

Twice Blessed

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Part Five

Chapter X

It is more tolerable to be refused than deceived.

There *were* fates worse than death.

If Olórin had ever doubted that, the remaining days of their journey to Lórien very clearly proved it to him. During his time in Arda as a servant of the Valar, he had been sent on many perilous journeys. Some lasted but a brief time, others spanned hundreds, even thousands, of years as they were counted in the mortal world. He had helped in the great effort of shaping the physical world, had undertaken tasks too menial or repugnant for many others to feel them worthy of their time. He had seen the first terrors Melkor had inflicted upon Arda, had trembled in fear of them, yet had somehow found within him enough courage to aid those who desperately wished to put an end to the Great Enemy's plans of destruction because he wished it, too. He did not think there was any kind of pain he had not witnessed, no fear he had not felt, no sorrow he had not experienced. He had given all that was in him to help see the full vision of the ancient Music made real, and he had lived through and suffered much to achieve his part in it. He even knew what it was to know death as the mortals experienced it, and to fear it, not because of the uncertainty that lay beyond, but because of how final an end it made to any plans and hopes and dreams one might have had in life.

Yet there were far worse fates one could suffer. He knew that now beyond question.

He had thought a surly, sulky, peevish, and petulant Aránayel would be difficult to bear, but predictably tolerable. He had not stopped to consider how much worse it could be if she suddenly and unexpectedly turned solicitous.

The change had not come about in a matter of moments; indeed, if there had been any change at all in her behavior during the feast in Yavanna's halls, he had been blissfully unaware of it. From what he had noticed, she had been remarkably quiet through the evening, speaking if spoken to, but otherwise remaining unobtrusive, sitting back to observe and enjoy the celebration. The following evening when they set up camp — the last time they would need to spend the night out of doors before reaching Lórien — he noticed that she was unusually helpful, even bordering on cheerful, but he had supposed it was nothing more than a pleasant aftereffect of their time in Yavanna's home. The Valier was a very sensible person, and while she did not brook ill manners among her servants, she was also

quick to recognize honest effort. Aránayel's behavior had been exemplary that night, better than it had been during the farewell feast in Nienna's house, for there had been much music and other entertainment for the guests, of the kind she had always loved so well before her exile from Ilmarin. Olórin presumed that her improved spirits were the result of both the rather large social gathering and some word of approval from Yavanna, so he had simply accepted her improved temperament, and her willing assistance, with polite gratitude.

The next night, two days before they were to arrive in Lórien, they came to a settlement in a hilly area of wide fields, small streams, and scattered but graceful trees. This was the land where dwelt many of the servants of Vána the Ever-Young, Yavanna's sister. Although she made her usual dwelling with her husband Oromë in the forests and windswept plains of southernmost Valinor, there was a special grace to the clime and the earth in this region that favored the growth of many flowers. They were her especial province and love, and here, her people tended them with great care, encouraging them to ever more beautiful shape and color. From afar, they shone like a glimmering rainbow spread as a veil across the green earth; the wind carried their sun-warmed fragrance to the travelers as they approached, headed for the village where the local Maiar made their homes, and where they were expected for the night. Through Melian and his own occasional dealings with Vána herself, Olórin was well acquainted with a number of these folk, who came out to greet the riders as they entered the small but pleasant town. Aránayel was again helpful when it was time to unburden the horses, and if she made her helpfulness somewhat more obvious, he suspected it was an attempt to make a positive first impression upon the residents, with whom she was not acquainted.

It was only after the twins had gone to sleep, when the Maiar remained in the airy hall where they had supped to converse with their hosts that the wizard began to feel strangely disquieted by Aránayel's politeness. He could not yet place a finger on the reason, but the sensation did not abate as the night grew older. He might have chosen to remain with their hosts and talk until the children woke and they were ready to move on, but they had been warned that he was still recovering from his long illness and should be encouraged to rest if he showed any signs of weariness. Not long after midnight, he did, and he could not deny that the sleep would be welcome. He was not exhausted from the rigors of travel, but from chasing after the uneasiness inside him, a stress that was more wearying than running a hundred leagues across inhospitable country. Fortunately, Aránayel did not follow when he was shown where he could rest, and for that, he was intensely grateful. She was up to something, and his heart whispered with utter certainty that this was *not* a turn for the better.

During the remaining two days of the journey, that certainty deepened. Experience had taught him many things, and among them was how to recognize the signs of duplicity. He had failed that particular test on one exceptionally notable occasion, failing to see beyond Curumo's skillful misdirection that had coaxed others to pay heed to his lies. But his own folly, exacerbated by an all too mortal confusion, had combined with Saruman's tricks to prevent him from acting upon what he had known deep in his heart long before his fellow wizard's treachery had been made plain to him. If anything, that incident had sharpened his awareness of such things, for what had followed had been a bitter and painful lesson in learning to trust his own instincts. He was not about to make that same mistake with Aránayel, whose hostility toward him was of even longer standing than Curumo's. When they were once again in the wilds, he noted that she became less overt in her civility, though it did not entirely

abate. When they reached their next destination — a settlement along a river that they would follow into the heart of Lórien and thence to the hill country — her pleasantries again became more pronounced.

Had he witnessed such behavior in anyone else of a sour mein, Olórin would have been gratified by the improved temperament, but in Aránayel, it made him suspicious. The changes had come too suddenly and were too obvious to be unintended. Moreover, every time she treated him with unusual politeness, he could sense something about her that left him feeling disquiet rather than pleasure. It was true that before the beginning of this journey, he had not seen her for many years, but from what others had told him of her, much of the person he had known all those centuries ago remained the same. Flattery and kindness and civility were tools to Aránayel, things to be used in her dealings with others for express purposes that would be to her profit in the end. Knowing this, he could not help but feel that she was definitely up to something — but he could not decide if it would be wiser to question her about it or remain silent.

He finally chose the latter course of action, deciding that there was far too great a danger that she might take poorly any questioning of her motives, to the undoing of whatever good might come of the situation. He *was* being suspicious, perhaps far more than he had any right to be. Instinct had never betrayed him, though he had sometimes betrayed it by not heeding its warnings, and though he knew there was something more to Aránayel's behavior than could be easily perceived, the precise nature of it continued to elude him, as moonlight evades the hand that would seek to capture it. Nonetheless, her strange politeness toward him continued to disturb him, for reasons he could not clearly see.

On the morning of the final day of their journey — which would bring them to Lórien's hill country late in the afternoon — the obscuring mists at last began to lift. They had spent their final night of travel in a village alongside the falls of a great river that fed many of the streams and pools of Lórien to the south and east. Both Eldar and Maiar made their homes here, the latter primarily people of Ulmo, who delighted in the waters of the magnificent river and falls. By comparison, they made Rauros and the Anduin seem as small and insignificant as the trickle of a half-dry stream over a precipice of pebbles. The twins had been entranced by it, as they had never seen anything like it, but Olórin had fully expected Aránayel to complain about the natural humidity of the region, as she had complained of the dampness brought by the rains during the nights they made camp in the wilds. But she did not, and though the wizard was glad that they were being spared her complaints, he could not help but feel that there was some ulterior motive, even to this. One — especially one such as Aránayel — did not have such a complete change in a matter of mere days.

Their horses had been allowed to run free in the grasslands along the riverbank while the travelers rested; the following morning, Olórin called the beasts together so that they could be prepared for the last leg of their journey, while his traveling companions collected their other gear and had their breakfast. He had just finished fitting them with the tack and was checking one of the saddlebags to be certain that a gift Lady Yavanna had sent for Frodo was still intact and unharmed when Melui joined him, her own pack in hand and a deeply perplexed look on her face.

“Mithrandir,” she said as she handed him the satchel, to be secured on the back of her steed, “are we to make a permanent home in Lórien, once we arrive? Did Lady Nienna send us away so that we would no longer be a nuisance in her house?”

A puzzled frown creased the Maia’s brow as he took the pack from the child, pausing before he secured it with the others already attached to the saddle of her horse. “I cannot say where you will make your permanent home in the end,” he said, “but I can assure you that Lady Nienna did *not* send you away for any reason, least of all because she considered you a nuisance. Wherever did you acquire such notions?”

Melui flushed with chagrin, but only faintly. “By listening — but not on purpose,” she added quickly, lest he think ill of her. “I was in the room where we’d slept during the night, making ready to leave when I accidentally spilled some of the things from my pack. When I knelt down to pick them up, Aránayel and some of the people who live here went by. They were talking, and I heard Aránayel tell someone — Celussëmel, I think, the very pretty lady who lives under the waterfall — that we wouldn’t be coming back because we were going to be staying in Lórien. I thought at first she meant that she just didn’t know how long we’d be there, but when Celussëmel said the same thing, Aránayel said no, it wouldn’t be temporary. Arrangements had been made for all of us to stay in your house, though she expected Lére and I would be sent to join the Elves in Lórien before long. Is that true, Mithrandir? Are you going to send us off to live with people we don’t even know, and will we never have a chance to see Helyanwë again?”

Her expression was stricken. Olórin paused before answering, first collecting his thoughts, then setting down the pack before he crouched to speak with her more directly. “I shan’t lie and say that I know for certain what the future holds for you, Melui, for I do not. But I do know several things, and you may take them as truths: Helyanwë is as fond of you as you are of her, and no matter what home you may eventually find, she will forever be your friend. It *is* true that she is a servant of Lady Nienna, but her mistress knows of her affection for you, and I do not think she would ever insist that you be parted simply because Helyanwë is in her service. I myself am a servant of Lord Manwë, yet he does not insist that I make my home in Ilmarin. The very things that make Lady Nienna so patient and compassionate would not allow her to keep Helyanwë from going to you, if that is best for your happiness, and hers.”

It was Melui’s turn to frown. “But Aránayel sounded quite certain...”

A soft sigh whistled past his lips. “I have no doubt that she did, as she herself wishes very much *not* to return to Lady Nienna’s house. But she spoke without full knowledge, I believe. Arrangements have been made for all of you to stay in Lórien, but my house is not large enough for all of you to be my guests at the once, especially since there is already another who resides there with me, awaiting our arrival. I had sent word to him that you and Lére would be joining us for a time, since I felt you would be most comfortable in my home, but one of my neighbors will provide accommodations for Aránayel. As you have doubtless noticed, she and I are not on the best of terms, and I have no desire to make you, your brother, or Frodo — or even Aránayel — ill at ease by exposing you to the friction between us, both day and night.”

