

# Twice Blessed

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## Chapter XVI

*Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own.*

Those inside the house had settled down to enjoy the refreshment their hosts had prepared; as the day was still fair, many of Turgon's party had moved to the pleasant surroundings of the porch and lawn before the house. With the willing assistance of Ványalos and the twins and even Aránayel, Frodo happily saw to the comfort of the guests, although most showed him great deference, knowing that through him, Sauron's defeat had at last been achieved. When those who had sought quiet on the verandah returned to join the others, Lindarinë was most insistent that Frodo take at least a few moments from his tasks to sit with them. "I see no one here who is not capable of attending their own needs," the sea-elf said as he cajoled the hobbit into taking a seat near the central hearth. "And while I have been told that the halflings are most gracious and generous hosts, I would like to have a chance to show that we of the Elves can be equally gracious and generous guests."

When the hobbit was seated, with a small but curious audience gathered nearby, Lindarinë settled in a chair beside which an oddly shaped cloth-wrapped item had been placed. He lifted the largish thing into his lap, still smiling at Frodo while he carefully undid the cords that fastened the cloth. "I should remind you, Master Baggins, that it was by your request that others persuaded me to return to Lórien. There were other reasons, I grant, but it was yours that began the sequence of events that led me here. I have not forgotten it, and I think now that I am most grateful for it. Something was needed to stir my heart, and while other matters have done so more profoundly since I left Alqualondë, none have touched me in quite the same fashion. For that, I thank you, and offer this gift."

As he pulled aside the now-loosened dark canvas, Frodo was the not the only one to gasp at what was revealed. In his arms, Lindarinë cradled a small lap harp of an Elven style that was distinctly Telerin. It had been carved of polished silver *mallorn* wood; its pillar and neck had been embellished with intriguing designs like the swirling waves of the sea; the sounding board was set with pearl inlay in the shapes of many finely detailed shells, and it had been strung with wires of gleaming silver. Though the colors and designs were different, the work was clearly that of the same artist who had made Olórin's harp. Lindarinë plucked a single chord, and the sweet sound shivered in the air for a long, lovely moment.

A hesitant smile touched Lindarinë's face. "When I was told that you were interested in pursuing an education in music and were in need of some instrument on which you might learn, I knew this was the perfect answer to your need, and I give it to you gladly. This harp was mine when I was quite young," he explained, both to Frodo and the others gathered round them. "It was given to me by Caladar, a woodcrafter of high renown who was the elder brother of my mother, Cualle. His primary work was in shipbuilding, but for pleasure, he made many other things and gifted them wherever he felt they would be most appreciated. It was he who fashioned the harp I gave Olórin many years ago, which I understand he has not forgotten how to play."

As the Maia smiled brightly at his old friend, Frodo remembered the story the wizard had told him about his harp's origins, and the Elf who had seemingly lost the joy of living. Seeing him now, in the flesh and not merely as

described by others, he could sense that Lindarinë still held an air of sadness about him, but that he was at last beginning to understand the need to let it go. Given his own past and its lingering pains, he was glad to see the Elf taking the first steps toward his own healing. “No, he hasn’t,” the halfling agreed, “and your uncle’s handiwork is extremely beautiful. Olórin and Ványalos have both told me of your love of music, and my only thought was that you might be willing to help a poor hobbit by loaning some old castoff you had lying about. I could never hope to repay you for such a gift...!”

Lindarinë’s smile became a bit brighter, less tenuous. “If you learn to use it as well as you are able, that will be payment enough. Olórin paid him no more than that when he was given his own harp, and my uncle wished for nothing more. Caladar made this for me when I was a youth no taller than you, and doubtless less skillful of hand, as children are. I have not used it in many, many years, both because I had moved on to learn other instruments I preferred, and because I lost the heart to make music after the tragedy that struck down so many of my kin. I should like to see this played again and not sit idle, gathering dust; it would please me very much if you used it to learn upon. Knowing its voice is singing once more would bring to mind the fairer days I have too long forgotten, and perhaps help me forget the darkness instead, as you have done. For that is part of why you wished me to come to Lórien, is it not?”

Frodo inclined his head in gracious acceptance of his gentle rebuke. “It is. Forgive me if I presume too much, but I take it your uncle was also lost.”

The sea-elf nodded, sadness again touching his fair face. “Yes, he remains in the Dark Halls, but not because he has been refused release, or has despaired of life. He remains in the hope that he will be allowed to speak to those of my kin who have remained obstinate and will not repent of their evils; so Lord Manwë told me on the day I returned to the living. He did not say that it was a vain hope, so good may yet come of it. But all things happen at their appointed times, especially in the realm of Lord Námo.”

