"In the universe, there are things that are known, and things that are unknown, and in between, there are doors." – William Blake

How many books out of worlds and worlds out of books? This is the story of Janet Lambert, a thirtysomething college student, as she travels out of her own world and into the Tolkien multiverse and beyond.
Notes

A note on languages: All of the languages you see in this story are either based on Tolkien's constructed languages or are based upon languages of my own creation. Any resemblance to real languages is completely and totally coincidental.

This story has long outgrown the Tolkienverse and now contains references to Tolkien himself, C.S. Lewis and the Chronicles of Narnia, Stephen King's Dark Tower series, H. P. Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Mythos, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan, among others. While it's not strictly a crossover, the story depends on these elements to function, so it only seems right that I acknowledge them here.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hobbitland

I could start at the beginning: I got up that morning, ate a homely breakfast of oatmeal and fruit, went to school, daydreamed about my Archaeology professor, ate lunch while giggling with some women from my Archaeology class, went out onto the grounds to do my homework and take advantage of the gorgeousness of the day—it was autumn and crisp, the sky a perfect blue backdrop to the riotous red change of leaves, and the air smelled fresh and dark, like well-turned earth—but the beginning is boring, as beginnings often are. You yourself have lived a hundred such beginnings.

I will give a brief description and history of the grounds. Given what has happened to me, the history has made the leap from quaint to sinister: the grounds are rolling and green, thick with trees and populated with secret trails. There’s a stream that sprouts up somewhere in the middle of all that verdure and flows out through a cleft in the low hills until it reaches a giant culvert. The culvert directs the busy waters to a muddy eddy in the local river. In the early 1980s the administration put a huge screen over the culvert to prevent drunk Uni students from using it as a waterslide. The groundskeepers are always cleaning clots of string bikinis and rejected boxer shorts out of that same grate; the stream cascades in a waterfall and fills up a deep clear pool before continuing its roar to the culvert. The land came as part of a bequest, the legacy of an old man in an oil painting that hangs in the building named after him. I think often now of that portrait and wonder at the tilt in the old man’s smile. He knew something about all of this, the crafty bastard.

I’d heard the stories. Everyone heard the stories. They were as part of the initiation into college life as keg parties and cram sessions. The student folklorists picked them apart with an avidity reserved for teenage fangirls. Those who followed the course of the stream up to the pool and had their drunken bonfire parties told their silly stories, but with a tinge of uncertainty: the one girl who was sure there were long-robed ghosts watching her in the woods, the guy who heard a bunch of men muttering in a guttural language, the unexplained lights flickering through distant trees. Archaeology students and Criminal Justice majors made forays into the woods by day, attempting to investigate the sources of nighttime disturbances. Linguistics students did their best to unravel approximations of the overheard languages. All of them looked for traces of fires, disturbed earth, fibers and fallen buttons that might’ve been left behind. Parapsychology majors left tape recorders and video cameras rigged up in the branches overnight. Most of the stories got laughed off and blamed on the interference of alcohol and psychedelic drugs. I laughed them off.

I’m not laughing now.

I’ll begin with the action. That’s the part you want to read. How I, a nice girl, ended up in a place like this—Middle-fuckin-earth.
The Not-All-Right

That the grounds were called Hobbitland should’ve been my first clue. It wasn’t. The word Hobbitland conjured up people who dressed like Elves and Wizards and sat around in the field smoking long clay pipes while reading aloud from *The Silmarillion*. I came across these people all the time in my quest for solitude and I usually smelled them before I saw them. Despite the air of authenticity lent by leaf-dappled sunlight, Shakespearian diction, and hand-sewn woolen robes, it wasn’t Longbottom Leaf in those pipes.

That day the field was empty. It’s a stretch to call it a field; it’s more a of a large clearing, fragrant with knee-high grass and wildflowers and surrounded by towering oak trees. A number of tumbled boulders sat strewn amongst the grass, bleaching slowly with the seasons of weather. In one corner a claw-foot bathtub was sinking into the earth. Most of the enamel was gone. What little remained had graffiti scratched into it: years of graduation, initials, strange geometric eyes. Someone had scrawled SALLY SUCKS! with what looked like the edge of a key and another person had scratched an ejaculating penis with the word OOOH written beneath it. The tub had been spray-painted several times but the paint did not stand up well to the ongoing passage of years.

I asked a guy in my Archaeology class why it was called Hobbitland. “Duh,” he said. “The bridges.” I went searching on a spring day of exceptional beauty and found the bridges on my own: little wooden footbridges arching across cracks in the land, dozens of them, spanning tiny ribbons of water too small to be called creeks. I asked a girl from Calculus why it was called Hobbitland and she turned her big vacant eyes on me. “Things,” she said. “There’s, like, things in there.” I asked her about the things, and with the solemnity of the perpetually stoned she leaned forward, enveloped me in a fading cloud of patchouli, and whispered, “Fairies. Wood nymphs. Shit like that. I’ve seen them. But you have to watch real close because they know how to hide.” The only thing I ever glimpsed in those woods were wind-driven shadows and the occasional used condom.

I picked a place in the field because it was empty and it was sunny. Winter is long and harsh in New England and while there’s still sun you want to drink in as much of it as you can. I took off my sweater and leaned my back against a boulder and the stone gave its heat to my spine. For awhile things felt like they always felt and then they just didn’t. I want to mark the moment in time where it shifted, but in looking back I can’t. There is all right, and then there is the kind of absorption that erases time, and then there is not-all-right. Not-all-right began as a gentle feeling that bloomed into a hyper-awareness. There were birds chirping and that was all right, there was the pleasant sound of wind moving through leafy trees and that was all right, but when I held my breath I couldn’t hear the almost subconscious drone of highway noise, and that was not-all-right. I went still as an animal may, without knowing why but obeying some deep-rooted imperative, and I listened. I struggled to listen beneath the surface sounds. What else was not-all-right? No highway noise and no airport noise. I glanced across the field and the tub was still there. A sense of relief at seeing the tub came over me like a swoon. I started to giggle. If anyone had ever told me that the sight of that mangy old thing would thrill me beyond belief, I never would’ve believed it. Not in a million years would I have believed it. The tub was there but that sense of strangeness, of not-all-right, remained. I ignored it and went back to my reading. A wind blew in my face and it was the freshest breeze I had ever received. Its purity slapped through all of my reveries and took deep clenching root in my mind and all I wanted to do was inhale again, draw in air through my nose. I put down my book and did just that. Such sweetness, such everlasting sweetness. The not-all-right knocked on the insides of my instinct but I ignored it. What a beautiful day! What a gorgeous, sweet, magnificent, lovely…
The wind shifted and brought with it the strong gagging odor of unwashed bodies. I thought of the homeless people. Sometimes they camped up here and most of the time they were harmless. I thought about packing up my stuff and heading back. Most of the time the homeless folks were harmless and lots of times they were drunk, but sometimes they were crazy and I didn’t want no business with crazy. This kind of crazy was its own hot-eyed thing. It had been a long time since a student ventured into Hobbitland and didn’t venture back out again, and even longer still since someone digging around had turned up a set of long bones. I liked my bones just fine, kept inside my flesh where they belonged. I gathered up my books and my water bottle and slung the pack onto my back. Those stinky bodies were sneaky, as you can well imagine. Their footfalls made no sound and there wasn’t much to be done about the wind, but even with the wind I was unaware enough to find an arrow nocked and pointed at the hollow of my throat.

I’ll tell you something, ladies. The real Legolas? He’s some kind of weird looking.
Meetings

He’s tall, yes, and he is impossibly cat-like. His reflexes are as the glint of sunlight on a fast-moving stream and the color of his hair is unbelievably fair, hued the very shade of sunlight if sunlight were a thing of substance. His eyes are the sky reflected in the sea and his skin is the exact shade of those longing white shores in Aman. He really does hurt your eyes with all of his goddamned sucker-punching gasp-inducing beauty. But in real life, anchored in actual air, this is a very unsettling thing. He looks like a beautiful woman, if a beautiful woman could be beautifully male, and all the ancient tempered rage of his race sleeps buried deep within in his flesh. His scowl transforms that ethereal quality into something that might make lightning and crack open the soil beneath your feet. The look on his face and the arrowhead hovering a hair away from the juncture of my collarbones made me feel very much like pissing myself.

He spoke to me. I still have no idea what he said.

Aragorn put a hand on the Elf’s arm and spoke to him. I still have no idea what he said.

I’m going to dispel all those thoughts regarding their looks right now by telling you that none of them look the way they look in the movies. They don’t look much the way they are described in the books, either; Professor Tolkien got it right only by virtue of less is more, and in this case less is enough to cover the most basic of attributes only if you stretch it out and tuck it down and don’t take too deep a breath. Aragorn and Boromir look like those guys who stand outside and do the roadwork every summer, minus the mullets and cheap tattoos; in other words, they are ordinary and capable, men with work-toughened physiques and weathered faces made to disappear in a crowd until they smile, when every feature transforms into a unique memory. Aragorn is the taller of the two, and he is darker in coloring and lighter of build. He has a soft and cultured voice. Boromir is the sort of man who holds words dear and parts with them out of necessity. He is restless and possessed of a ruthless economy of movement, a subtle rhythm of skill. When Aragorn speaks one thinks less of soldiering and more of time spent hidden away in the stacks of a library. His intelligence and temperament unfold. When Aragorn speaks he becomes handsome; a quiet charisma awakens inside the words and kindles a flame in the lines of his face. Something inside you stirs to the fore, moves toward that warmth, and yearns to listen.

I yearned to listen, but more than that I yearned to understand. I yearned to live.

They conversed in a mellifluous language I had never heard before. It seemed fashioned out of the forest sounds themselves. I had heard Elvish spoken in the movies, but the words I heard in the glade weren’t like the words I heard on the screen. There was a musicality to them, a lilt that only comes from long use, a well-trained tongue, and cherished paths worn deep into the subconscious mind. It was Elvish spoken the way it would have been on the screen if the screen had borne all the weight of its history, its birth and bloodshed, its evolution and its nobility. These were the voices of men whose thoughts rustled and bloomed and wrought themselves in Elvish before making their way out into the world.

Aragorn looked at me and nodded. He looked at me and he waited. He made a hand gesture. *Speak.*

“I don’t understand,” I replied. “I don’t understand a word you’re saying to me.”

Aragorn switched to a different language. I couldn’t understand that one, either. As Aragorn
translated one simple sentence into a wealth of different dialects, the others in the group wandered into a ring around me. The hobbits caught my attention and held it for a long moment. They looked back at me, equally fascinated. Their size and proportion astounded me; they were very much like miniatures of people, down to the length and breadth of their fingers and the balance of the features on their faces. Those faces were framed by mops of tangled curly hair and the lean cheeks were dirty and sunburned. When I imagined hobbits, my imagination got hijacked by the Bakshi cartoon long before Elijah Wood ever stepped into the picture on his prosthetic feet.

Frodo is dark-haired and has big blue eyes but that is where the resemblance ends. Sam Gamgee has amber eyes and amber hair and he has lots of freckles. I mean, lots of freckles. The kind that run into one big freckle and splay across the bridge of his nose. Merry and Pippin are both blond and look alike, as though some careless god fashioned them out of the same clay. Actual hobbit feet, at first glance, look like pairs of big hairy boots.

They stood huddled near each other and gazed up at me with the solemn watchful eyes of creatures who are not yet inured to surprise. The set of their shoulders looked broken down by the road. All of them looked broken down by the road.

“What Aragorn wants to know, is what exactly do you have in your pack?”

“I have books.” I paused. “And some granola bars.”

It was Gandalf who spoke, and though he used a strange accent that sounded like a British shading tinged with something Slavic, the words made sense to me.

“Would you remove it slowly, then, and consent to a search of its contents?”

“Um, yes.”

I took the pack off, moving as slow as I could, and set it down in front of me. Legolas kept the bow trained on me while Aragorn squatted and opened it up.

“Are you armed?”

“No.” I held my hands up, the way I’d seen people do true crime shows. “I’m not armed.”

Aragorn touched my books as if they were holy objects. He fished my cell phone out of its pocket and turned it over in his hands, his brow creased in a slight frown.

“Are you in mourning?”

My mind took mourning to mean morning, and I was confused; the long shadows told me it was afternoon. “I don’t understand.”

Gandalf nodded. “You’ve shaved off your hair.”

“No, no, I’m…uh.” I put my hands on my head. Legolas took in a sharp breath at the movement of my arms and Aragorn stilled him with a look. “No, I’m not in mourning. I just didn’t like the color. I had dyed it, and it didn’t turn out so good. So I figured what the hell, just shave it off. I’ve had it shaved before. Who are you people? What the hell is this, because, you know, I don’t appreciate it.” I looked at Legolas. “You can take your bow off me now. Just so you know.”

Gandalf regarded me for a moment. “Where is it you think you are?”

“Is this like some kind of mind trippy thing? Hey, did one of you assholes put shrooms on my
pizza? Because that is so not funny. So not funny, buttmunches. I’ll get your ass expelled for that.” I blushed and shut my mouth. It was a lame threat.

“What is your name?”

“My name is none of your business. Your business is canceling this whole Tolkien trip and either waking me up or helping me get back to my dorm room where I can spend the rest of tonight watching wargs crawl out of my walls while I wait for whatever you put on my pizza to metabolize out of my body.”

Gandalf softened his voice. “No one has drugged you.”

Aragorn put the things back into my backpack.

“If I’m not drugged, and I’m not dreaming, then where am I. And don’t you say Middle-earth. Don’t you even.”

“Would you have me lie?”

Gimli glared at me and muttered something to the wizard. Gandalf translated the words. “Gimli says if he took your head off perhaps you’d stop talking. For what it’s worth, I highly doubt it.”

I looked at Gimli in disbelief. You may find it hard to believe, ladies, but the dwarf is actually hot, in a scaled-down lumberjack-meets-Viking kind of way. “Well, you can tell Gimli to stick it where the sun don’t shine.”

“He says he doesn’t trust a woman without hair.”

“You can tell him he has enough hair for both of us.”

Gandalf laughed. “Tell me, lady, would you speak with me as equals?”

“Um…sure.”

“I have no explanation for this. By rights this should not be and I would venture so far as to say that such a thing would never happen in the design of Eru, but Sauron does not have this sort of power. Therefore it is the will of Eru, though it be a mystery.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t belong here,” he said. “It’s simple. But we cannot leave you here. That’s simple, too.”

“So…what does that mean?”

“It means I’ll hold council with my fellow travelers, and if they agree, we will stop here tonight.”

“You mean sleep here?” I thought about the not-all-right. The strange silence weighted by a rustle of trees.

“Yes,” said the wizard. “You and I will ponder this mystery together.”

“But…”

“For a night,” said Gandalf. “Just one. Perchance to wake in your own bed.”

Though the passing moments had none of the rhythms of a dream, I agreed with him.
Okay, okay. This is getting boring. But that afternoon I thought I was dreaming, and in dreams people will say anything. I kept looking for the prismatic colors and snakes crawling out of rocks and other things characteristic of a particularly intense drug trip. The detail was amazing, but it remained realistic. No dancing notes of birdsong or talking water. Aragorn and Boromir had gone off in the woods to hunt when a peculiar sweating sensation rose up out of my stomach and swept over me. It was like the onset a fever but without the sense of heat. Panic kicked up in my throat and everything got bright and sharp around the edges and there was too much detail, all of it pressing in on me until I couldn’t breathe and my heart kicked into a fierce gallop to try and escape. My hands started to shake.

The change in breathing and the pallor became apparent to Legolas first, and as I pulled myself into a defensive posture he sought Gandalf’s attention. I don’t remember much of these moments; I’m retelling them as they were told to me. My stream of thoughts breaks up at this point, and what I remember is Gandalf putting his hand on the back of my neck and his voice without words, the rise and fall of his voice, a velvet rope tossed into the churning waters of my mind.

Tolkien described wizards as beings who wear the visages of old men to cloak their keen minds and vigorous spirits, and he made mention of the liveliness of their flesh, how they wield the stamina of much younger men. My first memories of Gandalf’s appearance were swept away by the sensation of his hand and how his palm transferred soft tranquility into my flesh, calm and clarity beyond my ken, blown into my mind on the pursed and gentle breath of his thought. From inside myself I felt the measure of his great power, the seduction of long-lived years and endless winding roads, while the sweet scent of places I would never sully with my humanity lived and died in my laboring nostrils. He took my panic like an offering and drank it down in a single draught and when I turned my head and looked at him over my shoulder, for one single moment I saw all of his face.

It bears lines, but they are the kind of lines that speak of life rather than age, and each one is a map leading to somewhere you’ve never been.

I longed for disconnection from the turmoil but it was not to be. Someone draped a blanket over my shoulders and gave me water to drink. I sipped it. The shakes began to subside. Aragorn and Boromir returned with a small doe and dressed it on the other side of the field. I could see the blood, and when the wind was right I could smell it. The stench of opened bowels and spilled stomach contents withered my appetite. Warmth settled over me. Gimli roasted the haunches over a fire and the meat dripped fat that sizzled and popped inside the flames. Blue evening drifted down over the tops of the trees. Stars came out one at a time, then in hazy groups, and strove against the firelight.

“Your body is fighting it, but it is starting to believe,” said Gandalf. “Even when the heart and mind are not ready, the flesh will not deny the truth.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re starting to get over it,” he said.

I knew the time had slipped sideways. It was full dark and I wasn’t at home. This was the not-all-right. I had fallen into the very heart of the not-all-right.
“Are you sure I’m not dead?”

Aragorn looked at me. He took a bite of venison, chewed, and swallowed. The firelight did strange things to his eyes. He inclined his head toward Gandalf and asked him to translate what I had said. The wizard nodded and did just that. Aragorn shook his head. He muttered something in the strange cadence of his language and looked at me while he did it.

“Aragorn says that if you are dead, then so are we all.”

“That isn’t very encouraging.”

“What is your name?”

I thought long and hard about it. It felt in that moment that admitting my name was tantamount to admitting this was reality. “Janet.”

Gandalf gestured for the attention of the others, and when he had it, he repeated my name.

“Janet,” said Aragorn. His accent defied description.

I nodded. “Yes.”

We went around the circle. They told me all of their names. Aragorn picked up a fork and got up from his place across the fire and came over to sit down beside me. He put the fork into my hand. He folded his fingers over mine and held up the fork, made a gesture of firmness with it, then let go of my hand and pointed to the tines. He said a word. He then nodded to me and sat back and fixed me with an expectant look. I looked at the fork and then looked into his face. I looked over his shoulder at Gandalf.

“He wants a language lesson,” said the wizard, with a hint of a smile.

“Well, will you help me? I’ve never taught anyone anything.”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” I pointed at the fork. “Fork.”

Aragorn smiled, showing teeth that were worn and white. “Fork.”

That was the first Westron word I ever learned.
A Shared Bedroll

As romantic as it seems while you’re reading Lord of the Rings, sleeping on the ground in the middle of the wilderness actually sucks. It sucks with great vigor when you are accustomed to a nice mattress, a plump pillow, and a thick fluffy comforter wrapped tight around your toasty warm body. I thought with longing about my comforter as I curled up on the cold ground and struggled to get warm. I had Boromir’s spare wool blanket wrapped around me, but the dirt sucked the heat right out of my flesh. The fire died down to red coals. I watched them flare and listened to them crackle in the light breeze as my teeth chattered.

It was Boromir’s watch. He heard me shivering and he woke Gandalf. The wizard covered me with his spare blanket and tucked under the edges but it still wasn’t enough.

Legolas watched all of this from his bedroll, his attention relaxed and feline. He said something and Gandalf hearkened to him. He then looked at me. He looked into my eyes for a long moment, as if peering past them and into some deeper part of myself. He pulled his hand out of from beneath his covers and made a gesture: *come over here*. I looked at Gandalf. The wizard smiled a little, pulled his blanket a little tighter around him, and nodded.

“It’s all right, Janet,” he said. “He won’t hurt you.”

I blushed and got up. The cold air felt colder on my heated cheeks. I carried my blankets wrapped tight around my shoulders and walked over next to Legolas and got down on my knees beside him. With his hands he described a body stretched out on the ground, then another body stretched out beside it. My blush intensified and I looked away. He followed the movement of my face with his own, and when he had my eyes he put the backs of his hands together and held them up in front of his chest. In a movement of singular grace, he bowed to me over them. “Back to back,” he said in halting, broken English. I was looking at the ground and listening, and he touched my chin, reorienting my eyes to his. He made a long sweeping gesture toward the ground and picked up the edges of my blankets, tugging on them gently, overlapping them as if pulling them tighter. He pointed to the ground again. He put his hands back-to-back. He nodded to me. “Und…her-stand?”

“Um, I think so.” I closed my eyes and tried to recall the unfamiliar Westron words. “Sleep…?”

He smiled and I felt it in my guts. “Sluh..heep.”

I got down on the ground beside him. I made a cocoon of my own blankets and he covered me with his. He turned over and put his back up against mine, solid from shoulder blades to hips. Even through the blankets he felt strange. A sound settled in my mind but it was soothing, like the murmur of water on a shoreline or the wings of butterflies beating in concert. The blankets held his scent, and there was an animal tinge to it, but there were other scents buried in it too, growing leaves and misty rain, buds that yearn to bloom wrapped up in a faint ghost of wood smoke. My mind felt calm but my blood wouldn’t settle. I didn’t think I’d be able to fall asleep, but the blankets filled with heat. My shivering ceased and my fingers and toes warmed up. My dreams were full of the sea and when I awoke in the morning I didn’t remember much but I remembered the crying of seagulls, and it awoke a fierce longing in me to be at home and that was the beginning of wondering whether I would ever see home again.
Three Sheets To The Wind

That first day of walking I felt like I was going to die. Little knives settled into my muscles and by afternoon they sliced into me with every step. By dusk it took all of my will just to keep myself moving forward. We made camp and I collapsed into a trembling heap and sobbed over the pain. Gandalf had herbs in his pack and even though they smelled like freshly brewed horseshit I forced down every last drop. The effects went straight to my brain. While I sat with a blanket wrapped around me, mesmerized like an idiot by the flames, they sat in council and pondered what to do with me.

“Janet,” said Gandalf. “In a few days’ time I’ll want to speak with you. I have discussed your presence with the Fellowship and together we’ve come up with some options.”

Whatever was in that brew, it was some fine stuff. I was feeling no pain and didn’t have much in the way of inhibitions, either. “You’re kind of hot, you know, in that John Hurt-circa-1995 meets someone-who’s-actually-tall kind of way,” I said.

Gandalf smiled. “The medicine I gave you is quite powerful. I’m afraid you’re in no condition tonight to make decisions.”

“Actually, now that I really think on it,” I said, drawing the word really out into several separate syllables, “I’m not sure John Hurt was ever quite this hot. And that’s saying something, really, because you know, in my not-so-humble opinion, he is one sexy motherfucker.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No.” The word came out wistful. “Though I very much like the sound of food. Yummy delicious food, food, tasty yummy food. I could so go for a Pop-Tart right now. Strawberry. With frosting. And those crunchy little confetti sprinkles.”

Gimli couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. He told me later on that he didn’t understand a single blessed word but that the combination of my intoxicated tone and the look on Gandalf’s face more than made up for his lack of comprehension.

“Give her less next time,” Legolas said to Gandalf.

“I suppose you find all of this entertaining,” the wizard replied.

“Maybe you should give her more next time,” said the Elf.

“Hey!” I said. “That is totally no fair! I have no idea what you’re saying. This is like some kind of…of…linguistic fascism, or something. I’m way too fucked up to remember my twenty Westron words.”

“She’d pass out cold,” said Gandalf.

Legolas grinned. “Indeed.”

“Janet, you should get some sleep,” said Gandalf.

“What is in this stuff, anyway? I feel awesome. I mean, totally fucking awesome. Like I could…
could...climb a mountain, kill something really big and scary, and screw. Like, screw. The kind of screwing that breaks furniture and wakes the neighbors.”

Gandalf colored. “Really, now. At least try to sleep. You’ll need the strength in the morning.”

“Oh my God...are you blushing?”

Gandalf took a breath. “Are you sure you aren’t hungry?”

“That is so hot. Seriously. So, could you conjure me a Pop-Tart? Like, wave your staff around or something? Poof, there’s a Pop-Tart. That would be so tasty. I’d share it and everything.”

“There will be no more medicine for you,” Gandalf muttered in Westron.

“Give her a little bit more,” said Legolas. “Then she’ll sleep whether she desires it or not.”

Gandalf brewed up a couple more swallows and handed me the cup. I sniffed it and made a face. “Smells like shit.”

“It will make you feel better,” he said.

“But darling dear, I feel fine now.”

He gave a hard-edged smile. “It will make you feel finer.”


Gimli told me later that it was like watching all my bones melt. I slid sideways, the cup still positioned in my loosened fingers. My head hit the ground. Gandalf took the cup and covered me with the blankets. The soporific powers of that particular brew generated some legendary snores. Small furry animals feared me more than they feared the fire.

Gandalf looked at Aragorn. “Who’s John Hurt?”

Aragorn shrugged. “Sounds like an Orc name.”

The wizard was slightly offended by the comparison. He repeated all of this to me the following morning, but I was far too embarrassed to offer any clarification.
I tell you, ladies, nothing beats the Tenth Walker Diet: hike from sunup to sundown, live on water and deermeat, and you too shall earn a pair of shriveled boobs, rippling thighs like Miss Universe, and buns like cannon-shot. I think I could’ve cracked hazelnuts with my cheeks, if I’d wanted to, and I imagine I would’ve offered given enough of Gandalf’s special brew. Course, eating all that protein you’ll crap like a rabbit when you crap at all, and you’ll pass into hitherto unknown realms of ecstasy at the smell of a peeled apple.

Or of any fruit, really, but in that particular moment it was an apple. A beautiful, ruby-skinned, plump little lady of an apple, just as juicy as a spring bride and fair quivering in Gimli’s hands. At least, my taste buds fancied that it was quivering. They wanted all that quivering juice, all that sweetness, pale white flesh that would crunch between the teeth instead of needing to be gnawed. I squatted and watched Gimli peel the apple with his knife. I marveled at the way it parted from its jeweled skin. I struggled against the urge to drool and lost that particular battle. My salivary glands rolled over and surrendered as I watched the dwarf filet a slice and slide it into his mouth.

“Give Janet more fat,” Aragorn said to Gimli.

“Aye, and more apples,” said Boromir.

I shook myself out of my daze. “What?”

Aragorn shook his head. “You’re too thin. You’ll stop your courses.”

My eyebrows went up. Considering the level of my astonishment, I’m surprised my eyes didn’t fall right out of my head. “Since I’m not looking to get pregnant on this trip, I think it’s probably all right.”

Boromir chuckled and Aragorn colored a little but he furrowed his brow. “What means ‘all right’? I don’t know this phrase.”

“It’s…acceptable. It’s okay.” I winced and made a face. I made a settling gesture. “Okay, all right…both mean when something is acceptable. It’s acceptable.” It crossed my mind to explain to him what a supermodel was, and what a size four was, and that I knew people who paid exorbitant sums of money to beat their bodies into the shape mine was in, but in a single breath I knew that there was no point; there was a far wider gap in comprehension than the little bit of space living between all right and acceptable. I shook my head. “I’m still having monthlies and I’m far from stopping. I’m fine.”

“Give her the apples,” he said to Gimli.

The dwarf shrugged and handed over three of them. I blushed and took them. “No, it’s okay.” I said, even as I tore into one of them with my teeth. Oh, the flavor. The sweetness. There are times when words die on your tongue. As I chewed, my mind enveloped in a sweet rush of glucose. “Oh that’s so good. So good. Who knew apples could taste this good? Who knew? Who knew?”

Gimli smiled and crinkles folded into the corners of his eyes, and then he started to laugh. His belly caught and started to shake. Gimli laughing is a contagious thing; it appears in others as a small smile, sometimes a twinkling of the eyes, and then a full smile unfurling across the face until its blown wide apart in a gale of laughter. Boromir and Legolas both possess soft laughter, as
though restraint itself is a virtue worth the cultivation, but their voices in mirth are deep and soft, scented like the leather and soft on the ears like the finest furs. When Gimli laughs it is a boom, it is like thunder, but that of a long-awaited and refreshing rain, and when it comes it pours down on you and runs over you and fills you up until you run over with it. Gandalf laughs that way too, and in his gusto there is still a measure of restraint, as though the full strength of his joy could be like the wind that tears the fruit out of the trees or stamps the wheat back into the ground, but it is still a refreshing sound, and it picks you up in a flood and carries you along. Gandalf doesn’t laugh as often, or as deeply, Gimli’s laughter is his alone, and in hearing it you are quenched even when you didn’t know the measure of your thirst.

“I knew, lady, I must confess,” he said, when he had stopped. “But perhaps they taste different in your mouth?”

“Hunger sharpens,” said Legolas.

“I’m not starving or anything,” I said. “I eat enough deermeat to glut a platoon.”

“The hunger for fruit is different.”

The hobbits huddled together and cast looks in our direction while Frodo curled up on the ground and tried to sleep.

“It’s not healthy for you to be so thin,” said Gandalf.

“And it’s healthy for you? You look like a bag of sticks tied up in that robe.”

Boromir snorted. Legolas grinned, and he hid the shape of his mouth with the flat of his hand.

“So what you mean really,” I said, “is that it is unseemly for a woman to be so thin, that maybe with my bouncing buns of steel I’m offending some sort of delicate aesthetic that you have, that perhaps in my withered boobs I am now in fact less of a woman by your view, and oh goodness hurry up Janet and eat something, because in your minority of flesh you may be threatening to the eyes of these poor men who have never seen a woman do anything but keep house and suckle babies and…and well…stay fat.”

Gandalf watched me with a placid expression. “Are you finished?”

“No,” I huffed. “I’m not.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Minority of flesh?”

“Yes. My…my reduced hoard of flesh. My paucity of flesh, if you like that better. What I lack. Proper women of Middle-earth are all hearth-fattened, right?”

Boromir’s eyebrows went up but he didn’t say anything.

“We’ve been on the road a long time,” said Gandalf.

“You know what? Fuck this. Fuck your damned road. I want to go home where it’s normal and people won’t try to force food on me because I look like a fitness model!” I turned on Aragorn, the tears standing in my eyes. “And don’t you ask me what a fitness model is either because it does not fucking matter what a fitness model is! What matters is that…is that…oh, I don’t know what matters anymore, just that I’m tired of seeing miles and miles of nothing but you and rocks. I can’t help it if I’m not sitting on my ass any more, and I’d rather be sitting on my ass right now believe me, even if sitting on it and eating junk food made it fatter, the point is this: it was my ass, and by
Iluvatar my ass was *fat*, and now it’s not fat anymore, and you’re…you’re…trying to make it fat again, but it’s an *artificial* fat. It's fake. I don’t want to be fake. Can’t you understand that?”

“Yes.” Gandalf’s voice was soft. “I understand completely.”

I snapped my mouth shut because those weren’t the words I expected to hear, and as if my eyes were flipped on by a switch embedded in my jaw the tears began to flow. They embarrassed me. The abundance of my tears kindled shame, and recalling the words I’d just said rubbed the shame in deeper, made it hot, and I held the apples to my chest and lowered my head. “I’m sorry, I should not have yelled at you. It wasn’t right. I need to be alone right now.”

“Go ahead,” said Gandalf.

I went off through the bushes and found a lonely rock to sit on. We’d only be stopping for a short while and I’d been in Middle-earth long enough to see the light pass in individual moments I knew that it would be time to press on soon. I sniffled and wiped the snot onto the leaves and ate the apple through choppy breaths. A bird sang somewhere and it didn’t change tune as Legolas came through the spindly branches and sat down beside me.

“May I sit with you?”

“You already are,” I said. “I don’t suppose I’m going to stop you.”

“May I comfort you?”

My shoulders tensed, then dropped. I nodded and looked at my splayed feet. “Yes, you may comfort me.”

He put a hand on my hand. It was comforting, as it had been all the times before, and his simple practice of tuning his breath into the rhythm of mine slowed the labor of my lungs. The irregularities fell away and my head started to clear. “Thank you,” I said.

