

Twice Blessed

© 2002 Mary Jean Holmes
disclaimers in Part One

Chapter IX

*Trees are the earth's endless effort
to speak to the listening heaven.*

Fortunately, the twins had not been overly upset by the brief but fairly explosive exchange between the two Maiar, and were actually more concerned that Olórin had spent a needlessly uncomfortable night out in the rain due to Aránayel's fit of pique. Discovering that he was neither discomfited nor still upset by the altercation restored their spirits considerably, as did a decent breakfast under sunny morning skies on a day much warmer than the one before. Aránayel's mood was withdrawn; she did not mention events of the previous night, but neither did she make any effort to engage her companions in conversation. Whether she was sulking, brooding, or reflecting upon what she had been told was not clear to Olórin, although he privately wagered it was the first. As she did not hinder their preparations for departure and did, in fact, offer some assistance, he said nothing, and was certain she preferred it that way.

At midday, they stopped so that the horses could rest and graze for a bit while the children had their noon meal, followed by lessons with Aránayel. Melui resigned herself to their studies, but Léré was less pleased by it, having thought that they would be given a respite from them during their journey to Lórien. Olórin did not interfere, and was in truth glad that Aránayel was not shirking her duties. He could not tell if her diligence was a reflection of how she had changed over the years, or if she was attempting to prove to him that she had not spent that time idly, doing meaningless or ignoble tasks as part of her punishment while he was sent off upon missions of a more noteworthy sort. He actually hoped it was the latter, for if she was willing to make an effort to defend her pride and her honor, then perhaps she might also be willing to behave less irritably and make the remainder of their trek less unpleasant. The lessons did not continue too long for Léré's patience to endure, and they continued on.

As evening drew nigh, they began to search for a suitable place to make camp. Melui was puzzled that the wizard was looking for a spot on the open plain; now that they were much farther inland and away from the river they had been following, a forest had become visible ahead of them, to the south and east. "Wouldn't it be better to find shelter in the woods, if it's going to rain again tonight?" the girl asked. "Father said that trees are always kind to our people, because they know we care for them. It's not much farther to the forest, and I know there aren't dangerous wild creatures here, like there were in Middle-earth."

“That is true,” Olórin agreed, “and I would not hesitate to seek shelter there for the night, were it possible. The forest may seem to be very close, but I assure you, it is not. That is the woodland of the Lady Yavanna, and nowhere in all of Arda do the trees grow taller and more gladly. Even if we were to ride as swiftly as our horses could carry us, we could not reach so much as its outermost eaves before the night is gone. If we rise with the sun and ride on at a better pace, we will arrive there tomorrow at dusk, and then you will see the trick your eyes are playing upon you now.”

Lére frowned, squinting as he gazed at the distant woodland. “I can’t see any trick,” he said after a moment. “I can tell one bird from another half a league away, and I’m *never* wrong.”

His sister made a spluttering noise, having already accepted the wizard’s explanation. “Oh, don’t lie, Lére, you’ve been wrong plenty of times. And I remember the mountains we saw as we approached Aman, before everything went wrong and the ship was wrecked. They looked very close from very far away because they were so terribly big, and even you thought they were nearer than they really were. You said so the last time we went to Valmar, for the spring festival. This is the same sort of thing, isn’t it, Mithrandir?”

“The very same,” he confirmed. “But it is no fault of you or your eyesight that makes the Pelóri or the forest seem so near from afar, Lére,” he added when the boy scowled at his twin. “Many who sailed West with me last autumn made the same mistake simply because they had never seen such a thing before. When we reach Lórien, ask my friend Frodo what he thought of the Pelóri when he first saw them, and also ask Glorfindel, if you should chance to meet him while you are there.”

Lére blinked, all traces of his frown vanishing. “Is that the same Glorfindel we’ve heard songs and stories about, the one who slew a Balrog? I should like to meet him. He must be the bravest warrior of all Elves, if he could kill such a terrible creature all by himself!”

Olórin laughed brightly. “Perhaps he is, though sometimes, managing such an impossible feat requires more desperation than courage.” He said no more than that, having at last spotted a good site for them to settle for the night, a nicely flat grassy sward near a grove of flowering trees and shrubs that had sprung up beside a small and clear stream that sang cheerfully as it ran its swift course.