An odd wryness crept into the girl's expression. "I don't think that's what *she* wants, Mithrandir," she said softly, wary of being heard by the wrong ears. "She hasn't been arguing or complaining or saying nasty things, ever since we left Lady Yavanna's house. I think she *wants* to stay in your house, because... well, not because she *likes* you, exactly, but..." She paused, then shook her head. "I'm not sure, but I think she wants people to think *you* like *her*. I heard her say something like that to Celussëmel, just a few minutes ago. That years ago, you told her you loved her when she couldn't stand the sight of you, but now, things are different, and maybe could be the way you'd wanted."

It took several moments for Melui's observations to fully register; when they had, the wizard paled. He had considered that Aránayel's improved manners might be an effort to impress upon others how she had changed by being the soul of politeness toward someone whom she had long despised. He had *not* considered that she might take this attempt a step farther and try to use the common knowledge of what had happened between them so long ago as the means to make others believe there was more to their improved relationship than met the eye, all for the sake of gaining the freedom she so desperately craved. He suddenly understood why he had been so uneasy in Aránayel's presence these past few days, but for Melui's sake, he swallowed the groan that began to rise in his throat; he schooled his expression to one of polite curiosity rather than overt discomfort.

"Did she?" he said mildly, forcing a faint smile. "Well, then, perhaps I need to discuss the situation with Aránayel, to make certain there are no unfortunate misunderstandings between us. I am not the same person I was in that long ago time, but she has seen very little of me since, and may not realize all that has changed for me. Thank you for mentioning this, Melui. I shan't tell Aránayel that you told me of it, for she would surely accuse you of eavesdropping."

"I didn't *mean* to," she vowed, afraid that he would disapprove.

Instead, he smiled, a bit more earnestly. "I know. But I think it was good that I heard of it, before it causes any unpleasantness. I offered you and your brother the hospitality of my house for as long as you might wish it, and I will not allow anyone to send you away without my leave — which I assure you will be quite difficult to obtain, unless I have not the slightest doubt that such a departure would be best for your well-being and happiness. And you have only to ask my friends in Lórien just how stubborn I can be when my mind is made up."

Reassured, Melui smiled back. "Helyanwë said as much the night before we left Lady Nienna's house, when she took us to our rooms to sleep. Léré's never liked Aránayel at all, and he was afraid she might be able to convince you to send us off to Eldamar before we even had a chance to see Lórien. I don't think he remembers you as well as I do. Helyanwë said you wouldn't have invited us to come if you didn't really want us there, and if you did, nothing Aránayel could say would make you change your mind. Do you think Helyanwë might come to see us in Lórien, once she's finished her errands for Lady Nienna?"

"I think she might," he answered, relieved by the change of subject. "I don't know the specifics of her tasks for Lady Nienna, but when we spoke before she left, it seemed to me that she did not expect them to be exceptionally difficult. If she is right, I have no doubt at all that she will wish to join you in

Lórien, and she will certainly be welcome. With both her and I to defend you, none will dare send you to any place you do not wish to go.”

She sighed, pleased. “I thought as much, but I’m very glad to hear you say it. Now I can tell Léré he’s just imagining things, and there’s nothing to worry about at all. Thank you, Mithrandir.”

Impulsively, she embraced him, and rather than rebuff her, he smiled, returned the affectionate gesture, and sent her on her way. He watched her go, then turned back to the task of securing the pack she had brought to the saddle of her horse. He nearly dropped it again as he lifted it from the ground and an unexpected voice spoke, uncomfortably near.

“It would seem that you have more skill with such young ones than I had heard you felt was within your capacity,” Aránayel said, her tone droll. “Is there any resident of Aman whom you cannot befriend so easily?”

The wizard snorted softly as he took firmer hold of Melui’s pack to fasten it to the saddle. “Without a doubt. Curumo and I were never particularly close, nor was I especially well-liked by many of the Noldor who supported Fëanor. I fell out of his favor well before he led his revolt, and I have often suspected Lindarinë bears me some ill-will because I could not help him as he once helped me. Even among our own people, I know I am not universally loved, for one reason or another. I have been a friend of Aulë, if not as close as some, and I have met with a fair amount of friction and distrust among his servants — possibly because I have always had unusual gifts in regard to the beneficial aspects of fire, and they view it as a claim upon their purview which they themselves have difficulty mastering. Also, unless there have been changes of which you have not informed me, when last I looked, *we* were not friends by even a very loose definition of the term. In coming to understand the truth I would not see in my youth, I came to know that we never *had* been friends. It was but a fantasy of my overactive imagination.”

She did not respond defensively or angrily, for which Olórin was grateful, but that she also did not agree with his assessment of the situation disturbed him. “Much has changed since that time,” she said simply, in a tone that might be described as studiously neutral. “Would you prefer that our relationship remain *unfriendly*?”

His eyes slipped toward her in a sidelong glance. “If it is not based in honesty, yes. I have not failed to note that you have been treating me somewhat more... charitably since our departure from Lady Yavanna’s house,” he added, deciding to throw caution to the wind and speak openly. “If more than ten thousand years of separation was not enough to temper your disposition toward me, what could have happened to change it in one night?”

She glanced away as she considered her response. “Realization, perhaps, one I could not reach so long as I remained in an isolation not of my choosing. A bird that is kept caged may cease to sing and be silent for many years, and yet regain its voice in one day after it is released and allowed to be free again. There were things Lady Yavanna said to me that gave me such hope. Should I continue to

sabotage my own chances for freedom by maintaining a demeanor that will only prejudice others against me?"

Olórin considered her reply. What she said was in keeping with some of his own suppositions, that Yavanna had somehow complimented Aránayel for her good behavior during the feast three nights ago, and the Maia had taken it as encouragement. For that he could not fault her — but neither could he dismiss the persistent feeling that this was not the whole of the truth. "And you would not, of course, resort to exaggeration to enhance a positive perception among others?"

"Of course not. I am not a fool, Olórin. Whatever I do now is bound to be weighed and judged sternly. I have no desire to return to a life of exile, and exaggeration once won me harsh punishment that made my life even more unbearable. If I am making an honest effort to improve relations between us, would you begrudge me that because of what happened in the past?"

"No," he admitted, "so long as it *is* honest. For all that you have been known to have a quick temper, you have not been mercurial in your habits, apt to change your ways at a moment's notice. As far as I am aware, I have done nothing to warrant such a change of heart."

"Perhaps not. But I have been told by many that showing kindness is more apt to win the approval of others than nurturing bitterness, and as it is approval I require in order to be freed of my long punishment, I have realized that the best place to begin changing that attitude is with you. Though I still believe I did not act wrongly those many years ago, I now begin to see why you have so many staunch defenders. You seem to attract the trust and respect of others without much effort. I do not quite see what it is about you that they find so very admirable, but I *can* see how, feeling as they do, they would not understand why I do not share their attitudes. If I cannot change their minds or open their eyes to *my* point of view, then my only option is to attempt to understand theirs. Do you find this intolerable?"

He hesitated, almost imperceptibly, then shook his head. "I do admit that I did not understand *you* those long years ago; I did not even understand myself. Lady Nienna did not speak clearly of why she chose you to accompany the children to Lórien, but I have suspected that some part of her intent was to deliberately place us in such close proximity that friction between us could not be avoided, and thus would have to be dealt with more directly for the sake of the youngsters with us, so that we might derive some mutual benefit from it. It would seem that you have better availed yourself of this education than I. Forgive me if I have been overly suspicious."

A wry smile tugged at one corner of her lips, though its warmth did not extend to her eyes. "If you had acquired *that* trait before your ill-advised confession, it might never have come to pass, nor any of the grief that has since come between us. I should be angered that you waited so long to learn such common sense, since I have suffered for it longer than you, but instead, I will give you the forgiveness you have requested. I am not, after all, incapable of showing tolerance, or offering a conciliatory gesture for the sake of making peace that is perhaps long overdue."

Something in her words made the wizard uneasy, but as it seemed to him that it had less to do with Aránayel and more to do with his delayed forgiveness of Lord Manwë, he said nothing of it. Aránayel set about preparing her own steed for departure, and Olórin was glad, for it put an end to their strained conversation. The children returned with the remainder of their things, and they were soon on their way.

They rode easily, following the meandering river until at last it reached the northwest outskirts of Lórien. There its main course took a turn to the east, toward the sea, while a smaller branch and the travelers continued in a generally southward direction. "This land has changed little since last I saw it," Aránayel remarked when they paused to water the horses before venturing away from the stream toward Lórien's wooded heart, which shimmered like a golden haze on a not too distant horizon.

Olórin did not hide his surprise. "I was unaware that you had *ever* seen it. In all the years I have made it my home, you have not visited — or was this hidden from me as another ploy of well-meaning friends?"

She shook her head, her hair shining in the midday sun like dark copper leaves in autumn, dancing on the wind. "No, I have not visited since you settled here. In years before, when I still served as a handmaid to Lady Varda, I was sent twice or thrice as her messenger to Lady Estë. If Estë has not mentioned this to you, then I suppose she does not remember me, or thinks ill of me, as so many others do."

"She thinks ill of no one," the wizard said with confidence, "although she is perhaps more able to forget than many others of the Ainur. She is well familiar with all the blessings of sleep and rest and healing, and often, forgetfulness can help one to heal more quickly by lightening the burdens on one's heart and soul. Lady Estë and Lord Irmo do not bear grudges, which bodes well for your time here. You should be able to begin your stay with a clean slate in the eyes of both the Lord and the Lady, and if they have a good report for Lady Nienna, it will carry considerable weight when she pleads your case to Lord Manwë and Lady Varda. She has great faith in the opinion of her brother."

Aránayel sniffed softly, as if she doubted that such trust would extend to her, but she said nothing more. The horses were soon ready to continue their journey, and they moved on.

The creek widened as they neared the central wood, and before long, the lake of Lórellin became clearly visible, sparkling brightly like a diamond amid the greens and golds of the woodland. This was not so great a forest as Yavanna's, the trees tall but not so incredibly high; what lay beneath the canopy was dappled with both sunlight and shadows, which flickered and shifted like images in a dream as the winds blew through the graceful branches above. The path they had been following broadened as they passed beneath the trees; it was lined on either side by myriad shrubs and flowers of many shapes and colors and sizes. Here and there, placid pools and beautiful fountains graced and cooled the land. It was a place of great peace and stillness, and even the birds that sang amid the trees kept their songs to a soft sweetness that pleased the ear without disturbing the sense of calm and quiet.