“You miss your home,” he said.

“Yes. I do.”

“I miss mine too.”

I looked at him. Looking at him was hard, and his beauty intimidated me. “You do?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“I bet you don’t cry over it.”

“There’s no shame in crying,” he said. “There’s no shame in the pain that comes here.” He put a hand on his heart. “I feel home here. I feel the empty place where I should be.”

“Me too. I think about the smell of the sea. I can’t smell it here. I’ve smelled it all my life and now it’s gone.”

A strange look came over his face. It was like a shadow walking across the moon.

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” I said.

“Nay,” he said. “I take no offense.”
“Good.” I smiled. “I’m surprised you all haven’t hog-tied me and dropped me in the nearest fen.”

“Well there were any…”

“Are you cracking a joke?”

He held up his thumb and forefinger. “A small one.”

“Aragorn worries about my periods and you, the stern-faced Elf, you crack a joke. This is a day to be remembered in song.”

A quick flashing smile darted like light chasing a current. “It’s time to go.”

I looked away. “I bet you don’t start fights with Gandalf over it.”

“Nay.” His smile broke out in full force. “I’m not that brave.”

Though by then the sight was familiar, I still lost a little breath every time. “I don’t think bravery has much to do with it.”

“Nor do I,” said Legolas. “But, come. We must go. The others are breaking camp now.”

“You can hear them.”

“Yes.”

“I will never get used to that,” I said.
That night we made camp in a tumble of tall flat-sided boulders; the slabs of fallen sandstone or whatever it was leaned against one another like men in conspiracy or weary soldiers who have fallen asleep propped up on each other. I preferred the imagery of soldiers to that of conspirators, and I imagined ragged and footsore men held fast in the bonds forged by war, the simple brotherhood ingrained in such a gesture: they propped each other up, cooperating so that every man kept the shit out of his nostrils and the dirt out of his hair. I wondered if it was sandstone, or what kind of rock it was, if it was the same sort of rock that existed in my world. I thought about my world and wondered if it was still there or if it had perished when I left it behind. It sounds like a mad thought, the sort of phantasms that blow through a fevered mind, but when you’ve been in Middle-earth long enough to have lost track of the days, anything and everything seems possible. I read somewhere long ago that death is like waking from a dream of having lived. I wondered if I had dreamed all of my life. I wondered if this was how it felt to wake up.

It was Gandalf’s turn to sit the watch, and he sat cross-legged next to the smoldering fire and looked off into the darkness. I watched his face by the dubious red light and thought I read in the lines of his skin the word of a man who has looked into the darkness long enough to catch the darkness looking back. Did the night have eyes? Were they on me even if I couldn’t feel them? Could he feel them, could he see them, Gandalf with his ancient fire-tempered eyes and his maddening composure and the patience held so lightly in the turn of his wrist, in the way he wielded his pipe like the tobacco had all the time in the world, as if time itself knelt to its combustion, as though the moments wove themselves out of smoke and carried secret messages out into the darkness. The eyes I couldn’t see could read them. The eyes I couldn’t see could read the lines on his face, the shadows that deepened them and added nuance. I thought about Chinese characters and how the twitch of the hand could change the meaning of a word. A slight breath bowed into a dab of ink. A jitter in the tone could alter meaning. A shadow cast by the last dying breath of a tiny red fire could change the view of the future.

I was very tired. I was so tired that I couldn’t sleep.

I got up and for a miracle I didn’t wake Legolas. He stayed in his bedroll though I now suspect that he kept still and willed his breath into a sham of sleep out of respect.

I sat down across the embers. “What are you going to do with me?”

“You ask me that question every night,” he said.

“I know. But I never ask it alone. Now I’m asking it alone.” I took a deep breath and smelled ash. “What are you going to do with me?”

He let smoke curl through his nostrils. “What do you want me to do with you?”

I leaned back. “I want you to give me a straight answer.”

“It’s the straightest answer I have.”

“Is it the truest?”

He inclined his head. “Yes. I’m afraid so.”
“What.” I paused and shifted on my heels. My knees felt wrong and so I moved them and my hands were out of sorts so I put them higher on my thighs. I became aware of my fidgeting and the awareness kindled a blush. “Well…what…what do you want to do with me?”

“I think it wise to leave you in the hands of one better suited to such endeavors,” he said.

“You want to leave me in the care of someone’s household,” I said. “You want to take me to a village.”

“If a village would suit you.”

“Do you…do you know how I came to be here?”

“No,” he said. “I have given the matter some thought.”

“And?”

“I have given the matter some thought,” he chided. “Giving thought is not equivalent to acquiring an answer. A chicken, my dear, is not the same thing as a chicken dinner.”

The blush rose and in the red light of the coals I felt like someone’s blood spilled across the stones. Any moment I would start to steam. “You want me to decide, then.” I swallowed my discomfiture. “You want me to decide what this means. Is that what this means?”

The smoke wreathed his face. “Is that what what means?”

“This.” I made a circular gesture. “This conversation. This answer that isn’t really an answer. You never give me an answer, I might add.”

“Any creature with spirit guides its own course every day. The very presence of spirit carves its own place in space and time. Every second you make a decision, Janet. Every breath is a small and heartfelt yes to life. Every exhalation is a choice. You are here.” He took a smoke and let it drift out of him, the thin acrid tendrils like an underline to his perfect nonsense, this mirror of words that threatened to catch my reflection out of the ether and toss it back to me. “You are here. You aren’t there. This by itself has meaning. This alone is freighted with spirit. The spirit has responsibility, Janet. So. What do you want me to do with you?”

“Is it about what I want to do with myself?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know you.”

“Okay.” I took a breath and closed my eyes. “Okay.”

I wanted to crawl over broken things to get back to where I was. I would’ve. I wanted to apply my bare feet to those coals and wake myself up from this dream. I wasn’t sure about life, I wasn’t sure about my spirit, but one thing I tasted was desire, that crazy desire for home and a yearning that was like choking, and I didn’t think that one tasted anything in dreams whether they be of living or of dying. With that taste burning on my tongue I decided that this wasn’t living, this wasn’t dying, this wasn’t even dreaming; I felt caught between the ether and toss inside out, I felt liminal, and I wanted to be yanked through to one side or the other.

“In a place of liminality you are no one at all.” His voice dipped below the wind. “You are no one and can thus become anyone. Anyone at all.”

“You’re reading my mind,” I marveled.
“No,” he murmured. “I’m reading your face.”

I opened my eyes. I looked at him through the fire and the dark and the march of time moving so quick and flowing so slow that it wasn’t moving at all; trapped inside this paradox I saw his face: every path worn, each tiny canyon living in repose and waiting for the sunrise to fill it with the warmth and the fragility of a new day, each day like the last and yet no two exactly alike, each eye like the eye of God and filled with fury and with silence and so myopic in the flesh, limited in the material of its fashioning, the bottomless age reckoned in the long teeth and a hint of mortality in their slight stain, eyelids folded over like shrouds waiting for the final glimmer or great veils to shield something that is too strong for mortal flesh, something that burns on the way out and leaves no vessel behind to contain its smoking remains.

“Oh, my God,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I’m really seeing you.” The blush turned to a conflagration and my head pounded out the words before I could catch them and haul them back inside: “You’re so…beautiful. Am I steaming yet? Am I spilled like blood on the ground?”

“No.” The word birthed itself, tender. “As I can see, you are hale and whole.”

“What is this? What is this really?”

“There is no mystery,” he said. “What you see is what there is.”

“I have…n-never…seen anything…l-like this…be---” The sobs flung themselves out of me. They climbed to my eyes and jumped out, flopping around on the fire like kamikaze fish. The shame of it and the fierce exasperation sliced me open on the inside. “I’ve never…I-I…”

“Oh, now. Now. Come to me. Will you let me comfort you?”

The shivering stitched along the raw places and dug into them with nails of ice. “I’m afraid.”

“I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m overwhelmed.”

“It’s all right to be overwhelmed.”

“I can’t.”

“Shhh.”

That sound pushed all other sounds out of me, and it left an empty space that was small and dark but full of silence. Inside of it I found tranquility, and I got up and followed it like a rope on the ground to the other side of the fire. I did it blindly. He did feel like a bundle of sticks, but he felt warm and the night was cold, and he felt more human than Legolas. He didn’t shy away from putting his hands on my head, or from putting his arms around me, or from letting the front of my body touch the front of his. I closed my eyes and inhaled the scent of his shoulder.

“You need to sleep,” he whispered.

I shook.

“You’re so tired. So very tired. So beholden to exhaustion. Be still, now.” He rubbed my back.
“You are allowed to be still.”

“I can’t.”

“But you are. Go into your flesh and feel yourself. You aren’t shivering.”

I wasn’t. He was warm and it was the kind of warm that feels drowsy. There was an edge buried in the heat but it stayed hidden. It stayed soft.

“I am,” I murmured. “But it’s on the inside.”

“Lie down. I’ll cover you with a blanket.”

I did. I felt the world reel around my head. It spun like something drunk on honey. He put a hand on the back of my neck. It held my spirit down.

“This is no dream,” he said.

I felt the words but I didn’t hear them. I couldn’t. I was asleep.
Learning A Few Things

The following morning, I announced that I wanted to learn a few things: hunting, cooking, fire-tending, sewing. I expected some resistance but got none. The hobbits taught me how to forage as we moved, keeping an eye out for root tops and pungent leaves and fruits, how to store our get until it was ready for unpacking. Boromir acquainted me with hunting. He pushed me until I killed my first deer, and then pushed me harder to learn the art of dressing the carcass, as he knew I wasn’t keen on making the kill-stroke, but I felt no fear of animal guts and after the first couple of times hauling them out of a slimy stinking cavity my gore-triggered nausea receded. Hacking the slippery bones and disarticulating the joints made me feel the way I imagined people must’ve felt millions of years before high-tech grocery stores came along: the simple satisfaction of tending to your own food, seeing it through from beginning to end, slicing supper out of the warm meat and tasting the vitality and sacrifice of the animal with every bite. The fervency of the natural-food movements and the proliferation of summertime farmer’s markets back home made me laugh, though I laughed under my breath. I didn’t want to invite explanation. It was just another thing that wouldn’t translate.

The days unrolled with sweet similarity. The land started to change. It was subtle at first. One day I looked around me and saw that the sunsets were different. The colors had deepened somewhere under the passage of my feet, and when the night sky came over the land it was darker than it used to be, full of a new hard blackness and pierced with sharp white stars. There were more stars than there had been, and they felt closer. I looked down at the soil and saw that it too was different: the grasses were narrower and more like wires, and the rocks were lower and rounder, moss clung to the rock faces, and the mountains seemed so close. For weeks they never moved from their place on the horizon, nor changed their shape or their perspective. The flanks had shifted like those of a animal in its sleep. The sun outlined a change in the silhouette that I had been too busy to notice before.

I sat in a patch of dwindling sun with Sam’s cloak spread across my knees. I was a good seamstress, and I had been a good one in my previous life, and out of my demonstrated skills the mending was the first job delegated to me. I still did it the most often because my skill in small hidden stitches was second only to that of Legolas. I didn’t mind. It was repetitive and relaxing, and my fingers had strengthened with the exacting work and my knuckles could bear the strain for a long time without pain. There are a lot of small rips and tears acquired in a day’s hike, and every garment is held as sacred, because there are so few of them to go around. I was thankful every day for my outdoorsy poseur silliness at University, and at my insistence upon wearing real hiking boots out into Hobbitland, even if I was only hiking in just far enough to find a place where I could spend the day sitting. My jeans were holding up well, and my boots were fucking troopers, though my cheap socks had not fared so well and my dingy T-shirt looked like the skin of Frankenstein. I had one of Boromir’s tunics and a big blanket to wear when I needed to repair my own clothes. My own stuff got saved for the nighttime firelight for this purpose.

“Do you remember much of your old life?” Sam never got enough of my past.

“I remember some of it,” I said.

“I remember all of mine,” he said wistfully. “Almost all, I suppose the little things are lost, but the big things...aye, those I remember every day.”

“I try to remember,” I said. “But some days I just can’t. It’s like trying to take hold of mist.”
He nodded. “Do you think it’s the magic, then?”

“I don’t know.” I peered at the hem. “It may be. I have no prior experience with magic.”

“There was no magic for us,” he said. “We just packed it up and left the Shire behind.”

“I know.”

“I wish you could recall, lady, but I know you can’t, so I’ll not ask.” Sam put his small hand on the back of my wrist. “But I wish you could. I should like to know what such feels like.”

“I would tell you if I could, Sam.” I smiled. “I would keep no secrets from you.”

“Aye, well then.” He turned pink. “I think some secrets are best kept closer than others.”

“Indeed, Sam. I think you’re right.”

“I’m gonna start the cookin now, if you’d like to part with those mushrooms,” he said, nodding to my pack. “And those herbs you have tied to the top, there.”

“Oh, yes, go ahead,” I said.

Frodo moved the blanket around his shoulders. “Are you going to read to us tonight?”

“I don’t know.” I gathered up the cloak in my lap. “I hadn’t thought much on it.”

“Seeing as we have the extra time, and could use a spot of relaxation, I think it would be nice,” said Frodo. “I for one would dearly appreciate it.”

“I would hear about the travelers in the desert,” said Pippin.

“Nay,” said Merry. “I want to hear about the father and the hundred acres.”

“Maybe I’ll choose something different,” I said. “Maybe I’ll choose neither of those things.”

Sam looked at me. “You have something different?”

Merry and Pippin looked at each other. “You mean there’s more?”

“Yes.” I put aside the mending. “I do, there is more, but it’s a bit…I don’t know. I don’t think ribald is the right word, for it demands a little more respect than that. I have a story written by a woman about being in love.”

“Awww.” Merry pulled a face. “Is it full of flowers…and…and…poetry?”

“What’s wrong with poetry?” asked Frodo.

“Nothing, when it’s good poetry,” said Sam. “I think they only mean the awful stuff.”

Gandalf smiled.

“Oh my love it is red like a rose;“ Pippin chimed in. “And twice as stinky. And other such fanciful things?”

Merry laughed.

“I dunno.” Sam blushed. “Sounds like it could be a nice story.”
“No, it doesn’t have flowers and poetry in it,” I said. “It has honesty and sex. But I don’t think you’d like it.”

Merry sat down beside me. “Is that why you haven’t offered before now?”

“Yes, I think so. I just didn’t think it had much to offer in the way of storytelling out loud. Meaning there are no big wars, or small ones, or scenes where there is merrymaking or where one person is telling themselves to another. It’s a good story, but it might be the best kind when its told to the self.”

“I think it sounds nice,” said Pippin. “I should like to try listening to it.”

“Me as well,” said Merry.

Sam fidgeted. “You don’t suppose it’s too…blushy, do you?”

“If it is, I promise I’ll stop. Or I’ll just skip over those parts. How’s that?”

“I think it sounds fair,” said Boromir.

“What are you speaking of?” Aragorn walked into the camp and unshouldered a load of fresh meat.

“Janet has a new story to read from,” said Merry. “She says that it’s about love and honesty and there’s sex but no silliness. Is that right?”

Aragorn’s eyebrows went up.

“It’s a fair way of putting it,” I said.

“Sounds like a good story,” he said. “Did you write it?”

I turned pink. “Oh, no. I didn’t write it.”

“I would like to hear it just the same,” he said.

Sam gathered the forage from where people had left it and went to the built-up fire. He busied himself with the meat.

Aragorn looked at me. He nodded. “After dinner, then?”

“For a short while,” I said. “For a short while, yes.”
I sat close to the fire and skimmed over the text. “Uh, I don’t know if this is going to work.”

Aragorn held a pipe but didn’t smoke it. He rested his forearm on his knee. “Why don’t you try?”

“The whole thing is obviously too long, and I’m looking for a good place.” I looked around at the faces limned in firelight. “A good place to start that sort of contains…everything else.”

The hobbits huddled together and watched me with eyes made wide and solemn in the floating darkness. Boromir sat back to back with Aragorn and used the firelight to sharpen the blade of his sword. The whetstone made long slow ringing scrapes against the metal. His hand moved with patience, describing the slight arc forged into the blade. He lifted his profile slightly and turned the blade over on his knee. “I feel your eyes on me.” He didn’t look up from his work. “I am listening.”

His words flustered me. “I could go with something else.”

“The vigor of your denial has only made this story of yours more interesting,” said Gimli. “I would hear it, myself, every word.”

“Well, not every word,” I said. “There are a couple hundred words and not enough night left to repeat every one.”

Gandalf looked at me. “But a few.”

“Aye.” I looked back. “A few.”

I found a page and traced a beginning with my fingertips. I cleared my throat. “Love it was that brought them forth. Love that brought them home again. Love hardened their hands against the oar and heated their sinews against the rain. The journeys they made were beyond common sense; who leaves the hearth for the open sea?” I looked at Legolas and his eyes had gone to a shadowed place. “Especially without a compass,” I continued. “Especially in winter, and especially alone. What you risk reveals what you value. In the presence of love, hearth and risk become one. She kissed me and in her kiss lay the complexity of passion. Lover and child, virgin and roué. Had I ever been kissed before?”

Aragorn shifted his legs into the lotus position. “You say the author of this tale is female.”

“Yes, she is.” I looked up. “But her speaker is male. Or, rather, it does not say whether or not the speaker is male. The reader is left to infer what he or she wills.”

“Forgive my interruption,” he said. “Go on.”

“I was as shy as an unbroken colt,” I continued. “I was full of swagger. This was the woman I had made love with yesterday, her taste was fresh in my mouth, but would she stay? I quivered like a schoolgirl. ‘You’re shaking,’ she said. ‘I must be cold,’ I said. ‘Let me warm you,’ she said. We lay down on my floor, our backs to the day. I needed no more light than was in her touch, her fingers brushing my skin, bringing up the sensation. Eyes closed I began a voyage down her spine, the cobbled road of hers that brought me to a cleft and a damp valley and then a deep pit to drown in.” I felt the red faces rather than saw them and swallowed before I continued: “What other places
are there in the world than those discovered on a lover’s body?”

“A lucky few traverse such country, in the manner you have described,” said Gandalf. “It is a
day beautifully wrought.”

“I didn’t write it,” I murmured. “A lady by the name of Jeanette Winterson did.”

“You read this woman’s work very well,” he said.

I looked at the pages. “Thank you.”

“Is there more?” asked Boromir.

“Yes. Would you like to hear more?”

“I would.” He set the sword at his side and settled with his legs out in front of him. “I would like to
very much, thank you.”

“We were quiet together after we made love.” I let my voice flow into the words. “We watched the
afternoon sun fall across the garden, the long shadows of early evening making patterns on the
white wall. I was holding Louise’s hand, conscious of it, but sensing too that a further intimacy
might begin, the recognition of another person that is deeper than consciousness. I couldn’t know
her well, and yet I did know her well. That afternoon it seemed I had always been here with Louise.
We were familiar.”

“Louise must be very beautiful, for the teller to speak so,” said Boromir, looking up at the stars.
“Like all the stars in the sky.”

“She is,” I said. “The way she is described, I would say that yes, she is beautiful. Or the narrator’s
eyes have made her so, and since the narrator is telling the story that is what we’ll see. The narrator
says that Louise has hair like a cloud of orange-winged butterflies. It is something about the
motion of it and the way it flows around her head.”

Aragorn smiled. “Well, if those aren’t the eyes of love, I don’t know what they are.”

“I wish I could say such beautiful things,” sighed Sam.

“Thank you, Janet,” said Gandalf. “That was exceptionally lovely.”

I put the book away.

“Would you tells us now about the horizon made of blood?” said Merry. “And the men in the
desert?”

“No, no,” I said. “I don’t think so. I think you’ve heard enough of my voice tonight.”

“Aww.” Pippin slumped in his disappointment.

“Tomorrow night, I promise,” I said. “I’ll read tomorrow night.”

“I liked it,” said Frodo. “It was nice.”

“You have so many books,” said Aragorn. “I know I have mentioned this before but it’s such a
rarity. You were a student?”

I didn’t like how the use of the past tense made me feel. “I was. I suppose I still am.”
Aragorn nodded. “What did you study?”

“Words.” I shrugged. “Language. I was a writer, but…”

“You were a writer, after the manner of this woman Winterson?” Boromir turned to look at me. He gestured to my pack. “Did you write words like this?”

I blushed. “I don’t think I ever wrote them as well as she did, but yes, I was a writer who wrote stories. Some of them were part of my studies and some of them were for pleasure, and a few of them were for money.”

“You wrote in books,” said Legolas.


“What sorts of stories did you write?”

“I-I wrote about…love, and people, and how they are with each other. Like every other writer does, I suppose.” I shrugged. “At school I studied other writers. Their stories, as well as things like history and the natural world. But I’m tired. I don’t want to talk about this any more. I should go to bed.”

“Are you all right?” asked Aragorn.

“Yes, I’m fine. Really.” I pulled the blanket tighter around me. “I’m just…it’s been a very long day, and I’m starting to feel it. I’ll move away some from the fire as not to disturb your conversation. There’s a space over there.” I gestured. “I’ll go over there. I’ll be over there.”

“Good night, Janet,” said Sam.

“Aye,” echoed Merry and Pippin. “Have a good sleep.”

I gathered up my blankets and moved into the lee of a stone. The stone blocked most of the firelight. I made my bed and climbed inside it and tried not to listen to the men. They did a good job of keeping their voices low. The crackle of the fire seemed louder and the wind moving among the bushes both soothing and compelling, but it was the balm of mixed human voices, no matter how indistinct, that my restless mind kept battenning to. I balled up my sweatshirt and tucked it beneath my cheek. I was warm enough and the stones kept the wind off me but nonetheless I shivered. I heard feet on the stony ground. I heard the little branches of bushes shiver and I knew those feet didn’t belong to Legolas.

“Janet?”

“I’m all right.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing bothering you?”

“I said that I am all right!” I winced at the hiss. “Can’t you ever just…I don’t know, get the point?”

He sighed.

“I feel out of place. Tonight I feel it keenly. I’d like to be alone.”

Gandalf sat down beside me. “You can’t always be alone.”
I took hold of his hand. “I know. But I can always want it.”

He rotated my wrist so the top of my hand faced the sky. He touched the knuckles, then settled his fingers over it. They were cool at the tips and roughened where they joined the palm. His other hand was hot, the spaces between the fingers exhaling into my skin. I pondered my skin, the surface of it, and knew the cells were not the same cells that had been there months ago, even weeks ago: it occurred to me in that moment that there may have been no part left on the surface of me, any bit of skin or single hair, that remembered what it was to be a student. My outermost layer was built entirely of nutrients extracted from Middle-earth. Another year or two and the hair on my head would yield, and so would my nails, and then my external surrender would be complete. How long before every cell in my body replaced itself? Seven years?

“I don’t know if I’m speaking English or Westron,” I whispered. “I’m losing my distinction.”

“I don’t think you will ever lose your distinction,” he said.

I put my fingers through his. “I hope not.”

“You don’t have to sleep.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t. You can get up. You can join us.”

“Maybe later.” I sighed. “Maybe later.”

“Maybe.” He unfolded his hand from mine. He unlaced his fingers and placed my palm on my breast, in the vicinity of my heart. The aureole of my breast prickled and wrinkled in effort, pushing the flat-topped cone of nipple up through the layers of shirt and blanket. It burrowed into the heat of my palm. His fingers curled over mine. My eyes widened and I remained still as my heart thudded against the junctures of all the little bones buried inside my hand. “Maybe later,” he said. “But sleep now, if you will.”

“All right,” I said.

He got up and walked back to the fire and I felt hot and cold, strange and calm, here and there, all at once.
The Doorway (I)

Gandalf woke me in the middle of the night. It was deep into the darkness and I was sleepy, I fought off his insistence but there was something buried in his voice that hauled me up and out of sleep. I blinked at the dark and waited for the stars in the sky to make sense. I looked at him. He was a ragged shadow against the sky. That he’d kindled no light at all, not a candle or a torch, disturbed me. I looked around at the camp, at its shapes of wrapped-up bodies, and into the slumbering red glint of the fire. I sat up, feeling the wind blow in off the stony hills. The air was soft and held too much warmth. I sniffed and made a face.

“Yes,” whispered Gandalf. “I smell it too.”

“What is that? It’s so familiar, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Shhhh,” he said. “Don’t wake the others. Get up. Come with me.”

I pushed back my rolls of blankets. The sky was black, a-sprawl with a mess of cold white stars. The wind felt blunted with a hint of new spring; that breath of rain and the first tentative touches of the sun upon the earth in April, coaxing the sweet green out of the soil the way a bridegroom would coax the first flushes of pleasure out of his bride when she has finally cast off the long white gown of her virginity. The rocky landscape was barren and forbidding. There was no space between shoulders of stone for a breath of flowers. Besides, it was the wrong season for it. No blossom rooted in this thin cold soil breathed such a cloying perfume. I got up, picking my way through the camp. Gandalf touched my elbow. He led me past the perimeter and down a slope scruffed up with dense prickly cedars and paved with loose gravel. The shaggy bark scraped the skin on my ankles. That peculiar sweet discordant smell hung everywhere.

“I want you to tell me something,” he said.

“What?”

“I want to know if you have ever seen one of these before.”

“One of what before?”

Gandalf pushed aside some unruly branches. Beyond them, tucked away in a spill of immense fallen slabs, was a small clearing. The ground inside of it was bare and blackened. In the center was a free-standing stone doorway. There was no door, only an arch to shape the night. Gandalf put a hand on my shoulder, but I slipped out from beneath it and walked down into the clearing. I moved in a slow circle around the doorframe. I touched the stone. The masonry was weather-worn and smooth at the joints; it had once been decorated with lines, but the edges had softened and crumbled beneath the centuries of rain. That heavy fragrance lingered everywhere; it seemed to seep up through the charred dust and pool like the mist in a low damp place.

“I smell…desert,” I murmured. “Desert…and water, even though it’s strange to smell them both at once.” I stroked the stone. “Orange blossom, and something else, something…night-blooming.” I rested my hand on it. “It’s warm the way a rock will be warm at night after a day spent living in the desert. This is where the heat is coming from. And the smell.” I looked at Gandalf. “What is this place? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

My eyebrows went up. “You don’t know? What do you mean, you don’t know? Aren’t you
supposed to know everything? Can’t you look in your magic hat or something?"

He chuckled. “There is much that I do not know. How you came to be here, and where this
doorway goes. It is not supposed to be here, I do know that. In all of my travels this way I have
never seen this place.”

“Doorway? Doorway to where?”

“I don’t know, Janet. I believe it’s for you.”

“What? Why me? Why not you? You’re the wizard, for fuck’s sake. Aren’t magic doorways kinda
your thing?”

Gandalf sighed. He shifted his robes and sat down on a low-backed stone. He took a deep breath
before letting it out. “Things are coming apart, I think.” He let his hands dangle between his knees.
“There are places on the land that feel worn-out to me. They weren’t always so. I don’t know how
this can be. It is said that once the Ring is destroyed, the restoring powers of the remaining three
would decline. Indeed, this should be so. A world cannot live in stasis. Things must move on. But,
the One remains here, safe for the moment, and the three remain intact.” He looked at the
doorway. “This is not a thin place but it feels like a thin place. I don’t understand how.”

“Built by who? This whole mysterious thing is not working for me, Gandalf. It’s kind of chapping
my ass. Can I get a straight answer from you, just once, without it having to be a mystery dipped in
a puzzle that’s all fried up nice and crisp in an enigma coating?”

He smiled a little. “You have amused me, and pleased me, greatly on this journey.”

“What does any of this have to do with the goddamned door?”

“Janet.” He looked at her through starlight. “How does this make you feel?”

“Pissed as hell. I was having a really nice dream.”

“What about?”

I folded my arms. “Nothing…I don’t remember.”

“This is a serious question, Janet. I mean what I say, exactly the way I say it.”

“Well, it was…I’m not sure how to explain it. Like going through the wind. Being in it. I was in
this guy’s office but he couldn’t see me. In his place of work, I mean. There were books there and I
thought that if I could get a hold of them, I would know where I was. Like there was a map, or an
encyclopedia, or something.” I pause. “I came in through the window.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.” I blushed. “I think so.”

“Your face tells me that you’re leaving something out, but I’m not sure you need to leave it in. It
doesn’t matter. Have you ever seen this door before?”

“No!”

“Have you seen it in dreams?”

“No, not even…I don’t think so.” I bit my lip and looked at the doorway standing in the dark,
clothed in shadows and redolent of night-blooming flowers. “I don’t think so,” I whispered.

“It’s all right, Janet.” He reached out for my hand. “It’s all right.”

“It’s, umm…I don’t know, awakening something in me. I want to touch it. There might be a door like this in the old country, but if it’s there I haven’t seen it. At a place in ruins. It looks like a ruin but it doesn’t feel like one. I want to go there. I want to see it. My body responds to this place. To this smell. It’s like a body-memory, those feelings locked deep in the flesh.” I looked at him. “It doesn’t feel this way for you?”

“No,” he murmured.

“I’m not sure I like the way it feels,” I said, my breath growing lighter. “It’s good, but it’s also bad. Like I couldn’t stop myself.”

He held my hand between both of his own. “Stop yourself from what?”

“From…from going through it. Just flinging it open and letting all of that heat rush in. Letting myself rush out. It’s making me feel strange.”

“How?”

“Light. Like I’m not even here. Do I feel solid?”

“Yes, solid as flesh.”

I thought of turning back, of returning to my bed. Maybe the door would be gone in the morning. Yet even if I was gone in the morning, the sensation of that stone would live on inside my fingertips. The stones in my bones would fumble. It would come out when I least expected it. If I kissed Legolas I would taste those savage secret blossoms that were like orange blossoms but not; I would touch something and feel the warm insistent stone beneath my fingertips and then the longing would begin. I would dream of doors and think of doors that tasted like heat. No one would see me because I wouldn’t be able to see myself. I would walk balanced on the fringes of their long shadows. Each day would drift apart like milkweed fluff. All doors inside me would remain closed until this one opened. I would live in bated existence. It would be a delirious kind of hell.

“It’s speaking to me,” I marveled. “It’s so seductive. Should I trust something that is so seductive?”

But Gandalf wasn’t there. He’d left me alone in the clearing.
In Other Worlds, Other Times

It troubled him to be so far from home.

A thirst for adventure simmered in Frodo’s spirit. It had whispered in Frodo’s childish ear, taken root in the tween years and blossomed through adulthood into a tiny tenacious flower. Sam loved this about Frodo. It was not such a surprise that Frodo should find himself cast out of the Shire; it was not such a surprise that Gandalf would choose him for this task out of Elves and Dwarves and Men. Reluctance crept upon Frodo only when the memory of a warm bed and a full belly receded before the reality of the road. Sam ached.

But he had made a promise.

The two of them lay in a grove of old trees. For a wonder the ground was cushioned in sweet-scented moss, and they had made their bed between a pair of gnarled roots. The campfire was a scuffed smudge. The shadows drew close and wrapped them in velvet darkness, exhaled the sweet fumes of green leaves and rich hidden earth. Frodo curled tight by his side. Sam kept his arm around his shoulders and pillowed his head with his pack and looked up between the interlacing branches, counting the stars that peered through fluttering leaves.

“There are the same stars,” he whispered. “Same as those twinkling over the Green Dragon. Same as those over Bag End.”

Sam longed for comfort, but there was none to be had. He placed his nose against Frodo’s forehead and fell into a fitful sleep.

* * *

Why do you not show your faces?

We come for what is ours.

There is an eerie quality to the way they speak. They do so as one, voices flowing into a rhythm reminiscent of lonely winter wind, of rattling dust and the murmuring seashores he has only heard rumor of.

Show me your faces!

It is not in your authority to command us.

The air ripples. Sam feels it pressing into him, a weight of drowsy water rolling over his limbs. There are nine of them. Their horses are tethered in a ring around the grove of trees. Sam looks around at the trees, at their weathered and dignified trunks. The horses are the color of ash and restless. The nine figures are still. Their black robes flicker in and out of the shadows, as though their hold on reality is tenuous and febrile. Sam listens for breath but hears none but his own. The leaves rustle a bit, as if in response to the touch of his eyes.