When they had dismounted and removed the horses’ packs and tack so they could refresh themselves, the twins once more went off in search of wood for the evening fire. To their surprise as well as Olórin’s, Aránayel had volunteered to help set up the shelter, a task she had disdained the previous day. The Istar briefly wondered if she had been thinking of some scathing rebuttal to the things he had said the night before, and wanted an opportunity to deliver it without the children about to hear it. Yet when they were gone, she merely did what was required to erect the tent, and for a long time said nothing. When at last she spoke, her words were not cruel or harsh.

“Why did you not tell them of your own encounter with a Balrog?” she wondered, the question more genuinely puzzled than Olórin could have anticipated. “I have heard the tale often enough, and from sources I do not believe would lie or exaggerate. You did the very thing Glorfindel did, and under

more trying circumstances, for he was not denied the use of all his abilities, and you were limited to little more than that of an old mortal man — and considerably more hung in the balance in Moria. Why do you not take credit for your own deeds when the praise of them is merited?”

“Because it is not in my nature,” he answered, sighing. “Have you never understood this about me, Aránayel? Certainly, I am pleased to know that what I do is appreciated by others, and I feel the warmth of praise and kind words as would anyone. But I do not seek them out; that reward is not what moves me to any deed. I desire only the happiness and well-being of others, not my own glory. It was not bravery that made me stand against the Balrog of Moria, but concern for the lives of those with me, who could not have hoped to even flee from it unless something gave them enough time to escape. I would rather have run with them, but if I had, I would have placed my own safety above theirs, and all of Middle-earth’s. I was sent to Endor as a servant of both the Valar and the Eruhíni whose world it is, and had I done aught but what I did, I would have failed utterly in that mission, though my own life be spared. So I fought the Balrog to give the others time to escape and continue what was more important, and though it was a worthy deed, it was the only thing I could do in clear conscience, and keep faith with both my friends and those who had sent me. But I know only that when I fought him, I felt naught but relentless determination, that this danger should trouble Middle-earth no longer. Perhaps that is indeed what is called courage, but in hindsight, it seems to me that if it is, bravery is no more than doing what must be done, regardless of the cost to one’s self. Regardless, I did not do it for the sake of reverence and glory, and thus I have no desire for it now. It is reward enough to know that what I did allowed the quest to continue, and that Lord Eru judged me worthy to continue my task to its end, even after my mortal body had been slain.”

“So you consider being given even more work to do a reward?” Aránayel made an impolite sound. “I should consider it a punishment!”

Olórin chuckled very softly, shaking his head. “Then you do *not* understand me at all. It would have been far more painful to me to be forbidden to finish what I had started, to sit idle in Aman or even in the Timeless Halls while those whom I had tried to help and guide struggled on against ever increasing odds, and eventually foundered and failed. Had I not returned when I did, Curumo would have had his way in Rohan. Théoden and his people would have been destroyed, no help would have come to the aid of Gondor in its time of greatest need. The Ents, perhaps, might have yet stormed Isengard, but could even they have stood against the armies of Saruman, had they not been engaged elsewhere in battle with the Rohirrim? Ah, I see I am boring you with talk of places and policies with which you are unfamiliar. Suffice it to say, then, that there was indeed a reason for me to return, and I did not look upon it as punishment. To me, it was a gift to be given a second chance, and in no way do I regret it. Lord Manwë commanded me to go to Endor as one of the Istari, but when I might have come home and stayed, thus avoiding the most desperate hours of the war, it was *I* who chose to return. Lord Eru saw fit to grant my desire, and that is all the reward I could have wanted.”

“He gave you more than that,” she said softly, in an oddly uninterpretable tone.

The wizard blinked, much as Lére had earlier, comprehension dawning as he followed the movement of her eyes. “Does this disturb you?” he asked, touching the thin band of crystal about his head. “It was not a prize Lord Eru gave me, Aránayel, but a crutch. A very beautiful one, I grant, yet a crutch nonetheless. If one of the Eldar had come to you with a broken arm and you gave him a splint to support the bone until it was healed, would that mean you had given him your special favor, or a mark of your approval for what he had done?”