It did not seem that any homes had been built here, yet from time to time, they would spy someone who smiled and waved at the passers by. The twins glanced all about, looking for places they could identify as residences, but saw nothing. "I don't understand," Lére finally admitted. "You told us that this part of Lórien was much like our father's home, but it doesn't look at all like he described it. He said there were great houses built up in the branches of the trees, not like the houses in Lindon, but simpler and more open to the sky and the wind. But I don't see anything at all, not on the ground or up above us. Are we in the right place? Lady Yavanna's forest seemed much closer to what Father spoke of, and it wasn't really like that at all."

Olórin chuckled. "I'm sure your father knew his homeland well, and that he was also well acquainted with the tales which told of the Lórien that is here in Aman. But he had never seen this place with his own eyes, nor had your mother or any of their kin in Middle-earth. The realm of Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel was indeed a remarkable attempt to capture what Galadriel had loved best of this place, which she knew from her childhood and youth, but though their power combined with that of Ninya could slow the decay of the mortal world, not all the power of the Elves could have stopped it entirely, nor purged more than the smallest corner of Endor of the worst evils of Melkor. They did their best, and their skills were considerable, yet even the greatest of their craftsmen did not have the skills of some of my people of who have lived here since long before the first of the Eldar awoke at Cuiviénen."

He drew his horse to a halt when the boy's expression told him that he was saying too much. He laughed at his own long-windedness. "I beg your pardon, I'm sure that wasn't the answer you were seeking. See there?" he said when the others had also come to a halt. He gestured toward three women who were walking in the glade a short distance from the right of the road. They soon reached a spot where there grew several well-grown trees with smooth silver bark and broad branches that spread close to the ground. They were situated near one another, and their lower limbs overlapped as they often do in the thicker regions of a wood. But as they watched, the women stepped lightly upon those low-slung branches and used them as one would a flight of stairs, following a path that led up and around and between the trees, until at last they reached an open platform high above the ground. The talan had been so cunningly fashioned, it was almost impossible to discern it from the natural growth of trees all around, unless one could see the persons upon it.

Thus given a clue as to the nature of the local dwellings, the twins now glanced all about, finally able to see what they had missed before. "Oh, that's so terribly clever!" Melui exclaimed, unabashedly delighted by all there was to see, if one simply looked closely. "Is this much the same as Lóthlorien, Mithrandir?"

"Similar," Olórin replied. "This is less obvious than the city that was built amid the trees of the Golden Wood, but both have their own beauty. Each place reflects the ways and the arts of the people who inhabit it, and as my folk walk upon the world unseen if we do not choose to clothe ourselves in a fana, so too are the homes of the Maiar who dwell in Lórien simple and unobtrusive. Their art is in the tending of those things which grow here, as the art of the Elves of Lóthlorien was in the shaping of what the natural world provided them as material with which to ply their crafts. Lord Irmo's home on the

shores of Lake Lórellin is very similar in its artistry to the Elven dwellings in Lóthlorien, as is the house of Lady Estë on the isle at the center of the lake.”

“Will we pass near them?” Lére wondered.

The wizard smiled. “Very near. Few visitors are allowed upon the isle, but we will stop at Lord Irmo’s home before we continue on to mine, so that he and his lady may welcome you to their land. Then, I think, you will be able to better imagine Lóthlorien as your father described it to you.”

The twins were both delighted and mildly apprehensive, and asked many questions about the lord and lady and how they should behave toward them as they continued along the road toward the great lake. Aránayel said nothing, but appeared to be listening with interest. The inquisition ended when at last Irmo’s home came into view.

For a time, the youngsters were struck with wonder by the graceful beauty of the place. More than any of the other settlements they had visited while in Aman, this spoke of the craftsmanship of the Elves, even though it was home to a lord and lady of the Valar. It was as if a world of trees and water had been brought into the land of dreams and there shaped into something that grew and flowed as they did. The whisper of the wind, the rustle of leaves, the soft song of water flowing over glass and stone all spoke of healing and visions that are seen only in the night, during the hours of sleep. Yet there was no lethargy about the great hall; it held power and strength as well, that of life and spirit and dreams renewed by well-earned rest. The house was not lifted up among the branches like Caras Galadhon, nor was it beneath the roots of the forest, like Yavanna’s hall. It stood at the edge of the lake, sheltered by trees on one side and open to the sun and moon and stars upon the other. It flowed between the trees like the carven, winding stairs of Lothlórien, the trusses of its roof bowed like Elven arches that imitated the arms of spreading elms. Water lapped against its southern wall as rain caresses the roots of tall mallorns; and the silver voices of fountains mingled with the song of birds and wind in a tune of peace and joy. The children drank in the beautiful sights around them, and for a moment felt nearer to their father than they had in all the years since his death.

At last, they came to a halt where the forest road ended before a broad plaza of silvery stones, artfully laid before what was clearly the main entrance to Irmo’s mansion. They had just stopped and had not yet begun to dismount when someone emerged from the shadows of the entranceway, a tall fellow garbed in dusky blues and silver with long plaited hair that shone like fiery copper in the midday sun. He chuckled as he strode forth to meet them.

“Well, now,” he declared in tones as bright as the sunshine, “here I had begun to think that for once, I might win a wager with Lord Irmo because you had chosen to tarry on the way, or had gotten a late start on the day, but truly, I should have known better. Your reputation for punctuality continues to remain unblemished, *pityandil*, but for those few occasions on which you arrived late by design rather than poor planning. And are these the young Elven guests whom my lord and lady have been anticipating with such great delight?” He bowed deeply to the youngsters.

The children laughed at his manner; Aránayel favored him with an expression that doubted the motives of such expansive good cheer; and Olórin simply smiled. “They are indeed, Ványalos, and you know it well, as you also know that Lord Irmo and Lady Estë are already acquainted with Melui and Lére, so you need not go to such great lengths to appear ingratiating.”

“Not on their behalf,” he agreed cheerfully as he assisted them in dismounting. “But though they have met my master and mistress before, it was not here in their home, nor have they had the opportunity to converse with them, as their voices were still lost when last they were together. That is what they are anticipating so eagerly, to hear the fair Elven voices that could not speak during their other meetings.” Melui laughed as she accepted his assistance; her brother did so less willingly, believing himself quite capable of dismounting on his own, though he allowed it when Ványalos did not presume to help more than was necessary to retain his dignity.

“Are you a friend of Mithrandir’s?” Lére asked as Ványalos subtly helped him make a steady final step to the ground.

The tall Maia lifted one eyebrow at the boy’s use of the Elven name, but made nothing more of it. “Alas, yes, we have been acquainted for many long years, during which he has patiently suffered my presence as his nearest neighbor in the hill country.”

His words piqued Melui’s interest. “Oh, then are you the one who has lodgings prepared for—”

“Melui, did you remember to bring the flowers you gathered at our last stop along the riverbank?” Olórin asked, his tone casual but his glance toward the girl pointed. “I believe you said you wanted to make a gift of them to Lady Estë.”

Melui’s answering glance was puzzled, but she quickly understood the meaning of the wizard’s interruption when his eyes briefly flicked toward Aránayel. Abruptly understanding that she was about to mention something better left for others to discuss, she accepted the change of subject without complaint. “Oh, yes, I’d almost forgotten. I wrapped them in a damp cloth and put them in the outer pocket of my pack, there.” She pointed to the place, too high for her to reach from the ground. “I didn’t want them to get crushed or wilt in the sun.”

Ványalos, who was closest of the three adults, easily reached into the pocket in question and withdrew them, a fistful of small blue-white blossoms that looked much like the *elanor* of Lothlórien, but for their color. Ványalos smiled as he inhaled their fragrance before handing them to the child. “Ah, *eliminyar*. That is what your people call them, first stars, because as the stars they resemble do in the evening skies, they are the first flowers to open in the morning, and the last to close at night. Did Olórin tell you that giving them to another is a custom of welcome to a guest among the Eldar of Lórien?”

Melui shook her head. “No, I didn’t know. Would it be wrong for me to give them to Lady Estë, if they’re supposed to be given to a guest?”

“Not at all,” she was assured. “They are a much-prized flower, for they do not grow in all parts of Lórien, and here beneath the trees of its heart, they are seen only when others bring them as gifts. Lady Estë is quite fond of them, and she will be pleased to accept them, I’m sure.”

Having relieved the girl’s concern, he turned his attention back to his neighbor. “I will see to the comfort of your horses while you visit the Lord and Lady. And I will make certain Frodo knows that he may expect you at the time you anticipated. He was surprised at first to hear that you would be returning from the north with guests, but he is delighted by the chance to welcome them. His people truly are the most hospitable I have ever known.”

“They are indeed, and I think there is much that the people of Aman might learn from them, while they are with us. I am relieved to hear that he did not take the news poorly. He has not been long in the West, and his time thus far has been filled with many difficulties not of his making.”

“Which are all well in the past, and behind him, as you know. May I assist you, my lady?” the redhead asked Aránayel ever so graciously, noting that she had not yet dismounted. “Seven days of travel across the open country can be wearying, even for the most experienced rider, and the lands in that part of the west never quite seem to lose all of winter’s chill.”

Aránayel gave him a measuring glance, attempting to gauge his sincerity. Ványalos was wearing his most ingenuous expression and had spoken politely, so that not even she could tell if was in any way dissembling. After considering this for a moment, she accepted his offer with a brisk nod. “So you are Olórin’s neighbor, of whom we have heard so many colorful tales,” she said neutrally.

Ványalos laughed. “Have you? Then I am justly rebuked for all the many colorful tales I have told of others. I trust you did not find these stories too boring.”

She sniffed. “Too fantastic, perhaps, but I am not well acquainted with any of the people of the Master of Dreams. I only know of him through his lady sister, and from what I have heard, they are not similar in their habits.”

“On the surface, no, I believe you are quite correct. In any case, he and the Lady Estë are awaiting all their guests, and so you may soon judge for yourself how he and his sister are unique.”