I shall call the trees upon you. Sam blushes and feels foolish as the words leave his mouth. He is hobbled with hot shame. Why, they are nothing but trees!
Our herald is the desert, they say in creepy unison. Their voices rise and fall within the words, drawing gooseflesh from Sam’s skin. And we shall suffer only dust.

I don’t understand.

Give us the Ring.

No!

Frodo awakens. Sam feels his return to consciousness long before he stirs and stretches and utters a moaning yawn. Sam pulls Frodo’s face into his chest. His hair is disheveled and knotted with dried leaves. No, says Sam. Go back to sleep. This is only a dream.

Frodo grins and pushes him away with a sleepy chuckle. If it is a dream, why do you implore me to sleep?

Go back to sleep, Frodo.

Am I not already asleep?

Give us the Ring.

Frodo sits up and turns around. He takes in one big gulp of air and clutches the chain at his throat. His voice sharpens. In whose name?

He is Aulëndil. He is Annatar. He is called Lord of Mordor. He is Sauron.

No!

Such is not for you.

I will not.

The pain shall pass.

No. I’ll not surrender it.

The pain shall pass.

It is mine.

The pain shall pass.

Frodo closes his mouth and confusion drifts over his features. His fingers flex and pull on the chain. It hurts me.

We know.

It is a burden.

We know.

This charge was laid upon me.

We know.

I cannot give it up.
Sam watches in mounting horror and drowning disbelief as Frodo’s trembling hand pulls at the chain. He grunts. With a grimace the weak clasp breaks. As if it is a vine growing across the ground, his arm snakes out into the darkness. A long-fingered hand passes through the space beneath Frodo’s fist. Sam sees a loose sleeve and black skin and curved talons. A closer look reveals fine stitching and ornamental bits of metal fastened to the fingertips. They are gloves. Silver falls in a soft heap across the leather palm. The Ring slides into a valley of flesh.

The world is rocked asunder and

* * *

Frodo shook him awake.

“Sam! Wake up!”

Sam gasped. He opened his eyes.

“The Ring! It’s gone!”
Through The Doorway

The voice began in my bones and breathed through my ears and traveled outside, hovering near my panting lips with a taste of lemons and broken roses come in come through come in the arms of the land are waiting and though I feared the words I loved them too.

Stepping through felt like so many things: a reversal of gravity over a sparkling dark pool, an inhalation, the first tingle of awareness sparking along my bottommost layer of skin, the loosening of a memory that is beginning to rot. In the spaces between the tatters, lining the gentle whisper of the fragments as they hit the floor, I knew the things that wouldn’t happen he killed a doe and together we tied her spindly back legs and hauled the delicate carcass up onto the lowest branch of a maple tree I cut her throat and the blood spilled like dispassionate rubies we breathed in concert I loosened the liver and pulled it out my hands scarlet to the elbows his long frame twisted and his hands crawled over mine my mouth softened and my fingers glided between his knuckles, borne aloft on the slick and gristle, the lightness, the stink of loosened ordure I sunk into my breath and his fingers were very strong he touched my face and he kissed my mouth and left red handprints on my exposed skin and I marked him with scarlet streaks and he licked the juncture of my throat and I shivered like a droplet of water hanging off the tip of a leaf until I broke through into a different place fashioned of fevered breath and hotter skin and blood that yearned to surface and moan into the ground with the blood of the fallen deer and I knew the things that couldn’t happen in the ankles, like a wind was blowing up inside there but it was a soft wind, a whisper it would have been if the wind had a voice, something whispering between the wool and his skin like the Serpent in the Garden sliding into his mouth and tasting of the things that never happened but it was okay it was the all-right come out of a fragrant desert night to take hold of me and lead me out of this dream within a dream within the place that has no name in-between such long smooth strange silken seconds and I was through. I felt the heat on my skin and knew that I was through. A new world full of palm trees rattling in the dust-scented wind. I saw flowers. White and ghostly, floating in the shadowlands I smelled water riding the breast of a desert night and stood in the heart of the unformed. I tripped and fell. My cheek hit the sand and it was like all of me slammed at once back into my bones. Something in me cracked.

No. The word bent beneath a weight of mourning. Nooooooooooo. It bent into an owl’s cry and chased the hollow notes rattling around inside a hollow of stone. I tasted dust and wanton flowers. Noooooooooo. The sound went wherever sounds go to die. The earth beneath me felt infected. I pressed my lips to the warm stone.
It was with laughter that Saruman greeted him upon the stairs of Orthanc; deep and hearty laughter that delivered dread in its sonorous power. Gandalf knew in an instant that Saruman had crossed some threshold within himself, that all hope of wisdom had been abandoned to a strange and seductive form of madness. Saruman flicked a dismissive hand at him, a hand bedecked with a golden ring.

“Tarry not, Gandalf the Grey,” said the wizard. “For you shall find no counsel here. That which you would hold back with words has gone like water over a dam.”

“What? Whatever do you mean?”

“Why, it is the One,” said Saruman, with an unsettling chuckle. “It has rejoined its maker. A new day is dawning, Gandalf. One in which there is no White and no Grey. A dawn of many colors.”

“Sauron has the Ring?”

“Ride to Mordor,” said Saruman. “Ride, and you shall see.”

“You’ve gone mad!”

“Ride to Mordor.” Saruman smiled and let loose more of that indulgent mirth. “That is my counsel.”

“I’ll not surrender myself to Sauron.”

“We are done here,” said Saruman.

Gandalf watched in rooted shock as the wizard retreated to his tower. The sun gleamed warm and a river-scented breeze blew through the trees. A bird sang somewhere. All around him the world seemed unchanged for the news; his viscera nursed the blow and his lungs labored to regain their breath.
I laid on the new ground for a long time. The night settled on top of me, sighing its long warm stone-scented breaths into my ears. There was faint moonlight. The silver of it clung to all surfaces like a coating of uneasy mercury. I put my hands beneath me and pushed myself up into a squatting position. My right shoulder throbbed where it had struck the ground at an angle and I held onto it as I looked around. I saw black outlines of palm trees silhouetted against a star-crammed sky. The moon was half-full, and on the wane; close to a fortnight had passed through the door along with me. I smelled strange flowers and dark mud. I looked over my shoulder and found no door. I saw palm fronds and what looked to be distant mountains. The scent reminded me of orange blossoms

"I am really very sorry about this." It was a male voice that smelled like old libraries steeped in blood and it kept itself low, as though imparting a great secret. A large silver blade hovered in the spare inch above my throat. "But I have learned as of late that women aren’t always the gentler sex."

My breath rushed out of me. Adrenaline struck sparks in my vision. "If you can see me well enough to put a knife to my throat, you can see me well enough to see that I’m not armed." I swallowed. "You speak English."

"Well, yes."

"You haven’t been here long enough to know what a rarity that is. Do you have any Westron words at all?"

"Westron? I am not familiar with such a language as ‘Westron.’ If you would put your hands out, please."

I held myself very still. "How did you get here?"

"What we’re going to do now is this.” Each word sharpened more than the last, until the sibilant conclusion felt like a razor. "If you have any weapons, you’re going to divest yourself of them. You’re going to put them on the ground. Am I making myself plain?"

"I told you.” I put my hands out and spread my fingers. “I don’t have any fucking weapons!”

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"I’m not carrying.” My breathing quickened. “Go ahead and pat me down if you don’t believe me. I’ll old my arms out. I’ll even hold still for you.”

"That you’ll do anyway.” A hand patted the back waistband of my jeans. It moved around the front, flattening the pockets. It groped the back pockets. “Take off your boots.”

"Fuck yourself."

"Profanity is the last resort of the ignorant. It is a mark of low breeding and does not impress me in the least. I’ve already apologized. Take them off, please.”
“Oh, fine. Go fornicate with your fist, then. Besides, they’re laced. I can’t unlace them from a
standing position, and you can’t do it for me while keeping me subdued, something that you don’t
need to be doing, by the way, because I am not armed.” The hum of agitated night bugs went on
and on. “You’re assuming, and I suppose that I should be flattered by this.” A breathless laugh
crept into my throat. “You’re assuming that I have some sort of weapon in my boots and that I’m
fast enough to throw you off and get hold of it and use it to overcome you, or to work some other
sort of wickedness on you, which is all just so…fucking…funny. For instance, I can’t see you. For
all I know you’re a three hundred pound bouncer type. So, where are you from? The United
Kingdom somewhere? How did you get here?” I put a hand on his wrist. “Was there a door?”

He pulled his arm back. “How did you know about the door?”

“How do you think I got here?”

“How am I supposed to know a thing like that?”

“Since we’re from the same place, I thought it would be a given. How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know.”

I turned around. “You don’t know? What do you mean, you don’t know? How can you not know?”

There was just enough moonlight for me to see that he was a man my own age, of average height,
slightly thickened through the middle. He had dark receding hair that had grown flyaway out of a
once respectable style and clothes that looked like they’d been forced on a thousand mile march:
white shirt stained, missing buttons, frayed at the cuffs, collar gone, pants patched up with pieces
of cloth hacked out of the limp carcass of his sport coat. He’d cut the tops of his shoes down into
makeshift sandals and strips of braided coat held them tight to his feet. The sport coat still had its
arms, and they were tied tight around his waist. Over the sport coat hung a dark leather belt with a
long sheath for the knife. There was a holster for a pistol, but it was empty. Jammed inside of it
was something that looked like a pineapple. Its tuft of hard pointed leaves jutted out at a angle. I let
out a shocking bray of laughter. At the sound I clapped my hands over my mouth but the shivering
giggles spilled through my fingers, flooding into the silence of the warm night. I tried to take deep
breaths, but I glanced at the pineapple again and laughed so hard that tears shot out of my eyes. My
heart crammed itself into my throat and throbbed. I was convinced that I was going to die, sure of
it, that this strange man was going to fling his knife into my throat, that it was going to stick there
and quiver like a trick in a sideshow carnival, that I would drown in my own frothy blood, but none
of these thoughts made the image of the pineapple any less funny. “This is…this is…oh my God,
this is a W-Walter Mitty…nightmare!”

“You’re barking.”

I laughed so hard that I gagged.

“You’re going to be ill if you don’t calm yourself.”

All of the loose adrenaline piled up on me and I bent over, my evening’s venison splattering across
the dusty ground.

“There you go.”

“It’s the pineapple,” I gasped.

He returned the knife to its sheath. He took careful hold of the spiny leaves and pulled the fruit out
of the holster. “It originally belonged to a rather large gun. The holster, that is. They are spiny, you
I burst out laughing. “I’m sorry… I know I shouldn’t laugh, but oh!” I fell on my ass and giggled. “The incongruity of this entire situation is hitting my funny bone in all the right places. Would you like to have a seat beside this dusty road and perhaps share the mighty pineapple of doom?”

He looked at her for a moment. He sat down.

“What happened to your gun?”

“I lost it,” he said. “It came from some other place. I arrived here and it wouldn’t work.” He sliced the top off the pineapple. “I don’t remember much about it. The other place, that is.” The sunny sweet scent leaked into the air. “It wasn’t a very nice place.”

“How long were you there?”

He sliced off the top of the fruit. He cut a slice and pinched the center of it, peeling away the tough outer rind. “I’m not sure.” Juice dripped off his knuckles. He handed the skinned slice to me. “A long time. And you?”

“A long time as well,” I said. “Long enough.”

“It’s the same for me.” He cut a piece for himself. “Long enough.”

I took a bite. The flesh was sweet and soft, tart and honeyed, melting away from the pulpy core. Saliva squirted out of my mouth and landed across my wrist. I wiped it on my jeans.

“Are you American?”

“Yes.”

He cut away a second slice. “Whereabouts?”

“New England.” The acid in the pineapple juice reddened my cuticles. I licked my fingers. “And you?”

“Ireland, by way of England as an older man.”

“Have you seen anyone else?”

“No.” He chewed. “But this is a road, so there will be someone.”

I gnawed the last shreds of pulp away from the fibrous core. “Have you been on the road long?”

“A few days. Perhaps a week.” He gave me another slice. “Time does funny things out here.”

I took a juicy bite. “This is delicious. I don’t think I’ve ever had anything taste so good to me. What is your name?”

“Jack,” he said.

“I’m Janet. Where did you get it? The pineapple, I mean?”

“There’s a river. Listen closely and you’ll hear it flowing. The banks are thick with them.”
Brothers

It was a place where they had gone as children, whenever they wished to escape the grind of chores or the dusty mantle of duty. Warm sunny days and troubled hearts brought them often to this hollow place in the rocks; it sat high on the mountainside, a little bowl of stone set the crown of a narrow and dangerous footpath. Arriving there was a good two hours’ time spent grappling with loose rocks and inadequate hand holds, but the view was pleasing to the eye and mind: Osgiliath, the broad green fields of Pelennor, and the distant brooding Mountains of Shadow. Minas Tirith lay below. Her bulk clung to the flank of the mountain like a woman in fear, her snow white skirts spreading out around her.

Faramir needed to think. The wind was cold and he drew his cloak tighter about his shoulders. He looked down upon the city. A kind of apathetic simmer swept through it. Three days ago something or someone had set fire to the Tree. With dense black smoke and stink it burned root, twig, and branch; nothing remained now but a sullen smoldering stump. Was it a stray flash of lightning escaped from their frequent summer storms? Was it foul intent? Tongues kept speculation alive, but in initiative the bodies attached to them were sadly lacking. No investigation had been mounted. The guards stood in their position and watched with stoic faces as people passed by the stump and marveled. His father sat upon the steward’s throne and stared into the dark as though the dark had begun to look back. He sunk ever deeper into the troubled waters of his mind. Maybe the dark did indeed have eyes.

“This bodes ill.”

Faramir watched his brother ascend the leg of the path.

Boromir climbed over the shelf of rock and sat down beside his brother. He leaned forward, forearms dangling off his knees. The chill breeze blew back his hair.

“What bodes ill?”

“I find you up here,” said Boromir. “Is it thoughts of the Tree that drew you hence, or is it Father’s foul mood?”

“Both,” mumbled Faramir.

“A fair enough answer.” Boromir clapped Faramir’s shoulder. “Tis the same for me. Well half, anyway, by my reckoning. Father’s mood darkens like the storms over yon mountains.” He gestured toward the Mountains of Shadow. “Would that his anger be like something bred in Mordor. Elrond of Rivendell has summoned a council. It is Father’s will that I go.” Boromir looked away. “I do not wish it. But I will go.”

“Elrond has called a council?”

“The death of the Tree came to him in a dream,” said Boromir. “There is more, but he wishes only to reveal it in the company of a chosen few. He sent for emissaries. Father named me representative of Gondor.”

Faramir smiled. “It is an honor.”

“Not conferred to one such as I,” he said. “I am no diplomat. I’m not a thinker. The emissary to
Rivendell should be a thinker and one who sees with his heart rather than his mind. He should have subtlety with words."

Boromir looked at him. “It should be you, brother.”

Faramir’s cheeks turned pink. “I…it is not all as you say. I have no subtlety with words. I struggle to find words!”

“The subtlety is in your mind,” insisted Boromir. “And the quality of your heart has no equal. But it does not matter. Father has assigned to me this task and I will take it. Watch your back, little brother.” Boromir glanced at his brother. “I don’t know why it is Father hates you so much.”

In that moment Faramir, who had thoughts of his own, kept his own counsel. He watched Boromir, but Boromir’s attention was given to the borders of Mordor. The mountains there were shrouded in towering black thunderheads. Lightning flashed within them, the forks and jags of their shapes a veiled mystery.

“Watch your back,” Boromir went on. “Keep to the Ithilien.”

“Such was my thought,” said Faramir.

“Stay out of the city. It will not be safe.”

“When do you leave?”

“Morning,” said Boromir. “At first light.”
In The Shadow Of The Shadow

He’d drawn close to the borderlands, though never this close: the softening shade of the Ithilien cast a buffer between he and Mordor, an ambiance of rustling leaves and fertile earth and strong sunlight tempered by snow-cooled winds whipping across the Pelennor. It was morning and sunshine broke across the land. The sky to his back shone muted shades of blue. Gandalf walked in the lee of Ephel Dúath, jagged and soot-streaked mountains rearing up between his eyes and the first golden notes of the day.

I stand in the shadow of the Shadow.

He followed the old road, beaten into the receding wiry grass and strewn underfoot with loose black gravel. These mountains bore no green gown of trees, no sparkling streams, trailed no veils of sweet mist. They were hard and sharp and broken and crowned with constant towering storm clouds. Lightning flickered, buried deep within their bellies. The soft mutter of thunder rolled down the dusty slopes.

At sunset he approached the Morannon with blood red light cutting a swath across the stern face of the mountains and his shadow grown long and narrow upon the desolate ground. Spikes of pitted metal jutted from the structure, black velvet shapes cut out against a smudged starry sky. Torch flames flickered through iron teeth. He looked upon the ironclad gate and felt despair settle within his heart.

Ugly. It is a stain upon the earth.

A clang reverberated through the stillness. Gandalf waited, wincing at the squeal of reluctant hinges. A door opened at the base. Through it he could see flickering firelight and the outline of a well-built man.

“What do you want?”

“Not the welcome I’d hoped for,” said Gandalf.

“Greetings just the same. I should like admittance into your land, if you would grant such to a stranger.”

“Who are you?”

“I have many names.”

The man stepped beyond the threshold. A breastplate of dark metal girded his chest. His breeches were loose and the material was of light weave, dyed a rich purplish-red, and it rippled around his thighs in the breeze. Gauntlets sheathed his wrists and supple boots laced to his knees. It was too dark to make out his face, but Gandalf could see hair worn long in small braids and darkening around the eyes. A scimitar curved at his side.

“Whence do you come?”

“Eriador,” said Gandalf.

“That is a long way on foot.”
“My horse abandoned me in North Ithilien.”

“Come closer.”

Gandalf did as he was bid, moving with deliberation. He kept his eyes on the sentry. The wizard stepped into the half-circle of firelight and the features of the man revealed themselves. His skin was olive and his eyes amber, long lashes dusted and eyelids coated in a generous application of black powder. Small gold hoops dangled from his lobes. He had a nose like a hawk, full lips, and a bright pink scar stitched across his chin. Tattoos of delicate swirls traced his cheekbones and traversed the bridge of his nose, lacing together in a complicated knot between his eyebrows. He took Gandalf’s measure.

“Why do you come?”

“Why do you doubt?”

“Men of the West aren’t so kind to men of the East.”

“Would you allow me passage into your country?”

The sentry inclined his head. “Of course.”
They made slow progress, doubling back in places because Sam was too afraid to leave their sources of water behind and too fearful of the country beyond the familiar road. He hoped every day for passers-by, big folk on horses capable of speeding them to Bree. Their poor time was due to Frodo. Since the loss of the Ring he had fallen into strange delirium.

At times Frodo seemed himself: cheerful and talkative if a little worse for wear and prone to tiring, as though held in the grip of a lingering convalescence. By day it was not so bad. Together they could make good time. There would be laughter amidst the lethargy. By night Frodo was hesitant to sleep, for once he did he would cry out, tangled up in a web of cold sweating nightmares. Sam lay awake beside Frodo, both of them wrapped in blankets, his guts pierced by each broken scream. He stroked Frodo's hair each time a fresh batch of shudders worked through his flesh. Sam bore his clenched fingers, the ignorant scratching of his nails. Frodo's tears dripped on his neck. Sam rubbed his back and kissed his forehead and wept at the unwholesome temperature of his skin.

"Sam." His name fell from Frodo's lips like a flake of rust.

"I'm here."

"Good." Frodo gave him an exhausted smile. "You'll not leave me?"

"Never in life."

They had made camp at the banks of a tiny stream. Crickets tuned up in the watches of the night.

"It hurts," whispered Frodo. "Like the socket left behind by a rotten tooth."

"It'll be all right."

Frodo's fingers twined with his. "I very much fear that it won't."

"Shhh."

Sam lowered his face and kissed Frodo's small mouth. It was meant to be a placating gesture, a cool hand on a fevered brow, but Frodo's body stirred and his mouth went soft and hot. Sam hesitated. He felt it was wrong, that making love would be sullied by Frodo's debilitation. Frodo's tongue insinuated itself with tender insistence. A momentary ardor stirred his limbs, beating back the torpor and the fatigue. Frodo kissed with his entire being, all his desire and his breath thrown into his mouth. His need sizzled at the tips of his fingers. Frodo put a hand on the back of Sam's head and held him there. Sam moaned a little and fell into Frodo's arms. Frodo slipped a cool hand under his shirt, thumb stroking a nipple. Sam could not resist.

Frodo rolled beneath him. Sam settled his weight and touched the side of his face, aware of the wet sound of their mouths, their overlaid choppy breaths. Sam kissed Frodo's neck and remembered the first time, how their limbs had entangled upon the sheets in Bag End. He recalled the shame that had flamed in his face the first time he heard the noise of their kissing, echoing in the silence of that empty house. Love of men was discouraged in the Shire. Frodo had seduced him with his innocence, his assertion that love could never offend the natural order of things. How could something that feels so wonderful be a source of shame? Be ashamed of your shame, Frodo had murmured, leaving soft kisses all over the blush in his cheeks. For I love you and that's what makes
it right, and be damned to all the rest of them. The power of the memory washed through Sam. He loosened Frodo's buttons and painted the fair skin with his mouth, wanting to taste all of him, to strengthen in his mind the familiar texture of his nipples. He sucked on them until they were hard.

Frodo moaned. He opened Sam's shirt and pulled him close, bare bodies meeting in a press of silken heat. Frodo's fingers unbuttoned Sam's breeches and Sam gasped at the sensation of cold air on his cock. Frodo smiled and kissed him, then turned on his side reversed himself, taking the hard flesh into his mouth. He buried his lips in Sam's crotch, and the hobbit gasped again, this time at the sudden heat and the boldness of the gesture, the insane pleasure of it. Frodo sucked. Sam could not think. He lay sprawled on the ground, hips lifted and quivering, breath transmuted into whimpering moans. There was a soft woolen tent pitched in Frodo's pants, brushing against his cheek. Sam unbuttoned them with trembling fingers, struggling a little with his mounting breath. Frodo's cock sprung free. Sam sucked it into his mouth. He felt Frodo's body tense, heard him moan.

They had done this countless times. It was falling into a rhythm, keeping in tune with a plethora of subtle signals: change in breath, mounting tension under the skin, fresh moans, the swell and throb against the tongue. All these things they did without thought. Together they urged one another onward, striving toward rapture. Love and long experience made it both. They climaxed within seconds of each other, swallowing down the sweet cream, relaxing into the following warmth. Sam rested his head on Frodo's thigh. He stroked his navel and regained his breath. Frodo's hand cupped the curve of Sam's skull. He panted into the night, fingertips stroking curly hair.

"It's better," breathed Frodo.

"How do you mean?"


"Good."

Sam turned around and pulled the blankets up around them and took Frodo into his arms. Frodo rested his head on Sam's shoulder and snuggled there.

"Good," whispered Sam, unaware that he was crying. "That's so good."
Orange Blossom Honey

At the first silver flush of dawn a small caravan jangled up the road. The wagons were occupied by dark-skinned men in long sky-colored robes. The group of them stood at the roadside with the pink dawnlight casting long shadows, their bright robes blowing back in a wind that fluttered off the river. They uttered a few words of a guttural language and Jack saw the strangeness of the syllables mirrored in the lines on Janet’s face. The waters of the river coiled to the north, a slow bend of vicious blue glitter that lumbered off into a hazy horizon. He smelled the virtue of water living in a desert land, all the sweetness of its struggle caught inside its mineral breath of fish and reeds. The wooden wagons were loaded down with casks of orange-blossom honey. Bees hummed, drawn by the gagging sweet scent, stitching wide loops in their dust-plumed wake. Janet addressed the men in a different language; its rhythms sounded the way those of English would if they had been fashioned out of wax and left to warp in the sun. She waved a languid hand toward the crowded grove of date palms in which they’d spent the night. The men looked to each other, their dark faces wrinkled by a lifetime spent in the sun, and nodded. One of them went to the back of the first wagon and flipped open the rear flaps. Inside were boxes and bundles of supplies.

“Get in,” said Janet. “Thank God one of us speaks Westron.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Get in.” She stood squinting at him in the rapid ascent of the sun, her hands braced on her hips. “Just do it. You can question all of my decisions later.”

He did, chafing a bit beneath her impatient tone. She climbed up beside him and tucked herself into the remaining bit of space. The oldest of the men, a thin man who wore his hair shaved into a single long gray braided lock, brought a waterskin to them and a basket covered with a tied-down piece of cloth. The wind flipped the ends of his decorated hair against his waist. Janet took both and thanked him. The man nodded and pulled down the flaps, tying them into place. The strengthening sunlight leaked though the scarlet canopy, smearing them both in visceral shadow. The wagon started up. Janet propped the waterskin on her forearm and tipped it up. She wiped the loose droplets of water off her mouth and handed the skin over to him. He lifted it to his lips, watching as she untied the cords around the basket. Dust darkened the lines in her knuckles. The tattered blue fabric fell away to reveal small hard rolls of bread, a small clay jar sealed with orange beeswax, a bundle of salted meat, and two small pineapples. She took his knife out of its sheath and used the dull edge of long blade to chip away at the wax seal.

“What did you say to him?”

“Somewhere in Middle-earth, apparently,” she said. “Since they speak Westron.” She gnawed at the jar’s stopper. “I don’t know the other language. It doesn’t sound familiar to me at all.” She loosened the wax and pried the stopper loose. She peered inside the jar and stuck her fingertip in. It came out coated in a thick topaz glaze. She smiled. “Honey. Do you want some?”

“Yes, please.”

Janet sucked her finger and handed over the jar. He took it and sniffed. She broke open one of the rolls and crooked her finger beneath his nose, scooping up a little more of the honey. The wagon rocked and jounced, squealing in its wooden joints. She wiped the side of her finger on the white insides of a broken roll. She took a bite. “I think with longing to the day when I shall be able to take
a proper bath,” he said.

She shrugged. “Why? Dust like this will just get everywhere again. There’s really no point.”

He tasted the honey. The sweetness stung his mouth, bringing with it a heady bouquet of blossoms. His mouth filled with saliva and he rinsed it out with a swig of water. He held out his hand for the knife and she slid the hilt onto his palm. He used the tip of the blade to slice the strings on the bundle of preserved meat. He peeled the wrappings back. The meat inside was heavy and pink, marbled and encased in a thick rind of tanned fat. He carved a thin slice for Janet and a thin slice for himself. Janet sandwiched it into the remaining half of her roll. He rolled it up and took a bite. The flavor was rich and strong, its flavor similar to both pork and venison. The smoke imbued it with an unfamiliar taste, spicy and almost sweet. Janet folded her bread and took a bite. “This is good,” she said. “It’s almost like mesquite. I haven’t had mesquite in years. Well, not authentic mesquite, anyway.” She chewed. “I lived in Arizona for a while. You know, this would taste good with pineapple. We should slice one up.”

He picked up one of the pineapples. “Where is Middle-earth?”

Janet chuckled. “That, my friend, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn’t it? I have no idea.” She swallowed. “Before I found myself living and breathing in it, I thought it was nothing more than a myth in a book. Be careful with that.” She reached out and steadied the pineapple. “You don’t want to cut yourself. This thing has the rock and sway, you know?”


She swallowed. “You’ve never heard of Middle-earth?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Have you been living under a rock?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“I’m being serious,” she said. “Is this supposed to be dry British humor?”

He cut the top off the pineapple. “I assure you, I am being serious.”

Janet narrowed her eyes. “How old are you?”

“I am twenty-seven years old. I’m not sure what bearing my age has upon the question.”

She took another bite. “You look older. You sound it, too, actually. You’re like one of those guys who never had a real childhood.”

“I don’t care to discuss my childhood. It’s sufficient to assure you that I had one.”

“Well pardon me right the hell for living. I guess the crematorium is full-up.”

“What a tasteless thing to say.”

“Well that’s me, tasteless as a bowl of overcooked spag.” She took another bite of her sandwich before gesticulating with it. “Is this some kind of joke? How can you be British and not know about Lord of the Rings?”

“What, pray tell, is spag?”
“Spaghetti! Jesus, you really have been living under a rock.” She stuck her finger in the honey jar. “Or in a monastery.” She licked it clean. “Or something.”

“I’m Irish by birth, I’ll have you know. There is a difference.”

“It’s a book written by J. R. R. Tolkien,” she said. “Elves, wizards, magic rings, monstrously popular.” She stuck her finger in the honey and smeared a bit on her pineapple. “I can’t believe you’ve never heard of it.”

“Are you planning to leave any honey for me?”

She made a face and sucked the last traces from beneath her nail. “Have the rest of it, if you’re going to be that way about it.”

Jack scooped a finger into the honey. He licked it off the pad of his finger. “It’s quite delicious.”

Janet sliced herself a hunk of pineapple. The wheels dipped into a rut and she swayed her hands with the motion. “It’s even more delicious on the bread.” She skinned it. “You should try it.”

Jack looked at her. “What did you say to our…our benefactors?”

She shrugged and cut the hunk of fruit into chunks. “I told them we needed a ride.”

“Where?”

She popped a chunk into her mouth. “Anywhere.”

“And that’s all?”

“Well, yeah. What else would you have me say?”

“You made no inquiries as to how we may have arrived here, and how we are to return home?”

Janet snorted. “No. There’s no going home, baby. This is it. Until it isn’t. Until that isn’t moment arrives, if it ever does, it’s going to be all about finding ways to survive. The answers don’t mean much if you’re dead.”

“Finding ways to survive. By doing what, may I ask?”


“I don’t…I…d-don’t think it should fall so low as that,” he said. “Do you? Surely there are nicer opportunities for a woman such as yourself?”

“Maybe there aren’t. I don’t know yet, since we aren’t where we will be. If it’s a choice between fucking for money and dying for morality, I’ll take my days as a living breathing sinner, thank you very much.”

“And what if these men demand your body as their price for goodwill? What will you do then?”

“If they do, they do,” said Janet. “Don’t pop a clot over it or anything. It’s my body. I’ll do with it as I please. If my ass ends up saving yours I damn well expect a thank you.”

He blinked. “What would your husband think?”
“I don’t have one. Even if I did, he’s not here to object, is he? And even if I did have a husband, and he was here, it would still not be his place to make decisions regarding my body. It is my body, and I will use it as I see fit, even if that body happens to be married.” She smiled. “Honestly, I don’t care what my hypothetical husband would think. My hypothetical husband can suck it.”

“What is it that makes you so profane?”

“Just luck, I guess. I’m going to try to sleep.” Janet shifted around so she was half-curl on the floor. “I’ll probably wake if the wagon stops, but in case I don’t, would you please wake me?”

“Of course,” he said.

She rested her cheek on her arm. Jack untied his mangled sport coat and offered it as a pillow. She balled it up and tucked it beneath her head, curling her arm around to brace her chin against too much movement. “If I haven’t woken in a couple of hours, please wake me. Then I’ll stay awake for you, if you’d like.”

He put the rest of the food away. “That will be fine.”

Though he had no certain way of reckoning the time, the steady change in sunlight told him that four hours passed and maybe five. The wheels rocked and rolled and unseen scenery rolled past. He propped himself against a stave and watched her loose limbs curled on the sun-warped floorboards and tried to summon the heart to wake her and found he could not.
**The Mouth Of Sauron**

Spare moments were so few, those that slipped away in the star-smudged nights after merrymaking was done and accounts were settled and diplomacy dispensed with the touch of an eloquent hand in a velvet glove; so few, such little time to nurse the luxury of her whispering thoughts. She felt the loss of time like sifting sands in the deep silences of the Barad-dûr. For this was her life, the breadth and depth of her purpose. She was made in some distant past, the fruit of secret labors and forbidden lore. She did not come forth from flesh. She was an earthly representative of something birthed outside the stream of consciousness, a sliver snapped off the Secret Flame, an intelligence old as the world. She was coeval. She had become the third aspect: Ring, Ringmaker, Black Bride.