“No,” she answered, still quietly, “but a splint is not a thing of such beauty, nor is it fashioned in the shape of something that has meaning as a symbol of rank and honor. He could have easily made this crutch to resemble some other object of less import, and it would have been sufficient for your need. He chose this appearance for a reason, and I think there is little doubt of what that reason might be. He *does* approve of you, and you *are* in His favor, and He made this gift that you must wear in such a fashion so that others will also know of His approval. And it was your choice to continue to wear it, when He might have rendered it unnecessary.”

Olórin suddenly saw why she was so disturbed by it. “Do you think I refused His offer to heal me swiftly only so that I might have an excuse to flaunt the gift He had given me?”

Her eyes slid toward him in a piercing sidelong glance. “And what other reasons would you have?”

“Those of which I spoke last evening. Oh, Aránayel, the *last* thing I wished to gain from this is the attention and admiration of others! If you cannot believe me, ask those who know me once we arrive in Lórien. I did my best to try to *hide* this thing after I realized it was necessary for me to wear it, and finally gave up only because the more I tried, the more obvious it became. I wear it not because I look upon it as a badge of Lord Eru’s favor that others can see and admire, but because He commanded me to do so for my own welfare. The knowledge that it came from His hands also aids me, for it allows me to feel closer to Him every moment I wear it. I admit that I am glad to know that He looks upon me with favor rather than with disappointment, for I often feel that I have done much to merit the latter, but in no way do I believe that He holds me in any higher regard than He does all His children. I would take it off if the sight of it offends you, so that we might be more at ease during the remainder of our journey, but I cannot. I am not yet healed enough to sustain myself for long without it upon me. But if its presence is an annoyance to you, I *am* sorry. There is nothing that can be done for it, and I would remedy the situation, if I could.”

A half-smile tugged at one corner of his mouth as a possible solution occurred to him. “Perhaps when we have reached the halls of Lady Yavanna, I can ask if she has something appropriate I might borrow to cover my head so you might avoid further discomfort. There is nothing to spare among our gear to refashion for such a purpose, but she may be willing to supply what is needed.”

She grumbled as she returned to the task of lashing a corner of the canvas shelter to a stake that would hold it secure through the night. “You are mocking me,” she sniffed, very nearly pouting.

“Not at all,” she was readily assured. “It’s something I had already considered weeks ago, since my other efforts at concealment met with unqualified failure. I grew accustomed to wearing such things in Middle-earth by necessity; it would not trouble me to do so again, for a time. Although I suppose that if my failed attempts at concealment were the result of Lord Eru’s wish that His gift be seen, I would find that no hat or hood would stay for long upon my head!”

She did not answer, and for the remainder of the evening, she seemed unusually introspective. Olórin had no idea what was going through her thoughts, and he was not about to pry, either openly or surreptitiously. That there was no cause for a repeat performance of yesterday’s argument was enough, and he saw no reason to question that good fortune. There was also no need for him to leave the tent for the night, which pleased the twins and encouraged them to settle down to sleep earlier than they might have had they been upset. Since they were to make an early start the next morning, that was also for the good.

Around mid-afternoon of the following day, they finally drew close enough to the seemingly ever-distant and ever-near forest for the illusion to at last fail, even to young Elvish eyes. As it did so, Léré’s skepticism quickly vanished as his awe grew. As in the east of Aman, the mountains of the Pelóri soared into the heavens to an incredible height almost too great for the minds of the Eruhíni to conceive, here farther west, between the shores of Nienna’s home and the more central lands of Lórien, Yavanna’s forest grew in stately magnificence, a vast wall of living things that reached as high as the low clouds that scuttled across the midday skies. Far to the south, Oromë’s woodlands spread over a much wider range, but no trees in Valinor grew greater than those tended by Yavanna Kementári, the queen of the earth. She did not make her sole residence here, for she shared a home with her husband Aulë both in Valmar and in the mountains where the Smith did much of his work. Yet she came to this forest often, to instruct her servants and to attend her beloved *kelvar* and *olvar*. When the specific route between Nienna’s house and Lórien had been planned, an overnight stop in this great woodland had been chosen both so that the twins might see their spectacular beauty, and also because Yavanna was currently in residence, and would be delighted to have two youngsters descended of the Elves of Lothlórien as her guests.

