into the lighter ones just behind Nienna. The newcomer was another female Maia, tall and slender and as graceful as the wind. Her remarkably long hair was the color of burnished oak leaves in autumn, bound up with golden cords, and though her deep green gown was simple, it in no way detracted from the beauty of her face, which in many ways was greater than Nienna's, smooth and fair and without flaw. Her eyes were an unusual shade of blue that was almost green, and they pierced through any upon whom they glanced as the strongest winds of deepest winter cut through clothing and flesh to freeze the very bone.

Lére and Melui made odd sounds of resignation, seeing who was to accompany them in Helyanwë's place. Olórin had intended to smile in greeting, but the response froze within him before it touched his lips. Only a single word breathed past them, as the barest rustling of an unexpected breeze:

"Aránayel."

To be continued....