She sat in her dressing room before a round mirror and gazed at her face while she brushed out her long black hair. Her roots ached and the bristles soothed away the lingering day, melting her attention and focusing it inward. Her languid eyes measured the lay of the room: ornate carpets upon the polished black stone floors, low wooden tables with pillars carved in the likeness of flame, soft couches upholstered in gleaming silk, her drawers full of face paint, the wardrobes housing an abundance of diaphanous fabrics.

In this place she greeted her day before the sun, in this room she was arrayed by her zagurukí handmaiden. They were four women in the fullness of their childbearing years, their outward appearance of age equal to her own, tall and mottled and light of skin, possessed of the yellow eyes and ridged facial bones and white streaks of hair that were the mark of their Orcish blood. With their long-fingered clawed hands they brushed out her hair and pulled it into braids and pinned it into complex arrangements, then affixed it with regalia and metal veils that hung down over her eyes like swinging curtains of tiny jewels. In far-flung places she was named the Mouth of Sauron, her existence misunderstood. When giving counsel to her own people that was where their attention fell: her reddened lips.

"Obínu." She paused in her brushing. "Go home to your children."

A shadow passed across the doorway. There was darkness outlined in brilliant orange torchlight. A zagurukí face peeked in and nodded. A moment later came the faint clang of the closed door. At this level of the tower all sound fell away save the placating monotony of the wind.

She resumed her grooming.

She was Móriel, she was Saurë, she was the Mouth, she was Lugmokí rendered in her own language, the Black Speech of Barad-dûr. Yet in her secret soul she was without a name. In her secret soul she had never needed one.

She felt him stir in the core of her mind. He was omnipresent, a raging current laboring beneath the smooth surface of a river at dusk, the wood that smokes before giving itself over to fire, the subtle seismic shift of the land. He was at work in the lower reaches of the tower; she felt immense heat and oily perspiration on the sides of her face, felt it as one would perceive a phantasm leaving trailing touches on her skin. There was heat and steel, reverberation in her bones and back muscles. This sensation was pleasurable, and she closed her eyes a moment to savor it. The simple focus, the repetitive percussion, the labor of the body shaped into meticulous skill: he was locked away in his forge. She climbed atop the feelings and tried to wrestle a vision into the forefront of her mind. She was rebuffed.
I am focused.
I know. I wish to see.
No. I am focused.
She put down her brush.
Someone has crossed the borders.
I know.
He bears strangeness.
She perceived a renewed vigor and a steady rhythm of metal against metal. The brief vision of a sword drifted into her heart: storm-colored, lightweight open filigree worked into the blade. Tiny Nurnian black pearls set into the hilt.
I know.
You are focused.
Yes.
It is beautiful.
He drew his soul away. The images and words receded into the undercurrent.
Of course the sword was beautiful. Everything he wrought was beautiful.
Am I?
She looked at herself. She saw pale skin and long dark hair flowing across it. She saw dark eyes and a balance of features that could be delineated in the cold language of mathematics or uttered in a song of proportion. She viewed her body in the same manner; she took measure of her height, the rendered curves of her flesh, the articulation of her bones and the smooth sinew of her muscles. She marked their hidden strength and the way they moved beneath the unblemished quality of her skin. She tried to look at her collarbones, at her cheekbones. She tried to judge the sight of them but she could not. She saw the summary of all the parts. She saw him.
He made me. Am I beautiful?
It was a strange thought.
East Tower Road

The other side of the Black Gate boasted a garrison and a small village built into the crumbling slopes of the mountain.

The structures were stacked on one another like a child's blocks, quarried of a dark purplish-tinted stone. Scraggy twisted shrubs struggled their way out of the parched land, their branches bedecked with tiny yellow flowers. A thin powdery ashen soil drifted into the hollow places and clung to every surface. The wind plowed long feathery shapes of it across the ground.

The sunlight fell brutish and clear across his shoulders, shadows drawn with crisp outlines. Awnings of fluttering silk lashed themselves to creaking wooden frames. Blood red and dark blue and royal purple, they reflected the sun and shaded the doorways and alleys. Wrought iron torches jutted out of the ground. Most of them were still lit.

Gandalf heard the disconsolate bleating of goats. This early in the morning and already the eastern wind was like an oven; it blew straight into his face, blowing back his hair and rippling his heavy gray robes against his knees. He felt sweat break out on his brow. The air stank of dust, spilled water, and animal shit.

A tall iron pole stood at the left side of the road. Its roots were sunk deep into the stony ground and its top was crowned in a bowl of crackling flames. A series of painted signs ran down its length. They were adorned with arrows and written in a spidery-thin, jagged, corrupted style of Fëanorian script. Gandalf approached the signpost and shaded his eyes. He puzzled out the Black Speech words:

*Toothkeep of Udûn bids you welcome.*
You are traveling East Tower Road.
Fifteen wheels to Blackwater.
Twenty-two wheels to Bloodyrocks.
Forty-four wheels to Choked Ravine.
Fifty wheels to Snakeskin.
Fifty-seven wheels to Gap of Ash.
At the mark of fifty-eight wheels you shall pass into the region of Gorgoroth.
Seventy-five wheels to Tangleweed.
Eighty-nine wheels to Stinkwater.
One hundred twelve wheels to Swordtree.
One hundred thirty-one wheels to Flameflower.
One hundred sixty wheels to Barad-dûr.

A frisson of superstitious dread traversed his spine.

*One hundred sixty wheels to Barad-dûr.*

Gandalf tried to translate the measurement of wheels into miles, or into time spent on the road, and he found could not. The assault of numbers confounded him. Was fifteen wheels equal to the length of one morning, the sum of morning and afternoon, or did fifteen wheels worth of travel require an entire day? Was such time calculated upon a man walking? Riding? Or did 'wheels' presume the use of a vehicle, a cart or carriage drawn by horses?

"You look lost."
He turned around and saw an amber-skinned boy standing there. He looked maybe twelve years old. Lines and dots on chin resembled tattoos, but their smudged edges suggested paint rather than permanent ink. He was barefooted and dressed in ballooning blue pants bound tight with laces at the knees. A loose tunic of lightweight unbleached cotton covered his chest. Ash clung to his ankles and dirtied his toes, the longest of which were encircled with cheap metal rings. The hoops in his ears looked to be of higher quality, perhaps polished silver. His dark hair was tied back with a simple strip of cloth. His yellow eyes and elliptical pupils betrayed the only hint of mixed blood. He carried a long wooden tool with a tarnished bowl affixed to the end. He balanced it on his shoulder.

Gandalf smiled. "Do I, now?"

The boy grinned and showed white teeth. "Yeah."

"Does everyone on the border speak Westron half as well as you?"

He shrugged. "I guess so. Are you lost or not?"

"Not all who wander are lost," said Gandalf.

The boy shifted the tool into his hands, stood up on tiptoe, and used the bowl end to snuff the torch. "My mom works in the Traveler's Rest. She can help you. If you're lost."

"What's your name?"

"Ushobas," he said. "What's yours?"

"Gandalf."

"Where are you from, Gandalf?"

"Eriador," said the wizard. "How about you? Where are you from?"

"Sûghurah."

"Toothkeep," said Gandalf.

"Yeah. Here. Toothkeep. I have to finish work. Nice to meet you. I hope you figure out where you're going. Bye!"

"Good-bye, Ushobas," said Gandalf.

The wizard watched the boy run off with the unselfconscious grace of youth.

He let his eyes wander the bottom level of buildings. One of them had a fringed awning of dark blue silk. A hand-lettered sign hung in the shade, difficult to read with the sun glaring in his eyes. A hitching rail ran beneath the length of the awning. Two pack animals stood shoulder-to-shoulder, slurping water out of a clay-fired trough. They looked a little like camels, with their spindly legs and long necks and humped backs. Their skin was dark and leathery and hairless. Their splayed and tough-skinned feet looked custom-made for loose rock and treacherous ground. Instead of snouts, their faces ended in broad black beaks. They drank with much squealing and grunting and splashed water all over each other. Each bore saddles between the humps on their backs like little chairs fashioned of gilded purple leather. Tack, pack, and saddle were all festooned in rows of colored tassels.
Gandalf watched as Ushobas move along the second level, putting out the lights. He shouldered his pack and approached the doors of the Traveler's Rest.

He stepped through a tied-back curtain. Inside it was cool. The ghost of savory smells clung to the stone. The walls were plain and lanterns hung from the bare wooden struts of the upper floor.

Two swarthy men, wrapped from shoulder to ankle in loose black cotton cloaks, shared a splintered wooden table near the back. They clutched tall earthenware mugs and conversed in rapid accented Black Speech. Their looks bore Southron influence: bearded faces, curly hair, kohl-smeared eyes, patterns of dots tattooed into their foreheads. Both wore gold rings pierced through their septa and gauntlets of quilted leather. One wore a doorknocker style labret set with a tiny glittering red stone. Both kept their hoods drawn over their heads. They watched him approach the bar, nodded, then returned to their quiet conversation.

Gandalf nodded in return. With a creak of loose hinges, a woman stepped through a swinging door and out of the kitchen. She carried a jug in one hand and a cup in the other. She was tall and light-skinned, her long black shot through with streaks of white. It fell in a thick braid down her back. Refined bones composed her face, but her brow bone, the bridge of her nose, and the line of her jaw bore the ridged taint of Orcish blood. Her eyebrows were long and wing-like and swept up toward her hairline. Her painted eyes were gold and shaped like a cat's. Her bottom lip was pierced and plugged with a small black stone and several narrow gauge silver hoops threaded through the lobes of her ears. A simple brown dress hung from her lean frame. A stained black apron tied around her waist. She set the cup down in front of him and filled it to the brim with water. He noticed her long-fingered hands. They were tipped with groomed claws.

"Drink," she said. "Breakfast?"

"Yes. Please."

The woman left him with his water. Gandalf took a tentative sip. It was cold and sweet and laced with minerals, as though hauled out of a deep well. He took a long refreshing drink.

The woman returned with a bowl in each palm. One held a small mound of glutinous and starchy chopped roots. Sweet date stew had been poured over the top, drowning it in pungent brown syrup. The other held a bland concoction of corn flour and cooked beans. She gave him a spoon and a folded cloth napkin.

"Thank you."

She watched him tuck into the food. "Where are you from?"

"Eriador," he said. "I met your son."

She smiled. "I see."

"He directed me here. The corn and bean mixture carried a surprising and pleasant smoky flavor. "He thought I looked lost. This is quite delicious," he went on, gesturing to the bowl. "My compliments to the cook."

"Thank you. Are you lost?"

"No."

She leaned her elbows onto the bar. "You'll not get far dressed like that."
"How do you mean?"

"The sun is hot," she said.

"Yes," said Gandalf. "I'd noticed."

She chuckled. "You're not prepared for desert travel. I'll sell you what you need and be assured it's no shill. You'll die out there."

"Do you think so?"

She took a cloth out of her apron and wiped down the bar with it. "I know so."

"I've traveled through heat before."

"Not like this," she said.

"What's your name?"

"It doesn't matter."

One of the men at the corner table gestured. She picked up the jug and excused herself, carrying it over to them. She refilled their mugs. Gandalf tasted the cooked roots. They were mild and creamy in texture. The dates had been cooked with some kind of exotic pepper; it numbed his lips and burned on his tongue. He damped down the sensation with sips of water between bites. He'd worked through half of the bowl when the burning subsided, transmuted into a pleasant feeling. There was a tart aftertaste, something akin to sour cherries or under-ripe apples. He picked up nutmeg and a hint of citrus.

The woman returned. "You'll need clothes. And water. Lots of water. I recommend a kolnini, but if you feel yourself hale you can carry it on your back."

"Kolnini?"

"Mordor-camel," she said.
There were four nights of traveling through the dusk and fragrance of a desert road, three of them stretched with dreams and loaded down with starlight, and on the fourth night Janet’s skin glowed in fire as she danced. The men, all hailed from the far reaches of the Haradwaith, had small skin drums and rattles made out of disks carved from the shells of tortoises. As night dropped a purple shroud over the world, they burned sweet wood in a fire against the chill and in the circle cast by the fire they sat shoulder to shoulder and played their drums. They told each other stories that Jack didn’t understand. He had gathered a handful of words, *road honey sun rest*, but they lay ineffectual in the palms of his hands. Sometimes the men acted out the stories. Jack understood their dramas but only in part; they were like the common things of a child’s playroom made strange by sudden exotic darkness. The men laughed and smoked a foul pungent tobacco. The smoke built weak daydreams like tiny irritant pearls in the back of his mind.

Janet liked to dance. She called it belly dancing, and for these performances she tucked a long man’s veil into the waistband of her sagging pants and folded her shirt up between her breasts. The sun had taken to her arms and legs, and following a brief peeling pinkness her skin had reacted with a deepening tan. Her belly remained white as the cliffs of Dover. The sharpness of the drums coaxed forth the glide in her movements. The flickering fire worried at his mind and the steady overlapping rhythms knocked around inside of him, breaking things loose. She flowed into her movements. The tight shimmy of her hips softened and the undulation of her belly deepened like a shift of cold water borne loose upon a secret current. The men played faster and her hips raced to catch up. They smiled. She turned about, smiling back over her shoulder; her arms coiled into snakes, her hands turned into birds. They made delicate turning circles, mimicking the spiral described by her hips. Jack sat by the fire with his hands limp in his lap, his throat empty. One of the men would say something and another would answer and Jack struggled to read their tones and he could not. He looked into their faces and saw only the interplay of flickering light and shadows carved out of bone.

When the fire was done, Janet returned the veil and straightened out her clothes. The men laughed and cheered. She paused and made an exaggerated bow, her knee cocked and her curved arm sweeping low. The men cheered. She glanced up and delicate light shone through her smile, soft and shy. She shook off the entreaties for more, wiped the sweat off her forehead, and abandoned them for the supply wagon. Jack got up and followed her. Emptied of tents, the wagon made a comfortable sleeping place. Janet paused to drink some water from the skin hanging on a peg outside the curtains before climbing up into the back of the wagon. Jack opened his mouth to say something. She hung up the skin and took hold of his hand.

“What do they say to you?”


“No, I want to know.”

He could smell the tangy salt living in her sweat and see the moisture gleaming for a moment in the roots of her hair before the desert air sucked it up. “It’s nothing,” she said. She climbed up into the wagon. “It’s encouragement. That’s all. Are you coming to bed?”

“I don’t like it.”
“You’re cute.”

“Don’t condescend.”

“No. I mean it. Did I hurt your feelings, Jack?”

“I don’t think you should show yourself that way. It isn’t proper.”

“Because you don’t like it?”

“It might give those men ideas.”

Janet pulled back the curtain and looked at him. “Because it gives you ideas?”

“That isn’t…that’s not.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Don’t say anything. Are you coming to bed?”

“I am tired, yes.”

“All right, then. Don’t worry about your goodnights. I said them for both of us.”

He sighed and climbed up into the wagon. There was an old blanket of purple wool and Janet was on her knees in the far corner, spreading it out across the floor. It smelled faintly of horses. Jack hunched up and took hold of the bottom edge, pulling it straight. Janet smiled a little. Jack sat down and removed his footwear. He dusted the dirt off the bottoms with his palm and wiped his palm on his thighs. He unbuckled his belt.

“Don’t you like being told you’re good at something?”

“Of course.”

Janet stretched out on the blanket and tucked an arm beneath her head. “What are you good at?”

“The study of literature. Or at least I was.”

“I was, too.” Janet grinned and closed her eyes. “What are you good at now?”

He placed his shoes beside the blanket. He put the belt on top of the shoes and loosened the sheath. “I don’t know.”

Jack folded up the sport coat and passed it to Janet. She tucked one end beneath her cheek. He put the knife behind the pillow and laid beside her, careful not to touch her, and rested his head on the other end of their makeshift pillow. “That’s all they’re doing,” she whispered. “Telling me that I’m good at something.” She reached out and ran a finger along his forearm. “It’s harmless.”

“I can’t offer a proper critique.” He lifted her hand off his arm and folded his fingers over it. “I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

She turned her hand within the loose embrace of his fingers. “You don’t have to. You can just like it.”

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

“Keats.” Her eyes drifted shut and her smile widened. “Endymion.”
“Yes!”

“You sound so pleased.”

He laced his fingers through hers. “Have you read much Keats?”

“No, not much. I read what I was assigned, but not because I didn’t like it.” She swallowed and her body softened. “By the time we came to Keats, I was so ready for the experience of his language. It was more what I was familiar with, and after a dry British survey I was thirsty for it. It was spring, and it was lovely.” She sighed. “It was a very warm day, and we went outside to sit in the new grass.”

“Yes?” He touched her forehead.

“It was ‘Ode To A Grecian Urn.’ We laughed a lot because it was the end of term and we couldn’t focus.”

“Thou still unravished bride of quietness, thou foster-child of silence and slow time,” he whispered.

She opened her eyes. Moonlight filtered through the chinks in the cloth and drew thin silver lines across the floor. She let go of his hand and touched his cheek. Her fingers were warm and moist. “I wish I could see you.”

“Why?”

“It would be nice.” The edge of her fingernail rasped against his jaw. “I like your face.” His cheek grew hot and she giggled. “Are you blushing?” She cupped the side of his face. “Blushing in the dark?”

“Yes. I am. What of it?”

She drew closer and brushed his cheekbone with her cool lips. “You’re so cute,” she whispered. His breath left him in a little rush and she giggled again, slow and raw. “I’m not condescending. I mean it. Every word.” She grinned. “In their original contexts.”

“Context is subjective, isn’t it? Though I don’t think that’s quite the word you want. You’re looking for meaning.” He traced the bridge of her nose. “It’s the meaning of the words you’re after.”

She breathed into his mouth. He put his hands on her face, holding it, feeling the looseness cascade down the length of her neck. Her lips drew as close as they could without falling into a kiss. “I mean it so much,” she said.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” The words touched the corner of her mouth. “That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

She turned her face. “Kiss me, Jack.”

He held her chin and listened to her breath, its slow ascent through the passing seconds. He traced the angle in her jaw and her whole body leapt into that tingling narrow stripe of skin. She licked her lips. His mouth leaned over hers. She moved her fingers through his hair and he took hold of her wrist, holding her warm pulse tight against his temple. He kissed her, soft and slow. Her breath built up into a hungry sound that broke the kiss into puffs of saliva-painted breath and nuzzling noses. “I want you.” It was a helpless confession. “I want you so much,” he said. “I know I
shouldn’t.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

He did, firm and deep. Her neck arched up quivering and he put his hand on it, stroking the columns of her muscles. He massaged her throat, kissing the spaces behind her ears. She whimpered. He buried his face in her hair, resting his fingers over her lips. “Shhh,” he whispered. “Those men will hear you.”

She put his hand on her chest. “They’ll know I’m yours.”

He traced her eyebrow. She turned her head. “I wish I could see you,” he said.

She smiled. At the sound of her lips parting he touched them, moving light fingertips over the places where their corners tucked. He kissed one corner and kissed the other. Her lips quivered a little, softening beneath the descent of his mouth. She lifted her chin. Her hand cradled the back of his head. His tentative tongue touched hers. “Are we going to?” she whispered.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes.”

He brushed his lips along her collarbone. “I don’t want to dishonor you.”

Her breath grew shallow. “You won’t.”

He tasted the hollow at the base of her throat. “What shall I do?”

“Undress me.” The heat of her blush spread across her chest. “Touch me.” Her fingers shook. “Put your cock in me.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Do it slow. Come in slow and deep and make me come.”

He panted into the curve of her neck. “Janet.”

“Give me room to move.” She ran a hand over his hair. “Let me move against you and it will be easy. I can come that way.”

He slid a hand up beneath her shirt. Her nipple stood up stiff and tight. He took it between his thumb and forefinger. Her hand flexed and her breath hitched. He pushed her shirt up, bending his face to the incredible heat rising off her chest. He licked her wrinkled skin and tasted minerals. The nipple slid into his mouth. Her hand rested on his nape. Each pull of his lips twitched in her hips. He sucked harder and she moaned, a long silky sound dredged up from the depths of her belly. “Lovely.” He rubbed his cheek between her breasts. “So lovely.” He gathered up her other breast and sucked the nipple.

“Jack.” His name had never sounded so sweet. “Please.”

He unbuttoned her jeans. “May I?”

“Yes!”

He took her pants down. She pulled her shirt off. When she was naked he ran a hand along her body, skimming each breast, and flattened his palm against her thick bush. He let it rest, feeling the staccato rise and fall of her belly against his forearm, the slick hairs of her crease brushing his fingertips. Her thighs spread apart and her hips lifted. His fingers slipped into her. Her body
undulated, all of her flesh focused on his entrance. Her breath fell into time with her hips. He marvelled at her heat, the lush snugness of her flesh, the hunger of her hidden muscles. He stroked against her gentle rhythm. She cried out and grabbed onto his wrist. “Goddammit, Jack…fuck me!”

“Filthy words are so beautiful in your mouth.”

She groaned.

“I so wish that I could see you,” he whispered.

She pulled his fingers out of her cunt, sat up, and kissed them. She smothered his mouth in a long feverish kiss, broke away when he lost his breath, and pushed him down onto his back. She got up on her knees and reached overhead. Her fingers fussed with the canopy, groping around for the laces. She loosened them and pulled them out, one hole at a time, until a section of material fell across her head. She moved it aside. Moonlight spilled into the wagon, outlining her breasts and casting cold shadows in the hollow of her throat. “Take your shirt off,” she murmured. “I don’t want to rip it.”

He sat up and reached for the buttons. He looked into her face as he loosened them, eyes dark and hungry as they traced the underlying bones and the spaces where time had worn shallow lines. He looked into her eyes. “They will absolutely hear you now.” He took the shirt off. “Every tone. Every word.”

She kissed between his eyebrows. “Do you like the thought of that?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “Very much.”

She climbed off him and got on her back. The stripe of moonlight slanted across her belly and illuminated the loose curl of her hand as it rested upon the rumpled blanket. He leaned over and kissed her navel. He picked up her hand and kissed that too. “Lay in the light,” he whispered.

She slid down. Diluted silver fell across her cheeks, made pools of shadow in her eyes. He entered her, looking down into her face, and in her eyelashes he saw the spaces between the stars, the gleam of her aching spirit and the jeweled hands of God pulling him up. Between the stars, between the seconds, between the breaths: road honey sun rest, road honey sun rest…help me.
Sauron

He pondered the madness of Melkor, his great lusts and formless hatred, the long slow descent of a majestic Vala into the twisted prison of his own mind. It had been decreed at the Beginning, wrought by Ilúvatar, that Melkor should sacrifice his flesh on the altar of dissent and uprising. The Valaraukar, the Orcs fashioned in counterpoint to the Elves, Firstborn and chosen children of Eru, the fire and cleansing destruction that cleared the earth for new growth; into all of this Melkor had poured forth the measure of his eminence. Melkor had suffered slow corruption, named Morgoth by an impetuous stripling and been cast into the Void, all so that these things might be woven into the flesh of the world.

From Ilúvatar had come life; the bequest of Melkor was free will.

Sauron thought of him often.

He found his greatest refuge in the forge. The simple pleasure of fashioning things, of coaxing order and symmetry out of chaos, eased calming shackles over his mind. Around this tranquil center all of his memories toiled, all of his emotions spiraling out as in a great and blackening storm, living and concentrated in the palms of his hands. He dispersed this raw energy into objects: weapons, jewels, fixtures, furniture. When that wasn't enough he poured his thought into the design of systems: bettering irrigation, increasing productivity, tinkering with the machine of his armies, the laying out of cities, the improvement of buildings, the application of scientific principles, formulating strategies to educate his people and streamline the government of his land. In the rare occasions he was vexed beyond the quench of all these pursuits, he turned inward and pondered himself.

His thought turned to the Ephel Dúath. A creature had passed through the Teeth, a being now carrying his strange light along the Tower Road.

It disturbed him that it disturbed Lugmoki.

She broke bread seventeen floors above his head, sharing food and wine and negotiations with a delegation of Nurnen. He could see her reflected in the perspectives of the twenty chiefs arranged around the long wooden table; it was nothing to pierce their thoughts, to borrow their perspectives. Her eyes were drawn in shadow beneath the swinging strands of her veil. Her red mouth was closed. She kept her regal poise, still as a dark mountain at twilight. The language of her body resonated with elegant neutrality. Her ears were open. Her answers queued in her mind; she thought her way around the corners before they presented themselves, traded words and wove them into gracious solutions before making a gift of them to her audience. She wore the veil wrought of silver and seed-like black pearls, Nurnen's two rarest and fairest treasures. This choice in accoutrement, this simple expression of affinity and statesmanship, pleased him to the bone.

She was his finest unsung creation.

She did not trouble herself with the mysterious encroachment of the traveler on the road. She found refuge in the delicate execution of politics.

In the moment between completion of his sword and the conception of his next object d'art, Sauron troubled for her.
Tell Me About Valinor

The Mouth rarely slept.

Her bedchamber was cavernous, paneled in carved black stone, lit with iron bowls of fire. The bed was a huge thing constructed of mahogany and draped with festoons of sheer black mosquito netting. The bedclothes within were red, a brimming bath of blood in which a thousand roses drifted. She stood at her balcony and gazed down the long road to Mount Doom.

The wind touched her naked face. Her hands rested on the rail. She closed her eyes. The door clanked open. She turned around and sought his form, drawing in the details before he moved into the flickering shadows and claimed them for his own. The intimate geography of his face sent a sense of calm through her limbs, a ponderous space akin to the inhalation of a storm. She averted her eyes. He moved close and she felt his heat, the secret fulmination of his energy. A hollow place bloomed in her chest. She reached out in her mind.

_I'd like to send this man an invitation._

“I know.”

Lugmoki looked at him. “I can’t get hold of his purpose.”

“Does he frighten you?”

She gazed at the blooming lights of a distant village. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“What is truth?” she snapped. “I want to know his purpose. I try but I just…can’t see.”

“Look inside yourself.”

“I…”

“Just do it.”

She pressed her quivering lips shut. Her shoulders drew up and her head lowered, her fingers splaying on warm stone. Her knuckles blanched. Her insubstantial raiment fluttered around her thighs, molded to her hips, outlined her nipples. Her hair blew around her arms. Her concentration drew in, shrinking into her crackling core. He perceived it like heat-lightning. Sauron passed a hand through the space before her face. His agile fingers caressed her breath. They did it with languor.

“What do you see?”

“Valinor,” she whispered.

“You’ve never seen Valinor.”

“No,” she said. “But he has.”

“Can you see his name?”
“No.”

“Can you see his face?”

“No.”

“Can you see his purpose?”

“No!” Her hands tightened into fists. “Would you tell me of Valinor?”

“Are you going to hit me?”


“Look into my eyes and you will see Valinor.”

“I want to hear in your voice. Your words. Tell me about Valinor.”

“You don’t need to know.”

She moved hair out of her face and sighed.

“Dispatch your invitation.” He pushed back from the rail. “Send one of the Nazgûl, if it pleases you.”

Lugmokí looked at him. “Would he accept such an escort?”

“Then send a caravan.”

“There are no outgoing caravans.”

“How hard would it be to scrape up a caravan?”

“It wouldn’t be hard.”

“Very well. Send yourself, then.”

She held his gaze. “You want me to leave?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

A light flush bloomed in her cheeks. “I want what you want.”

“Not true.” He stepped away from her. “You’re afraid of this Western creature. I’m not. You want him brought here. I don’t care if he comes here or not.”

“You lie,” she said. “You want him here.”

“I don’t care.”

“You want to know what he’s doing here.”

“Go yourself. Travel with the Witch-King, but do so in camouflage. Set yourself at ease. He is nothing. You’ll see.”

“I should let him come to me.”
“Really.”

“Yes.” She looked at him askance. “You don’t want me to leave. I don’t want to argue about it.”

“I don’t,” he said. “You’re right.”

“Then I’ll give you want you want.”

“Send a caravan,” he said.

“And what of the Nazgûl?”

“Send a caravan,” he said. “Give him a statesman’s greeting.”

“If you wish it.”

“I wish it.”

His hands rested on the rail. She reached out and touched his knuckles.

“What are you doing?”

“Touching you,” she said. “It calms me.”

“Well, it doesn’t calm me.”

She persisted. The vitality of his flesh murmured in her mind.

“What do you want?”

She picked up his hand. She turned it over and subjected his structure to the exploration of her fingers. The palm was thickened in places, calluses drawing a map of all he had done. It was a toughened testimony to a solitary life spent in the trammels of creation. The bone in his index finger was bent out of true. She ran her fingertips over the scars. She imagined lifting his palm to her mouth, biting into the thickest part of his thumb. The thought surged in her breath.

“I didn’t make you for this,” he said.

Carnal knowledge and all its attendant imagery had come into her mind along with all the other subtleties Sauron devised: politics, glamour, metalwork, keen senses, eloquence, temperance, grace, the ability to redress the wounds of her body and her spirit. She knew of desire, but as a thing studied and pondered upon. All the songs and sonnets in the world, all the art distilled from the ecstasy of its suffering, could not prepare her for such ruthless imperative.

“I know,” she said.

“Let go of my hand.”

She did not. She picked up his arm and pressed her mouth to the soft place on the inside of his elbow. She exhaled. He broke out in gooseflesh. She brushed the skin with her nose. His breath hitched.

“Do you want me?”

“It doesn’t matter.”
“It matters to me.”

“It’s just flesh.”

“It feels nice.”

“Why now?”

“Why not?”

He pulled his hand away. She stepped forward and touched the backs of his wrists and felt the shadow of his lust. She longed to close the distance. He took hold of her arms. She stepped forward and his hands tightened.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “Why are you pushing me away?”

“I don’t have to explain myself,” he said.

“You’re right. You don’t.” She paused. “But it would be polite.”

“There’s something I need to do.”

She moved away. “So do it.”

“Don’t.”

She glanced over one shoulder. “What?”

“You’re turning your back on me.”

“What of it?”

“I don’t like it.”

“I don’t care.” She adjusted her bracelets. “Do whatever it is you need to do.”

“You’re shutting me out.”

“Yes. Did you think you were the only one who could?”

“You never have.”

“I don’t want you in me right now. Go from me.”

“It’s only flesh. It means nothing.”

Lugmokí took a deep breath and walked away from the balcony. She disappeared into her dressing room. The door clanged shut.

Go.

The word was a whisper in his mind. He tried to run it down, to harness its tides and ride them into her mind. Her doors were doors of iron. He waited to see if she would come out. She did not.

He left.
You’ll not get far dressed like that, the mutt at the traveler’s rest had said. The sun is hot.

Gandalf drank. No matter how much water passed his lips he remained thirsty. The blaze of heat wormed its way into his thoughts and tortured his skin. The road melted ahead into shimmering quicksilver currents, the anguish of a broken land rising up to wrestle the taunting onslaught of a ferocious sun. Never had he known such heat. He felt his flesh cooking on his bones.

In Toothkeep he’d swapped his heavy woolen robes for layers of blue gauze: loose flowing breeches, a tunic with baggy sleeves, a voluminous cloak spun out of yards of fabric. They had seemed so flimsy by the relative cool of morning, as though a strong wind would blow them into tatters. He’d laughed in his heart. At her instruction he brushed the tangles out of his hair and beard and wove them both into long braids. She’d steadied a brush in her clawed fingers and darkened his eyes with black paint, daubing his eyelashes with it, smudging it out to his temples until he wore the visage of an old and wrinkled harlot. She showed him how to wrap his head. She showed him how to swathe his ears and drape the sheer embroidered scarf into a dust muffle.

He was no longer laughing.

Keep your skin covered at all times.

She sold him a cantankerous kolnini and loaded the animal down with enough water to moisten a platoon.

Walk always with a swallow of water in your mouth.

He’d refilled the water bags six times. He could see the Gap of Ash, wavering like hulking black ghosts in the distance.