The children were indeed suitably impressed as they rode ever closer to the forest. Early in the afternoon, following their midday meal, they came to the first true road they had seen upon their journey, not a heavily paved thoroughfare of the great cities, but a broad, flat, and clear byway of well-packed earth that led directly into the heart of the wood. As they at last approached the forest itself, they saw other riders and travelers headed in the opposite direction, who greeted them cheerfully as they passed by on foot or on horseback. Many of those who hailed them were Elves, but of a kind that seemed oddly unfamiliar to the twins, neither like the folk of Lórien nor of Lindon. When the children asked about them, to their surprise — and Olórin’s — it was Aránayel who provided the answer.

“They are Silvan Elves,” she said. “Elves of the woodlands of Endor, akin to the Eldar yet not the same. I am told that as a rule, they do not have the longing to leave their homes and sail into the

West, yet should they be slain, their spirits come to the Halls of Mandos as do all of Elven-kind. Some who wish to be freed are permitted to leave the Halls, but they are not allowed to return to Endor, and so they seek places in Aman where they feel they can belong. I have noticed in my work with Lord Námo and Lady Nienna that of those who do leave the Halls of Waiting, many prefer the deepest woodlands as their home in the Blessed Realm, and Lady Yavanna and Lord Oromë are willing hosts to them, for they love the trees of their own realms as dearly as these Elves who lived among the forests of Endor.”

Melui peered at the thick woodland ahead, up at the towering trees and into the shadows beneath the canopy of branches. The sun was nearing the western horizon, and though the face of the forest was still lit by the last rays peeking through the thickening clouds to the west, the shade was growing ever deeper. “I think trees are very beautiful,” she said, “but I shouldn’t want to live in such a dark place all the time. The forest seems very gloomy, not bright like the woods of Lothlórien, as Father described it to us.”

“Many things appear quite different, depending on when and how they are seen,” Olórin reminded her, “just as this forest did not seem uninviting to you yesterday, when you saw it only at a distance. Wait, and perhaps you will discover that what seems intimidating from afar is more amiable than you suspect.”

Behind the clouds, the sun began to set and light rain started to fall just as the four riders passed beneath the outermost edges of the forest canopy. Though the trees at the very fringes appeared of ordinary size, those not far beyond them soared to immense height, their woven branches so thick, the world below seemed a great cavern, through which no rain could fall. Light came from many sources, dwellings and halls both on the ground and in the trees. In its glow they could see that while some of the trees had bark as smooth as glass, others were unusually textured. Their outerskin rose to form deep channels that stretched from the uppermost branches down to the very roots, thus providing a path for the rains to reach the forest floor and nourish all the growing things that needed its moisture to thrive, while preventing the rain from falling upon the people who dwelt in the sheltered land below.

Yet for all that the branches and leaves high above created a great protective roof, that which it covered was not barren, its life choked out by darkness. Many plants there were, not only the trees but lush grasses, thickets of flowering shrubs, beds of fragrant herbs, climbing vines that twisted about the taller growth and bore shining blossoms of soft colors that hung like living lanterns, casting their pale radiance throughout the woodland. Paths of smooth stone had been cleverly laid to give easy passage to both visitors and residents without harming the beautiful flora. Lesser *kelvar* made their homes both high in the forest and on its floor, while the Elves and Maiar who made this place their home had dwellings very much like Olórin’s home in Lórien, which seemed to have grown from the earth itself. Lére and Melui drank in the sights, wide-eyed and so struck by awe, they could not ask questions about all they beheld. It was nothing like their father’s tales of Lothlórien, and they looked upon it with surprise and wonder.