Something in his words appeared to please her, but Olórin spoke before she could say a word. “In which case, we should not keep them waiting. Aránayel, would you mind taking the children into the hall? I require a moment to make certain Ványalos properly sees to the needs of our horses. His skill with beasts is pitifully meager compared to his skill with words, and I would not wish to have our hosts wait to meet their honored guests. They know me entirely too well, and will not suffer for a minute or two of my absence.”

The woman cocked her head as one might when studying some unexpected curiosity; there was a hint of displeasure in her face. “I had expected *you* to properly introduce us to our hosts. Or is it not the custom here for the guest who is best known to present those who have not yet visited the house?”

Her reaction seemed strange to Ványalos; he cast Olórin a questioning glance once his back was to Aránayel. The wizard did not respond to him openly, but Ványalos noted something in his tone of voice that seemed oddly disquieted. "It is, but I shan't be long. No doubt I will rejoin you before you reach the place where the Lord and Lady are wont to receive visitors."

A shadow of doubt flickered across her face, but Aránayel offered no further protest. When she and the twins were gone, Ványalos turned to his neighbor. "I can see now why you once tricked yourself into believing that she might harbor some interest in you, *pityandil*. There are few who can boast of such beauty even among our people — yet I can also understand why you were warned to stay away from her. She could stand for a century in the full heat of the most blazing summer sun and still show no sign of warmth. But has there been some change in the climate between you? I had expected her to wish some other person to present her to my Lord and Lady, not you."

The breath Olórin loosed was nearly a groan. "So had I. My feelings toward her have not changed, Ványalos, and I suspect that she likes me no more than she did on the day of my unfortunate confession, all those years ago. But it would seem that she is not above manipulating how others perceive the current situation, if it will be to her benefit."

"How so?"

The Istar ran his fingers through his pale hair before answering; as they brushed against the narrow band of crystal, he knew that his suspicions were not mistaken. "The fact that I once believed myself to be in love with her and actually wished for her love in return is something I have never attempted to hide, even after I realized that it was a fantasy that had no basis whatsoever in reality. The pain I felt over my own foolishness was longer-lived than the affection I imagined I held for her. And I know beyond doubt that she is aware of this, for I spoke of it quite plainly before we left Nienna's house, so that she would not fear that I might still harbor some hope of kindling such a relationship. She seemed pleased to hear it, because indeed, she was no more fond of me than she had ever been — less, if anything."

The explanation did nothing to relieve Ványalos' confusion. "Then why would she prefer that you be the one to present her to Irmo and Estë? Would she not rather they viewed her as a governess of these Elven children than claim any connection with you?"

This time, Olórin did groan as he shook his head. "Apparently not. Over the course of our journey here, she came to realize several things, most importantly that I am *not* the same naive person she remembers from our youth, that I have at the very least gained some respect from those whom we all serve, and in particular that I have managed to win the approval of Lord Eru. She desperately wishes to be free of her exile in the north, and for that I do not blame her, but I fear that from all that has happened during our travels, she has decided that the best way to achieve that goal is through me. She has been unusually solicitous toward me ever since we left Yavanna's house, and Melui has overheard certain remarks that seem to indicate that Aránayel has been fostering the notion among others that our relationship may be developing in the ways I had once desired, and she had once refused."

Ványalos' mobile face suddenly went still. "You cannot be serious...!"

"I wish I weren't, but I'm afraid I am, quite serious. There was never any reason to discuss the particulars of the lodgings which had been arranged for her and the children here in Lórien. She has developed a notion that she will make some kind of long-term residence in my house, and will send the twins off to live among the Eldar, as soon as may be. What she intends to do with Frodo, I have no idea."

The redhead grimaced. "And you have done naught to disabuse her of this nonsense? I have not relished the thought of having her as even a temporary guest, but I like even less the thought of having her in my home, displeased with her lodgings because she had not been told that her presumption of where she was to stay was in error!"

"I realize that, but I discovered this particular detail only this morning, when Melui mentioned things she had overheard to me. Since then, there has been no opportunity to take Aránayel aside to discuss it privately, and I did not want them to witness her fury if she took such news poorly. They have already seen more of her ill temper than I would wish on anyone, especially a child."

Ványalos' annoyance vanished as quickly as it had risen. "Then I forgive you for not warning me sooner, since you have had little warning of your own. She may think her ploy a clever one, but you know as well as I that here of all places, it will not avail her. You are well known to every resident of Lórien, especially to those in the hill country, and whatever she says of your relationship, unless it is confirmed by you, they will know it for a lie."

The wizard grimaced, irritably pushing errant windblown strands of hair out of his eyes. "I know, I know, and if this were nothing more than a case of Aránayel telling falsehoods to garner sympathy for herself and undermine my reputation, I would dismiss it without a second thought — as I would have many years ago, when the rest of you conspired to keep the knowledge of certain words she spoke at an autumn festival from ever reaching my ears."

The taller Maia cleared his throat, unsuccessful in suppressing the color from rising in his cheeks. "I admit I have been a party to that secrecy, but it truly was done as gesture of compassion, Olórin, and for no other reason. You were not yet recovered from the abuse you had suffered under her tongue, and since we did not have the power to silence her utterly, we were determined to make certain she never injured you again, even through gossip."

"For which I am grateful, not angry. I am no longer so fragile, but I shan't deny that I am not yet fully healed of my more recent hurts. And that is why I wished to speak with you, before privacy may become difficult to obtain. Aránayel has tried to be subtle in her machinations, most likely to prevent me from interfering before she has gained at least a portion of the result she wishes, and so long as she does nothing overtly dishonest or harmful, I will let her be as solicitous as she likes. If I neither encourage nor hinder her, when others see through her ploys, she will have no one but herself to blame, and thus might learn from the experience."

Ványalos snorted as he took the reins of horses. "I may not know her as well as you, but from the little I have seen and heard, I think you may be asking for something beyond her ability."

"Perhaps, but I see no harm in allowing her such a chance. Yet over the last three days, I have sensed something more to her behavior, something I cannot lay my finger upon. When Melui told me of what she had overheard this morning, for a time, I thought this might be the cause of my anxiety, but my heart insists it is not. Before we parted company, Helyanwë warned me that Aránayel's anger toward me has not diminished, that she would attempt to harm me if she could. I felt she was mistaken at the time, but the more this feeling of disquiet persists, the more I cannot help but suspect that she may be right. I want to help these children as best I am able, but if must remain wary for new treachery from Aránayel...."

"It would be quite impossible," Ványalos finished for him, suddenly smiling. "Worry not, my old friend, this at least is a matter we *have* considered, and taken steps to help remedy. Until now, I had no notion of the full nature of the difficulties you were facing, but we have been given warning that there may be greater trouble ahead."

Olórin did not hide his surprise. "By whom? Helyanwë? Lady Nienna?"

The tall Maia shook his head, his long queue dancing with the motion; his grin was impish. "No, though I have discussed the situation with both of them since the message was received. The warning came from one of Lady Yavanna's people, Ornedil."

The wizard's eyes widened at this even more unexpected revelation. "Ornedil? But... why? I did speak with him for a time at the feast in Yavanna's house, but not of Aránayel. To be truthful, I was more concerned about how he had been affected by what became of his brother. Why would he have warned you of any difficulties I might face with Aránayel?"

"Because he is more perceptive than most folk would believe. Aiwendil had greater knowledge of Yavanna's birds and beasts, but much like yourself, Ornedil has quietly studied things that generally do not interest others of his people. You forget, *pityandil*, that he and I are also friends, as we have both long served our masters as a favored messenger. Not the most prestigious of orders, I do grant, but one that serves a useful purpose. In truth, I have often thought that you and he have a great deal in common, though his interests are less broad and his wisdom far less deep. That was why he worried for his brother's safety as one of the Istari in Endor, and why he noticed certain things at Lady Yavanna's feast which you did not. Ornedil saw and heard things that you were too busy to see, and he told me of them so that I might warn you. He considers it a small repayment on behalf of his brother, who became a disappointment rather than a supporter of your mutual mission."

After taking a few moments to digest this, Olórin sighed, his faint smile rueful. "Someday, I must make myself better acquainted with Ornedil — and sooner than that, I must thank him for this. But I still do not know precisely what may happen. What preparations have you made to deal with this situation?"

Ványalos' own smile broadened as they brought the horses to the water's edge, removing their reins so that they could graze freely on the lush grasses that grew between the path and the lake. "One you have already seen. Originally, I had not planned to be here to greet you, and if you had not attempted to draw me aside to speak, I would have asked for a moment alone to confer with you. Frodo is well prepared to deal with any trouble Aránayel might attempt to cause in your household, while I am prepared to debase myself in whatever ways are necessary to prevent her from harassing you."

"I sincerely hope you are *not* speaking literally," the wizard said, reacting to his peculiar choice of the word *debase*.

Ványalos laughed. "Not if it can be avoided. Others have said that I can ingratiate myself to anyone, given the opportunity, and I will do my best with her, for your sake. If she can at least come to accept my hospitality because I flatter her vanity or some such, then it will make matters easier for you. In my own house, it will be much less difficult to watch her for signs of trouble or treachery, and it is no bother at all for me, since she and I have no distressing history between us. Also, there are other plans already set in motion that should shorten all our trials, but I think it best if I tell you no more than that. You cannot be blamed for what you do not know — or, rather, you might be blamed by *her*, but she will tarnish her own image in so doing, not yours, for you will remain innocent. If it is acceptable to you, I will accompany your party on the remainder of your journey to the hill country, to begin in earnest my part of these designs."

Olórin hesitated, not certain he wished any of his friends to become ensnared with Aránayel and her scheming tempers, until he realized that they were already involved. "I suppose that there truly is no other option, since I had already agreed to allow the children to come as my guests before I was told who was to accompany them as their tutor. I still do not quite grasp the full wisdom of Lady Nienna's choice, but I am grateful for your help."

"And how could any of us refuse to give it? Our aid is as much a means of assuaging our curiosity as it is a means to assist you in a difficult situation — mine in particular. After all, I have long been told that my greatest gift is in making mischief, yet you have always dismissed my taunts and teasing with ease, while the effect of Aránayel's misbehavior has been vastly more permanent. I have often felt that my efforts are but the trifles of an apprentice, and I would very much like to see a true master at work."