The tiny village of Snakeskin, with its round Orcish houses dug into the hardpan and roofed with stone, with its wary inhabitants and jubilant nighttime dances around savory bonfires, seemed a febrile memory. In Snakeskin he’d sold the kolnini to the Orcs, who butchered it and charred it in coal-lined pits before sharing it out on tin plates amongst themselves. They received him by day, beckoning from the shade of their subterranean homes, but reserved their hospitality for nightfall, when the relentless sun disappeared below the shoulders of the mountains and took with it the poisoning effects of the light. They fed him gruel pounded out of seed pods and goat’s milk warm from the udder and lush golden pineapple, split open on a sharp-edged rock and filleted with gleaming black knives chiseled out of obsidian. Surrounded by blessed darkness they danced and told halting stories by firelight, while Orc-men negotiated trades with one another and Orc-women sat on the ground and gave their babies suck. These were no exotic half-breeds, but rather true Orcs with skin the color of stone and twisted faces, red eyes, hunched posture and mouths full of fangs. They feared him, one who walked as a man under the blazing sun without the shared burden of their blood, but amity could be purchased for a few coins and a glut of meat.

Skeletal yellow weeds rolled in the wind. Stones crunched underfoot. He shifted his pack. It was loaded down with bulging skins.

Never would he have believed a body needed so much water. Never would he have foreseen his feet upon such a broken path.
Sam and Frodo bode in the village of Bree. It was loud and overwhelming and the very motion of the big folk seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the air. They took a cozy room at the Prancing Pony and spent their evenings in the pub, nursing ale and seeking news of Gandalf. Each passing day mounted a toll of restlessness. How long before their meager coin ran out?

Sam sat beside the window and watched the thatched roofs and slick cobblestone streets. It was afternoon, a dull and cloudy day. It was weather good for sleeping and not much else. Frodo did just that. Days of numbing exhaustion had worn him down. He lay curled in their bed, toes sticking out from beneath the blankets. The sheet covered his eyes. He snored. The sound soothed Sam's heart.

He pondered Frodo's nightmares. They still came, but when they did they were decreased in potency and noon's bright light reduced them to the shadow of a memory. It seemed strange to Sam, how they faded with the intensity of their arrival, that they should wax as the moon and then wane. He wondered at the truth of that night. What magic befell them as they slept? What were-wraiths, what beings could hold easy sway over a sleeping soul? He struggled with it. All their combined determination to bear the Ring to Bree, all their fears and focus, and Frodo's thorny bonds to the cursed thing had not been enough. In the end all the power to move mountains and end days was distilled into a simple request.

Sam feared how Gandalf would receive this news. He didn't know where they would go. He felt himself spinning, helpless as a leaf caught in a whirlpool. He would feel the cold at the bottom of the stream soon enough. Trepidation crept into his heart. He tried to impose order on his thoughts and his brain cramped beneath the strain.

No hobbit was ever meant to carry such confusion. His little spirit was too small.
“How long did you stay in that other place?”

“I don’t know.” A breeze blew in off the water and smelled like fresh mud, small fish, and a long hot day put to rest. Jack cut into the meat with his knife. “It was…a long time.”

Janet smiled. “What is that pause?”

“Thinking.” He swallowed. “It’s thought. My time there wasn’t pleasant. I’m not especially fond of dwelling on it.”

Janet took a bite of bread. “But you remember it.”

“Only in parts.”

“Would you tell me about the parts?”

He transferred fish to his plate. “I’d rather not.”

“I know. But will you?”

“I suppose I will.” He sighed. “There was…a place, someplace before. It was like a nightmare. I don’t know if I was awake for that, and it seems rather like I was not. I couldn’t have been. The things I saw there…why, they were straight out of my own memory. I don’t know how a place could do that, take things out of your own head and make them real. After that I was in another place. It wasn’t nice. I loathe the use of such simplistic language, and I feel as though I should be able to do better with it, but the assignation of personality traits to such a place feels correct. It was an unkind place, the way a person may be unkind. It was a land of foul temper. It was desert, but it was always red.”

“Red? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Red. Like a sunset the night before an exceptionally beautiful day. The light remained that way all the time.”

“Wow.” Janet shifted her legs. “That’s nothing like where I was.”

“It was full of unsavory characters.” He looked into his plate. “Having to live there pushed me into places within myself that I had no desire to find.”

“Do you remember much about your life before?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“I don’t either.”

Janet pushed her plate away. “We’ll be to the lake soon. I guess it’s a week’s sail from the delta to Ini Unirulb. And another two weeks beyond that to Obira.”

“River…blue? Blue something river.” He looked at her. “You aren’t going to tell me, are you.”
She grinned. “Nope.”

“Blue…oh, bugger it.”

“No, love, it’s definitely not that.” Janet laughed. “Try again. I’ll give you a little hint. What is the name of this river?”

“Ini Uzonulb.”

“And what does it mean?”

“Blue Grandmother river.”

“Okay. And the river we’re traveling to is Ini Unirulb. I have great faith in your deductive powers. What do you think it means?”

He sighed. “Blue Grandfather. You’re right, it was perfectly obvious, I should’ve seen the change to the root. I don’t know how you pick up these languages so fast.”

Janet stood up and went to the rail of the barge and scraped her scraps into the water. “It’s one of my secret magic powers.”

He got up and stood beside her, flinging the crumbs. They made a wide arc that slapped the surface of the water. Fish churned up, flashed silver at the setting sun, and dimpled the surface with their mouths. “What do you remember of your life before?”

“I remember studying,” she said. “I remember that I had a cat. I think I had a sister, but I’m not sure. I know I was American but I can’t remember if it was Maine or Massachusetts that I came from. I lived close to my parents. My other memories, of the place I came to before I came here, are much stronger.”

He put an arm around her shoulders. “Tell me.”

“It was a party of men traveling,” she said. “They were heading south.” Her voice lightened, filling with understanding. “They were coming here, as a matter of fact. To Mordor.” She leaned her head into his shoulder. “But not here. Where they’re going is further north.”

“What do you remember why?”

“They didn’t tell me.” Janet tossed her plate onto the floor. “But there was one man with them, and he was not like other men.” She paused. “There was more to him. I can’t explain better than that. When I say more, I mean something like magic.” She looked up. “But I don’t think that’s the right word. He could see into me and know things about me that even I don’t know. There was so much wisdom there. It felt like he could see through time.”

Jack kissed her forehead.

“I’m not making any sense, am I?”

“Some days the memories are easier to find,” he said. “Do you think that’s so?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“How are they tonight?”

She sighed. “Full of holes.”
“There were a lot of guns in that other place,” said Jack. “The streets were always steaming with blood. I had to kill and I’m not proud of that. I think about those men every day. I remember their faces better than I remember my own.”

Janet hugged him.

“Every day was the same. I’m afraid that it was hell.” He whispered into her hair. “I’m afraid that this is death.”

“I am many things, Jack, but dead is not one of them.”

"This is not a time for jokes."

Janet pulled away. "We're not dead."

He pulled her back. "How do you know?"

"Dead people don't eat."

"Why shouldn't they? Isn't eating a pleasure?" He put a hand on her nape and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Shouldn't there be pleasure in heaven?"

"I don't believe in heaven."

"That doesn't matter. I'm quite sure heaven believes in you."

"Don't you think heaven would be easier than this? I don't want much to do with a God that wants me to work and suffer and struggle to figure out my way in heaven. If this is heaven, I damnwell want harp music and soft fluffy clouds to sleep in and clean clothes and...fuck that, I want no dirt at all. Sweet-smelling everything. Chocolate. And kittens."

He laughed.

Her tears fell onto the curve of his neck. "Jack, what are we going to do in Obira?"

"I don't know, love. I don't know."
Strangers In The Dust

Gandalf hunkered down beside the smoldering remains of a campfire.

The sky held particular fascination: the ash-laden air softened the stars, veiled them, and swathed the moon in gleaming orange torchlight. Sunsets over the plain of Gorgoroth defied description: a conflagration of heaven, as though the luminescent blood of slaughtered jewels poured across the horizon and kindled the vaporous clouds into flame. They were florid, blooming, bloody things. He knew it was Orodruin, that the fiery fumes and noxious exhalations stirred the air and bent the light in unnatural ways. Nonetheless it was beautiful. Every evening the dying rays of the sun glazed his skin in pink pearl. Every night softened into lingering purple twilight and dipped the mountains in black velvet.

He shared the broken clearing and the meager roadside well with a caravan of Stinkwater traders returning from an expedition to Udûn. It was a motley crew of brawny dark-skinned men and mixed bloods and a restless herd of loaded-down kolnini camped just outside the Gap of Ash, a few spare wheels beyond the place where the mountains parted and the land flowed into Gorgoroth.

From here he could see Barad-dûr. It was discernible by night as a wavering collection of distant lights that swarmed around the base like fireflies. Eldritch lines ascended into the night sky and suggested the shape of battlements and balconies. A beacon at the top burned and flared behind a construction of red and orange glass. It sliced through the gloom with a ruby beam and beckoned the eye for miles. In the distance beyond that he spied the sullen glow of Orodruin. Lava light reflected in the clouds atop the summit. They looked like dirty glowing cotton.

Gandalf smoked his pipe. He watched the beacon and blew smoke-rings into the dry desert air.

A commotion near the road broke his contemplation. Another caravan was pulling in. This one hailed from Barad-dûr, judging by the quality of its cloth and its gleaming black horseflesh. It was a small one, more for travel than for trade, hauling a few covered wagons. Gandalf ignored the men and focused on the horses. He hadn’t seen horses since crossing into Mordor and these were exceptional: small-framed and graceful, well-muscled and fitted with gilded tack.

Their handlers wore ubiquitous desert garments. Their gauntlets were wrought of dark leather and embellished with sharp metal accents. Their boots were the same and laced up to the knees. They moved with efficiency as they went about the dissembling of their caravan. The horses were detached from their vehicles and several men took off their gloves and massaged the animals’ sooty legs. Three began the laborious process of hauling water. Others mingled in with those already staked out, making greetings and trading wine for beer, dates for pineapples, bread for peppers.

One man drifted away from the bustling of the others. He unwound his head coverings and let them flutter around his shoulders as he walked to the well and drew a bucketful for himself. He drank deeply, water dripping off his chin, then splashed the dust off his face and used the tails of his loosened turban to blot his cheeks and forehead dry. He rinsed off his hands. He was the only man of Barad-dûr to be shod in sandals, and he eased them off and stood on smooth rocks and poured water over his toes, darkening the stone with a scent akin to the first sprinkling of a rainstorm. His feet were tanned and sinewy. He wiped his insteps on the hems of his robes and stepped back into his sandals.
The wizard lowered his pipe. He watched as this man approached him.

"In another world, they are described as Semitic," he said. "The features of my face."

“You don’t look the way I imagined,” said Gandalf.

Sauron smiled. “I never do.”

“You are built as a man.”

“So are you.”

“What do you want?”

“I would ask you the same question. What are you doing in my country?”

“Observing. Where is the Ring?”

“On the large toe of my left foot.”

Gandalf tried to scrutinize the man’s feet. They were obscured by loose folds of fabric.

“I wouldn’t be fool enough to wear it on my hand a second time.”

"There is no other world."

Sauron laughed. "Oh, but there is. Lots of them, actually. You still believe all the Valar told you?"

Gandalf gave him a look.

"I'll take that as a yes. No matter." He rolled his eyes. "Why this sudden interest in travel and tourism? Isn't this weather a bit hot for you?"

“The people here are as cagey as their king,” said Gandalf.

“I am no king.”

“You are distrustful of my motives.”

“Shouldn’t I be? It’s part of my nature. Still, I have kept to myself and kept my people on their side of the mountains.”

“That isn’t how Gondor tells it.”

“Orcs are very territorial, you know. They fall to battle over the slightest insult.”

“Are you implying that Gondor has slighted you in some way?”

“Not me,” said Sauron. “That is between the mountain tribes and the people of Gondor.”

“Mountain tribes?”

“Yes. There's an ongoing dispute between the two of them over mineral rights.”

“Mineral rights?”

“Certain gemstones.”
“You mean to tell me that your mountain tribes are invading Gondor over stolen gemstones?”

“Indeed.”

“How like an Orc to place undue value on something that sparkles.”

“Have you looked around?” Sauron made an eloquent gesture. “This place lives and dies on trade. Most food is caravanned in. With the exception of a few seeds and some cactus fruits, there is no wild food in those mountains. No diamonds, no rubies, no food. They’re angered and defensive when they can’t feed their families. Is it not the same in the rest of the world?”

“Yes, but…”

“Is it not the same in the rest of the world?”

“Yes.”

“There you have it. Now what do you want?”

“I came here on the advice of Saruman,” said Gandalf.

“I will extend to you an invitation to Barad-dûr. There you will be received as an honored guest and treated as a visiting dignitary.” He smiled. “There will be feasting, there will be dancing, there will be art and culture and all manner of politicos representing every corner of Mordor. Will that satisfy your curiosity?”

“I think so,” said Gandalf.

“Good.” Sauron stood. “I’ll host you for one week.”

Gandalf looked at the man’s feet. Every toe bore a gold ring.

There was no humor in Sauron's smile. “You aren’t fast enough, old man.”

Gandalf’s hand twitched.

“Besides.” Sauron leaned close and whispered: “I am an awful liar.”

With that he strode off toward the small caravan.

Gandalf remained awake most of the night and kept a close eye on the camp’s restless activity. The man blended in. He disappeared.
Faramir and his men had just bedded down when they were set upon by a roving band of Orcs. They rushed out of the dark, eleven in all, waving swords and growling. The men leaped to their feet and slaughtered ten of them. The eleventh lay fallen and trembling and a burly dark-haired man lifted his sword and Faramir halted him. He looked down. The last Orc lay sprawled on the ground. Her matted hair crawled with lice. Her dilated yellow eyes darted across the sky. Her breath came quick and ragged. Her robes were torn open, showing her breasts. Below them her delicate hands struggled to hold in her bulging intestines. The sight of those bared adolescent breasts turned Faramir’s stomach. He squatted down and covered them with the remains of her robe. The fallen Orc squeezed her eyes shut and cringed away from him.

“Kranklob,” she muttered. “Kranklob.”

The word meant mother.

“I’m here.” He hesitated and put a hand on her shoulder. “Shhh.” Faramir looked over his shoulder. “Build a pyre for the bodies.”

The young Orc’s eyes glazed over. Her body wracked in a deep cough and spattered his face with black blood. She coughed again and her guts spilled through her fingers. Her neck spasmed. She started to choke. Faramir looked down into her face and heat constricted his chest. He saw the fragility of her shoulders, how small and helpless she was, and he wanted to end her suffering but by the time he’d drawn his knife and agonized over where to place the fatal wound she had gone still.

"Captain Faramir?” the burly man asked. “The bodies are burning.”

Faramir closed his eyes. “She died asking for her mother.”

The man shifted his feet. “Do you want me to put the body on the fire?”

Faramir sighed and rocked back on his heels. He rubbed his face with his hands. “No. Bury her.”

The men looked at each other. “Sir…”

“By the Valar I said bury her!”

Two of them picked up her body and moved her as they would a fallen comrade. A third got to work digging a trench in the loam.

Faramir wanted to vomit. He got up instead and went into the woods, far away from the camp. He could hear the trees rustling and he could smell them, their green scent whispering of sunlight and rich earth. He squatted and put his hands over his face and leaned into a tree trunk. He started to cry.
Gandalf took lodging in a second floor room overlooking Stinkwater’s central plaza. It was a thriving place built up around the hot springs that gave the town its name. Water was abundant; a fountain spurted in the plaza, redolent of the minerals buried deep in the earth. Every bit of space inside the walls was irrigated. For the first time since leaving Ithilien, he was enfolded in the shadow of invigorating green life. Palms shaded the streets. Courtyards boasted citrus trees, yellow hibiscus, beds of fuchsia roses. A vine he had no name for curled up and around his window, smothered in tiny gleaming leaves. It clung to the adobe wall with tenacious thorny fingers. Its star-shaped purple blossoms surrendered themselves to the light of the moon and yielded a fragrance similar to jasmine but spicier, bruised petals mixed with sandalwood and a hint of clove.

He doesn’t know what draws him out of sleep; it is gentle and unobtrusive, beckoning him to pliant wakefulness. His eyes open and he peers into the darkness. It is sliced into shadows by the ambience of the street lamps. Orange light dances across the whitewashed walls.

A woman watches him from the doorway, her posture alert and languid as a cat’s. Her dark hair flows to her waist. Her hands rest on the doorframe. Her dress is plain and diaphanous and crafted of fine black cloth. Her eyes are bare; since crossing into Mordor he has not looked into a visage unadorned with kohl. Her face is full of simple beauty; there are echoes of familiarity in the strong shape of her nose and the angles of her jaw, but struggle as he might to recall them he cannot. He is dazzled by her fixed gaze. Her eyes are profound and dark.

His voice is rusty. “What is the name of the plant outside my window?”

“They call it Soldier’s Bloom,” she says. “In Harad purple is the color of valor. It originates in Harad but is grown everywhere.”

“It smells like bliss.”

“Yes.” She smiles. “But it is thirsty.”

“Who are you?”

Her hands caress the doorframe. “Would you tell me of Valinor?”

He sits up. “What are you?”

“Would you tell me?”

“It is beautiful,” says Gandalf. “All in Valinor is evergreen. It is a place without sorrow, without weariness, without toil.”

She tilts her head. “How can there be completion without toil?”

“That which is pleasing to the soul,” he says, “there is in abundance. Dumb labor, that which breaks the back and wears the hands to the bone, does not exist. There is no place for such in the Blessed Realm.”

“There is no shame in work,” she says.
“Those who live in Valinor delight in labor,” says Gandalf. “When it is a labor of love.”

“What of menial tasks?” She lifts a shoulder. “Sweeping the floor is not a labor of love. Yet it must be done. So it is with the mending and the washing.”

“Are those things not a silent testimony of love?”

“Perhaps.” Her smile is slow. “Perhaps so.”

“Valinor is the realization of perfection.”

“Are there pineapples?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Does the day pass on there as it does here? In a wash of many colors?”

“No.”

“And there is no scent of Soldier’s Bloom.”

Gandalf’s eyes crinkle at the corners. “I’m afraid not.”

“Then Valinor is not perfect.”

Her casual blasphemy is like a kick to the soul. He looks into her eyes and sees no malice; he cannot imagine contempt finding a home in such a face. She gives him an impish little grin. The ceiling melts into heavy clouds and tiny snowflakes swirl downward. They gather in a fine scrim on the tables and tiles of the floor. A breath of cold touches his cheeks. He exhales, feeling the oppressive heat recede from his bones. The snow sticks to her hair and catches in her long eyelashes. Her smile is small and content.

“Does this please you?”

“Yes.” The word rushes out. “It pleases me. Very much.”

Her eyes sparkle. “It pleases me that it pleases you.”

“I haven’t beheld snow for an age.”

“I haven’t beheld snow.”

“How can you make snow if you’ve never seen it?”

“I took it from your mind. I can make snow because you can make snow.”

“I don’t understand. What is your name?”

“This is all a dream, you know. None of it is real.”

He woke with a start. The heat gathered him into its fevered embrace. Frustration kindled in his breast. Outside the open window an exotic bird called to its mate and insects tuned up inside the darkened palm fronds while the scent of burning oil mingled with the fragrance of those purple blossoms. The odors of this desert town twined together and died in his nostrils.

*I am so far from home.*
Gandalf settled into his pillow. He lifted his head and turned the pillow over to the cool side and laid down. He closed his eyes. He willed himself to fall asleep.

There were no more dreams.
Faramir awoke with a strangled cry. His eyes snapped open, the sweat drying on his forehead. He took a deep breath and looked up at the star-littered sky. He fought to recall the dream but it fell apart even as the images rose into his mind. He remembered the wild look in the Orc girl’s eyes. A spark of intelligence.

He listened to the silence.

Faramir sat up. The fire had burned down to coals.

He thought of Boromir. He would be in Rivendell, sleeping in a soft bed. He had the whisper of water to lull him into sweet dreams. Had the Elves unearthed the truth of the burned Tree? Had Elrond shared his wisdom? Did the demise of the Tree herald what so many feared, the demise of kingly fate?

Faramir held a bracelet of beads in his hand. The beads were flat and carved out of ivory, inscribed with narrow blackened runes. The discs were spaced with round pink stones. It was the Black Speech but it was a dialect unfamiliar to him. It had fallen off the girl’s wrist. He touched the writing and wondered at her family. Were those he had slaughtered the last of her kin?

He put the bracelet in his pack and settled down into his blankets. They had come down out of the mountains. They had shown aggression but what else could they have done? Had they not shown aggression first would we not have? He thought not. They would have drawn swords first and asked questions later. He pondered how ragged they were. How hungry they looked.

Faramir closed his eyes. He felt the world unwind and his senses float away. The exhaustion lived in every inch of his bones; it ached in his heart. His last thought was of her breasts, his shame upon seeing them, how slight and childish they looked, and his marvel that an Orc girl should look no different beneath her clothes followed him down into the depths of sleep.
He came to Barad-Dûr at noon, at a time of day when there were no shadows, and Gandalf wondered if it was timed that way. The sun cast a forthright air to the fortress, which was built of black stone and clean in its angles, tall and reaching with barbarous elegance. The area around it was scoured clean and there was symmetry wrought into its sharp-edged gates and sculpted into its high balconies. Though it was dark stone built into a dark mountain there was nothing ominous about it. It was a beautiful building, like the sky reflected in the eye of a nocturnal creature. It bore the profound and darkling power of the mind that built it in every brick, every spire, every buttress. Simplest to say is that it was lovely and unknowable to him as the night itself, those dark velvet folds sprawled between Varda’s bright stars.

Water steamed out of cracks in the earth and coiled up to mingle with the exudations of Orodruin and make towering black thunderheads. The Orcs called this region Thunderclap, rendered Burzgú in their own tongue, and it was easy to see how they came by such an appellation: the clouds were ceaseless and piling high on the horizon by day, angry and full of mutterings and lightning and ash. When the thunderheads broke they poured down black rain.

Nights were cooler and the clouds tattered apart to reveal stars. His rooms were high up on some balustrade of the tower, a wide sweeping balcony offering a wide sweeping view. He saw the illuminated road to Orodruin and the flickering lights of distant villages. Soldiers’ vine grew in black marble pots at the corners and the vines twined themselves through the stout columns. These were planted with night-blooming jasmine and the perfumes of the flowers blended in with the scent of hot stone and the electric air of Burzgú and made an unforgettable olfactory print on his mind.

It was still hot and in this region of Mordor it smelled hot. The engulfing heat rose and wavered but Gandalf had grown used to it. At this height there was a constant movement of wind and there was no coolness in it but the motion through his hair was refreshing in its own way. He went to the balcony and looked out over the darkened land. He felt the presence of Sauron in the very stones beneath his feet, running through the walls, like a pulse beneath a layer of fevered skin. If he listened closely he would hear it murmuring, and then the murmurs would become words. Gandalf knew he didn’t want him here. It was subtle but it was everywhere, in the turn of a petal on planted vine, in the ripple of his diaphanous bed curtains, in the lingering scent of brimstone. He was unwanted but he was tolerated in a manner that longed to be indifferent and fell short of its goal.

A young woman came to his rooms, quarter-blood at the most. She had refreshments for him and a jug of some sweet juice. She offered to wash his feet and Gandalf sat in a chair and took her up on it, watching her long strong-looking fingers as she bathed his feet in spice-scented waters. Her nails were blunted down after the manner of animals, cats or dogs he had seen the sharp tips filed away, pets kept in homes and laps. The ridge of bone on her face was blunted as well, making him think that perhaps she was eighth-blood instead of quarter; her facial features were sharp, but they were sharp in the way of noble or exotic blood, and her lips were full. Her eyes were gold and the pupil was round. She wore a simple two-piece outfit, a band about the breasts and a long skirt slit up the sides. Her cloth was rich but simple. The black was a uniform shade, rich and deep. She cleaned
She offered him a deep massage. It would put him to sleep, she said, and when he awoke it would be ten times more refreshed than if he had gone to sleep alone. It loosened the mind as well. It soothed the body and lightened the mind and was good for travelers, often who had come many wheels to be here. One should go to the festivities relaxed, she said. She herself hailed from the Nurnen lake region where her father was a grower of dates and the massage was practiced there too, a way to help the farmers sleep after a long rigorous day of work.

Gandalf resisted for a moment. He acquiesced.

She had him strip down and put him on a long low bed with a drape covering his groin. She started on his face. He resisted this at first, it having been many long years since anyone had touched his face. The girl worked with smooth gentle determination. The muscles around his eyes, tired from squinting. The muscles in his forehead, in his scalp, down around his jaws. She touched them all and it brought strange awareness of his skin, the body he had not thought about before; it was a house for his fëa, and yet her fingers disproved that with every stroke. Each circle pressed into his flesh pulled him into awareness of his meat and fëa being one thing, not separate but united in their work of keeping him tethered to Middle-earth. She lengthened his neck and he sighed as the burdens of those muscles lifted away. She loosened his shoulders, turned them and used his neck to tug them deep below his bones. She turned them as though he may dance. He thought about dancing. He thought about the joyous expression of the body, as something separate from the joy of fëa, something with its own mind. Each little cell had its own brand of consciousness. Each of them had something to say and this woman was awakening their voices.

Dance, Gandalf. She kneaded his arms, pushed the muscle against the bone, and the bone and muscle whispered to each other: dance.

She loosened the spaces between his ribs and the air came easier. She scooped the flesh of his belly and smoothed it out, kneaded it in circles, and all his held anticipation melted out of that place where his body struggled every day to hold in his guts. He felt it flow down the long muscles in his thighs. His hips tightened a little, then released, tightened again and released a little more and all of this tied into his breath; he inhaled and his body drew inward, on the exhale came all of that unwinding. With it came a slow seep of emotion. He remembered his despair at the heat, the sensual surrender to the fragrance of soldiers’ vine, the uncontained awe at the sunsets, the meridian of flaming jewels that came every night and warmed the elongating shadows with its light, and his realization of all that lived on the other side of the mountains.

She turned him over and worked on his feet. They sang of the miles they had covered.

She kneaded his thigh muscles. She pounded on them as though tenderizing a ham.
There is no shame in work.

Her jerked a little, as if coming out of sleep. The rhythm of the woman’s hands calmed him, pushing him back down into the deep warm pools of his mind. This voice is not my own, he thought. He waited. He waited for it to come again, he listened with his skin and retreated to the darkness. She liked darkness. He listened with his muscles. Out of the darkness she would creep.

*Does this please you?*

*Yes.*

Then let go.

The woman dug the heels of her hands into his buttocks. Gandalf withdrew into himself and watched the muscle’s fruitless struggle to remain tight. To remain ready for walking or running. He willed it to release and it wouldn’t. He extended kindness to the flesh. He rewarded it for all its hard work and its faithful service and praised its unique dedication.

*That is not enough.*

*I don’t understand.*

The woman paused. Her hands trembled a little and she placed them on his skin. Her palms grew warm.

You must honor the flesh for being flesh. It cannot be anything else. All it wants is to be itself.

The trembling hands caressed him. The skim of her fingers kindled unbearable sensation. *Wait.*

The hands moved again. Gooseflesh broke out on his skin followed by a wave of heat. He warmed
from his toes to his scalp and his scalp prickled. The tide of his blood grew weight and pooled in his groin. The muscle twitched, and with a deep sigh it unfolded. It lengthened and grew soft. He sank into the cushions.

_There. You see?_

He had a semi-erection. The thought of it completed in his mind and it grew into a full erection. The woman continued to work on his back, her former sonorous rhythm pouring down the length of her arms and into her palms. She ironed out his skin. He took in a deep breath and felt everything: the cloth against his skin, each individual hair yearning to be known, the pressure of his bones on the cushions, the cooling tips of his toes and his hot cheeks. He felt the blood surging through his tiniest vessels.

The woman grasped the back of his neck. She cradled his head with one hand and tugged on the skin and made deep circles with her fingers. The muscles reacted the same way but now his skin was in on it as well, his traitor scalp tingling and an army of goosebumps sweeping across the plain of his body. The long muscles in his thighs hummed. His breath strode to catch up with all of it.

The woman turned him over. His cock bobbed up through the swaddling and he colored with embarrassment but the woman’s face ever changed expression. She kept her eyes on his skin as she moved the thin cotton and wrapped her fingers around the thickness of his shaft. The surge of surprise in him was no match for the gasp in his breath or the galloping affirmation of his body. She stroked him and all of his parts worked in concert. His rhythm picked up her rhythm. His breath strode in and out of his lungs.

_You see._

He did. He saw everything with his nerve endings.

Every part of him cried out at once. It was victory, it was joy, it was the blindness of rushing emotion---each cell down to its smallest parts lifted up its voice.

When it was over the woman cleaned him up and covered him with a blanket. It was still hot and he was covered in sweat and he didn’t see the need for a blanket and almost told her so. He closed his eyes and thought about how he would compose his words. This is how I would say it, it is too hot and I don’t need a blanket. How could anyone need a blanket?

All of his joints unwound and he slid into sleep.
The Awakening Of Faramir

Faramir was moving through the forest when a simple truth nearly humbled him to his knees:

*This bracelet. She could read it.*

He took it out of his pocket. He let the ivory discs tumble through his fingers, let the light fall across the scratched lines. It shattered every notion that Orcs were brute beings with low intelligence, no more than upright animals with zero regard for the beauty of language, the eminence of education, the preciousness of memory. That writing had found its way onto something as simple as an adolescent girl’s bracelet was a direct contradiction of all those things. It didn’t matter what it said. That it said anything at all was a casual unstringing of all the hate-based myths.

For the first time Faramir looked to the mountains and wondered at what lay on the other side.

He put the bracelet back in his pocket and picked up the pace. In two days’ time he and his men would be in Osgiliath and their turn in the Ithilien would be up for another fortnight.

There was an old man in Osgiliath who knew the Orcish dialects. No one had ever questioned how he knew them, but soldiers often repeated to him the words they’d heard in battle. Faramir thought about taking the bracelet to him. He couldn’t read the letters but Faramir could read them and speak them aloud. He wondered if there was some clue to the girl’s origins buried in the unfamiliar words. He hoped they would tell him something about the being who had worn it, help him honor her memory. He longed to replace the image of her death with something kinder. He entertained the notion of leaving Osgiliath and carrying the bracelet to the Black Gate, of giving it to one of the soldiers there. The thought of the girl’s grieving mother haunted him.

Faramir stopped at a small stream. The men stopped with him. Many of them knelt down to fill canteens and to splash cold water on their sweating faces. Faramir drank from his hands and looked at the rippling water. His shifting image looked back, broken into a thousand shards by the sun.
At sunset a gold-painted girl came and fetched Gandalf out of his tower room and led him downstairs into the great hall.

The place put him in mind of Khazad-dûm, except for the long windows set into the arched walls and the stonework wrought in shades of darkest gray. Stark iron chandeliers hung in rows from the vaulted ceiling. The floor was a smooth seamless gleaming black. The flickering firelight and the sunset pouring in through the windows hit the stone and the shades of gray gave the impression of motion, a slow subtle current of shadows. Huge tapestries hung on the walls. They depicted scenes of erupting volcanoes, the bright incongruous green of desert oases, jewel-tone sunrises, intertwined designs depicting the soldier’s vine and the sun and the moon. One bore a field of rich blue and vessels flying scarlet sails. Another depicted a savage coastline of pink stone.

Dominating each end of the hall were two huge flags. They hung from gleaming rods and trembled in the churned air. Gandalf had seen the design before, scrawled on Orc banners. Slashes of scarlet paint suggesting the crude shape of an eye. Those renditions were nothing like these: tall and finely wrought, imbued with all the shades of fire, they filled the centers of their adorned fabrics. The eye design contrived itself out of a single line woven in lush knot-work. The borders of the flags were embossed in repeating patterns of gold and fixed with a simple border of purple gems. Long red fringe hung from the bottom edges. Upon closer inspection Gandalf saw they were mirror opposites of one another; every stitch replicated itself down to the tiniest detail.

A young man handed him a goblet of orange blossom water. Gandalf took it and looked around.