At length, the road took them to the greatest tree of all, whose roots began far above the ground as a tremendous tangle of woody cords, each thicker than the body of a full grown man. They twined in what seemed like a randomly artful manner, but they shaped the walls of a great house, in which light shone brightly like the cheer of spring sunshine after a long, dark winter. Here, a thick root rose up like a steadfast pillar, offering staunch support; there, another arched gracefully, forming a doorway of unique artistry; there two or three more slender roots wove about in a shapely dance and formed a window, small and subtle or wide and glorious. An entire phalanx lay one upon the other and formed broad steps leading to the entrance of the great house, their bark covered by soft green moss, the balustrade formed by a more intricate and delicate lattice of root tendrils. An arbor of woven roots arched above the stairway, graced with vines of many sorts, some full of long and glossy leaves, others sprouting a tangle of smaller vines lush with soft mossy fronds; some were laden with fruit, others bore glowing clustered blossoms like lanterns that softly lit the path below. The newcomers came to halt at the foot of the stairs and there dismounted; as they did so, others came to greet them and see to the disposition of their horses and their things. At the landing at the top of the stairs, two tall figures waited; one beckoned them with a gesture. Though the twins were still wide-eyed with wonder, and Aránayel viewed the invitation warily, Olórin smiled in answer and bade the children come as he started up the stairs.

As they neared the top, the couple awaiting them stepped forward, and were more clearly seen. The pale light was brighter here, and they themselves had a golden sheen about them, like a forest in autumn, a meadow of flowers in the summer's heat, or well burnished gold. The lady was tall and slim but not fragile, strong as an ancient tree that has weathered countless storms; she was clad in a gown of rich green and deep earthy browns, her plaited hair shimmering with red and gold, graced with fragrant white blossoms. Her deep green eyes shone like beryls, and touched each of their guests with a glance that missed nothing. Beside her, the lord stood like a pillar of ruddy stone, taller than the lady and much broader. He was a figure of great power, but that of a craftsman, not a warrior; beneath his bronze skin lay the sinews with the strength to shape the very bones of Arda, and he covered that power with simple garb the color of deep red wine. His only adornment was an intricate belt fashioned of all the metals and jewels of the earth. His gleaming black hair was pulled back from his face in a serviceable fashion, as his beard was cropped short so as not to be a hindrance in his work. His dark eyes were bright and intelligent, though not shrewdly piercing in their gaze. He smiled readily upon all their guests as the newcomers joined them at the top of the staircase and paid their respects to their hosts after their own customs.

The lady then smiled openly. "I see you are as punctual as ever, Olórin," she said, a soft chuckle, in her mellow voice as she accepted their gestures of welcome and deference. "I was told that you and your party would arrive shortly after dusk, and here you are before the last light of the sun has faded. I have long suspected that those rare occasions on which you were late came by design rather than by accident."

The wizard inclined his head in such a way that one could not tell if it was mere acknowledgment of the remark or admission of its truth. "I am well aware of your preference in such matters, Lady Yavanna, and as we were to presume upon your hospitality to provide lodging for the night, I felt it best

to arrive in an appropriately timely fashion. I had been told you were in residence, but not that Lord Aulë was here as well." He nodded to the Smith in polite, if mildly puzzled, greeting.

Aulë's smile broadened. "I myself did not know that I would be here, until this morning," he admitted genially. His voice was much deeper than the wizard's, if somewhat less melodious, similar to the voices of the Dwarves. "I have been in my halls in the deep mountains for some while, and I had had it in mind to come here for midsummer, to enjoy the realm of growing things above the earth for a time. Midyear is yet some weeks away, but I decided to come early, both to see my wife again, and to be here when you and your companions arrived. It has occurred to me," he added with some chagrin, "that we have not properly offered our personal apologies to you, Olórin, for the failure of our servants who were sent as part of your Istari brotherhood. I know," he continued swiftly, brushing aside the wizard's imminent response with a friendly wave of one hand, "you will say as ever that none are needed, but this is more for my sake than for yours, I fear. Not only did Curumo fail most egregiously in his leadership, if not for the wickedness of one who had once been of my own people, who learned from me the very arts that enabled him to forge his dreadful Ring, none of you would have been required to undertake that mission at all."

Yavanna agreed, her own smile turned wistful. "And I bear my own share of regret for the acts of Aiwendil, who abandoned his greater mission at the worst possible time, and left you with no help whatsoever in your darkest hours. We cannot make reparations for what is in the past, but we can offer you the hospitality of my house in a befitting fashion, if only for this one night. A feast has been prepared, to welcome your companions who have never visited this land, and to honor you for that which you have done for the sake of all Arda, and were made to endure because of the faithlessness of our servants."