“And did you come today only because you wanted to bring this? Did others have to trick you into seeing us again?”

The unexpectedly bitter questions came from Lére. Helyanwë began to chide him for his rudeness, but Lindarinë stayed her with a touch of his hand. “His questions are not unjust,” the Teler said with regret. He turned to face the boy and his sister. Melui also wore an expression of concern, though she had held her tongue. Lindarinë sighed. “At first, yes, I’m afraid what you say was true. I saw no point in meeting with you again — not because I dislike you, but because I did not think it wise for me to bring children into my house. It is an empty and lonely place, full of the grief and darkness of all the long years I have spent mourning the past, and those who are lost to me. I would have been a cheerless guardian, and I had no wish to make you suffer in my care. Chill and gray as the halls of the Lady Nienna might be, they are warmer and more inviting to those who wish to enjoy life than my home. I thought that by refusing to be your guardian, I would spare all of us considerable unpleasantness.”

“But you never asked if that’s what *we* wanted,” Melui pointed out. “No one ever asked or cared about what we thought, except for Helyanwë, and Mithrandir.”

Puzzlement over the unfamiliar name creased Lindarinë’s brow; Helyanwë provided an answer for the child. “Olórin cares because that is his nature, as he cared for you even before you came to these shores. For myself, I know that I grew more fond of you than perhaps was wise, for I knew that it would be best for you to live among your own people, not mine. But because they did not ask such things in words you could hear does not mean that others were not concerned for your welfare, and your happiness. Lady Nienna is quite fond of you indeed, and has had naught but your good in mind in all she has done for you. Aránayel is not so demonstrative as I, but I cannot believe she had tutored you only because she was commanded to do so.”

When she glanced at the auburn haired Maia, who was standing beside the door to the kitchen, near enough to hear but not so close as to seem intrusive, Aránayel pressed her lips together, as if biting back a response she realized would be taken poorly. She hesitated for a moment, to compose herself, then adopted a more genial expression. "It would not be truthful to say that I would have volunteered my services in this manner," she admitted, her glance flicking from Helyanwë to Olórin before returning to the children. "I have never been close to the children of the Eldar, of any of the kindreds, and I had no experience in instructing them. But it would also be untruthful to say that I have not taken some pleasure from the task. If I have seemed harsh and unfeeling at times, no doubt it has been the result of unfamiliarity, both with you and the work I had been asked to do. I was charged to do what was best for you, but I did not always know what that might be."

"Nor did I," Lindarinë said, his words directed to the twins. "I have lived too long, alone and aloof from others. I did not begin this journey with your welfare in mind, but much has happened along the way to make me reconsider my rash rejection of you, who are my kin. If you are willing to forgive my past rudeness toward you, I will do my best to make a place for you in my heart and in my home."

"In Alqualondë?" Lére asked, frowning. "We don't know anyone in Alqualondë."

"We don't really know anyone in Eldamar," Melui added, wistfully.

Olórin, however, favored them with a compassionate smile. "Ah, but that is not true, Melui. I for one will not forget you, and wherever you live, I shall be more than happy to visit, as often as I may. And am I mistaken, or do you not know Lord Círdan quite well indeed? From what I recall, he was as another father to your mother, after her own father was slain in battle, and from what I saw during my last visits to the Havens, Círdan was as dear as a grandfather to both of you."

Lére blinked, eyes wide. "I didn't know he was here," he admitted. "When did he arrive? Why weren't we told?"

"For the same reasons you did not know Olórin had come West," Helyanwë answered. "He and Círdan came aboard the same ship, during the time when you still were not able to speak or tell us anything of yourself. Even after you were able to tell us of yourselves, Círdan certainly had his own reasons for encouraging Lindarinë to accept the responsibility — but had Lindarinë continued to refuse, Círdan himself would have taken you into his household. He simply felt it best that you have a chance to live with your true blood kin before he made such an offer. Rest assured, he has not forgotten you, and if you come to live with Lindarinë, you will see enough of Círdan to feel as if he is living in the same house. And he will not be the only familiar face you will see in Alqualondë. I myself have grown very fond of both the city and your cousin, and I have asked Lady Nienna's permission to make my dwelling there."

That announcement won immediate reactions of joy from the twins; their squeals of delight won broad smiles from most of the adults, as well as a few wincing. "Will you live close by?" Melui asked when she had contained her excitement enough to speak at a more appropriate volume. "Will we see you as often as we did in Lady Nienna's house?"