Chapter XI

*It is impossible to love a second time
what we have really ceased to love.*

As their guests arrived at mid-day after a long morning of travel, refreshment had been prepared for them, which the Lord and Lady of Lórien shared with them as their way of greeting, especially to the young Elves. Olórin and Ványalos had joined the other travelers just as they arrived in the hall where Irmo and Estë waited to receive them. As their servant, Ványalos took upon himself the task of presenting Melui and Lére, who were already known to the two Valar, as well as Aránayel. The female Maia came very close to taking offense at his presumption, but Ványalos was quite lavishly gracious, after his usual manner, and startled Aránayel by mentioning the fact that she was no stranger to these halls, having come to the Lady Estë in the service of Varda, many years before. Even Olórin was mildly surprised by that part of his commentary, as it was unexpected, for he had not mentioned this to Ványalos, but he also knew that his neighbor had served Irmo and Estë since their first entrance into Arda, and had a memory for things others would consider inconsequential. He may never have seen Aránayel before this day, but as Irmo's favored messenger, he was aware of all who came and went to Irmo's house, especially other messengers. If she had been here before, Ványalos would know of it, and remember, whether or not he had ever set eyes on her.

Moreover, he had a true gift for sensing the moods of others and how to make the best of bad situations. Before Aránayel's ire had more than begun to rise, Ványalos' adroit reminder of her past visits to Lady Estë prompted an unexpectedly warm response from the Vala, which swiftly quelled Aránayel's burgeoning upset. Olórin was grateful to him, not just for averting her anger and sparing him the need to perform the courtesy, but also for turning her interest elsewhere, for the time being.

When it was time for them to move on, Aránayel continued to show at least some minor interest in conversing with the red-haired Maia, which, the wizard perceived, was his part of the greater plot he intended to work upon during the remainder of their journey to the hill country. Once outside the mansion, Olórin whistled for the horses; Lére's face creased with thought as he watched them run up from the grassy sward at the water's edge. "If Ványalos is coming with us," he reflected aloud, "should Melui and I share one horse? There are five of us now, and only four of them. We've ridden together before, you know."

"I'm certain you have," Olórin replied as they waited for the horses to join them. "But I'm also certain those occasions were with gear that was meant to accommodate two riders, not one. It was a generous thought, but I think such an offer will not be necessary. We brought four mounts more for the sake of the things that needed to be carried with us from Nienna's house. It will not trouble me to walk the remaining distance. I have done so many times be—"

A rather solid nudge from behind curtailed his remark and nearly knocked him off his feet. He stumbled forward in surprise, managing nonetheless to keep his balance; when he pivoted to see who had so rudely interrupted, he was nudged again, more gently. He laughed.

“Shadowfax! Did you come with Ványalos, and were hiding all this time?”

A ponderous sigh escaped the Maia in question, even as the grey horse shook his head. “I fear not,” Ványalos said with considerable regret. “It would seem, *pityandil*, that during your absence, I made one too many jests about the errors you made that irritated your equine friend, and he has turned his scorn to me as well. I had wondered if he had yet forgiven you, but it seems I now have my answer.”

There was little doubt of that, as Shadowfax did indeed appear quite happy to see his master again. The children watched in wonder as Olórin, still laughing, accepted his gentle demonstrations of welcome. “Is he your horse, Mithrandir?” Melui asked from where she already sat astride her own steed, quite amazed by the size and noble bearing of the creature. “He’s beautiful! Has he been waiting here in Aman all these years, while you were in Middle-earth?”

“No, of course not, he was born there, just like you,” the wizard said, softly stroking the stallion’s proud head when he was finally finished offering his greetings. “He was the greatest of all the horses in the kingdom of Rohan, the greatest to have been sired since Oromë first brought his ancestors to the plains of Middle-earth. Théoden King made a gift of him to me for the help I gave to him and all of Rohan during the recent wars, though Shadowfax and I were friends before that time, and have been ever since. It is difficult for me to think of *owning* a friend.”

“It is said that Lord Oromë greatly covets this beast, or so I have heard in the idle talk of his servants in Nienna’s house,” Aránayel noted, her expression a subtle blend of surprise and envy. “How is it he remains attached to you? Have you not heard of Oromë’s desire and offered the beast to him freely, or do you wish to keep him for yourself in Oromë’s despite?”

The sound Olórin made was remarkably similar to the one Shadowfax made in the same moment. “As difficult as it is for me to think of owning Shadowfax, it is far more difficult for me to even consider forcing him to go where he does not wish to go. He remains with me by his own choice, not by my command. Should he choose to leave me and become a servant of Lord Oromë, I will not hinder him, unless I believe the choice was imposed upon him and not a decision made of his own free will. And take care how you speak of him in his presence, Aránayel. Shadowfax understands full well our speech, not only a few commands as ordinary horses perceive it. Is that not so, my old friend?”

There was no doubt that the answering sound and motion was a very strong affirmative. The silver horse’s dark eyes seemed to hold a glint of suspicion as he turned his head to regard Aránayel. She frowned to be the focus of such a baleful glare, and might have been stung to make some defensive remark had Ványalos not chosen that moment to speak, and break the uneasy mood.

“Alas, he does indeed,” the redhead said quite mournfully as he gave Lére a leg up onto his own mount. “And because I was foolish enough to forget this, I also forgot to choose my words more carefully in his presence while you were gone. I am not as experienced a rider as you, but I know that neither am I so poor that I cannot stay upon the back of whatever steed deigns to carry me. I had intended to ride here with Shadowfax this morning, but he overheard my parting words with Frodo, and carried me only far enough so that there could be no doubt in my mind that I had been deliberately

thrown off because he no longer wished to carry me. My words were in jest," he added hastily when the stallion snorted loudly, "but I admit I have earned the rebuke. I confess I have been less kind than was seemly, Olórin, taking too much amusement from the manner in which you inadvertently offended him by seeming to forget him once you were no longer forbidden to travel as our people are able. Neither of us meant to give offense, but we both went too far before we understood our mistakes."

The wizard regarded Shadowfax with a measuring glance. "Hmm, then do I also need fear being tossed to the side of the road like a spoiled apple, to be taught my lesson in humility?"

Aware that his worry was feigned, Shadowfax shook his head, imperiously butting his master with his nose as he sidled up alongside him. Olórin recognized this as a sign of the horse's agreement to bear him, and chuckled softly as he followed orders. Once settled upon the *meara's* back, he reached forward to scratch lightly between the horse's ears, an affectionate gesture Shadowfax had long enjoyed. "Then let us go, my friend, but not too swiftly. Your cousins who were kind enough to carry us from the north are strong and sturdy, but they have brought us a long distance these past seven days, and there is no need to hurry to our journey's end. Come, show our guests the fairest path between here and our home. They are new to Lórien, and will appreciate a knowledgeable guide."

During the months of Olórin's illness, Shadowfax had had many opportunities to become acquainted with every trail and byway between the heart of Lórien and his master's home in the hill country, as the Maia had been forbidden to use any extraordinary means of travel, and he and Frodo had often been summoned to Irmo's mansions so that the Dream Master and his wife could aid both of them with their healing. There was one path for which both the horse and his rider had a particular fondness, and he now led the others upon it, so that they might enjoy it, too.

As they rode at an easy pace, Olórin listened to Ványalos tell Aránayel and the twins of all they passed and everything they saw, regaling them with such tales of awe and amusement, even Aránayel's laughter was occasionally heard. The wizard was grateful, both to Ványalos for his attempts to engage her interest, and to Shadowfax for forgiving him and thus allowing such exchanges to occur. He closed his eyes and felt the clean wind of their movement stream over his face and through his hair, taking with it some of the tension he had not been able to fully dismiss since he had first laid eyes on Aránayel in Nienna's house. Now, if only Frodo were as well-prepared to deal with her and any unpleasanties which might evolve while she was in Lórien, he felt certain all would soon be well.

Frodo, on the other hand, had his doubts as to whether or not such a thing would be possible while Aránayel remained in Lórien. When Ványalos had given him the news that Olórin would be returning with guests, the hobbit had been delighted, a feeling which had faded quickly when he was told who to expect. He remembered the wizard's admonishment, given when they had first discussed that part of his past, to keep an open mind about the Maia woman even though the tales he had heard of her were not at all evocative of pity. What further enlightenment Ványalos and their other neighbors were able to provide had not been encouraging. That they and the other Maiar who knew Olórin had conspired for thousands of years to make certain he remained ignorant of Aránayel's other misdeeds

toward him had startled the halfling, though he couldn't decide if he was more surprised by their actions or the simple fact that they had succeeded in keeping the wizard in the dark. Fortunately, they had time to prepare as best they might, and when additional news had come to them from Ornedil, their best course of action became much clearer. Frodo regretted that there was no way in which they could implement all of their plans before the guests arrived, but knowing that things had been set in motion was a comfort to him.

Pausing for a moment from his chores in the kitchen, he peered out the windows which looked west, and saw the shadows between the rays of sunlight lengthening as the afternoon grew late. Sunset was not due for several hours, but the first clouds that would bring the evening rain had begun to stream in on the winds from the west, dimming the skies from blue to gray. The others would arrive soon, if all had gone as planned. As he returned to finish preparing a late tea for the travelers, Frodo realized that he was listening for the sound of approaching footsteps, and why. It had been a long time since he had settled down upon a quiet evening in the Shire, wondering if he might have an unexpected visitor, one who so often came in the gray shadows of dusk. He was far removed from that time and place, but the old habit was still there. For many years, he had paused to listen most every evening, hoping to catch the soft sound of those footfalls on the path that wound its way up the Hill. Gandalf had visited Bag End quite regularly after Bilbo had left the Shire, and he always departed with the assurance that he would return when he could. Frodo had grown used to his visits before they had stopped for nine years. He had just about given up hope that the wizard would ever return when he suddenly appeared again, bringing with him grim news about the Ring.