Although the children were delighted by the prospect of a feast after days of long riding and trail rations, it was difficult to tell which of the two Maiar was more shocked by the announcement. Olórin tried to speak and found his throat too dry to make sound; he swallowed fitfully for a moment, then tried again. "My lady, I am truly flattered, but there is no need for either of you to feel any remorse over paths Curumo and Aiwendil chose of their own free wills. I had thought any fuss over this particular matter to be done with months ago, when I was at last healed of the injuries I had suffered from my life as a mortal. Had I merely fallen ill to no good purpose, perhaps then you might have some cause to continue to feel remorse, but such is not the case. I will gladly share what hospitality you have prepared for all of us, but I have earned no more than that."

"Rubbish," Aulë said succinctly, even as he laughed. "Ah, Olórin, whatever befell you these past two thousand years and however you might have grown from your experiences, you remain unchanged in one thing: you are the most obstinate Maia in existence. Yavanna, perhaps, has no call to ask your forgiveness, for she did not question the truth of what you reported to us before you were sent back after your struggle with the Balrog to finish the task you and your brother wizards should have completed together. I *did*, and I confess that my questions were initially asked out of pride, my own unwillingness to believe yet another of my servants had fallen into Shadow and betrayed his own people. I knew that it would not sit well with you to be offered such apologies at a more public event, such as one of the

festivals, so I offer them here, in the privacy of my lady's house. If you truly cannot bear the honor we offer you, then of course you may refuse it, but I admit that I had hoped you would accept so that I might at last feel unburdened of the guilt I bore after I recognized and accepted the truth of what Curumo had done. A selfish reason, perhaps, and unworthy of one of my supposedly exalted station, but there it is."

His remorse was genuine, as were his words, and Olórin had not the heart to gainsay him. In fact, as he listened to the Smith's earnest explanation, he could not help but recall the discomfort between himself and his own master, awakening a sudden and unanticipated realization: During the days after Moria in which he had returned to Aman, placed there by Eru Himself so that the Valar would know that the choice to return was Olórin's own, he had neither seen nor heard from Manwë. The king of the Valar did not often travel from his home atop Taniquetil, yet on the fateful day in which they had taken counsel to select those who would become the Istari, Manwë had come to Valmar, and had made the ill-chosen decision to order Olórin to go as his emissary, disregarding the counsel of Eru Himself. And when at last his servant had been given a chance to remain home and let others bear the burden of the final fate of Middle-earth, when the wizard had chosen to return even though many of the Valar felt he should stay, Manwë had not been there; indeed, he had said nothing. Varda had stood in his place, or so he had presumed, and until just now, when Aulë reminded him of that council and the way in which the Smith had questioned Olórin's judgement concerning Saruman's treachery, the wizard had thought nothing of Manwë's absence. At the time, he had been focused completely on his need to return to Endor and finish his tasks. But as he listened now, he felt the sting of injustice, and realized that it sprang not from anything Aulë had done on that day over three years ago, but from what Manwë had not.

He was attempting to determine the reasons why such a thing caused him to react thus when he was interrupted by Yavanna's gentle laughter. "If my husband's unusual eloquence has left you totally speechless, then may we presume that you have agreed to accept our hospitality?"

The amused remark startled Olórin out of his thoughts and prompted a more suitable response. "Yes, my lady, of course. I beg your pardon, and Lord Aulë's, if I have seemed ungrateful, and ungracious. I have never sought renown for the tasks I undertake, yet it would appear that this time, I shall not be able to avoid it in any way. Which is doubtless a new lesson in humility Lord Eru has set for me: to understand better when it is time to accept honor, and not carry modesty so far that it becomes vanity itself."

"A wise observation," Aulë agreed, raising one arm to encourage the children to come forward. "Let us then go and see what the servants and friends of our household have prepared for us."

The halls within were no less marvelous than the forest without. Above them, the living wood of the great tree arched in a high vaulted roof; the shadows in those hollows were lit by cleverly wrought lamps suspended from the tendrils of woody vines. The wooden walls shone with the gloss of good health, as did the smooth floors. Curtains and hangings and carpets were woven of delicate leaves and

petals that did not decay; all about them pulsed with life, the beauty and vigor of the wild forest. The lord and lady led the way to a large chamber at the center. Here, all had indeed been prepared for a feast, furnishings of wood and stone arranged in a broad circle, with a high table clearly meant for the lord and lady and other important guests on a raised area opposite the main entrance, a vantage from which one could see all within the hall. Garlands of twined ivy and trailing flowers adorned the tables and chairs, while the floors had been liberally strewn with pungent herbs and sweet-smelling blossoms. The tables were set with fine utensils of gold and silver, plates of polished stone, goblets of clear crystal; lamps of many colors cast a festive light upon all.