"More often, perhaps," Lindarinë said with his own wry grin. "Your governess and I have grown quite dear to each other since my release from the Halls, and if those above us will grant us their blessing, we would like to be wed at the coming festival. It marks the beginning of the new year among the Eldar, and I can think of no more appropriate time to begin a new life with one whom I love, and two whom I hope to love as well."

This new announcement elicited sounds of delight and many words of congratulations from all the older folk gathered round. "That's wonderful!" Frodo said, setting aside the harp and standing to bow to the couple in the hobbit

fashion. “Weddings among my people are some of our happiest occasions. I never expected that such a thing would occur while I was here, and I wish you both all the best.”

“If it is allowed,” Aránayel pointed out, her expression an indecipherable combination of many emotions — mostly negative, it seemed. “As I recall, there was considerable disagreement among the Valar concerning Melian’s joining with one of the Eldar. Had that never occurred, much of the grief that happened in the First Age might have been avoided.”

“Unlikely,” Olórin reflected after offering his own congratulatory embraces to both his friends. “The troubles of the First Age stemmed largely from the actions of Melkor and Fëanor, and both had their roots here in Aman. Had there been no kingdom of Doriath to stand against the darkness, matters would likely have grown worse, not better. Elwë made mistakes, but even they served a purpose, ultimately saving one of the Silmarilli for Eärendil to bear in the heavens and be a light to all of Arda in times of greater darkness. Evil will have been good to have been, as others have said. And there is certainly no evil that can come of this joy.”

Aránayel frowned at Helyanwe. “And do you believe Lady Nienna will free you from her service simply to become the spouse of one of the Children?”

“She already has,” Helyanwe replied, blithely ignoring the scornful undercurrent in the question. “She has known of the affection between us since it first began, and she has always encouraged it. It is not her approval we seek, but that of Lord Manwë. We do not wish to bear children of our own blood; thus, there will be no need to pursue the special conditions Melian required in her marriage to Elwë. We will abide by Lord Manwë’s decision, but whether or not he approves, it will not change our feelings for one another.”

“And you believe that Lord Manwë would set aside thousands of years of custom, and give approval simply because you ask it?”

“I cannot imagine he would refuse to give it!” was Ványalos’ exuberant opinion, completely overwhelming the effects of Aránayel’s bitter remark. “It would be a blessing for many, and could bring only healing, not harm. If Manwë could even imagine refusing, I know my Lord and Lady would intercede, and have him reconsider his decision. There is no greater healing in all the world than love. I now understand why you turned away our help when your life was so dark, old friend,” he said to Lindarinë, grinning impishly as he glanced from the Elf to Helyanwe. “You were waiting for a brighter light, and a greater joy.”

Lindarinë flushed as the Maia embraced him and then Helyanwe, but his smile did not deny that Ványalos spoke the truth. Turgon, grinning broadly, declared that a more proper celebration was in order, an idea that was heartily approved by all.

Or nearly all. While others went to fetch wine to toast the couple, the twins babbled at them with excitement, wanting to know everything they could tell about Alqualondë and Lindarinë’s house and all the people they would meet in Eldamar. While Olórin smiled to see his old friends so happy, and Lindarinë at last comfortable with the notion of fostering his young cousins, behind him, unseen, Aránayel slipped into the shadows of an out of the way corner. Outside the circle of activity and merriment, she watched, her eyes following and measuring everything said and done with frightening intensity. When the news had spread to the other members of Turgon’s party, she remained in her quiet detachment while they came to offer their good wishes and share in the celebration. Before long, word had reached other residents of the hill country, folk who had once been friends and neighbors of Lindarinë, and soon many more were arriving to add their voices to the gladness, happy indeed to see the Elf who had once made his home in Lórien at last returning to a life of joy. Aránayel remained carefully aloof, and when the time came to drink to the health of the couple, she was nowhere to be found.