Frodo sighed as he thought back to that particular day. From time to time, he had thought that perhaps he would have preferred to never see Gandalf again rather than hear the news he had brought that night, and live through all that had followed. He had once been certain he could have given up anything if it would have spared him the ordeal of his journey to Mordor, the dreadful injuries he had sustained, and all he had lost because of the wounds of body and spirit that could not be healed in Middle-earth. Even now, there were days when he thought of Sam and Rose, of little Elanor, of Merry and Pippin and all the dear friends he had left behind, and wondered if there might not have been some other way. Aman was beautiful, its people kind, and the hills of Lórien so like the Shire, he more than half-expected to walk around a corner someday and find hobbits in the marketplace, or a merry old inn full of laughter and song. Before Bilbo had gone back to Tirion to settle into his place in Elrond's house, those fantasies had crept upon him more often than he liked, which was why he had encouraged Olórin to go off on the errand with Helyanwë. He needed to know how comfortable he could be here on his own, so that he would understand whether or not these pangs of homesickness would diminish once he had a chance to make a place for himself without Bilbo or Olórin always there.

He had doubted that a week would be time enough to take such a measure, until just now. Naturally, he looked forward to his friend's return, but seven days ago, when the first news of how and when that would happen had reached him, he had been mildly irritated, believing that surely this was not time enough for him to achieve any semblance of personal settling in to his life here in Lórien. But when he found himself listening for any sounds of Olórin's return, he had suddenly felt not as if he were in a strange house in a foreign land, trying to find ways to feel at home. He *had* felt at home, completely and utterly, as comfortable as he ever had in the kitchen at Bag End, preparing himself a spot of tea to

tide himself over until supper on a rainy evening. And his mind did not conjure up memories of those bygone days when he had welcomed a weary gray wizard into his home. He knew precisely what and who he was expecting, and he anticipated it with pleasure, not discomfort. It felt like the days of his youth, when he had welcomed Bilbo back from one of his long tramps about the Shire, a feeling that had always brought Frodo both joy and contentment. Bilbo would be here in Aman for a long time, of that he was certain, and whenever they wished to visit each other, arrangements would be made.

But somehow, Frodo knew that Bilbo was likely to come to Lórien more often than he would go to Tirion, for the old hobbit recognized the treasure they had both been given in finding a part of the West that so closely resembled the land of their birth. And for Frodo, there was a unique and special joy in having the privilege of sharing his life here with an old friend who had at last been set free of the shackles of human existence to live the life to which he had been born, a life of which the hobbit had truly known all but nothing, prior to their landing on the white shores of eastern Valinor. From Frodo's point of view, it was as if coming to Aman had somehow allowed time to turn back, so that he could have the miraculous chance to know Olórin as he had been in his youth only after first having known him in his old age. Like so many things in the West, it was both strange and wondrous, and very precious.

He had not, however, expected that he would come face to face with this specific and unpleasant part of Olórin's youth quite so soon after his initial discovery of its existence. Yet even that had had a positive aspect to it: it had given him a reason to speak at length with many more of the residents in this part of the hill country than he might have sought out had he been given no reason to visit them during this past week. When Ványalos told him of the guests who were to return with Olórin, Frodo had not hesitated to ask both him and others what they knew of Aránayel when they gathered to share the evening meal at the tall Maia's home. No one had rebuked him for prying, nor had they refused to answer his questions, and over the following days, in which they helped him prepare for the anticipated guests, Frodo developed his own friendly relations with more than a few of their neighbors. They told him of many things besides Aránayel, and were curious to know him better in return, an exchange to which the hobbit gladly agreed.

Strange, he mused, how often things that seemed unfortunate or unpleasant could in the end bring about results of quite the opposite nature. He hoped that such would continue to hold true, until this visit was over and Aránayel returned to... wherever she called home. Until that moment, it had not occurred to Frodo that he knew of no particular name for Nienna's house, or the land in which it was located. For that matter, he was not certain he knew if such names existed for most of the homes of the Valar. Lórien he knew, as well as Mandos and Ilmarin; Ulmo made his home in the depths of the Encircling Sea, and some of the Valar had mansions in the great city of Valmar, but he had no idea if those halls had names of their own, or any of the others in which the Valar dwelt throughout Aman. It was another question to add to the already long list of questions he had been accumulating during the months since his arrival in the West. Not for the first time, he was grateful for Lord Eru's grace, which would allow him and Bilbo to remain in Aman, untroubled by the weariness of the world, until they were ready to move on, for he was quite certain it would take many years before the questions he already had could be adequately answered.

The rattling of the kettle he had set above the kitchen fire interrupted his reverie and told him the water was ready to brew tea. As he poured it into the ceramic pot he had already prepared, he tried to recall what Mirimë had told him of beverages often preferred by Elvish children. He had just begun to consider the options he was able to remember when a noise from outside the house caught his attention. The sudden thunder of horses' hoofs alerted him to the arrival of those he was expecting, a mildly surprising sound, since he hadn't thought they would be in so great a rush. Setting aside the kettle and leaving the tea to steep, he hurried to the front of the house and the clearing before it, where riders were best able to approach. His surprise deepened when he stepped out onto the porch and saw only a single rider. Shadowfax was drawing to a halt; still on his back, Olórin appeared torn between amusement and annoyance, laughing even as he ran his fingers through his seriously disarrayed hair, which had bits of leaves and twigs tangled in it, the circlet set upon it skewed slightly to one side. There was not another horse to be seen or heard.

"Where are the others?" Frodo asked, startled by this unexpected and hasty arrival.

Shadowfax made an odd sound half-echoed by his master as he slipped down from the horse's back, landing lightly on the grass and packed earth of the clearing. "Still several miles behind us, I should think," the wizard replied. "We had just come to the place where the stream that runs beside the western meadow branches off from the river to the east, when Shadowfax took it into his head to race the others the rest of the way. Never mind that this great brute knew full well he could outrun all but the swiftest of Lord Oromë's steeds, and those we borrowed from Lady Nienna were just come from a week's journey and know nothing of this region. Not that he appears to remember it as well as he ought, given that he nearly tore my head off, jumping the hedge on the far side of the woods without leaving quite enough room for my hair to clear the vines growing above it. And it's good to be back again, thank you for asking."

The halfling blushed, but smiled. "I'm sorry, that *was* rather rude of me, Olórin, and I beg your pardon. I *am* glad you're home. If I have an excuse at all for my poor manners, it's only that I'm surprised to see you arrive alone. It's not what I expected."

"Nor I, so I forgive you your momentary lapse. I had fully intended to come with the others, although I do admit I had thought it might be advantageous to arrive slightly ahead of them, to speak with you in private." The Maia's eyes darkened and narrowed as they slipped toward Shadowfax, who had moved to drink from the small stream that ran near the house. "Did you overhear my discussion with Ványalos, before he and I went in to meet Lord Irmo and Lady Estë?"

The silver horse raised his head enough to clearly nod his confirmation. Olórin sniffed. "That explains it, then. I hadn't realized it until this morning, but Aránayel has acquired some notions I have not had a chance to correct, and which might have uncomfortable results for all of us, yourself included." Quickly, he told Frodo the things he had told Ványalos a short time ago. Frodo listened politely without interrupting, but his eyes grew steadily wider with all he heard. When Olórin was finished, it took but a moment for him to react.

“And if she’s already laid plans to oust your other guests before they’ve even arrived, what plans does she have laid for *me*? Is she thinking of sending me off to live with Bilbo in Tirion, or shipping me back to Middle-earth?”

The Maia sighed and winced as he tugged a particularly tangled clump of twigs and leaves from his hair, tearing out a largish knot of the hair itself in the process. “I thought precisely the same thing when I realized what she was planning. You needn’t worry on that account. I assure you, if she so much as breathes a word of such a notion, she’ll find herself back where she came from before she finishes the sentence. Lady Nienna may have sent her for some greater purpose, but I cannot believe it would involve allowing my friends to be hurt or insulted without reason. I believe she seeks concrete proof that Aránayel has at last fulfilled the terms of her punishment, and if she would attempt such a thing, I suspect it would be more than adequate evidence that she has not.”

“I suppose you’re right,” the hobbit agreed. “There isn’t any chance, is there, that you might have accidentally given Aránayel the impression that you *did* still want such a relationship with her?”

Olórin shook his head emphatically, both in firm rejection of such a possibility, and to shake the last of the leafy debris from his hair. “I’ve looked back over everything I have done and said since we met again, and if I did such a thing unintentionally, I cannot see how. Ványalos told me that you had been warned that she might bear watching after her arrival here, but he did not mention the precise nature of Ornedil’s warning.”

“Undoubtedly because his warning wasn’t terribly precise. I didn’t hear his exact message, of course, but Ványalos told me Ornedil had seen and heard things from Aránayel during the evening you spent in Lady Yavanna’s house that led him to believe she intended to cause some kind of mischief, should things not go to her liking during her time in Lórien. We discussed it as best we could, and consulted anyone who was more familiar with her, and finally decided that the best way to deal with any trouble she might cause would be by preventing it. We—”

The wizard held up one hand, stilling Frodo’s explanation as he straightened the crooked cirlet with the other hand. “Ványalos spoke of this to me, and he felt that it would be better if I knew as little of your plans as possible, so that Aránayel could not lay the blame upon me, should she be angered by whatever comes of it. You needn’t say more. I believe I know all that is necessary. I have been more concerned that you feel adequately forewarned. She has... a strong personality, and can be fierce in dealing with those she considers her enemies. In my youth, I was too blind and foolish to see it, but by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, you could easily win that distinction.”

Frodo wrinkled his nose, not at Olórin’s words, but at the memories they stirred. “One that I’ve lived with before, if you recall. I did nothing more than allow Bilbo to show me kindness by taking me in after my parents were killed, and I immediately won the scorn of the Sackville-Bagginses. Bilbo did try to protect me from their cruelty as much as he could, but he could only do so much. I’ve given this some thought while you were away, and I’ve decided that if I take the same kinds of precautions around Aránayel as I would have around Lobelia, I should be able to deal with her.” He laughed ruefully. “It’s much the same situation, after all. Lobelia wanted me out of Bag End so she could have it for herself,

and it sounds as if Aránayel has much the same intent — though Lobelia wanted Bilbo out, too, and from what you just told me, it seems that Aránayel would rather you stayed.”

The Maia shuddered at the very thought. “Yes, and given a choice, I would have preferred enforced company with Lobelia.” He exhaled, the sound of his released breath halfway between a moan and a sigh. “There is no question that any love I might once have imagined I held for Aránayel is well and truly gone, but neither can I hate her or be angry with her for what happened so long ago. Yet in making it clear to her that I held her blameless for my past errors, it would appear that I have erred once again. In her mind, I believe she sees kindness and pity as either signs of weakness or opportunities for manipulation — manipulation of a sort I would prefer not to contemplate.”