He saw men like those dwelling at the Black Gate. He saw Dwarves, Haradrim, half-trolls with heavy muscled bodies and dainty Moria Orcs and mixed breeds of all kinds: half-bloods, quarter-bloods, some with just enough of a trace to have gold or red eyes. He glimpsed pale skin, honeyed skin, skin the various and pleasing hues of chocolate. The hall was awash in color: blood red and the purple of Harad, the glassy blue of a night sky, aquamarine and flaming orange, gilded shades of gold and silver. He spied delicate flowers and vivid plumes. The storm-colored stone walls and gleaming black floor tiles acted like a jeweler’s velvet, taking the beauty of Mordor’s people and reflecting it back tenfold.

Welcome.

Gandalf scanned the crowd.

Welcome.

A group of dancers took the open space at the center of the hall. There were eight of them, all Orc-women, all wearing long split skirts and bracelets and girdles of jingling coins. Four of them were the color of tar, with gray skirts and silver coins; their eyes bright gleaming yellow and their long hair the color of snow. The other two were exotic with bright gold skin mottled with black, and their skirts were bleached white and their belts of coins black. Their eyes were large and almond-shaped, a uniform black with no pupil, and looking into them was like looking into the blackest pit in the darkest trench of night. They had long gray hair and the onlookers clapped and whistled and stamped their feet as they revealed their bodies. The black-skinned ones discarded their capes and the eight of them danced as one, arms held out in graceful poses. The two yellow ones danced in circles around their black sisters, making snakes of their arms, feet turning and turning about again.
Sweat gleamed on their bare breasts. A pair of dancers twirled, and then another pair broke away, each passing the spin on to the other. The people watching tapped their feet and clapped to the strong beat of the music. It was primitive. Each hammer beat overlapped the one before and it swayed in the blood.

Gandalf sipped his water and searched for her face.
He smelled snow. The scent came to him in a wave, that dry musty tingling, borne on a lingering sense of clouds. Gandalf closed his eyes and inhaled. He smelled snow beneath the odor of sweat and perfumes and burning torches. He heard its soft and soundless descent between the murmuring of voices and the thrum of music. The ghosts of flakes touched his skin.

People drifted out of her path as she walked into the room, flowing with dark grace and a sinuosity like shadows borne upon water. Gandalf opened his eyes and the sight of her filled them, filled his mind, mingled with the scent of snow. Every inch of skin was tinted the dark gray of storm clouds. Rubies and fire opals encircled her neck and stood out like fallen embers on her painted skin. Her gray skirt fell from an ornate black metal belt and bled down into a rich deep red at her feet. A murmur swept through the hall. It melted into the rhythm of the music and dragged it out, slowing the beat into a sensuous pace. A swirling intricate web of black lines delineated the contours of her body. Her hair fell to her waist. Dark designs decorated the corners of her eyes and outlined them, darkened her eyebrows and bisected the bridge of her nose. Tiny dots emphasized her cheeks. A veil of fine chains covered her red mouth. Languorous calm settled into Gandalf's bones. He felt her draw her glamour across the room like a veil. It spread across the crowd and the murmurs trailed off into silence.

This was the crowning event. All manner of dancers had performed, from young novices all the way up through to the renowned Odizgurí, the so-called Thunder Hips of Barad-dûr. The Odizgurí men danced first, wielding long heavy sticks and performing a war dance, an Orcish dance that had its roots on the plain of Gorgoroth. This involved lots of twirling and slamming the sticks in unison, producing a crowd-pleasing effect like thunder. The women danced a folksy style full of hand flourishes. The men and women danced together, and it was the most skillful of all the dances and the most stylized, both dramatic and engaging. Seven courses of food were served: sun sweetened fruits, a starchy vegetable-based soup, small fish imported from lake Nurnen in barrels and filleted alive at the table and served raw on pungent curls of leaf. There had been seared fowl and a tender salad made of tossed flowers, flavored iced waters and chilled beers. A roasted red meat arrived still on the bone. Men with long knives carved slices and sprinkled them with cracked pepper. It tasted like a cross between venison and wild boar and was so tender that it seemed to melt on the tongue. Dessert came with tiny cups of intense wine: it was a small dense syrupy cake that smelled of vanilla and left a sharp bite on the tongue. The hour was late and the people wished to see her dance.

A deep hush fell. Heavy and oppressive, it drifted down over the hall in a scent of ash and musk. All motion distilled down into the rustle of garments, the stirring of breath. A thousand tiny flames whispered.

A tall man stepped into the center of the hall. Gandalf looked at him and tasted dust.

He carried a sword. It was long and curved, the blade wrought in openwork filigree. He balanced it on the tip of his finger. She looked at him and took the blade up with her hands and Gandalf felt the air change. It thickened, hummed a little, acquiring a heated instability. She lifted the sword and twirled around once, delicate and strong. The man stepped back. She lofted the blade, holding it high over her head. She began a gradual whirling descent. She tilted the sword outward, her hair flowing around her body. Gandalf's stomach dropped with her. She collapsed into a soft pose on the floor, her hair spreading around her feet. She breathed for a long moment, the sword held up. Her
face lifted and her neck arched up toward the ceiling. The air crackled and Gandalf felt a stirring deep in his flesh. She lowered the sword to the bridge of her nose. Her hands came away and it balanced there. Her arms unfolded in a flowing pose and she lifted herself in one smooth motion, a slight curve traveling the length of her body. Her face tilted back. The sword hovered. A slight tremor rocked through it, a thin line of orange light racing along its edge. She held the pose. Her fingers plucked, shaping undulant forms of shadow.

Every eye marked her movement. The spectators didn't know it but they were helpless not to look. Gandalf knew. He sensed her power, the soft strength of it and the silken pull; the thoughts all around him were drawn to the center of the hall by her strange force.

The music drew itself up and spilled forth into the air with greater precision. Her feet moved and her body began to turn, each rotation marking the beat of the drum, whirling faster and faster until her hair fanned out. Her arms glided through the air in baroque patterns. The sword balanced on her nose. The blade whirled through sibilant air. Her hands interlaced and lifted the sword and she straightened her head up, all of this happening with a single smooth revolution, and in the next turn she placed the sword on her head, arms curving up and downward as she slowed down, imitating the gradual unfolding of a flower. She became still. She breathed hard. Her hips trembled like ripples of water. The ripples swayed, then slowed and grew deeper. Gandalf tried to look at Sauron but he could not. Her hips drew a lazy circle and a sweet soporific mist fell over his mind. In it drifted images, fragments of past pleasures and whispered promises: cool wind, untroubled sleep, the taste of honey, the succor of skin. He thought of her voice, how it ran through his consciousness like a vein of ore.

He remembered the masseuse. Heat rushed to his face.

She lifted the sword off her head and drew it down in front of her body. Her hips made quick rolling circles.

Gandalf eased open his mind. The placating nature of her power rushed in and made him dizzy. He relaxed further. The disorientation passed when it had he glimpsed more happening behind it, conflicting emotions like shadows behind a curtain. He came to this curtain and leaned his ear up against it. The shadows overlapped and tangled themselves together. He summoned respite, a blooming perfume of athelas, the twinkling tranquility of a night sky. He tried to lift the curtain but he came up against an armored hand. Stone walls seeped through his vision of soft stars. The odor of heat-blasted rock drowned the scent of leaves. The curtain was ripped down and filled with impenetrable darkness. Sauron's ire stung the insides of his cheeks. It coated his tongue with the taste of old blood and gunpowder.

You overstep your bounds.

Gandalf came back to the music. It poured into his ears, staccato and hypnotic. He didn't open his eyes. He imagined her hips and feared to look upon them.

Don't.

The music finished. A silence rode out ahead of the applause, all stillness and smooth shadow. The applause rushed forward and built to a thunderous pitch. Women ululated shrill appreciation. Gandalf opened his eyes. The Mouth was still there, her head bowed. He looked through the crowd for Sauron. The stomping and whistling swelled up, rolling over her like a wave. Sauron had taken the sword and gone.

She bowed once. Two of her handmaidens melted out of the crowd and walked with her out of the hall. With her disappearance the party atmosphere dissembled itself. A dissonant roar of
conversation built up.

After dinner and dancing came counsel. Gandalf found a servant to lead him back to his room.
The room was circular and had a glass ceiling; the smudged stars and a half moon contributed a soft silver light that mingled with the bright yellow of the lamps. The walls were smooth dove gray sandstone. A round table built of dense dark wood dominated the center of the room. A pair of comfortable chairs upholstered in red velvet sat opposite each other.

Gandalf took his seat. Runes were carved around the circumference of the table. Though more fashioned in a more beautiful script than he was accustomed to, the inscription was the same as that on the Ring: *Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatulûk, agh burzum-ishi krimpatul*. He traced their shape with his fingertips. The center of the table bore the stylized depiction of the Eye but in triplicate; a bowl of floating jasmine blossoms covered the place where the three corners joined.

Gandalf was lost in pondering the meaning of this when the door opened. He looked up, expecting a retinue. He leaned back in his chair and watched her enter the room alone. Up close she was tall, broad at the shoulder and full at the hip. A black silk caftan hid her shape. Her skin shone creamy and white in the lamplight against the backdrop of her dress. She took her seat. She folded her hands and rested them on the table, watching him through a veil of tiny red stones. It fastened to a simple headdress and hung down over her kohl-lined eyes like a beaded curtain. Her lips were tinted a dark shade of red. An intricate pattern of dots bisected her chin.

He inhaled through his nose. She smelled like nothing.

“*The people want to go to war.*” Her voice was mellifluous and calm. “*But I believe you know this.*”

He blinked. Did she mean the people of Gondor? The people of Mordor?

“*Are you not here on behalf of the White City?*” She tilted her head. “*Do you not have this authority?*”

“No, lady. I came here on the advice of Saruman.”

“What was this advice?”

“That I come into Mordor. That I see for myself.”

“And what have you seen?”

Gandalf sighed. “I see…more.”

“What does this mean to you?”

“It means I have been chastened. I do not like it but I am forced to reconsider my beliefs about the nature of your country.”

“What is it about this knowledge that displeases you?”

“My eyes have disproved everything I previously believed. It countermands all I was taught. This is a place of beauty and culture and the people here are free to come and go as they please. I was
told a lie and I did not seek to prove or disprove it for myself. I was a fool and I am ashamed.”

“There is no shame in following wisdom. Following such led you here.”

“Yes. It grieves me and it pleases me just the same.”

“What is the source of your grief?”

“That I should part with old and well-loved notions.”

Her voice deepened, acquired a softened lilt. It made her face appear foreign. “The loss of folly is no loss at all.”

Gandalf looked at her. “What are you?”

The mellifluousness returned. “I am the Mouth of Sauron.”

“That is not the answer I seek. And you know it.”

“It is the answer I have.”

“Where do you come from?”

“I come from Mordor.”

Gandalf sighed. “Who made you?”

“Sauron made me.”

“He is your father, then.”

“No.”

“You say he made you. Yet he did not sire you.”

“Yes.”

“How can this be?”

“It is outside my knowledge.”

She was lying. There was no entrance into her mind now; without effort it came to him as a locked gate. The truth of it was in her face.

“My origins are of no importance. What is of important is that my people wish to go to war. I would treat with you if you have the authority to treat. If you do not then our council is done.”

Gandalf laid a finger along his cheek. “Tell me about this war.”

“The people have suffered invasion and destruction at the hands of outlanders and these outlanders bear the standard of the White City. They take sick pride in what they have done. When questioned about their actions they throw out their chests and declare their allegiance to the White City.”

“Where are these men now?”

Her lips were tight. “They have died.”
“How did they die?”

“They perished of their wounds.”

Gandalf folded his hands on the table. “Why not strengthen the borders?”

“The border is thousands of wheels long. It is craggy and mountainous terrain and unsuited to the building of fortifications. I’ll send for maps if you like.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “And the mines? Can you not fortify the mines?”

She paused and searched his face. “They do not attack the mines. They attack the caravans as they leave the mines.”

“I see.”

“It is my preference that we send liaisons to the White City and speak with the king. The people are angry and think only of striking back.”

“There is no king in Minas Tirith. As I’m sure you know.”

“Someone rules in the king’s stead. I would address my concerns to him. Or her.”

“Gondor has a steward.”

“Very well. It is my belief that this situation would best be handled from both sides.”

“It is your belief,” said Gandalf.

“Yes.”

“It is not your master’s belief?”

“The Lord of the Tower does not concern himself with such things.”

“Until it is necessary for him to do so.”

“It is not necessary.”

“Tell me. Are you in possession of the effects of the dead?”

“They have gone to their families,” she said. “What little remained after the payment of their burial.”

“No. I meant those of the Gondorians.”

A faint blush tinged her cheeks. “Yes. Of course.”

“Permit me to take them back to Minas Tirith as tokens of goodwill. If you would allow me this great honor.”

She looked away. The tiny beads tinkled. “It is an errand befitting a emissary of Mordor. But there is no one.”

“Why not you?”

She glanced at the table. “It is not my wish to leave the Tower.”
“I would do this,” said Gandalf. “I would do this for you.”

“Why?”

“The Steward will listen to me,” said Gandalf. “My word is worth more.”

“I will send you with a caravan. You should not make the crossing alone.”

“Thank you, lady.”

She put her hands on the table. “Another day of rest and the caravan will depart at dawn.” She stood. “Does this suit you?”

“Yes, lady.”

She bowed her head. “I am pleased.”

“It pleases me too.”

“It is my hope that you continue to enjoy our hospitality. Would you require anything more before you leave?”

“No, lady. Your good wishes are enough.”

She bowed again and walked out of the room. As the door closed air moved across his face and he caught a whiff of frost blended with soldier’s vine.

This is a great thing that you do.

The words blew through him. He tried to catch hold of their essence but they slipped through his fingers and left him cold.
Loving Is Hard On The Flesh

Lugmokí’s hands shook as she extricated the headpiece from her hair. The combs snagged. She paused and worked the strands loose one at a time and with an abrupt sigh lost her patience. The headpiece sagged over the front of her face. It ripped her hair and she winced as it came loose. The headpiece bounced off the dressing table’s stone top. On impact the veil detached and slithered down over the edge and landed in a dusty heap. The headpiece hit the floor with a loud clang. It rolled and came to rest at her feet.

She picked up her brush and drew it through her hair. Heat prickled in her scalp. She bloomed in a flush. A swelling tide of air rushed into her lungs. A strange sensation passed through her insides, a light caress up the inside of her chest. She closed her eyes. Her nipples lifted, thickening, filling with a soft incessant awareness. She felt loose trailing touch all along the insides of them, pushing them out further, tightening the skin into unbearable sensitivity. The hot tingling took root in the pit of her belly. Lugmokí put down her brush and laid her hands on her heated cheeks. Her fingertips brushed across her skin and elicited goosebumps but the feelings drawn by her own hands were only whispers. Her womb filled with anguish. A hot wind passed through her loins.

What are you doing to me?

Sauron leaned his forehead against cool stone. He fastened to the change in temperature, the place where hot skin met stone, he took hold of it and tried to climb the ladder back into his mind. His eyes squeezed shut and he gripped the frame of the doorway. He regarded the longing of the body with distrust and fought against the surrender to his blood, his infernal surging blood. He’d made of his mind a temple. Every time he breathed he smelled her skin; air passed over his tongue and he wanted to taste her sweat. Her scent sunk roots into a deep place within him and all the seduction, all the negotiations and all the brute strength in his world wouldn’t pull it up. The fury of his desire hurt him and crippled his mind. It stirred up the edge of his anger, stoking it into confused white heat. He longed to hurt her, to handle her, to drive her insane and drink up her torrent of moans.

The view of her reflection clouded by the net of her thoughts, the lens through which he viewed the flush in her cheeks. It flickered. He made a fist and bit down on his bottom lip. The pain and the taste of blood aroused him further.

Come here.

Lugmokí touched a nipple. Don’t stop.

Come here.

She left her rooms. She ran up the three levels to the uppermost level of the Tower, and when she came to the carved door it swung inward. He stood there, clad in the flowing black and red pants he had worn to the great hall, his makeup washed off and his hair bound in a tight pigtail. He looked at her and she saw the tension in the cords of his neck, the way his collarbones rose and fell with his breath. His eyes were dark. She put a hand on his bare chest and his raw essence leaked through her skin and slammed into her. A billowing cross-current of conflicting emotions, magnetic yearning, and primitive memories stormed up within. She felt caresses once stitched into long-ago skin, the long stretch of intervening years, the breath and silence of memory, and the great measure of Sauron’s temperance. His restraint was more than she could have imagined; the floodgates were ancient and forged of seasoned iron and yet beneath her lightest touch they
groaned. She gasped and took in a deep breath. Her blood fell into to her groin and she was light-headed, unsteady on her feet. He put a hand over hers. Her eyelids twitched closed. He stroked her wrist with his thumb. She started to pant.

“Come in,” he said.

“Yes.”

Lugmoki stepped inside. Sauron reached over her shoulder and closed the door. She moved closer and touched his flanks. His breath halted. She leaned her forehead against his chest and brushed her nose into his skin. His hand skimmed her hair, a light touch that quivered all the way to her roots. She rested her mouth against his breastbone. He lost himself in the feel of her breath, the quick delicate pace of it warmed by her body and its thrust against his skin. He lowered his face and inhaled the scent of her hair.

“So much.” Her silken puffs of air stoked the engine of his breath. “So much feeling… I can’t think.”

“Blood doesn’t think,” he murmured.

She felt her way to his face, held it in her hands and let her fingertips trail over the surfaces, the smooth jutting of bone and the rough grains of hair along his jaw. Her fingers slid around his ears and wove into the constriction of his hair. She lifted her face and brought her mouth close to his, inhaled his breath. She touched the place where his lips ended and his face began. She felt the trembling below his skin and pressed into it with her fingers, then covered it with her mouth. He sucked her top lip and she whimpered; he ran his tongue under the edge of it and tipped her face up. He tilted her head and kissed her. His tongue was a whisper in her mouth that spoke to her joints and loosened them and she felt the insinuating softness in her nipples and lower down, like he was inside and rushing in her blood, the flesh of her cunt swelling with longing and with fear. Her hands went to his chest and her fingers slipped through his nipple rings. She tugged and the hunger roared in his mind, the lust for her pain and acquiescence. She blasted breath into his mouth. He took hold of her wrists.

“I want what you want,” she whimpered.

He leaned the bridge of his nose into her forehead. “Take off your dress.”

She reached behind and unfastened it. She let it fall. He cupped her breasts, ran his thumbs over the nipples. He felt the moan rise to her lips and kissed her. It broke into his mouth like a delicious bubble.

*Bring me a knife.*

*Why?*

He moved hair out of her face. “I want to show your blood.”

Lugmoki went into his private armory. It was a small room in the top of the Tower, the place where the finest of the swords and daggers and razors he fashioned were kept. Most of them he gave as gifts to the visiting governors of villages, the representatives of neighboring countries, and as awards to citizens of honor and distinction. Some of them she danced with. She picked up a small dagger with a simple handle set in jasper and amethyst. Its blade of steel was struck and ground into a cunning curve. It was one of a perfectly matched pair; they were the same weight, the same length, made of the same steel, and bore gems extracted from the same ore. She had
sweated over them, fashioning them herself hundreds of years before, brooding alone in the tower while he was in Númenor; all of the toil she had put into them, the hollowness and the yearning, the frustration came back to her when touched the blade. The imprint of her old energy hummed in her fingernails.

Yes. That one.

Lugmoki carried it out to him and put it in his hand. His hand tightened around the handle and warmth flared in her. The beauty of the blade accentuated the strength of his fingers. He lifted it up and laid the flat of the blade along her cheek. He rocked it against her skin and the chill of the metal caught her breath. He turned it on its side and grazed her with the keen edge. It shaved through the fine pale hairs, rendering the skin baby smooth. He leaned over and kissed her earlobe. He ran his fingers along the length of her cheekbone. His breath tickled.

“Don’t bleed too much,” he whispered.

The tip of the dagger sliced into her skin. Ice cold dissolved into searing hot. A relentless tingling slowed into throbs and a flood of nettles awakened below the surface. With every breath the nettles marched closer to her temple. Her breath dissolved into something shallow and she made a fist of his pants, holding on until her knuckles blanched and the tendons inside her wrist trembled. Her eyes squeezed shut. Hot silk beaded up, spilled over, started its indolent crawl along the side of her face. Her breath quickened. Her heart pounded and the burning nettles picked up its echo. Her liquid thickened, made itself a light wet tongue. It licked around her chin in a hot smooth caress. Sauron moved his face through her hair and rubbed his thumb across her jaw. She felt air touch the skin there. He smeared her lips. She licked and tasted hot iron. He sliced the other side. Her dizziness grew sweet. Her cunt tightened and her knees trembled.

“Yes.” He smeared more blood. “Yes.”

Lugmoki licked the side of his thumb. He groaned and kissed her over it, tongue snaking around his thumbnail to enter her mouth. She sucked the blood off his thumb and kissed him at the same time, and she arched her body against him as the wounds itched with healing. This sensation heightened all others, turned every nerve ending inside out and made her raw with hunger. He touched her scars and she uttered a moan, and when he kissed her cheeks, trailing his open mouth across her neck, her breath hitched and her face tightened up. She started to cry.

Please, she whispered, over and over again in every language she knew; the word flickered up from his mind in old Valarin and she seized upon it and uttered it that way too, syllables he hadn’t heard since they fell from Melkor’s lips. He took hold of her thighs and lifted her up and carried her to his bed. Her tears pooled on her eyelids. The bed was no more than a nest and when she landed on it the linens puffed up his dream-crazed scent, and she panted and wrestled him close with her strong thighs as he stripped out of his pants and he growled a little, grappling her arms and pinning them with one hand. Her forgotten tears mixed with her blood. She breathed hard and uttered in the ancient tongue, implored him with it, and the words drove devious shards deep under his skin. He came into her with a single hard shove. Her voice cracked, the pain and the thin hard edge of her pleasure cascading in bright streaks down the inside of his mind. She tightened her legs around his waist. He held her down.

He kept his chin over her mouth. She slicked up with aromatic sweat and he let go of her wrists, his face lunging in rhythm. Loose strands of his hair stuck to her lips. She put her trembling palms on his cheeks.

He felt blinded and the last link to his control snapped. He drove into her with all he had and her cells burst open. A vacuum rushed in. It pulled her soul inside out and the emptiness filled with
excruciating pleasure, overfilled, and spilled out into time. Her mind groaned open to the size of
the universe. For a split second she knew it; she touched every corner and lived in the void, rode
upon the endless transmutation, lived and died and lived and strangled on the rich sounds that
poured out of her throat. She heard them through his ears and was confounded by their complexity,
their keen edges and how they flayed him all along the edges of his consciousness. They tortured
his flesh into rapture.

He licked the sweat off her neck. She shuddered.

When it was over the first thing she knew was the smell, her mild salty juices and the aggressive
green scent of his seed. Her harsh breath easing back into a calm current, the slowing labor of her
heart. His breath flowed into hers. Their heartbeats settled in time. She lay trapped and at ease
within this synchrony.

He withdrew and she felt hollow.

She reached out and touched his skin and it felt like skin. She kissed it and his flesh regained all
the limits of flesh.

“I’m tired,” she whispered.

He stroked her arm. “Loving is hard on the flesh.”

She put her head on his chest.
Gandalf sat on the balcony of his room. He relaxed in his chair and smoked his pipe, his mind
wandering as he watched the pinpricks of orange light travel along the Orodruin road. The
pinpricks drew his attention. They fascinated him far beyond the glow of Orodruin, though the
mountain showed a vigorous flame and a staining of red light that hovered in the sky like a handful
of crushed and burning rose petals. Each little flame was a votive lit upon the altar of someone’s
story. The mountain screamed while the lights whispered.

The door to his rooms clanged open. He heard the soft fall of bare feet on the stone floor and a
single delicate indrawn breath. He murmured without turning around.

“I have no need of anything. You may go.”

“I want to come with you.”

He flinched at the sound of her voice and turned around. Lugmokí stood in the doorway, her body
wrapped up in the black cotton cloak of a common woman, her white face bereft of adornment. She
stood poised and alert, the lines of her body full of tranquil feline grace, her eyes measuring him
from within their stronghold of darkness. She seemed watchful and wistful and mysterious,
something shaped out of the shadows, a fire-drawn figment of his imagination. For a moment he
thought he had fallen asleep. He imagined himself sleeping in the chair, the pipe fallen from his
relaxed fingers and the ash scattered on the stones. A disconnected sensation took root in his flesh,
a dangerous unknowing buoyancy that filled his lungs. He remembered his dream of snow and his
dream of her, the nakedness of her cheeks and her hands on the doorframe, and as the memory
unfolded in his mind the smell of snow came into his nose, crisp and cold and full of must. Her
wrists stirred within their voluminous sleeves. Her hair flowed loose around her neck. The color of
her lips looked pale and chilled. One long white-fingered hand lifted up and swept the hair back
from her forehead.

“Would you let me?”

“I didn’t...” He shook his head and closed his eyes if to clear his mind. “I didn’t know it was you.” He
looked at her. “How can that be?”

“I didn’t want you to.” She withdrew into her cloak. “I thought you would send me away.”

“I don’t understand.” He put down his pipe. “Please, explain this to me.”

“I should go with you to Minas Tirith.” She moved closer to him and draped her hood across her
shoulders. “It should be me who explains the deaths of those men.”

“What does Sauron think of this?”

“Sauron doesn’t think.”

Gandalf mulled over her words. “Does he know of your desire to leave the Tower?”

“My will is my own.” She turned her gaze to the mountain. “I go where I wish to go and it is my
wish to go to Minas Tirith.”
He watched her profile. “I don’t think you’re telling me the truth.”

She glanced at him and bowed her head. “If I have disturbed you, I’m sorry. I’ll leave you if that is your wish.”

“It is not,” he said.

“May I sit?”

“Yes.”

She went to the chair beside him. “I know another road.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s an Orcish road.” Her hands rested in her lap. “It’s meant to be traveled by night. When traveling by night, it is cool enough to travel the whole way on foot.”

“I would seek no passage on an Orcish road. Nor do I expect I would I gain it.”

She looked at him. “You would gain it if you walked with me.”

“Why?”

“I know their ways and their languages,” she said. “I am female.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No,” she said. “You wouldn’t know that Orcs are both matrilineal and matriarchal. You wouldn’t know their great respect for the female. You haven’t walked the Dreaming Road.”

“Mûlobín,” he said.

She smiled. “Yes. Mûlobín. The Dreaming Road.”

He looked at the lights on the road. “Why do they call it so?”

“Because it is traveled by night.” Her hands withdrew into her sleeves. “And also because of the legend surrounding its discovery, that it came to a long-ago Orc-witch in a dream. The Mûlobín is good terrain for walking and it has natural caves every ten to twenty wheels. They are deep and cool and perfectly dark, and yet they retain enough air for the burning of lamps and for breathing. Many have subterranean streams. They are kept by the different villages.” She paused. “The men of Gondor hold grievances against the Orcs. If you were to walk the Dreaming Road, you would bear witness to the humblest roots of their culture. You would see the ways of life unseen by most men of Mordor and never seen by any man of the West. You would participate in them. For a brief time their ways would become your ways. This would lend an unparalleled authenticity to your pleas of peace on their behalf.”

“You would walk with me on this road.” He paused. “You would grant me the possibility of traveling on this road.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Why?”

“You came all this way to see my country. It is my duty and responsibility to ensure you see all of
He glanced at her. “I don’t believe you.”

“You said that in Minas Tirith your word is worth more than mine. A woman of Mordor has no worth in Gondor regardless of her eloquence or her status. My very presence paired with yours could increase the worth of your words. If you were to forge alliances with the Orc-tribes, would that not lend still more value to your verbal currency?”

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose it would.”

“You cannot forge those alliances without my facilitation.”

“If what you say is true.”

“It is true.”

“How do I know I am not speaking to Sauron?”

“You don’t. But you are not. Would it matter if you were?”

Gandalf fell silent.

“Your presence lends my presence worth.” She sat straighter. “This is the way of men in the West. If you were to sponsor my words, the steward would perhaps heed them.”

Gandalf puffed his pipe. “What of the effects of those fallen soldiers?”

Lugmokí looked at the road. “I will have them sent to Toothkeep by caravan.”

“How would I get them from Toothkeep to Minas Tirith?”

“That is your choice.”

“I see.”

“If you refuse me I’ll go to Minas Tirith by caravan.” She kept her voice soft. “But I will go.”

“I’m not going to refuse you.”

Her mouth curved in a smile. She didn't look at him. “I am pleased.”

He tapped the spent ash out of his pipe. “How is it you know of the Dreaming Road?”

“In the matter of this country, Gandalf, I know everything.”
“I want you to shave,” Lugmokí said. “Orcs will not trust a pale-skinned man with a beard.”

Gandalf looked up from his rucksack. “Why not?”

“The mountain tribes and the Gorgoroth tribes speak to each other and they share their grievances against men of the West. Those grievances cross family lines. The mountain tribes have their roots in the Gorgoroth, as they have their roots everywhere in Mordor. It would be an insult to venture onto an Orcish road arrayed like a man of the West.”

“Insulting to them or insulting to you?”

She tied the strings of her purse. “Both.”

“I want to look like myself,” he said.

“Are you not still yourself beneath the whiskers?” Lugmokí looked up at him and smiled. “Your face does not disappear below the cheeks. Or does it?”

“No.” He sighed. “Very well.”

“Orcish men will not trust a white man with a covered face. They want to see the expressions. It is not in their nature to trust anyone with a covered face. When passing through an Orcish village hold your dust muffle up instead of fastening it into place. The women will only watch. It is the Orcish men you need fear.”

“Yes, yes, I know that.” Gandalf walked into the washroom and looked at himself in the glass. “Oh Varda guide and keep me,” he sighed. He sliced his beard off with his knife. “It’s been many long years since I was smooth in the face. Long and long. I fear I don’t recall the exact character of my chin.”

Lugmokí chuckled and brushed her hair into a loose sack of waist-length black gauze. She fastened the sack tight to her forehead. It covered all of her hair and lent her countenance a severity: her cheekbones sharpened and her eyebrows like the outflung wings of some narrow black bird emphasized the strong bony outcroppings of her eyesockets. Her eyes themselves looked stark, like deep pools caught in rough bowls of stone. It changed the noble line of her nose into a gleaming blade. She threaded plain silver hoops through the soft lobes of her ears, three in each, and with the tiny point of a feather brush she drew a curved line of black dots connecting the innermost corner of one eyebrow to the innermost corner of the other. She inked another line down the center of her face, just to the bridge of her nose. The design was a shadow. It hovered like something cast there by a pair of errant hairs languishing between her skin and the sun.

“You travel as a woman of the Gorgoroth,” he said.

She glanced at him. “I am a woman of the Gorgoroth.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Gandalf leaned close to the mirror and trimmed the remainder of his beard close to the skin. “You are no common woman of the Gorgoroth. Surely those who walk the Mûlobín will see that in your face.”
Lugmokí peered at her nails. “Beneath my jewels and my robes of state that is exactly what I am.”

Gandalf wet his face. He made lather of the wood-scented soap and massaged it into his cheeks. “How many years since you’ve traveled the Gorgoroth, lady?”

“Many.” She put the file down. She blew on her nails. “I will leave you to your grooming.”

“If that is what you wish.”

“It is what I wish.”

He listened to the soft falls of her feet. She moved out into the sitting room and paused there. He inspected the topography of his face and pulled the skin tight along his jaw. He unfolded the razor. He smelled the rich scent of the lather and thought of far away trees and dagger-sized thorns jagged and black against a pink sky. The blade in his hand was straight, fashioned out of dark steel. It was so sharp along its leading edge that it cut through the very odor of the soap and dropped it like ribbons. He angled the blade and drew it downward, guiding it across the flat of his jaw bone with the edge of his thumb. He listened for the whisper of the blade but heard only the sound of his breath and the beat of his heart. The razor cleared away a thick swath of foam, gathering up a clump of dismembered hairs. He flicked it off and rinsed the steel. He moved a finger along the edge of his jaw. The skin was clean and smooth.

