Leaving Home

by Caitie Anne Banks

A horn sounded at the edge of the woods. It rang through the trees, the only noise in a strange silence. The wooden houses perched in the branches of the great silver *mallorns*, trees that only lose their old leaves when the new ones come in, were empty. Not an animal or elf remained. The only sounds were from the train of horses and elves, all leaving Lothlorien behind forever. Soon all would be silent, except for the wind and the far-off chuckling of a brook.

Haldir watched as the last horses were loaded. All of his possessions were in a sack at his feet. He could shoulder his sack and join his brothers and friends as they left their home, or he could stay behind, as the forest slowly died. It had been a year and a half since Lothlorien's last spring.

Far away, he thought, those who had brought such doom upon the forest were in their homes, merry and warm. "But it was not their doing that brought an end to our Age," said a voice behind Haldir. He started, and turned. Standing behind him was the Lady Galadriel, Queen of Lothlorien. She seemed to know exactly what he had been thinking.

"We have all known that our day would end," she continued. "We knew that when the power of Sauron was overthrown, my power would also diminish, and Lothlorien would die. The Fellowship of the Ring that passed through here overthrew him, and so they were the footsteps of doom to Lothlorien. But if Sauron had not been overthrown, he would have descended on us with fire and death and we could not have withstood him."

Haldir bowed his head. He knew she spoke the truth. "But, my Lady, it burns my heart to think of them reveling in their peace and prosperity and we that have withstood the evil for so long, leaving Middle-Earth like thieves in the night."

"That is not completely true. Two of that company will leave Middle-Earth with us, and I think more will follow. The Lord Aragorn, leader of their company, may not leave with us but he mourns our passing as perhaps no other Man will." She was silent for a moment. "And now, I think the train is ready to move. Take one last look, and then come with us."

Haldir watched as the Lady mounted her horse and rode to the front of the baggage train, then he shouldered his bag. Then he looked behind him into the forest, the forest he knew so well. When you have grown up in a place, you know it in a unique way. You've seen everything from a shorter level, memorized the underside of things, and all the little holes and nooks that form a hiding place. Then as you get older, you know it from the top, and you know all the of the bigger spaces. So when you grow up in a place, as Haldir had in Lothlorien, you know it inside and out, top to bottom.

As Haldir looked back into the forest, it was suddenly filled with memories. There was the mallorn tree beside the brook, with knotty roots overhanging the water forming a natural seat. He and Luthien had sat side by side on those roots when they first discovered their love for each other. She had pulled a flower from her shining hair and given it to him, though the hair she accidentally pulled from her head along with it was more precious to him. His parents had always hoped he and Luthien would marry. As children they had played together, but as they got older they went their separate ways. And then there was that one day when he had found her sitting on the roots beside the

water, and he loved her. When she had looked up at him standing there, he knew she loved him too. Their betrothal had been in the sunny glade not far from the tree; his brothers had not been at the wedding. They were much closer to each other than to him. The tall grasses just over yonder held the memory of his little son toddling about. The lad had stepped on a bee, that day. Haldir remembered swinging the child up into the air, then holding him upside down by his legs while he inspected the bee sting. Then he had tossed him up again, and by then the boy had forgotten the sting, and instead was giggling and screaming as Haldir tickled him. That was the day before Haldir left on his first expedition since he had been married. He had kissed Luthien good bye just under this tree, and held his boy one last time before turning and leaving them behind. He had looked back and seen them together under the tree that he was standing beneath right now.

But Lothlorien was more than his life-long home. It had been a balm to him many times, when the world hit him so deeply he could not stand.

It was three months after this good-bye to his wife and child when an elven messenger on an exhausted horse had finally found him in the middle of a deep forest, and told him that nearly everyone he had ever loved was dead. His wife, son, mother and father had all crossed the river and picnicked in the trees, hidden from the view of Lothlorien. Haldir's father had wanted to show his grandson where he had killed his first wolf. It ought to have been perfectly safe; but a wandering band of goblins had surprised them and killed them all.

The next five months were spent tracking those goblins. He was successful; he killed every one of them. But his revenge brought him little comfort. So he returned to

Lothlorien, to heal. At first the places that held the memories of his family were too painful for him; but time made them seem sweet. Now they brought him closer to his wife and son. How could he leave them?