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As evening approached and the clouds of the currently predictable rain came as heralds to it, there were so many gathered to celebrate the joyful news that Olórin's house could not possibly contain them all. Unwilling to be deprived of such a unique reason to make merry, Mirimë and those of her household brought bright silks to make pavilions in the clearing before the cottage, so that all could gather to give praise for such a wondrous day as it drew to its close, despite the rain. Food and drink was also brought, a feast more lavish than even a Hobbit could have prepared on such short notice, for all wished to make merry on behalf of Lindarinë and Helyanwe and the twins, who surely were looking forward to a joyful life together. The sudden influx of people and bustle of activity flustered Frodo, who had not anticipated such an unexpected throng. Laughing, Olórin said that he reminded him of Bilbo and his reaction to the unexpected party of Dwarves that had descended upon Bag End, long ago. Mention of that incident brought a fond smile to the halfling's face, and a remark from the Istar that this time, it would be wiser if the Baggins of the house did not rush about in an attempt to accommodate so many. Their neighbors had come prepared to arrange their own feast, and were well able to manage on their own, with a little direction from Ványalos, who took delight in overseeing such things. Instead, Olórin drew Frodo aside to the quiet of the verandah, so that they could have a better look at Lindarinë's gift, for which the Maia promised he would provide instruction. The sounds of Frodo's first tentative plucking at the strings roused the interest of the twins and Lindarinë; the former came to admire the beautiful little harp, the latter to tell Frodo more of its history, and its little quirks, which were common to any hand-wrought instrument. Helyanwe had lingered with them for a time, but soon went to meet with other guests and help with the preparations for the evening meal, delighted to see her beloved and his cousins interacting with growing ease, a sign that boded well for their future together.

The hill country had seldom seen a celebration of the evening as lovely as the one that gathered in and about Olórin's house that day, despite the rain. Along with canopies fashioned of Mirimë's beautiful silks were mingled the banners and pavilions of Turgon and his companions, the dark and vibrant colors of Noldorin craft offset by the paler hues of sea and shore that Mirimë had chosen in honor of their Telerin guests, in especial Lindarinë and the twins. Ribbons made in all the colors of the rainbow were used to fasten and decorate the corners of the silken roof and were also woven with many scented flowers, to honor Helyanwe. Lanterns of delicate glass, fashioned by local Elven artisans, were hung inside the pavilions and filled with light by several of the Maiar in attendance, providing ample radiance without the danger of flame to burn the colorful silks. The carpets spread on the damp grass were lush and beautiful, the softer designs of Mirimë and her weavers complementing the bolder patterns of those brought by Turgon's companions. Cushions and low tables were added both to hold the feast and for the comfort of the participants. All was in order before the sunset; without a summons, all began to gather in the pavilions to sing praise for the day and the welcome of the night.

Having promised Frodo that he would find a suitable place to store the little harp, Olórin had remained behind for a few minutes while the Hobbit led their guests outside, to join the others. When the harp was safely in its new home, near the Istar's own instrument, Olórin began to hurry out, thinking the house already empty. As he passed the entrance to the kitchen, however, Ványalos emerged from the shadows and touched his arm to stay him. Olórin did not protest, as he expected his neighbor to ask his help in carrying out some items for the feast, but the only thing the tall redhead bore was a look of profound concern.

"Have you seen Aránayel?" he asked softly, clearly fearing that she might be within earshot, but out of sight. "I did not see her when Lord Turgon bid us drink to the future of our old friends, nor have I seen any trace of her since."

"No, I must confess, my mind was otherwise occupied," Olórin answered, also in subdued tones. "I would say that it seems most unlike her to absent herself from such a large and festive gathering, but then, the circumstances are not what they once were. She came here as a governess to two special children who were the subject of much

concern to the Valar; now, her position has become meaningless, for her charges will go into the care of their cousin, and he will have Helyanwe to help him, as more than a servant in the household. I do not believe she would simply flee, for her dislike of life in the north is genuine, and to run from her duties before being given formal release from them would not reflect well upon her, or her desire to be rid of those duties forever. I suspect she has found a place to be alone, away from this reminder that she is no longer needed here. Have you returned to your own home since our friends made their happy announcement?"

The copper haired head shook. "No, there has been much to do here. Her things are still there, and I told her that the rooms I offered in my home would be hers for as long as she remained in Lórien. You are probably right, she is there sulking, and I am worrying over naught. But as you know Aránayel better than I, I am better acquainted with Ornedil. I cannot believe he would have warned us so strongly if he had not seen or heard something truly worthy of great concern."

"Even the greatest of us sometimes make mistakes. It may be that those of us who knew Aránayel in bygone days have had our vision clouded by mists of the past, and too long a separation. So many years have fled since she was exiled to the north, can any of us who have not seen her in all that time truly know all the ways in which she might have grown and learned from her penance?"

A wry smile twitched at one corner of Ványalos's mouth. "Ah, *pityandil*, you at the very least have not changed. You are able to speak words of great wisdom and great naivete in the same breath. Was that not what led to your first difficulties with Aránayel?"