*It pleases me to know the strength of the blade pleases you.*

Gandalf mowed his cheek. She shape of the blade angled to the handle in a way that felt intuitive to his hand and the handle conformed to the shape of his fingers. *This is a lovely tool. It knows exactly what it is doing.*

She laughed. It came to him as a distant drifting sound. *I made it. I made everything in this room.*

He tucked his top lip beneath his bottom one and drew the flesh tight across his upper teeth. With a series of delicate little flicks he erased his moustache. He rinsed the blade. *What is your age?*

Her feet drew closer. Her voice swelled. “I don’t know,” she said.

Gandalf started a new swath at the opposite temple. Lugmokí stepped into the doorway. She put her hands on the frame and looked into the reflections of his eyes. “What is your age?”

He looked into the scullery bowl. He shook water off the blade. “I’ve been here a long time,” he said.

“As have I.” She released the doorframe and stepped away.

He shaved the hairs off his chin, then lifted his face to scrape the hairs off his neck. He took special care around his mouth, navigating the parenthetical lines that had grooved themselves into the skin and deepened with each passing year. He ran a hand across his narrow-lipped mouth. The sight of his bare face startled him; it looked younger than he thought it would despite its network of weathered creases. His chin was firm, the angles of his jaw sharp, and the absence of a moustache accented a very slight overbite. He put his hand over his mouth and leaned forward until his nose hovered near the glass. Without the beard to counterbalance the furrowed lines in his forehead and the long weight of heavy years beneath his eyes, he looked utterly exhausted. *Only that's too kind. I look spent. I look as though I haven’t slept since the First Age.*

“Have you?”
He straightened up. “What’s that?”

“Slept since the First Age?”

“Of course I have.”

“I don’t sleep very much,” she said. “I don’t have to.”

He rinsed away the last traces of soap and patted his cheeks dry with a towel. He brushed his hair into a ponytail. Lugmokí reappeared in the door and her eyes lingered on the bare parts of his face. He caught her eyes in the mirror and she turned away.

“I am ready when you are ready,” she said.

He smiled. The skin on his forehead lifted and the lines bloomed around his mouth. He glanced in the mirror. The exposure of his expression discomfited him. “I’m ready,” he said.

“Very well, then. There are perhaps five hours left of the night. If we travel into the first couple hours of morning we’ll make to the first of the caves.”

“All right.”

She handed him his stick. She handed him his rucksack and he took it, draping it across his shoulder. “It’s a long walk down,” she said.

“I know.”

Lugmokí moved past him. She kept her eyes ahead of her. “I don’t want to waste any time.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure.”

Gandalf listened in his mind for the breath of Sauron. He felt it muted and asleep, fastened to dreams within the walls.

“He doesn’t dream often,” she said.

Gandalf wanted to say something, but she walked away from him. After a moment’s consideration he followed.
The old man was one-eyed and he scrutinized the ivory. He held the bracelet close to his wrinkled face. “The ivory comes from Harad,” the man said. “But I can’t read the letters. What does it say?”

Faramir sat in front of the hearth. He held a cup of tea in his hands and watched by flicking firelight as the old man gave all of his attention to the bracelet. Faramir studied him. He was bald but for a fringe of white hair and had lost two of his fingers along with his eye. The socket looked as if it had been sewn back together by crude hands and was filled in with a mass of bright pink scar tissue. It pulled the skin of his cheek upward, puckering it. The pink beads rattled in his trembling fingers. The old man smacked his lips.

“Obînu,” said Faramir.

“The ivory comes from Harad,” the old man wheezed. He shook the bracelet. “Obînu, this means ‘dreamer’ in the Orcish tongue.” He licked his lips. “Like as not, this is her birth name. It is a popular name among the females.” He had a ponderous and quavering voice. “You hear the dream-root in a lot of the female names. The \textit{u} sound at the end, that is what makes it into ‘dreamer.’ You hear \textit{obîn} in many name-words: \textit{Ivakobín} means ‘dreaming desert,’ \textit{Gidobín} means ‘dreaming dancer,’ \textit{Mokobín} means ‘dreaming bride.’ The ivory, though. This means she is part of a tribe that owns something. The tribe lays claim to something valuable. Maybe it is a mine, maybe it is something else. One has to trade for something so far away. The ivory comes from Harad. Such a thing should be expensive.”

“Have you seen the letters before?”

The old man sighed. He held the bracelet out and turned the ivory discs. “This here, it is an old dialect. It is an old style of writing. I have seen the letters before but I can’t read them. What does it say, now?”

“Zguzámith-ishi,” said Faramir. “Mughashah.”

“Zguzámith-ishi.” The syllables tumbled off his tongue like small rattling stones. “It means ‘in the Thunder Mountains,’ and this is the name the Orcs use for the Mountains of Shadow. The storms never stop. And Mughashah, that is ‘place of fire stones.’ Like as not this is a village name. It would then be only ‘Firestone.’ Maybe named for rubies or opals the color of fire.”

“The place she’s from, maybe. Could it be the place she was born?”

The old man leaned back in his chair. He let the bracelet collapse in his palm. “It could well be. Yes.”

“Tell me.” Faramir sipped his tea. “How do you know all these words?”

“By and by I was more of a traveling man. In my younger days, that is. Oh I went everywhere in those days. Might be I crossed the mountains a few times.” The old man paused. “Might be I even stayed up there awhile. Might be that after awhile I came down through those endless storms and ventured into the \textit{ivak}, the desert, on the other side.”

Faramir was too stunned to say anything.
“Might also be it’s something I don’t talk much about,” he said. “For a silent mouth is a contented one.”

“Thank you,” said Faramir. “Thank you for sharing your wisdom.”

“Might be I’ve got only one eye left but that eye still sees plain,” the old man whispered. “You want to go, don’t you? Maybe get to know the Zguzámith for yourself.” He leaned forward and out his hands on his knees. “You have the face of an independent thinker. Stubborn some call it but I’ve always called it a man who knows how to listen. Maybe you want to dance with the desert to music of your own making. Dance with her, and dream of her.”

Faramir’s face grew hot. He didn’t say anything.

“Yes, young man. But a silent mouth is a contented one indeed, eh?” He leaned back. “The land is always a woman.” He winked. “She is always she. Don’t you forget it. And now you must go. Yes?”

Faramir fidgeted a little. “I’m afraid so but thank you again for your wisdom, and your hospitality.” He put the cup of tea aside. “For the tea as well.”

“Take care not get lost in the ivakóbín unless you are willing to pay.”

“Pay?”

“I did well to part with only my eye.”
We came into the eastern port of Obira as evening light slid off into something deeper and left a darkened sky in the east. The darkened sky fell behind us, and ahead of us rose the slow burn of a pink sunset. This softening flower-colored light unfolded behind the city as we approached, riding the low waves; built on a tall peninsula of pink granite bedrock, soft lavender striations move through the stone like the first intimations of twilight. The city rose up from its salmon-colored peninsula, into a welter of stout yet tapered buildings that rose and fell upon the spine of the peninsula; the lower levels of these buildings were dusky purple, the middle levels built of striated pink granite, and the uppermost levels a shade of stone cut out of the same coastline; the upper stones were the color of a blushing cheek, carved out of a maidenly statue flecked with sparkling chips of mica. There were tall trees of the twisted kind that grew strong in the face of constant winds, and palm trees. A low pink wall surrounded the city entire, marked with towers at regular intervals that gave forth blazes of light.

Obira is a shortened form of the city’s full name, a long and melodious string of syllables that rises and falls like the sigh of the ocean stretching out upon a tidal shift. I cannot remember the full name, or approximate the sounds of its many notes. I only remember the translation: To Stand Awake in the Heart of a Twilit Dream. In that moment when the ship came close enough to discern the buildings of the city, when the light had commenced its regal changing of the guard, to look upon the city was to see no separation between the last vibrant notes of sunset and the land below it; Obira means gloaming, and as the lights flickered on in the hundreds of windows facing the eastern waters it was like tiny orange stars had flown down to roost gently upon a curved horizon. The sky darkened to the purple of the lower levels and silver stars surfaced, reflected in the rolling waters of the lake.

I wept at the sight. I tried to remember when I had last seen something so beautiful, and I could not remember. I wept my slow quiet tears and Jack held onto my hand.
head was beautiful and felt my graduation from temple into cheekbone should be adorned with blossoms. Jack learned how to kill and dress chickens and cook them on a brazier. He learned how to disarticulate the carcasses of large animals. Sometimes he brought home the best cuts in lieu of payment and sometimes we cooked them in the rooming house kitchen and shared them with whoever happened to be sitting in the dining room. Going upstairs after all this meant climbing four flights of wooden stairs. We came into our bedroom in full darkness, into each other.

On a winter day we sat outside, wrapped up in cloaks, and drank spiced date wine under a purple canopy and looked out over the water. The wind blew in brisk and chill. An older man with long dark hair and a limp overheard us talking.

“A man come through here, five or so seasons ago,” the man said. “Sounded just like you.”

Electricity crackled in me, the humming danger of it simmering in my guts. I shaded my eyes.

“Where is he now?”

“Gone on to Gondor. Minas Tirith, I should think. Where are you from?”

“A long way away,” said Jack.

“Aye.” The man nodded and smacked his lips. “So he said, as well. The road goes ever on, does it not?”

My throat closed up.
“There is a council,” Lugmokí whispered.

“What?”

“He dreams of it.”

They walked together among tumbled-down rocks, led onward by the glint of starlight caught in flecks of obsidian. The night smelled of heat and drowsy rainclouds threatening to break into thunder atop the distant mountains.

“What are you saying?”

“There is a council happening in Imladris.” Lugmokí looked into the unflinching dark. “The one who dwells there knows about the Ring. He felt its return and called a council. I don’t know what they are discussing. Sauron can’t see it and so I cannot see it. But he knows.”

Gandalf sighed. “This does not surprise me.”

“That Sauron should know of it?”

“Well, yes. That does surprise me, but only a little. That Elrond should call a council does not, though I don’t know what he hopes to achieve. Neither does he, I would suspect.”

“Is he wise among his people?”

“Yes, very much so.”

Lugmokí looked at him. “And so his people will listen to whatever he has to say.”

“Yes, I would think so.”

“They would listen even to that which comes to him in a dream, if he were to relay it to them as wisdom garnered of his long years upon the earth?”

“Now, wait a minute.” He leaned on his stick and looked at her. “You are not thinking…”

“Why not? Is he one to listen to the wisdom of his dreams? He has the foresight or he would not have known about the Ring. Would it be so unbelievable that other information should reveal itself in his dreams?”

“Not when it contradicts all that his waking mind believes,” said Gandalf. “I don’t know what you’re thinking of, but don’t make the attempt. It will do you no good.”

“Is there any harm in trying?”

Gandalf resumed walking. “I suppose not.”

“Is he going to make war with the men of Gondor against us?”

“His interest lies in the prevention of conflict.”
“You aren’t telling me the truth. You are dressing words with me.”

“If he feels that he must go to war, then he will advocate for it, and if the emissaries of Gondor plead a convincing case, he will support Gondor’s decision to go to war against Mordor. That does not mean that he will volunteer soldiers or arms, but he will likely volunteer his intelligence, which is both considerable and seasoned with long experience. Sauron will know this. He does know this, and so do you. Who is dressing words with whom?”

Lugmoki was silent.

Gandalf looked up. The stars glared back at him from beneath the sky’s velvet brow. “I trust the emissaries have departed Minas Tirith?”

“Yes. They have not arrived yet but they will arrive soon.”

“That is as I feared.”

“My apologies, Gandalf.”

“There is no need.”

“There is,” she said. “Just now I did not accord you the respect of an equal. I spoke to you the way I would speak to a chieftain of the Zguzamith. You are my equal. My treatment of you was not appropriate.” She bowed her head. “Please accept my apologies.”

“Very well, I shall, though I will maintain that there is no need.”

“Thank you.”

A wind blew between the rocks and made a long hollow sound. In the far distance flickered pinpricks of orange light. Gandalf wondered if it was part of Tower Road.

“It is not,” she said. “They are wayfarers on the Mûlobín.”

“I thought it wasn’t lit.”

“It’s not. Those lights belong to campfires.”

“How far?”

“Not far. Two wheels.”

“What…what would you send to Elrond? In this dream you would fashion?”

“I don’t know,” said Lugmoki. “A vision of something kind.”

Gandalf pondered her answer.
“He isn’t coming.”

“I know it, Frodo.”

“Shall we return to the Shire, then?”

“Yes. I’m homesick.”
While all the windows were open in the hopes of catching a breeze, the air remained stagnant and fragrant with the day’s rising heat.

“I am daydreaming of snow.” Jack sprawled on the bed, shirtless, one forearm draped over his eyes. “I’m picturing it right now: fields of frost with smoking breath and icicles on the trees.”

“Is it helping?”

“No. This heat is maddening.”

Janet folded up a tunic and placed it on the shelf. “So tell me more about this cold place.”

“There’s lots of snow. Snow clear up to the knees, and it crunches under your boots and soaks through your trousers until your ankles have gone completely numb.”

Janet chuckled. “How charming.”

“Imagine it with me: a glaze of ice on the branches and snowflakes stuck to your eyelashes.”

“Always winter and never Christmas.”

He peeked at her beneath his forearm. “That’s a horrible thought.”

“Oh, I didn’t come up with it. It’s from The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe. By C.S. Lewis. I suppose you’ve never heard of him, either.” She shook out a clean bed sheet. “It was part of a series. Second, I think, in the proper chronology but it was the first one to be published. It was monstrously popular. I had to read it in…oh I don’t know, the third grade? Maybe fourth? I don’t remember. It’s not surprising, really. I went to a Catholic school and while Mr. Lewis insisted that his books were not Christian allegories, they very much were. Clever, really, since they were cloaked just enough with the mechanics of mythology to skirt the literal definition of an allegory, but, honestly. Anyone with any sort of Christian background is likely to see right through it. It’s that transparent.” She folded the sheet longways. “Though I suppose it is effective in reaching its intended audience, that of school-aged children. The Army of the Lord says get em while they’re young, right?” She heard drunken men laughing in the streets. “Jack? Are you awake?”

“Yes, love.”

“You know, if you want to sleep I can keep quiet. I can fold laundry with my mouth closed.”

“What are the initials for?”

“What?”

“In that fellow’s name.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Oh. Um…Clive something. Statham or Stedman or something like that, I don’t remember.”

“Staples.”
“Yes! That’s it. Thank you.” She folded the sheet into a neat square. “So you have heard of him. How is it you’ve heard of him and not J. R. R. Tolkien? I think Lord of the Rings was probably the more famous of the two, and it’s my understanding that the two men were contemporaries. Friends, even.”

“Janet?”

“Yes, love?”

He sat up. “In what year were you born? Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“When were you born?”

“December of 1975.”

“Do you remember the day?”

“I’m not sure. I think it was the seventh, but it might’ve been the fourth. There’s something about the seventh, tickling in the back of my mind, but it won’t stay still long enough for me to catch hold of it. I’m sure it was in the first week. Why?”

“I was born in November,” he said. “At the end of the month.”

“Oh.”

“It was the twenty-ninth. In 1898.”

She paused in her work.

“So we’re from different times,” he said.

“That’s why you don’t know what I’m talking about half the time.”

“Yes. This is why we don’t remember the same things.”

“You know I…I’ve wondered about that…it’s always seemed so…s-so…” She gave him a blank look. “Why are we talking about this?”

“You are the brightest, quickest, sharpest woman I have ever known. It will come to you.”

“I don’t understand. What does this have to do with my mind? What does my mind have to do with C. S. Lewis? What…are you related? Is that what this is about?”

“No.”

“Isn’t Jack a nickname for John?”

“Well, yes. It is.”

“But aren’t you John Lewis?”

“No.”

“I never cared for his fiction works but I liked the nonfiction ones a lot. So if he’s your cousin or something, I…well, I don’t mean it personally.”
“I’m not related to C.S. Lewis.”

“Oh.”

“I am C.S. Lewis.”

She backed away.

“Janet, wait. I swear to you that I have no idea what you’re talking about. I would never keep anything like that from you…I don’t know anything about Christian allegories or nonfiction works or monstrous popularity.”

She brought the back of her wrist to her mouth. “I’m going to be sick.”

“What?”

Janet ran to the window. She doubled over the sill and her supper fell to the street, splattering four floors below.

“Janet!” He got up off the bed. “You are overreacting. Come here. Please.”

The men on the street yelled up at her. One of them chucked a bucket half-full of water against the side of the building. She leaned over the sill and flipped them double birds and slammed the shutters closed.

“Janet, please don’t do that. I’m sorry. You need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! How many times, Jack? Look, chicks in your century may take that kind of shit lying down, but let me tell you: ladies born after 1975 aren’t so keen on letting the menfolks order them around. Or on letting them make the decisions, or on leaving everything up to the big strong boys. Fuck chivalry. It’s dead. So stop it. I’m sick of it.”

“I’m not ordering you about,” he said. “Believe me, if I were, you’d know it.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Well fuck that. And fuck you, too.”

“You’re impossible when you’re this way. I don’t know why I bother. You won’t listen.”

“Watch your tone with me. I guess now I know where it comes from, don’t I? Do they teach you that at Oxford or wherever the hell it is you went to school?” She covered her face. “For fuck’s sake, you don’t understand. You are here, which means you aren’t there. It means you aren’t doing all of the things that you’re supposed to be doing. It’s like a ripple effect…wh-who knows what the hell is happening, right now, even as you and I are standing here. This shouldn’t be possible, Jack. How do you explain that?”

“If you would stop interrupting me, I’d make an attempt.”

She wiped her face. “I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“I can’t explain it. It seems like utter madness, but I know you’re not mad. I don’t believe you’d lie to me. That only leaves the truth.” The words tightened and his voice began to rise. “I see you getting ready to let me have it and so for Lord’s sake, woman, just shut your gob for once in your
life and listen.”

Janet opened her mouth.

“If you’re going to mock me, I’m going to stop talking.”

“That might be the best thing.”

“It very well might, my darling, but you’re out of luck tonight.”

Janet made a choking noise. She lifted the scullery bowl to her face and puked into it. She coughed, spitting into the ruined water.

“I’m no different,” he said. “Do I horrify you so much?”

“No, it’s…” She dry-heaved. “It’s not that.” She wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of a hand. “I think it’s this heat. It just won’t quit. It’s making me sick.”

“Should I fetch you something?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe some dry bread and a bit of water. I’ll just lie down for awhile.”

Jack got up and took the scullery bowl out of her lap. “Go and lie down. I’ll empty this and see about getting some cool water and maybe an orange. Would you like that?”

“No oranges.” Janet made a face. “I can’t stand the smell just lately. It’ll just make me feel worse.”

“I would never keep such a thing from you.”

She shook her head and held up a hand. “Don’t. Not now.”

“All right, then. Just water. How long as it been since you’ve eaten?”

“I don’t know. A while. It’s this heat, I think. By evening my poor body has just had enough.”

“Into bed with you. Come on.”

Janet got up and went to the bed and stretched out on top of the covers. Jack opened the window and left, carrying the bowl down over the back stairs. She closed her eyes and her stomach fluttered. She felt its longing to knot into a hard fist.

She remembered her late lunch, fresh coal-cooked oysters and dumplings steamed in cardamom broth with a handful of dried fruit on the side, some kind of plum, sweet and earthy. Very dark purple, wrinkled with sunshine, the empty places left by their pits stuffed with whole nuts. Thinking about them made her hungry. Her stomach rumbled and roiled and sulked at the same time. *This is the fourth time this week I’ve eaten the oysters, she thought, and the fourth time I’ve come down ill by evening. But Jack eats them too, and he’s always fine. They are always so fresh, fished out of a bucket and still living when Ishasha throws them onto the coals.* Jack was gone for awhile, and in her stillness she grew drowsy. She listened to the voices of the people on the street below, wheels ratting on the cobblestones and the foot-strikes of animals, all of it far less than it would be during the day; music leaked out of a tavern somewhere, muted drums sharpened with the plucking of strings. Sometimes she could hear the winds that came in off the water, and within them the murmuring of the waters themselves, but tonight there was no wind. The winds had gone to sleep a week before and now they dreamed through the burning days.

“Janet? Are you awake?”
“Yes, love.”

He sat down beside her and put a small jug in her hands. “It’s cold,” he said. “I bought it from the people on the pier who put the jugs in the lake to keep them cold. They tie the handles to ropes and haul them up. Isn’t that brilliant?”

Janet sat up enough to drink. “Yes. Yes, it is.” She worked out the stopper and took a long drink. “My God, that’s delicious. Do you want some?”

“No, it’s for you. I know you don’t want it but I brought you some fruit anyway. Not oranges but custard apples. Two. In case you change your mind.”

Janet drank more of the water and put the jug against the side of her neck. “Thank you.”

“Do you want one?”

She thought no, but said, “Yes. I think so.”

He cut one of them open. The mild pineapple-banana-berry scent of the pale flesh inside made her mouth water.

“How is your nausea now?”

“It’s calmed.”

“Do you want the bowl by the bed just in case?”

“Yes.”

He put it on the small table beside her head. He went to the cabinets for a wooden spoon and came back with it and scooped out some of the fruit. He picked the big dark seeds out and handed her the spoon. As she nibbled from its edge, he put an arm in the pillow and leaned over, pressing his mouth to her forehead. “You don’t feel feverish.”

“That’s because I’m not.”

“How is the fruit?”

“It’s delicious.” She offered him the spoon. “Do you want some?”

“No, love.” He kissed her temple. “You know, it could be the same for you.”

“How do you mean?”

“All those things that you aren’t doing. The life of yours that isn’t happening.”

She took the fruit-half out of his hand. “I’m sorry, Jack,” she murmured. She loosened a bit of pulp and spooned it into her mouth. “I’m very confused. I have two different associations with you in my head and they’re pulling at each other.” She spat the seeds into her hand. “And I have all of my academic assumptions at direct war with my personal experience and I have those things mixed in with the sheer ridiculousness of this whole situation and all of its paradoxes and the impossibility and thinking about all of this is giving me such a headache.”

He gently pried the seeds out of her hand.

“So I’m going to stop. I’ll think about it when I feel better.” She closed her eyes. “Tell me about
“Well,” he said, taking the fruit out of her hand. “It’s still white, and it’s still cold. The field can be
virgin if you like.” He scraped the fruit away from its scaly green rind. “So you can make
footprints and snow angels. It must be at least up to your knees.” He plucked out the seeds and
placed them on the table, next to the scullery bowl. “Would you like it to be light and powdery or
dense and perfect for snowballs?”

She smiled. “There’s a field?”

“Of course. Isn’t there always a field? And evergreens all round, their boughs weighted down with
snow. Or dusted with it, if you prefer. I have fruit for you, love.”

“Powdery,” she whispered. “I want drifts.”

“Have the spoon.”

She lifted her eyelashes just enough to take it. “When I was a child I would play in the snow until
my legs got red beneath my pants, and when I came back inside and they warmed up it would itch
so much, it was maddening.” She ate the fruit. “Like there were little ants running around on the
underside of my skin. Did that ever happen to you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you knock down icicles with snowballs?”

He settled down beside her. “Yes.”

“Tell me about the snow.”

“I will.”

He made up a story about a little cabin in a snowy meadow that lived empty and lonesome for
many years until one day, near the end of a very long winter, a small white cat jumped up into the
window. She jumped down into the cabin, strutting beneath the magisterial air common to all
felines, and went to the hearth, where she curled her small white body into a circle and her long
white tail around the tip of her pink nose. He described the long rambling conversations between
the cat and the house, how they would often sit together and watch the icicles shrink into the
coming spring, watch the flowers bloom into cups of honey for the bees and the scarlet leaves fall.
He described the hearth, how it would set its own logs alight, how the house liked to make itself
warm so the cat would want to stay. Cat and house, warm and content each within the other, telling
all the long and secret stories of their days.

Janet fell asleep.
“It does not feel the same.”

There was a melancholy, a breeze hiding between the words. It lifted Sam’s head. “How do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” Frodo got up from the table and walked to the window. Though it was a moonless night, his mind knew every curve and shadow imprinted upon those fair grounds. “It’s as though I’ve left something behind. Something in the way I see.”

“But this is home,” said Sam. “Whatever else is there to see?”

“Familiarity,” sighed Frodo.

“Is it the Ring? That foul and infernal thing.”

“Maybe. I don’t feel settled. I’m rather restless, as a matter of fact.”

“You haven’t been sleeping,” muttered Sam.

“I can’t hold my dreams together,” said Frodo.

Sam looked into his teacup. His hands curled around the porcelain. “More tea?”

“No, thank you.” Frodo touched his navel. “I’m afraid the tea I’ve got won’t settle.” He grinned. “Much like the rest of me.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Nothing, dearest. Your presence is enough. If you should like to go to bed, I’ll be fine by myself.”

Sam smiled. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. The fire is lonely. I shall keep it company.”

“Not all night?”

“Not all night,” said Frodo. “I promise.”

Sam pushed away his tea. The bottom of the cup scraped across the careworn wood. The air leaking through the cracked window was mild and smelled of violets and burgeoning grass. Within Bag End a tepid silence settled to the rafters. Crickets sang.

“It’s too late for tea, anyhow,” he said.

Frodo laughed. It was a merry and musical thing.

“Good night, Frodo,” said Sam.

“It’s good enough,” said Frodo. “It’s good enough.”

The following dawn brought a stranger to the door. Magnificent and strange as he was, full of portents, trailing awe and incandescent disruption in his wake, Sam’s heart lightened a little.
For who could not mend Frodo’s unease, if not an Elf?
He killed a doe and together we tied her spindly back legs and hauled the delicate carcass up onto the lowest branch of a maple tree. I fastened the rope square around the tree’s sturdy trunk and he handed me the knife. I cut her throat, feeling the steel slice through that which had once been living and had lost in death none of its tenacity, and the blood spilled like dispassionate rubies, hitting the ground and flattening out before running off the rude stone to be imbibed by the earth. The blood made a sound that wanted to be like rain but it was too warm and too thick and it wanted to steam but it wasn’t cold enough. My fingertips were numb, and when I handed the knife back to Legolas he cut through the white fur and the skin and the toughened membranes into the cavity, the space inside the doe’s body that was still hot with life. We breathed in concert. A light wind stirred in the trees and the guts sounded wet and slippery before the entrails spilled out under their own weight and made blue coils upon the reddened stone. He reached into the cut and I leaned into his shoulder and reached in after him. I loosened the liver and pulled it out, letting it fall, gloving my hands scarlet to the elbows. His long frame twisted and his hands crawled over mine, around and up beneath my wrists, the outsides of his forearm stoking my breath and our bones getting warm inside the cooling cradle of flesh. My mouth softened and my fingers glided between his knuckles, borne aloft on the slick and gristle, the lightness, the stink of loosened ordure and the sweat that joined the spent blood, mixing in with it, making the cement that joined our hands. I sunk into my breath and closed my eyes, concentrating all of myself along the electric places where my skin hummed. His fingers were very strong.

He touched my face and the blood chilled the mark of his fingertips. I kept my eyes closed, pressed them shut because I couldn’t bear the thought of looking at him while he was looking at me; I didn’t want to see the terrible light behind his face while he put his fingers on me and read the intent of my skin. The sensation of him played havoc with all of my senses. I couldn’t inhale without tasting flowers and I could not exhale at all until I heard his breath inside my mind, felt its song calling to my blood. My breath came out in flaming pieces. My mouth trembled and the juices ran beneath my tongue and I swallowed them down like sweet sap and it went straight to my head, filled me with a restless surge, made me dizzy. My sinews crackled and my womb felt like stone, my cunt like a lake, my clit like a hard burgeoning seed that longed to crack apart and push soft beckoning leaves into his palm. I pushed my soft beckoning hips into his slender thighs. They were like the limbs of trees, strong and fragrant with long woodland years, rooted in the earth. I came into his space and the air around him intertwined with the air around me and we both inhaled it and sent it back out in silken ropes that pulled us tight.

He kissed my mouth and left red handprints on my exposed skin and I marked him with scarlet streaks and put them in his golden hair, used them to take apart his clothes. He licked the juncture of my throat and I shivered like a droplet of water hanging off the tip of a leaf until I broke free and fell to the ground somewhere away from the killing, into a place mossy and smelling of fresh semen spilled on a riverbank, a place warmed by his breath and the smooth inside of his mouth. His tongue cleaved me until I broke through into a different place fashioned of fevered breath and hotter skin and blood that yearned to surface and moan into the ground with the blood of the fallen deer; my nipples throbbed and my loins swelled open like rosebuds and I kissed him with my tongue, rubbed him with my hair, took his scent into me and wrought it into silken breathless sounds.

He held my hips as I rode him. He pushed up and up and up.
I came so hard that it was almost like going home.

Janet rose out of sleep, took in a mouthful of stinking city air, and dove back down into darkness.

Beside her Jack twitched, caught deep in his own dreams.
Lugmokí put a hand on Gandalf’s arm. He slowed into the lightness of her touch, held his breath, and listened beneath the low humming of the wind.

*What is it?*

You feel it, too.

“What are you talking about?”

“Shhh. It will hear you.”

*It?*

Lugmokí circled around a slab of blackened rock. She hunkered down into herself like a cat. She looked around the edge. Gandalf followed in her footsteps and peered over her shoulder. The land beyond the monolith was solid bedrock. Ribbons of ashy dust curled across its face and caught at the threshold. At first Gandalf saw darkness imprinted against darkness. He saw the absence of stars and heard the displeasure of the wind. A strange feeling slipped down over his head. It tightened at his brow, a hood woven of forgetfulness and the tingling trace of a vacated memory. The bedrock made a shallow bowl and in the center was a free-standing stone doorway. There was no door, only an arch to shape the night. The words came to his ears clothed in the dark places of his mind: “The masonry is weather-worn and smooth at the joints…it was once decorated with lines, but the edges have softened and crumbled beneath the centuries of rain.” Who said that? Was it me? Have I thought of this before? Gooseflesh marched up his spine. He pulled his robes tighter around his shoulders.

“Sauron fears them because he does not know who made them,” Lugmokí whispered. “Yet he is not so afraid that he won’t use them.”

“What is it?”

Her answers overlapped inside his head, shaped out of old Valarin and the Black Speech.

“Why dreaming doors?”

*When they’re asleep you can’t find them. When they’re awake you can’t miss them.* She looked up into his eyes. *Sauron believes Melkor made them.*

“But he doesn’t know.”

“No,” she whispered. “He doesn’t know.”

“I don’t like it.” His blood drifted within its lacing of veins. “I…I don’t like this door. It makes me feel strange.”

Lugmokí dropped her voice below the wind. “That’s because it wants you. It wants me, too.”

He looked at her. “You said he is not afraid to use them.”

*He has gone through. He has gone to where they go.* She held his gaze. *When he is gone it is like a*
part of me sleeps.

“How does---”

---I don’t know.

“It won’t be ignored.”

“No.”

“No one would see me because I wouldn’t be able to see myself,” Gandalf murmured. “I would walk balanced on the fringes of their long shadows. Each day would drift apart like milkweed fluff.” He looked through the empty door and saw the barren plateau. “All doors inside me would remain closed until this one opened.”

Lugmokí put a hand on his shoulder. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s speaking to me.”
In The Inbetween

I woke on a moist gasp. Apocalyptic light filled the ceiling. The sleeping pleasure flew from me like clouds of butterflies. Their wings whispered as they passed through my loins.


He muffled.

“No, love. I mean it. You need to wake up.”

He muffled his reply in the pillow. “It’s too early.”

I sat up and drew the sheets into my lap. I looked at the window. My insides shifted, made buoyant by a slow-blooming fear.

“I had the strangest dream,” he murmured. “It was about snow. It froze the world into a season out of turn. Snow like a blanket, like the land had gone to sleep and could not be wakened.” He shifted.

“There was a woman. A white witch who spoke to me in the drifts. Curiously, I couldn’t understand a blessed word. Isn’t that strange?” He pulled the pillow off his face. “Janet?”