Others were entering the hall even as they arrived, taking their places at the lesser tables and awaiting the pleasure of the lord and lady before they were seated. Olórin did not come to this part of Aman often enough to know the Eldar population, which shifted far more often than that of the Ainur; thus he did not recognize the Elves he saw who were there as Yavanna's guests. But he did know many of the Maiar, people of the Lady who had been in her service since their beginnings in Arda, and had served her faithfully. He graciously acknowledged their nods of greeting as he followed their mistress. He knew some of these folk well, if not as intimately as the servants of Manwë and Irmo and Nienna, and one he recognized with faint discomfort. The Maia who had elicited that reaction was tall and thin, and bore a strong resemblance to Aiwendil — not surprisingly, for he was the brown Istar's younger brother, Ornedil, a worthy servant of Yavanna who bore great love for the trees of Arda, but had not been quite as knowledgeable of other matters as his sibling. There was no anger in his expression as he silently greeted the wizard, but there was nonetheless sadness in his dark eyes.

Fortunately, there was no opportunity for them to converse, as Olórin did not yet know what he might say to him. He had been on friendly terms with both brothers before he and the elder had been chosen for the mission to Endor, and he certainly bore no ill will toward Aiwendil. He knew only too well how difficult it had been to maintain a balance between involvement with the affairs of Middle-earth and the distance that would allow him to retain his sense of self, as a Maia and not a mortal. How he had managed to succeed while Aiwendil failed was something of a mystery to him, for he had loved the inhabitants of Middle-earth no less deeply than Radagast had loved its birds and beasts. Ornedil, he was certain, would not hold him accountable for what had become of his brother, but it seemed to Olórin that it would be unwise to begin a celebration by stirring too many memories of such sadness.

It was difficult to tell if Aulë also grasped this, for the Smith was generally not so perceptive of the feelings of those around him, but regardless, the timing of his next comment was gratifyingly opportune, even though it was directed to the twins. "It has occurred to us that you might prefer to spend the meal in the company of your own people, since we have been told that you have spent much of the past five years in the company of ours. As you are our guests, it would be customary for you to be seated with us, but we will leave this choice to your discretion."

Lére gaped up at the Smith, still as much in awe of him as they had been of the great trees; Melui nudged him to prompt him to close his mouth even as she replied. "Oh, no, we wouldn't mind sitting with you at all. We only met a Dwarf once before we left Middle-earth, and he said all of his people are

like you, because you made them. Lére's been wanting to see just how much you're really like a Dwarf, but we never had a chance to see you this close at the festivals in Valmar."

Her brother quite promptly turned a vivid red and elbowed the girl hard to shush her, but Aulë laughed, a great booming sound that was cheerful, not chagrined. "My pride was great in attempting to fashion a people of my own, I do admit that, little ones, but even I was not so proud as to try to make them in my own likeness. But if you wish, I will tell you what I can of them, for I have tried to look after them as best I might, since Eru Ilúvatar adopted them. Not many in Aman are interested in such tales, and it would please me to share them with you."

As the Smith lengthened his stride and moved on to show the youngsters to the places that had been prepared for them, Olórin suddenly slowed his own pace. Yavanna noted his hesitance, asking after its cause with a curious glance. *I am not attempting to refuse your kindness*, he whispered to her through the speech of their thoughts, so that they might converse quickly, and none would overhear. *But before we sit down to these festivities, I must ask, my lady, how Ornedil has taken the news of what befell his brother. I have had no chance to speak with him since my return to Aman, and I fear I would make a very poor celebrant if I knew, or suspected, that I was breaking bread with someone to whom I might represent a cause for great sorrow, not celebration. I do not wish to tarnish the honor you offer me by being a needlessly somber guest.*