It took but a moment for the hobbit to see his point. “Do you think she might actually attempt to...” He cleared his throat, then spoke more quietly, just in case his words might be considered inappropriate or rude. “...seduce you?” It rather embarrassed him to realize that back in the Shire, such a thought would not have even occurred to him, but there was no denying that the person the wizard was here in his homeland was astonishingly unlike the weary and careworn old man he had appeared to be in Middle-earth. From Frodo’s observations, among those still faithful to the Valar and Eru, there was no such thing as an ugly Maia, and in expressing his simplicity, Olórin’s fana held a quiet but nonetheless striking grace.

The wizard grimaced. “Ordinarily, I would say no. Our people are not like the Eruhíni. While our fanar can be precisely like your bodies in form and in basic functions, none of the things you require to sustain or enhance your physical life are needed by us. We are capable of experiencing most things that are natural to one born in flesh, but our reactions to them are quite different on very fundamental levels. That is why it was necessary for Melian to take on a body of true flesh when she wished to bear Elwë a child. It could not be done otherwise, for we do not have children among ourselves, even when we remain in our self-incarnate forms. Among the Ainur, spouses relate to one another in ways that are quite unlike those of the Eruhíni; a desire for offspring is normally not a part of this love. A greater tie to physical existence is required to kindle it, and then the spouse must be chosen from among the beings Lord Eru created as naturally incarnate, or....”

He shook his head, curtailing his unintended lecture. “Well, that is a tale for another time, I think. Suffice it to say that I now have a much better understanding of what both the Eldar and the Atani experience in their incarnate lives since I spent so many years in the body of one of the Second-born. What it means to be male or female is not the same for us as it is for you. All of Eru’s living beings, I think, wish to have family in our own fashions, but the desires that arise from the need to give birth to children are unique to the creatures born of Arda and quite beyond the reckoning of any Ainu who has not lived in true flesh. Aránayel has *never* experienced such a life, of that I am certain.”

Frodo saw his point. “Then there’s no chance that she would even think of attempting such... coercion,” he said, relieved.

That feeling faded a moment later when the wizard made an indecisive gesture. “I would not expect that such a means of ingratiation would readily occur to her. But I may be mistaken; I have

misjudged her before, to my regret. She has spent many years working among the Eldar who are freed from the Halls of Waiting and their kin; she has witnessed their ways far more closely than she could have in her service to Lord Manwë and Lady Varda. She may have some curiosity about those customs and habits which are not ours; she might think that I would share such an interest because of the many years I have just recently spent in the flesh of a mortal, and because of my acknowledged love for all the Eruhíni. Also, she has also developed an... attachment, if you will, to certain things of the physical world, her fana apparently not the least among them. If she grasps no other aspect of humane existence, she knows vanity quite well indeed. My suspicion is that she would not demean herself by using such blandishments upon *me*, but if she has witnessed such behavior among the newly released Eldar who have been reunited with their spouses and loved ones...."

Frodo winced, sympathetic. "What will you do if she does try?"

Olórin shrugged. In the distance, he could hear the approach of the other horses, though they were yet too far for Frodo to catch the sound. "Deal with it when and if it happens. My hope is that it will not, which is why I am grateful to Ornedil for warning you that Aránayel may attempt to cause trouble, and that you and Ványalos have already taken steps to prevent it. Whatever measures you have begun, if they at all involve keeping close watch over her, I doubt she will ever find an opportunity for this particular kind of mischief. I intend to avoid being alone with her, so long as she remains in Lórien."

"I'll do whatever I can to help, of course, if you wish. I must admit that I hadn't even considered this possibility, until just now. I know your people aren't like mine, but I often forget how very different we are. When you speak about siblings and spouses among the Valar and your own people, I cannot imagine them without thinking in terms of how such things are among my own kind. I don't believe I will ever quite understand how there can be brothers and sisters and husbands and wives, yet no mothers and fathers or children. All of you have the same parent, yet you are not all related. It's quite incomprehensible to me."

The Maia smiled wryly. "I understand, better than you may know. In my own way, I was just as baffled by those differences when I came to Middle-earth two thousand years ago, but I have learned. Perhaps that is why I have come to look upon the Hobbits as my family, especially you and Bilbo. I had no kin by birth, and none by blood, but some I have found in spirit, in you and your people. That is more precious to me than the kinship I had once imagined I might share with Aránayel. Which is why I will not let her spoil the happiness and peace you are finally coming to know here in Lórien. Too many of the months since your arrival have been spent in dealing with my troubles. I have no wish for you to suffer one moment more because of my errors and inadequacies."

Frodo harrumphed softly. "I don't consider helping a friend to be suffering, much less one who is more family than mere friend. But..." He glanced at that friend, who was watching Shadowfax nibbling on the grass near the stream. His earlier thoughts concerning the obvious changes in the wizard bubbled up in the hobbit's mind, and to his chagrin, a sudden laugh escaped him. When Olórin gave him a sharp glance that was painfully near to taking insult, Frodo did his best to suppress his unseemly mirth. "Forgive me, I don't mean to imply that I consider what Aránayel has done, and might yet do, to be humorous. But..."

He paused, then began again. "Look at it this way, if you will. I can easily understand why this whole situation concerns you deeply, because Aránayel has done you considerable harm in the past. But I've only known you as you are *now* for... eight or nine months, isn't it? I grew accustomed to your changed appearance much more quickly than I would have expected, but even so, it did take some getting used to. Yet before then, I knew you as a very old man for all my life, more than fifty *years*. I beg your pardon if my reaction seems rude, but I cannot help but think that back in Middle-earth, I couldn't have even begun to imagine that something of this sort would *ever* worry you. Realizing that it *does*...!"

Olórin had no trouble grasping the explanation behind this unseemly laughter. His offended expression turned to a rueful, crooked smile. "I suppose from that perspective, you're quite right, and the whole notion *is* utterly ludicrous. To be frank, I never would have expected to find myself in such a predicament, either. I have loved a great many people in my life with a deep and earnest passion, but I have never *desired* anyone as the Eruhíni do, not even when I lived as one of you. What I wanted of Aránayel all those centuries ago was not the attention of a lover, even as our kind knows them; I wanted to experience the sort of deep love of heart and spirit I saw between my lord and his lady. In my ignorance, I *did* delude myself into doing something I should not have done, because only recently have I grown enough to understand that this particular path is one not meant for me, not in this world. It does not make me bitter; indeed, the clarity of that enlightenment has been an immense relief."

He sighed softly. "But that is why I am so greatly troubled by the direction in which Aránayel's attentions appear to be progressing. She doesn't truly understand me; she knows only what I was in my foolish youth, and now sees how she could turn what she believes I might still desire to her advantage. If she reacted with such powerful rage when all I did was speak to her of love, how do you think she will react if now, when the tables are turned, I reject her? Do you imagine she will believe such a refusal can be aught but a long delayed and completely deliberate revenge?"

Frodo shook his head, his laughter gone. "No, I suspect that's precisely what she'll do. And truly, I do see why such advances might be particularly uncomfortable and distasteful to you, especially now. After Bilbo left the Shire and I inherited all he had left behind, I reaped an unwanted bounty of feminine admirers, looking to marry into a life of comfort. Some of them were complete strangers, others lasses I hadn't spoken to in years, still others young women who wouldn't have given me time of day when I was in my tweens and Bilbo was the master of Bag End. A few had been quite unkind, then, repeating Lobelia's nonsense about me not being a true Baggins at all, unworthy to be the heir to Bilbo's so-called fortune – until it was *my* fortune, and they wanted it for themselves. It doesn't surprise me at all that Aránayel might change her tune toward you, if she saw something in it for herself, and that she would be quite offended by rejection. To be wanted for something you have or are that others wish to *possess* – be it wealth or beauty or power or influence – is quite demeaning. I despised it for myself, and I fully understand why it troubles you now."

Olórin leaned against the balustrade near the place where Frodo stood upon the porch, his breath whistling through his teeth as he exhaled, pondering long-buried memories. "I'd forgotten your troubles with the young ladies of Hobbiton after Bilbo's departure – but then, whenever I visited you during those years, the matter of the Ring nagged at me more and more, and I seldom saw anyone but you or whatever friends and neighbors you allowed into your home while I was there. If I regret anything

about that time, it was how estranged I became from the rest of the Shire. It felt much like becoming an unwanted outsider to my own family.”

The halfling smiled wanly. “Perhaps it *was* for the best, in the end. Even if I had not needed to come here for my own well-being, you would not have been allowed to stay in Middle-earth, would you?”

The fair head shook. “No. Aiwendil and some others of my kind remain because they have lost their memories of Aman, and believe themselves to be a part of Endor. To stay, I would have had to become like them, and much as I love Middle-earth, I missed my home and my life here, and wanted to return to both. I admit that there was a goodly measure of selfishness in my actions when I asked the Valar if you and Bilbo might be permitted to sail with us. Even though the request was for your well-being and happiness, not mine, I did feel less torn when the time came to depart, knowing that the best part of what I had known in Endor would be coming with me, if only briefly. I am relieved that I was never faced with a need to persuade you to come. That you chose of your own free will eases my heart considerably, especially since I know that your decision left you bereft of a part of your life that you hold most dear. Now, I can only hope you will not regret your choice so soon, because of Aránayel.”

Frodo chuckled, almost deviously. “Oh, I don’t think so. Given all you’ve told me, I think what we’ve planned to thwart her will turn out better than we could have expected. Although we’ll have to find ways for you to survive a day or so, until everything falls into place. Do you think you can manage that?”

Olórin made a face of good-natured exasperation, standing straight again as the sounds of the other travelers approaching finally became clearly audible to both of them. “I will manage for as long as is necessary, if it will prevent Aránayel from nurturing these... disturbing schemes any more than she already has. Speaking of nurturing, that reminds me: Lady Yavanna sent a gift for you, and she made me promise to make certain it came into your hands directly upon our arrival.”

Frodo blinked, startled, as Shadowfax ambled back to the front of the house. The *meara*’s entire posture radiated a sense that it was about time the others joined them. “A gift for me? Why? I spoke with her for a time during the welcoming feast in Valmar, and she was a very kind and pleasant person, not at all terrible or frightening, but I’ve seen very little of her since. We discussed gardens and growing things, and she seemed rather pleased that hobbits have such a fondness for both, though we spoke of nothing more important than that.”