And then, of course, there was Corin. Haldir was again sent scouting far to the north. In the Misty Mountains he was attacked by cave trolls. He barely escaped with his life, and his leg was badly wounded. Few but dwarves lived in this part of the world, and he knew that he would get small help from them. So he had reigned his horse in and dismounted. That was the last thing he remembered until he awakened to find himself slung over the back of his own horse, which was being led by a short, hairy man. When the man turned and looked at him, Haldir had seen that he was very ugly, but pleasant-faced. Corin was part of a small settlement at the feet of the Mountains. He had been out hunting when he found Haldir laying on his face in a pool of his own blood. Corin and his family welcomed Haldir into their home, and took care of him until the wound was healed. Then he had decided to leave, but Corin begged him to stay, reminding him that he still had a limp and it was the height of a particularly bad winter.

Haldir stayed, and often hunted with Corin. Game was scarce that winter, and Haldir's skill as a hunter was greatly appreciated. But the wolves and bears living in that part of the mountains were driven to desperation by the scarcity of the game. They came closer and closer to the settlement in search of food; and one morning the settlers awoke to find that their sheep pens had been raided and nearly every ram and ewe had been killed and eaten or carried off. A quick counsel was taken, and it was determined that the pack of wolves must be destroyed before they ate the horses and possibly even the settlers themselves. Every man shouldered a pack of food, slung his bow across his back,

and set off through the heavy snow after the pack of wolves. All except for Corin and Haldir. Corin had caught a bad cold, and Haldir still limped. Since the wolf hunt would likely be very dangerous, and they were more vulnerable in their present condition, they were left behind.

But Haldir and Corin were not to have a quiet day. A few hours after the hunting party had left, they were dismayed to hear the wolf pack howling in the village square. Even worse, they discovered that they were not ordinary wolves, but great wargs. Haldir and Corin spent that long, nerve-wracking day leaning out of the windows of the upper story of Corin's cabin, and shooting any wargs with arrows that leaped up on the doors of the settler's houses. The wargs were so big they could have knocked down a door within half a minute. Inside the other cabins, they could hear children crying and their mothers shushing them.

Eventually they ran out of arrows, and the wargs soon discovered they could leap on cabin doors without getting shot. Haldir and Corin watched in horror as a cabin door came down with a crash. They knew they had to do something; so Haldir grabbed his sword, and Corin an ax, and they rushed out into the middle of the pack of wolves, weapons swinging. When they had finally reached the cabin, they found that the family were upstairs behind another door, temporarily out of the reach of the wargs. He and Corin were backed up against a wall, and then he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Corin go down. With a cry, he stabbed the warg worrying Corin's throat. But another beast leapt upon his back and he fell over, his sword under him. He could feel the warg's hot breath on his neck. Suddenly an arrow came from no where and pierced the warg to the heart. Cries surrounded Haldir and Corin, and he felt the wargs get off of him. He

jumped up and grabbed his sword; but there was no need. The hunting party had come home and had sent most of the wargs running. The rest were lying in bloody piles, dead.

When spring came, Haldir said good bye to Corin and his family. He would never forget Corin; you never forget someone who fights alongside you in battle for life and death. He visited Corin often after that, but eventually the Man grew old and died. The settlement flourished for a time, and then was abandoned within two hundred years. Haldir had other friends after that, but none so good as Corin.

The world was like that; kingdoms and Men came and went. The years rolled on and took all in their path. So Lothlorien had seemed like a great lighthouse in the midst of a terrible storm; the only steady thing in the midst of change. Perhaps that was why he so hated to leave: Lothlorien had been an emblem of steadfastness, and now she was dying like the other kingdoms he had seen rise and fall, like Corin's settlement.

Haldir was called back to reality as the horn sounded again, and the baggage train moved forward. His heart beat wildly; he set down his pack. He would stay — he could never leave. He could not leave the graves of his wife and son, and far away, the grave of his friend. As he looked into the forest, he saw one of the great *mallorn* trees drop a leaf.

Then he understood. The great trees were dying; the forest was dying. If he stayed behind, he stayed for graves, for dead trees, for everything that once was. He himself would become a shadow of his former self, a gray elf that lived in twilight.

No. He would not become a ghost. What lay ahead was unknown, but it was hope for the future. He shouldered his pack again, and ran after the baggage train, shouting for them to wait. He did not look back.