Yavanna smiled sympathetically, understanding his reticence. *He mourns what he has lost*, she answered in that same swift and private manner, *but perhaps not in the fashion you may think. Ornedil would not have opposed me openly, but I know well enough that he never favored the idea of sending his brother to Endor as one of the Istari. Much as he loved Aiwendil, he feared for his safety in the mortal lands, for he knew, perhaps better than I, how his brother could become too involved with the task at hand and wholly lose sight of greater issues. Yet Aiwendil was also the most learned of my servants in understanding the ways of both the kelvar and olvar, and he shared my concern that those in Endor might suffer terrible harm in the potential conflicts to come if no one dedicated to their interests was sent to look after their welfare. He wished to go as much as I wished for him to go, and perhaps in our mutual eagerness, we did not consider well enough whether or not it was wise for him to go. Ornedil offered his counsel, but Aiwendil was determined, and I fear I did naught to discourage him, for I remembered too well how that part of Arda which is under my care suffered during the ages before. Aiwendil chose this task entirely of his own free will, and in the end he fell as others of my people had fallen before him, becoming enamored of that region of Endor which they loved best, and turning their back upon the rest. Ornedil bears no ill will toward you because his brother would not listen, and while he is saddened by what happened, he has not yet surrendered to grief. For although there are those among the Valar who have said that Aiwendil is lost to us, he who is his closest kin still believes that he might one day remember who he is and from whence he came, and return to us.*

Her smile brightened. *Indeed, I asked Ornedil to come this evening because one of your many gifts which you share most freely with others is that of hope, and he knows it well. What was Aiwendil's mood, when last you saw him? Was he in despair, or sorrowful?*

The wizard shook his head ever so slightly. *No, not at all. In fact, he was quite happy, since the end of Sauron's threat had lifted the shadow from many places and creatures he held dear, and he was glad to see them*

able to thrive freely once again. He did not remember what he had been here in Aman before he became Radagast the Brown, nor could I stir those memories for him, but he was in good spirits, and eager to go about his work in Middle-earth.

Then Ornedil will be pleased to hear this, and know that perhaps there is indeed reason for him to continue to hope for his brother's sake. So there is no cause for you to be somber, Olórin. Let this be a time of joy, and it will lift the spirits of many, myself and my lord not the least.

It was with a considerable — and quite genuine — sense of relief that Olórin accepted her encouragement, and complied when she motioned for him to precede her, to join Aulë and the twins at their table. Yavanna began to follow the Istar, then herself hesitated, to glance back over one shoulder. “Aránayel, come,” she said aloud to the Maia woman, who had been several paces behind them and had not noticed more than a brief moment of hesitance when they had paused to exchange their thoughts. There was a distinct reluctance in her step, as if she were loathe to move a step nearer to the high table. “There is no need for you to hang back so. A place at our table has been prepared for you as well.”

The auburn-haired Maia's eyes widened with surprise. “My lady, I am not of your people, nor of the First-born who dwell here. I freely admit that I know little of you, nor have I made the acquaintance of the Lord Aulë. I expect no special treatment in your house. I have been waiting only to be shown to my proper place.”

Yavanna sniffed, faintly amused by her attitude, which she more than half suspected was a show of false humility, a means for Aránayel to save face, should she be sent off to a seat among the lesser guests. “Which is with the rest of your traveling companions. I am aware that many things have been said of you during the ages of our residence here in Arda, and that few of them were flattering, but if Olórin has found it in his heart to forgive you those ancient transgressions, then we will do no less, for his sake. He is our honored guest this night, and as you are one of his companions, it is only proper for you to share in some part of that honor. You would do well to remember that there are many in Aman who will look favorably upon the fact that Olórin is willing to keep company with you, for he has earned great respect since his youth, and the days when things went awry between you. Come now, make haste, before my husband grows impatient with our dallying. I would not have his genial mood fade too soon, and spoil our evening!”

The Vala moved on to join the others without so much as a backward glance to confirm whether or not Aránayel was following. Thus she did not see the expression that flickered across the Maia's face, a strange look of pleasure that matched the glitter in her dark eyes, the delight of a cunning hunting beast who has at last inadvertently been shown the perfect way to corner a hated and long elusive enemy — and kill it.

To be continued....