“It was significant to her. She was aware that your people loved the plant life of Endor, but she had never before met a hobbit, and apparently, your conversation in Valmar delighted her greatly. When she heard that you had chosen to reside here in Lórien, in the house that she and others made for me, she regretted not having provided it with anything considered special by hobbit-kind, and she wished to remedy that situation. If Ványalos has not destroyed the things I brought with me from the North, I shall make certain her gift is delivered promptly.”

“That is an unfair accusation, *pityandil*,” the redhead remarked as the four horses entered the clearing and brought them within easy earshot of those before the porch. “I have admitted that I am not the most skilled of riders, but neither am I *that* poor! Indeed, if Shadowfax hadn’t gone galloping off and prompted the others to try to keep pace with him, I would not have so much as jostled a thing. If some item you have in your packs has been damaged, you may lay the blame on your own horse, not this gentle fellow.” He patted the neck of the dappled gray stallion that had borne the wizard all the long way from Nienna’s house to Irmo’s. “Indeed, he and his friends would have exhausted themselves completely, if our two young Elven companions had not used their charms to calm them into a more reasonable gait. Whyever did you bolt off in such haste?”

“It was none of my doing,” the Istar assured his neighbor as he reached into one of the packs after Ványalos had dismounted and gone to assist the others. “Shadowfax was eager for home, I suppose, and had become restless. And no harm done, I see,” he added with a smile, lifting something from the top of the uppermost pack. “Lady Yavanna will be pleased, especially if this meets with your approval, Frodo.”

The hobbit’s brow creased with curiosity as Olórin brought a cloth-wrapped something to him, and held it so that he could uncover it. Frodo did so carefully, mindful that what lay beneath might be fragile. Removing the cloth revealed a soil-filled pot with a number of seedlings in it; they were not yet large, but they were strong and healthy. Frodo made a sound of delighted surprise as he recognized the plants. “Pipeweed!” he exclaimed, familiar with both the sight and the scent of it, even in this tender young state. “I had no idea it grew here in the West!”

“Not in Lórien, and not with that name. But it is well known in some of the regions we passed through on our journey, where it is called sweet galenas and is grown for its fragrant flowers, not its leaf. There were many such blossoms gracing the hall in which Lady Yavanna held her feast, and when I mentioned to her how the hobbits had found a unique and delightful use for the leaves of the herb, which you and Bilbo had enjoyed during your lives in the Shire, she proclaimed that it must be added to your garden, straightaway. She sent seeds as well, so that you might grow as much as you wish, but she wanted to be certain that you had plants for your use as soon as possible. The climate of Lórien is not unsuitable for them, and with the Lady’s blessing upon them, they will grow swiftly, once they have been properly set in the soil.”

Frodo laughed as he accepted the gift. “And I don’t suppose you bothered to mention that you enjoyed using ‘the herb’ every bit as much as Bilbo and I?”

Olórin cleared his throat, lightly, and shrugged. “Perhaps not in so many words,” he admitted. “I was telling her of the arts of the Little Folk, after all, not my own habits. The gift was meant for you, but if we do share it, I will also share in the task of tending it properly. That is, of course, if you wish to have it in the garden at all.”

The hobbit smiled. “When I first arrived, I might have thought not, but now, I believe it will be very pleasant to see. Does it need to be set immediately? I have tea prepared for you and the others.”

“It can wait. Permit me to introduce them....”

“Oh, I think that’s quite unnecessary,” Frodo said cheerfully, placing the potted plants to one side of the porch, then stepping down to the woodland floor to meet the travelers. “Several of those who live hereabouts were familiar with the people you told Ványalos would be returning with you, and their descriptions were so remarkably clear, I believe I would know any of them on sight.

“Let me see,” he said as he drew near to where the last of the visitors had just dismounted, turning from one to the next as he addressed them. “You would be young Master Lére, of course, and Miss Melui, his sister, and the Lady Aránayel. Frodo Baggins, at your service,” he added with a proper hobbitish bow for each of them. “Unless, of course, I have insulted you by confusing your names, in which case I sincerely beg your pardon.”

Melui giggled at his look of feigned concern; Lére, however, blinked, startled. “Why, you *are* no taller than I am!” he exclaimed. “Mithrandir told me so even before we left, but I didn’t really believe him. I thought he was teasing, because I’d said he was short.”

“All a matter of perspective, I imagine, since to me, everyone in this land seems quite impossibly tall, even Mithrandir. Which, no doubt, is why the Big Folk insist on calling us halflings, even though we Hobbits have a perfectly good name for ourselves. I can see you’ve never met one of my people before.”

Both twins shook their heads. “Father did,” Melui said. “He told us about the times he traveled through your country, but he never had a chance to take us there before...” Her expression dimmed. “Well, before we sailed West.”

Frodo’s nod was sympathetic. “I’ve been told the tale of your voyage to Aman, and I’m very sorry about what happened. I was a bit older than both of you when I lost my parents in an accident on the river, but for a time, I thought I would spend the rest of my life alone, among strangers or relatives I scarcely knew.”

The children’s eyes widened. “Mithrandir talked about you during our journey, but he didn’t tell us you’d lost your parents, too,” Lére said. “Was it a long time ago? You don’t look terribly old, but I’m afraid I don’t know how to tell with mortals. You *are* a mortal, aren’t you?”

Frodo laughed, kindly. “My, but I can see you have a lot of questions. I can try to answer some of them for you over tea, if you’d like.” He cast a questioning glance at the three Maiar, not certain if he should proceed if Aránayel was apt to balk at the suggestion.

Fortunately, Ványalos intervened. “Ah, tea! This is a splendid custom of the Little Folk that should not be refused when offered!” he said with great enthusiasm, gesturing broadly to both the twins and Aránayel. “Come, now, I have learned from experience that this is something best appreciated if it is not delayed.”

The children eagerly followed Frodo as the hobbit turned to enter the house; Ványalos went in their wake, but Aránayel did not. "Pleasure should not come before duty," she said, a bit stiffly, as if she disapproved of Ványalos' wish to be off so quickly when Olórin had turned instead to relieve the horses of their burdens. "We should see to the comfort of our steeds, first. They have brought us a long way, without complaint."

"I will attend to it," the Istar assured her quickly, seeing that the very circumstances he had hoped to avoid were in danger of coming to pass. "Ványalos can assist me before sharing whatever is left of tea by the time we are done. You and the children are guests here, and as a member of this household, Frodo is offering welcome in the way of his people. I would not see his traditions ignored when I'm sure he has gone to considerable effort to arrange this, and Ványalos and I know where all the things we have brought are to be taken. Go, enjoy yourself, Aránayel. That is your only duty for the moment, as a guest."

From her expression, she appeared inclined to argue. Frodo noticed it at once, and acted to forestall her. "I would consider it a great honor if you would join us, Lady Aránayel," he said deferentially, but not overly so. "I have heard a good deal about you since the day I arrived in Aman, and I must admit, I have been quite curious."

She favored him with a look that might have been easily called snobbish, but which the hobbit ignored. "To know if the ugly tales are true?"

Frodo smiled as he gestured for her and the twins to follow him into the house. "I am curious to know the truth, yes," he admitted, "but I shouldn't call it ugly. I have heard, for instance, that you sing with a voice second only to the Lady Melian's, and I have heard her from time to time, during my stay here in Lórien, so I know this is a great compliment to you. The folk hereabouts are positively smitten with music, somewhat more, I have noticed, than seems typical of other places in Aman — although I must be honest with you, I have seen very little of the country. I'm afraid I slept a good deal of the time during the ride between here and Valmar, and I've not had much opportunity to travel far since. I'm also very curious about the lands of the North, where you have been living for many years. Is it true that summer never truly comes there, and it's cold all the year 'round...?" His comments and queries seemed but a babble, yet they had the desired effect: Aránayel went with him into the house, and began to answer some of his questions along the way.

When the door had closed and they were well inside, Olórin breathed a sigh of relief, which was echoed by Ványalos. "I told you he was prepared, *pityandil*," the redhead said as they set about taking care of the horses and their gear. "His wits are very quick. She won't get 'round Frodo easily, because he has both your welfare and his own firmly in mind. You were also right to make me stay and help with this. If her things are settled into my house before she even knows where they have been taken, she will have less reason to complain of her lodgings and may even accustom herself to the fact that they will *not* be in your house. Now, if you will only tell me that you had Shadowfax bring you here ahead of us because you have devised a way to tell her this news without inciting her anger and required Frodo's aid...."

“Unfortunately, no,” Olórin grumbled as he removed the packs and tack from the horse Ványalos had borrowed for the trip, while his neighbor set about collecting Aránayel’s things from her steed. “I told you precisely what happened, and if I *had* been inspired with a solution to this problem, I would have bespoken you silently during the ride from Lórellin. The simplest answer to this would be for me surrender my own private corner of this house to her and take up residence in yours until all is resolved. But in the end, that might solve nothing. If her designs are to somehow attach herself to me so as to enhance the opinions of those who have come to look upon me with favor, she would certainly follow — and under your roof, there is more than enough space to shelter half the residents of Lórien.”

Ványalos grimaced. “And even if she did not follow, Frodo and the young ones would be left alone with her, defenseless. Ornedil did not speak so directly, but I am certain that a part of what he fears is that she would seek to be avenged against you by harming the Eruhíni you love, who cannot protect themselves.”

“Helyanwë had much the same concern, though she was worried for my welfare, not the twins’ — yet I fear much more for them, and for Frodo. Besides, prepared though he may be, I cannot abandon him to her mercy, only for the sake of my personal comfort. I told Frodo that he would be welcome in my house for as long as he wished to stay, and that is the same promise I gave to Melui just this morning. I invited her and her brother to return with me before I knew Aránayel was to accompany us, and I cannot go back on my word to any of them simply to spare myself yet another siege of her anger. I will weather the storms of her displeasure, as I have done before. And since I suspect that you and Frodo have arranged for our other neighbors to come this evening and welcome these new guests to the hill country, I sincerely hope that whatever merriment they provide will be enough to lighten Aránayel’s spirits so that when the time comes to inform her of her erroneous assumption, she will look upon it as a mere irritating inconvenience rather than the first strike of open war!”

To be continued....