Olórin's answering smile was also crooked. "Being young and foolish and innocent and ignorant... aye, that was what led me into folly, but I hope that my wisdom at least has grown greater in the ages since. I have no illusion that she is a wholly different person, for I have seen enough during this past week to know that much of the pride and anger that she turned on me long ago is still there. But I have also seen that she is making a greater effort to temper it, and that should not be ignored. Whatever means she is using, she is attempting to win her freedom from a long and overly harsh sentence, and I think she is at last coming to realize that bitterness and anger will only win her a continuation of her exile. I cannot say if this new understanding is strong enough to win out over her bitterness, and her sincerity is certainly subject to doubt, but I will not judge her until I have seen more conclusive proof."

Ványalos snorted softly. "Then you would not mind if she took it into her head to seduce you? That would certainly be proof of a great change in her attitude!"

But the Istar dismissed that with a wave of one hand. "Only her methods, I fear, not her attitude. Although she has been very solicitous toward me ever since she realized that my status among our people had changed for what she considers the better, there is no true affection toward me involved in her schemes and posturing. I believe she knows that I am aware of this."

"Perhaps," Ványalos allowed, without much conviction. "I know it is not in your nature to harbor unreasonable suspicion against any, even your enemies, yet I still cannot disregard the warnings of Ornedil. I am not as wise as you, Olórin, but my heart tells me that Aránayel is still a danger to you. Please, beware."

The fairer Maia smiled earnestly. "I have never doubted your heart, my old friend, and I owe too much to you for the healing of my own to disregard your advice. I will be careful, I promise. Now let us join the others before we offend our honored guests by causing them to harbor notions that we have disdained the celebration."

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Frodo had indeed begun to wonder where the two neighbors had gone when the other visitors began to gather to sing their thanks for the day. Despite the light rain, the hobbit could almost see the beauty of the sunsets of Aman in the colorful silks raised as their roof, glowing in the light of many lamps. He was about to return to the cottage when he saw the two Maiar heading out the front door, unbothered by the thickening mists of the evening. The Elves had just begun their song in their usual manner when the pair joined their guests. Aware of the reason Ványalos had remained behind, Frodo glanced at him, a question in his gaze, but he received no more than an indefinite shrug in reply. Olórin, however, was smiling quite serenely; thus, the hobbit could only suppose that he had not been troubled by anything Ványalos had mentioned of his concerns. When the assembled Maiar began their portion of the daily benediction, both Olórin and Ványalos raised their voices without hesitation...

...until they reached a passage in which the melody rose to a higher pitch, and a single voice soared to much greater heights, lifting up a descant of such intense and ethereal beauty, many of the other voices faltered in surprise. Even those that did not turn to see the source of such wondrous sound, as did Frodo and the gathered Elves. The hobbit gasped to see that Aránayel had arrived and had for once joined in the singing, but in such a fashion that no one could have failed to notice her magnificent voice. She had emerged from the cottage shielded beneath a large shawl of plain gray fabric; once under the protection of the canopies, she let it fall aside, to reveal how she had carefully arrayed herself in elegant splendor to equal that of her voice. Though Frodo had already perceived that she was fastidious, it was plain that this evening, she had prepared herself to make an impression upon any and all who laid eyes upon her. Every aspect of her appearance had been arranged to take the greatest advantage of her every feature, so that none could look upon her and not admire her beauty, as the timing of her entrance drew the greatest attention to her singing.

After the first few moments of surprise had passed, neither of these things went unnoticed by Frodo, whose dealings with pretentious persons such as Lobelia Sackville-Baggins had long ago sharpened his perception for deliberate artifice. Yet he was not as certain of Aránayel's motives as he had been of Lobelia's. Was it her intent to take advantage of such an unusually large audience to impress them with herself and the ways in which she had changed? Had she been offended by the way in which everyone's attention had suddenly focused on the twins and their new guardians, and was determined to win back her share of their notice? Did she have some even less obvious but potentially more nefarious goal in mind?

Frodo did not know, but when he looked to Olórin, seeking some sort of answer to this puzzle, he was struck by the strange expression on his face, and the fact that his skin had paled almost to the color of his white-blond hair. His eyes held more than a suggestion of panic; they were filled with reflected memories, of times that could not be recalled without pain. And seeing this, Frodo suddenly understood. Aránayel had looked as she did now once before, on a day Olórin did not remember with fondness. Then, he had been the one who asked and the one who was rejected, and now, it appeared that history was about to repeat itself, in reverse.

Frodo winced. In spite of the rain, he had been looking forward to the feast, but now, it seemed as if storm clouds were rolling in, boding ill for the evening ahead.

*To be continued....*