“I don’t care about your dreams right now. Open your eyes and look. Look at the light.” I pulled on his wrist. “Look out the window!”

The crack in the shutters framed a red sky. It hung low, woven of stained clouds. The shade of it made me think of angry skin, broken taillights, poisonous berries chewed upon a feverish tongue. Black mountains, jagged and bare, hugged the horizon. The light was thick and flushed. It fell in through the slice of space and skimmed the woodwork in the ceiling, soaked a discarded shirt, and bent around the legs of the night table. It glinted like carnelians on the side of the scullery bowl. It made smoky shadows on the floor.

“What’s going on with the sky? Is there a fire?”

“Would you look around?” I shook him. “This is not the same room we went to sleep in last night. And don’t you give me any of your placating bullshit, either. I am not hysterical, for God’s sake. Would you just look?”

He sat up and blinked sleepy eyes. “Am I still dreaming?”

“No!”

He looked toward the window. He withdrew his hand from beneath the sheets and held it out so the light fell across his fingertips. He turned the hand this way and that, watching the light advance and withdraw, spinning ashy darkness between his knuckles. He slapped himself. I flinched.

“Come on, now,” he muttered. He slapped again. “Snap out of it, old boy. Wake up.”

“You’re not sleeping!” I climbed out of bed and went to the window and yanked it open. The small room filled with bleeding light. “I don’t know what this is, Jack, but it’s real. Real as roses, and rain, and…and snoring, and sex. And food! This is real. I am real. You are real!”

Jack rubbed his eyes.
My chest tightened. “Dammit, Jack! Don’t you see?”

“She said her name was Jaden,” he said dreamily. “I remember the silver chair. She said she was made of crows. Sometimes she said she was the devil.”

“What?”

“This is the in-between.” The emptiness in his voice chilled me.

“The in-between of what?”

He looked at me. “The worlds.”
Lugmokí held onto Gandalf’s sleeves. “Do we go? Shall we go now?” Her body softened. “This feels so strange…so…” Her sentence wove through all of her languages, blending into a pidgin stew that tasted of fortitude and confusion simmering apart in a languid broth. He chased her meaning through the flighty halls of her mind. Her tongue settled upon Sindarin, and the syllables moved through him like cool droplets of dew shaken off the petals of Lórien. “I feel its desire for me in my body and my mind. It thirsts for my *fēa* and for my words. Does it feel this way for you too?”

“Yes.” The wind blew at her veil and he stilled it with his hands. “It feels this way for me too.”

He kissed her and felt the surprise in her lips, a softness wakened and made still. His fingertips knew the beauty in her cheek and described its curve down to the corner of her mouth. He saw stars in his mind’s eye, millions of them crowded together, the velvet between them breathing. *Yes.* The word quivered in his belly. *Yes. Yes. Yes.* Each word burned out of the sky. Each sound slid through the wind and trembled in dark waters before falling into silken petals. Her breath made a bed for his moan. Her mouth made a home for his tongue. She pressed his hand to her breast and beneath the soft flesh and stony nipple he felt all the yearning fury of her heart. “Yes,” she whispered, pulling away. “Yes, Gandalf. Yes, Mithrandir…yes to Olórin.” She moved her hands over his hair as she named all of his names, smoothing back the loosened strands.

“The only way out is through,” he said.

“Yes. The only way out is through.”

He touched Lugmokí’s back as she stepped over the threshold. For a split second there was nothing beneath his fingers…then his feet carried him through and he had no fingers.

*I am in the heart of the unformed.*
Faramir made camp on the eastern slope, high above the line of trees demarcating the Ithilien. The air was clear. Stars gleamed on the breast of the night. He sat on a rock with the guttering fire at his feet and watched the city as the wind came down off the mountains, pushing into his back, moist and stinking of electric rain. The orange lights of Minas Tirith flickered on the horizon. Starlight reflected in a pale hue off the nodding cheek of Mindolluin. The slopes around him brooded, dark and profound, filled with the muttering of the wind as it snagged in ravines and twisted scrub bushes on its way to softer places. He thought of Boromir. His heart went out across the space between them, imagining the kindness of an Elven bower and all of the secrets shimmering behind its soft veil.

“Varda watch and keep you, brother.” He kissed his loose fist and opened his fingers in the direction of Rivendell. “By all the eagles of Manwë and the grace of the encircling sea, may it be.”

He used a long stick to poke at the embers. Sparks broke loose and whipped away. He tossed the bones of his supper into the dying coals and went to his bedroll.

In the wind-driven distance he heard drums.
Frodo and Sam and Legolas squatted around a ring of dead coals and ate dried venison with apples for breakfast. The light behind them rose cold and pale, lighting a scrim of clouds tender pink from within. The meat was tough and stringy and the salt made their tongues cringe. The air smelled of fresh earth. Dew clung to the underside of every leaf.

“Sir?” Sam put a hand on Frodo’s blanket-wrapped shoulder. “If... if you’ll pardon my interruption.”

Legolas turned his head. His regard fell upon Sam like a weight of birdsong and silence.

Sam blushed to the roots of his hair. “I’d ask you a question, if it is allowed.”

Legolas’s smile raced the sunrise. “Of course.”

“Do you ever dream, sir?”

“Dreams come to all beings of fëa, Master Gamgee.”

“Aye. Aye, it’s so, for I have seen a housecat dream by the fire in wintertime, and I’ve heard it said that even birds dream of flying.” Sam wrung his hands. “But what I mean to say is... Master Elf, do you dream of things that feel like memories? Those that seem so real that you taste the tastes and smell the smells...but you know that those things never really happened?”

“Sam,” Frodo cautioned. “You shouldn’t bother him with your nonsense.”

Legolas held up a hand. In his mind’s eye he saw deer’s blood beaded upon the mossy ground. The memory of blood made him think of apples, and the thought of apples filled his mouth with the sweetness of women.

“Yes,” he said.
Sickened light gleamed off the wet black beach.

The sky over the ocean was cobalt, un kissed by moon or stars. The sky over the land was the color of rotten tomatoes. The two skies mingled over the beach into a hue of torn plums and bruised violets.

Lugmokí’s toe touched something buried in the sand. She squatted down. The restless sea smelled fresh and clean. A close look at the beach revealed a scattered trove of tide-embedded trinkets: a broken junk-metal bracelet, the hilt of an Elvish dagger, a drinking vessel wrought of dented aluminum, a baby doll without legs, a piebald length of blue tinsel, a die with the snake eye scoured out, a piece of ivory chipped off a powder horn. Gandalf shifted his robes and got on his knees. He pulled a cameo out of Lugmokí’s footprint. Sand crumbled free of the tiny links. The ivory silhouette carved into the small cracked jewel might’ve been a lost queen or a servant girl.

Lugmokí sat down beside him. She worked something loose from the beach’s grip. Chunks of sand and bits of seaweed fell away from a wad of soggy paper. The wind blew in off the water, wet and blunt as a chilled slap. It was bound together with a row of silver staples. Lugmokí’s teeth chattered as her sand-encrusted fingers worked the paper apart. She thought of people held together after the wars and skin made shy and soft from the shock of a sword. The water roared and the wind made hollow cries as it raced through the dunes. The bleached and wrinkled likeness of a young man opened itself to the periwinkle light. He had big white teeth, an angular hairless face, and a silky black noose cinched around his neck. He wore a bleached shirt. The hair on his head was streaked, like he spent long hours laboring in hot sun. He looked old and young at the same time. Lugmokí balanced the tender sheaf on her thigh and rubbed black speckles off the paper’s strange red letters: *Entertainment Weekly*.

“Sss-zzaak Aay-frrron.” Lugmoki held the dripping wad close to her face and wrinkled her brows. “Sszzak Efrron. Szac Ayfrrron.” She showed it to Gandalf. “I can read this but it makes my head hurt. What does this mean, Zac Efron? Does it mean anything to you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Lugmokí tossed it onto the high tide line. She wiped her hands on her lap. “What is this place?”

He handed her the cameo. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“But you know what it is.”

Gandalf let his hands dangle between his knees. “No. Not…exactly.”

“Not exactly?” She stood and flung the cameo aside. “How do you mean, not exactly?”

“It’s apparent to me that this must be another world.” His words sharpened. “I trust it’s apparent to you as well. One that is unlike Middle-earth in nearly all respects, so far as I can tell. Sauron was correct after all.”

“Yes, it is so, Lord of the Obvious.” She put her hands on her hips. "What do we do now?”

“I don’t know. You are the only one with any experience after a fashion. What do you remember?
Why don’t you go into your mind and ask Sauron?”

“I can’t. I told you before.” She put a hand on her forehead. “Though I suppose now I am the one who sleeps.”

Gandalf stood. “We can’t stay here. Look for some shelter, I suppose.”

Lugmokí took a deep breath. “Where there is trash, there are people.” Her eyes followed the horizon. “Where there are people, there is shelter. Where there is shelter, there will be answers.”

“Shall we follow the beach or head inland?”

“Water flows to the sea. Sooner or later we’ll find a stream or a river and we can follow that inland. Settlement follows water. It’s the shortest route.”

“It’s neither hot nor cold.” Gandalf picked up his staff. “It’s a boon, water-wise. We won’t sweat too much. Even so we can’t go long without water.”

Lugmokí looked at the sky. She pulled her flapping mantle tight around her shoulders. “Perhaps there will be rain.”
The Fish

Time passed, but how much neither one could say. The skies never changed and there were no tides to mark the progression of hours. They walked---up the beach? Down the beach? They didn’t know. Directions meant nothing without a sun to draw them upon the ground, and a thin needle floated in a cup of salt water spun around in lazy circles. Gandalf and Lugmokí kept close to the waterline, where the sand was firm.

The rain came without warning. A scattering of warm droplets swept along the beach before quickening into a hissing veil. A light breeze chased the rain, stoking the downpour into a steaming roar. The sand simmered. The falling waters frosted the ocean into a mutable shade of gray. Lugmokí stripped off her mantle. Her dress clung to her skin as rinsed the sand off the hem. The rain drummed mist out of the ground and the breeze teased it into strange shapes as Lugmokí used the wet cotton to fill their waterbags.

The rain slackened. Lugmoki wrung out her mantle and draped it over one shoulder. She glanced at the waves. “Look!”

She pointed. A flurry of phosphorescence rolled up from the darkness, suspended in glassine waves. Bits of it spread out over the sand, glowing green and yellow, purple and pink. They burrowed into the wet sand, colors shimmering and changing like a string of holiday lights.

“Why, they’re fish,” said Gandalf.

“Yes!” Lugmoki ran down into the water. She squatted and filled her hands with wriggling translucent bodies. “Do you suppose we can eat them?”

“The rain must bring them out,” said Gandalf. “I don’t know if we can eat them. I don’t know if we should even try.”

Lugmoki looked up at him. Variegated light waxed and waned under her chin. “Are you hungry?”

Gandalf hunkered down at the water’s edge. “Not so much.” He plucked one of the creatures out of the sand and it rolled itself up. The segments of its back stuttered yellow and green. “They’re more like shrimps.”

Lugmokí dropped her handful and plucked up one and twisted its head off. Neon pink blood smudged her fingertips. The luminescence faded. She sniffed. “It smells fine.”

“Are you hungry?”

Lugmokí peeled the shell. “A little bit. Look at the blood.” She squeezed the twitching body and more of the thin fluid ran out and coated her nails. “It loses its reactivity when exposed to the air.”

Gandalf stood. “Are you going to eat it?”

“I don’t think so.” Lugmokí tossed it aside and picked up another one. “It’s fascinating, don’t you think?”

“If you aren’t going to eat it, please don’t kill another one.”
“Why not?” Lugmokí looked up. “Don’t you wish to know how it works?”

“No.”

“You aren’t curious?”

Gandalf started off down the beach. “Not in the slightest.”

“I don’t understand. There might be a way to harness the light.”

“I wouldn’t have you kill a thing to learn how it works.”

Lugmokí ran after him. “Have I offended you?”

“We shouldn’t tarry.”

She grabbed his wrist and pulled him to a stop. She walked around in front of him. “Have I offended you?”

“What does offense mean to you?” Gandalf pushed off her hand. “You’re worried that you’ve offended me? Offense is naught but a political construct and there’s no space here for politics. I’ll not leave you here alone, if that’s what you mean. Beyond that it doesn’t matter whether you have offended me or not. Now let’s go.”

“I have offended you. I’m sorry.”

“More meaningless words,” he snapped. “Your diplomacy is empty here.”

“If I kill another of the glowing shrimp, are you going to leave me then?”

“No.” He moved past her. “I see no use in pointless killing. The thing works because it works. It glows in the water because that is its function. It’s function is not your concern.”

“But you’ll take the skin of an animal and turn it to leather.”

“Leather is for survival, and the taking of wool and bones is for stew and the roasting of meat. I would not take an eye from a horse to merely see how it sees, or a lung to see how it breathes.”

She hurried her stride. “I apologize if I have offended you.”

“Trade in your apologies for sincerity.”

They walked into a long wind-tossed silence.

“There is nobility in attempting to understand the way a horse sees, or breathes,” said Lugmokí. “The only way to know is to study the structure and the structure exists inside a living thing.”

“Then you are much like your maker.”

“You say that like…like there is filth in your mouth and you have to spit it out! Of course I am like him! Why does that have to be such a bad thing? Do you know how many infants in my country don’t die because someone once took apart the bodies of children? Of course you don’t. You are too busy making judgments of things you don’t know. Do you know how much disease there isn’t? Do you know that most people in Mordor live past their fiftieth year?” She pushed him. “Look at me when I speak!”
He stopped walking.

“Can you say that about your Gondor? And your precious Dúnedain? Those backward people on the other side of the Zguzamíth who revere a race that doesn’t sicken and will not die without arms or grief and think that its alien wisdom will save it? Your Elvish royalty has left them to wither and pass into nothing. I am like him. I am like Aulendil and I would be no other way.”

He looked at her.

“If you want to look at me and see filth then you will see filth. You will see a stain upon my skin. I have no more to say.”

Without a word or look, Gandalf resumed walking.
They knew the river was there before they saw it; the waters of the sea coiled dark and smoky up onto the beach. The beach itself changed character, becoming softer and blacker, caking apart under their feet like a crust of ashes. On the day that they came to the mouth there were things in the bloody sky that might’ve been stars or might’ve been tricks of the light. The river itself was wide and shallow and poured out into the darkness of the ocean. Its swift currents undercut the tides, its surging waters a milky shade of green.

Lugmokí and Gandalf cut across the dunes and followed the bank. The river’s edge was weak and treacherous, and so they kept their distance. Three days later, they breasted a steep line of dunes and Lugmokí spotted tangles of gleaming white sticking out of the riverbank. She put down her things and got on her belly. Gandalf cautioned her.

“There is nothing to worry about.” She groped over the edge, wrapping her fingers around a knob. “My weight is spread out.” She yanked. The surface shifted beneath her and she scooted backward, the long thing in her hand digging shallow ditches into the sand. “What kind of bone is this? I’ve never seen one before.”

Gandalf took the femur out of her hand. “It’s an Elf-bone.” He tossed it aside. “Male, I should judge.”

“There must be millions of them.”

“It may well be.”

“Perhaps it was a war.”

Gandalf wiped his hand on his robes. “We should go.”

“Do the bones unsettle you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“That’s a lot of death,” said Gandalf. “ Likely all of it needless.”

“Elves don’t die very often.”

“No.” His eyes moved over the eroded places in the dune. “They don’t.”

“Do you think they’ll burn?”

“What?”

“The bones,” said Lugmokí. “Do you think they’ll burn?”

“What for?”

“I’m cold. I want to cook something. I’m tired of eating raw fish.”
“We’re not burning these bones, even if they would burn, which I’m not sure of,” he said. “They are the mortal remains of fallen Firstborn. And they’re wet.”

“They’re dead, Gandalf. They won’t mind.”

He sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

Lugmokí used her mind to lure some lobster-like fish out of the river and Gandalf built a fire out of long bones. They were slow to catch, but once they had the fire burned bright and hard. The fish steamed pink inside their shells.

“This is magnificent.”

“Few things in life are finer than hot food.”

Lugmokí paused. “To your right and behind you. Upwind. Do you smell them?”

Gandalf tossed an empty claw into the fire. “For some time.”

Lugmokí looked over his shoulder. Her vision adjusted to the clotted darkness. Raggedy shadows moved against the horizon. Some of them carried flames of their own. “Shall we allow them to approach?”

Gandalf sucked white meat out of a jointed coral tail. “I think so.”

Lugmokí looked into his eyes. “We don’t have enough to share.”

A man drifted into the circle of light cast by the fire. He was tall, lean, dressed in castoff swatches of clothing. His hair and beard were matted into dreadlocks. He carried a weapon fashioned out of a length of pipe. Strings of animal teeth and feathers dangled off the handle. Lugmokí spoke in rapid Black Speech: “Leave your weapon.” He halted at the words but didn’t do as she asked. She shifted to Haradh, went through the Elvish languages, Dwarvish, the cave dialects of Orkish, and Westron.

The man spoke with a thick Mississippi accent. “I can barely understand you, ma’am.”

Lugmokí closed her eyes and tried again. Her forehead wrinkled.

“She wants you to put down your weapon,” said Gandalf.

“Yes sir.” The pipe thunked on the sand. “My name’s Bill. We’re wondering where you came from. Y’all don’t look like you’re from someplace familiar.”

“How many are you?”

“Eleven.” Bill swallowed. “My wife and some others.”

“Are you hungry? Would you like to join us?”

“We got some fruit to trade, if you like,” said Bill.

“No trade is necessary.” Gandalf turned around. “Sharing, on the other hand, is always appreciated. We have fish if you’d like some.”

“You’re right, sir. That sounds great. Just a minute. I’ll fetch the others.”
Gandalf listened to him run back toward the dunes and lowered his voice. “He says they are eleven and that they are willing to share fruit,” he said. “Would you please go and fetch some more fish while I settle our new friends?”

Lugmokí stood. “Of course.”

Bill’s makeshift tribe melted out of the shadows. They were as thin and disheveled as he was, clutching an assortment of bags and packsacks. He introduced his wife as Sharon, and one at a time the others gave Gandalf their names, whispering them, huddling together on the sand. Bill had some cactus fruits and Gandalf used his knife to peel them and slice them into raw red chunks. The juice stained their fingers. Lugmokí returned with six more lobsters. She flung them onto the fire, prodding them with the end of a broken shinbone as their legs twitched. The shells whistled and crackled. Their sweet, faintly salty scent filled the air. When the lobsters had turned pink she raked them out of the burning bones and tossed them toward the newcomers. Gandalf shared the remainder of his fruit with her.

“We’re on our way back up to the city,” said Bill. “We been hunting out here in the dunes for the last month or so. You’re welcome to fall in with us, if you like.”

“Hunting?” said Lugmokí. “There are animals out here?”

“No for animals,” said Bill. “Scavenging. Wires and bits of metal and whatnot. Wires and metal and gadget bits are always good for something. The palace buys em up and pays gold for em. There’s lots of fighting out here, though, over the best places. The best territories. Around here’s not so good cause it’s already been picked clean. Further out from the river, though, and down on the beach there’s lots of junk that just washes up.” He shrugged. “It’s rough, but it’s a living.”

“You say there’s a city,” said Gandalf.

“Hell yeah. It’s the city. It’s yonder up the river maybe fifteen miles, or wheels as they call em here. You know about miles, mister?”

“Distance is reckoned in both wheels and miles where I come from,” said Gandalf. The ghost of a memory niggled at him: How many fucking goddamned miles to Mordor, Gandalf? Behind that, fainter still, carried on a soul’s breath: Janet? Who is Janet? A face blurred in his mind, almost sharpened into focus, then fell away.

Lugmokí’s gaze narrowed onto him. “It is wheels where I come from, also.”

Bill chewed a piece of fish. “So I guess it’s about fifteen wheels, or whatever that is in miles. Not too far from here. I kinda figured you must be heading up there. It’s the only place to go.”

“What is the name of this city?”

Sharon spoke. “Xe Nahadu.”

Gandalf looked at her. She looked back, her eyes wary. In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree. A shiver fell down through his flesh, cool and vertiginous. Where Alph the sacred river ran. The voice of his memory was female, and his mind linked it to that strange name. Yes, Janet. Do please read to us again tonight. We have enjoyed it so much. “Through caverns measureless to man, down to a sunless sea,” he murmured.

“What?” said Lugmokí.

“I don’t know.” Gandalf shook his head. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry, Sharon, I was woolgathering. Xe
Nahadu, you say?"

Sharon nodded. “Yes.”

*Did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree.* The line’s maddening cadence marched through his mind. “This palace you mentioned,” said Gandalf. “Is it ever called the Dome?”

“Yeah.” Bill sucked the meat out of a split claw. “It sure is. It’s got a big dome on it, like it encases the whole thing. I wouldn’t really know, though. I’ve never been inside.”

Lugmokí kept her eyes on his face. “Gandalf, what are you talking about?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But I think it’s best that we travel together from here. Especially if it is as dangerous as you say, Bill.”

“I think we’d be glad to have you.” Bill looked around. “What do you say?”

Sharon nodded. The others looked among themselves, seeking approval reflected in one another’s faces. They murmured their agreement.

“How about you, Lugmokí? Do you agree as well?”

She stared into the flames. “There are things you aren’t telling me.”
I felt a throb in the air, it surrounded me like the surge of an invisible sea. Air flowed across my skin, pushing a welter of sound into my ears and filling them to the brim: voices clashing, meshing, murmuring, and shouting, the incredible noise of motors and the bass pulse of music humming its way in my bones. On the heels of that came a stronger breeze, stinking of exhaust and simmering garbage. I took a big breath in through my nose.

“Do you hear that? It’s modern music!” I giggled. “It’s fucking club music! Do you smell that? It smells like...like...Boston! Well I’ll be! Can you get over that?”

“It’s noise,” grumbled Jack.

“But it’s modern noise. It’s contemporary, at least to me. What the hell is this place, anyway?” I flung open the shutters and looked out onto a darkened maze of urban canyons. Neon signs glowed up the sides, different scripts stacked one on top of the other: I looked at the sooty buildings and imagined a hellish reflection of Tokyo seen in a time-darkened mirror. “Maybe this means we can go home. Home, Jack. Think of that for a minute. Anyone who can get their hands on the latest KMFDM remixes is sure to have one of those magic door thingies.” I moved my hands over my head and cackled, full of dangerous euphoria. “This is some fucked-up Emerald City, let me tell you that. Let’s go. Let’s go!” I snatched my clothes off the floor. “This is some motherfucking Wizard! Woo-hoooo!”

“This isn’t a very nice place, Janet.” Jack got dressed. “You’d do well to remember that.”

“Dude, I smell fried chicken! Fried chicken!” I tied on my skirt. “I think I’d hamstring my own mother for some fried chicken right now. I’m starving. So let’s go!”

“Janet!” He took hold of my arms. “Listen to me. This is not a nice place.”

I shook free of his grip. “How would you know? Have you ever been here? Yeah, I know about your whole in-between the worlds thing, but were you here? Actually here, wherever here is?”

He paused. “No.”

“That’s what I thought. Now, I am going to finish getting dressed and then I’m going out and trading something for some of that fried chicken and after that I’m going to ask someone who’s in charge of this pop-stand, and after that I’m going to go find him, or her, or whatever, and ask him or her about the Lady GaGa that’s playing right now. You don’t know who Lady GaGa is, and you probably don’t like this song very much, but Ms. GaGa is from the year 2009 just like me. If the disco stick can make it here from good old 2009, there’s a chance, just a chance, that maybe I can make it back.”

“What if this Lady GaGa comes from here?” Jack’s voice was quiet. “And her presence in 2009 is the anomaly? What are you going to do then?”

“Yeah, Lady G and KMFDM? And whatever else they’ve got going in another part of the city? I don’t buy it, Jack.” I shrugged into my top. “I’m sorry. I’m going to find whoever runs this show and you can come with me or not. But staying up here and cowering over how it’s not a nice place?” I tied on my belt and checked my knife. “Fuck that noise right to hell and back.” I take a
deep breath. “Oh man, fried chicken. I could almost cry. If there’s chocolate too I might just have an orgasm right in the middle of the street. I wonder if we could actually get a car?”

Jack geared up without a word.
The little group of travelers left the dunes and followed the floodplains to the city of Xe Nahadu.

Lugmokí admired the lofty architecture and the city’s strategic location in the bend of the river, perched atop the outermost edge of continental shelf. She knew the potential of electrons, but even Sauron’s mind had never conceived such harmony between function and beauty: the tall gates were outlined in individual sparks, each one fierce and white, ambient light polishing the elegant curves of the walls. Words written in glowing colors outlined doors and tall windows, stacked on top of each other, and reflected in silver windows. Each building silhouetted against the others, carving russet slices of negative space. Fans of gilded light positioned between them fashioned the city into a dark and fiery jewel, a living jewel, a cradle of life and forgotten civilization nestled into the blasted landscape. Overlooking all stood the palace: high, symmetrical, cut from the bedrock, faceted with glass, capped with an enormous pale dome both ghostly and blue and luminescent as churned seawater beneath the glow of a full moon.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

Gandalf kept silent.

“We’ll take you through to the market,” said Bill. “Then we’ll shake hands over it and move on. Deal?”

“Of course. In case I forget to mention it, thank you for the fruit. And for your guidance.”

“Don’t worry.” Bill unshouldered his pack. “We’re square.”

“They don’t like us.” Lugmokí spoke Sindarin. “They don’t trust us.”

“They don’t trust your fëa.” Gandalf gestured toward the city. “I’m not sure I trust this fëa.”

“A city doesn’t have fëa. This is electricity.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve never seen it before, but I know what it is. I know how it works.”

“And what is it?”

“Tamed lightning,” said Lugmokí. “Harnessed and made useful.”

Gandalf looked up at the gates. Up close he could see the fine workmanship of the steel beams. In places the walls were made of thick glass and he could see people walking inside them, suspended in dove-colored corridors of artificial light. “I saw nothing like this in Mordor.”

“Sauron believes in the management of progress. Awareness of truth must be raised gradually. Otherwise there is a risk of destabilization.”

“You’re saying that Sauron believes in the control of education,” said Gandalf. “The strict management of lore and knowledge.”

“Are you going to tell me that the Dúnedain do not? That the Elves do not?” Sarcasm iced her
Spare me your disdain. That legendary promotion of equality and progress must be why so many Men speak Elvish and all of Gondor can read.” She paused, took in a sharp breath, and let it out. “There are problems with the generation and distribution of electricity. It’s not yet practical. Here, it is only one city and compared to a country one city is far more manageable.”

“Why doesn’t he electrify Barad-Dûr, then?”

“If the Tower had electricity then the rest of the country would want it too, and demand it, and they would be in the right to do so.”

The stink of bodies competed with the smell of burnt petrol and the savory aromas of sidewalk-cooked food.

“Who is Janet?”

“I’m sorry?” Gandalf raised his voice over the noise. “What did you say?”

“I want to know about Janet.”

“I don’t really know,” he said. “She’s a memory of a time that I can’t seem to remember. At first I thought maybe it was a dream, but now I’m not so sure.”

“How do you mean?”

“There are scenes inside my head that come from another place. They don’t feel like memories in the most familiar sense, but rather like…something concurrent, or something happening outside of time.”

“We’re outside of time now,” said Lugmokí. “This is nowhere.” With an elegant turn of the wrist she indicated the paved streets, the ragged crowd, the vaguely Elvish façades of the buildings. “Can’t you feel that?”

“Yes, but that isn’t what I mean.”

“Sauron says that all things exist in all times. There are mathematics to explain how, but I don’t know them well enough to show you.” She watched their jostled reflections in a shop window. “I’m not sure you’d understand it anyway.”

“I don’t know who she is,” said Gandalf. “I only know that I remember her.”

“What do you remember of her?”

“That she was both intelligent and lost,” he said.
A sign over the fried chicken place said COIN ONLY.

“Coin?” I looked at Jack. “So where do we get coin?”

“I have no idea.”

The chicken place had glass windows, red plastic booths, and a yellow neon sign shaped like a chicken. People sat shoulder-to-shoulder inside, eating wings and thighs and bits of fried dough out of paper-lined plastic baskets. A pair of harried women worked to keep the tables and floors clean. The chicken was made up of two sets of bulbs, and they flashed on and off, creating the illusion of motion. In one configuration it looked like it was roosting, and in the next it had its wings spread and its feet curled up, like it was running toward the next building. The bulbs sizzled as they lit up and popped as they went dark. A scrawny boy dumped out the trash and disappeared with it through the kitchen. The backbeat of a distant disco song thrummed inside the grease-fried air, underscoring the constant stew of voices and footfalls.

“Dammit, I’m hungry. Hey! Hey you!” I lunged forward and touched the elbow of a tall dirty blond with dreadlocks in his beard. He wore an aviator’s jacket, a long tattered skirt, and a striped knitted cap. I tilted my chin toward the sign. “So where do you get coin around here?”

He gave me a blank look. “Dome.”

“Dome? What do you mean, dome?” I looked up at the towering buildings. “What the hell is the dome?”

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “The dome. The palace. The market. Moneychangers are all there.” He gave me the once-over. “You new?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I put on my best smile. “Thanks.”

His bloodshot eyes flicked to Jack. “You with that guy?”

“Yeah. I’m with that guy. Thank you.” I raised my voice. “That will be all. So move along.”

“Janet,” hissed Jack.

The guy leaned back and pushed open the door. A bell tinkled. He shot Jack a half-smile. “Got a mouth on her, don’t she?”

“I’m sorry about that,” said Jack. “Please don’t take offense.”

The guy shook his head and lumbered into the restaurant.

“Janet! For Christ’s sweet sake, curb the sharp side of your tongue.” Jack let his hand fall from the hilt of his knife. “The next so-called gentleman won’t be so nice, you know.”

Dull irritation flowered behind my temples. “Don’t speak for me, all right?” I rounded on him. The petals sharpened into anger. “You know I fucking hate that. I hate it when you do that. So why do you keep on doing it? Why?”
“Because I fear for your safety. Someone has to do it because clearly it isn’t going to be you.”

“I can take care of myself! I don’t need you…looking out for me, or whatever it is you think you’re doing.” I folded my arms. “How would you feel if I did that to you? Huh? Spoke for you to some random stranger? Just…like that? Would it make you feel emasculated? Humiliated? Pussy-whipped? Righteously pissed off? Or maybe it would just make you feel ridiculous. Perhaps it would make you feel as though I treat you like a child. Oh I’m so sorry Jack spoke to you that way. I’ll be sure to seat him in the corner and send him to bed without breakfast. Imagine that. Just imagine it. Take a minute.”

“I’ve no wish to get into this with you.” He sighed. “Don’t you think that’s enough?”

“I’m a woman, Jack. I’m an adult just like you.” I put up my hand. “So fucking stop it.” I moved past him. “I’m going to get coin.”

“If you didn’t act like a child, perhaps I wouldn’t treat you like one.” He remained still. “Something for you to think about.”

I turned around. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Since our arrival here you’ve done nothing but act like a kid at a carnival, running around, moaning about fried chicken and chocolate like these things are the most important things in the world. Which is something a child would do.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Okay, Dad. Go ahead and say it.”

“Children don’t fear anything greater than the loss of a beloved toy or privilege,” he said. “You have more to lose than that and you’re old enough to know better.”

“I’m having fun. You know, fun? The stuff where you go ha ha hah, which that’s laughter by the way, and it only hurts the first time. I’m happy to be here. I like it here, Jack. This place makes sense to me. I know the barbaric music and the crush of humanity offends your oh-so-delicate sensibilities, but I like it. I like that it’s dirty and noisy and full of strange people. I’m having fun. Now until someone sticks a big old knife in my face, or points a gun at me, or gets all up in my grill, I’m not going to obsess over my safety. I think it’s possible that I might know a little more about how to get by in the big city than you do.” I started to giggle. “You haven’t spent a lot of time in New York, have you?”

“No,” he said. “No, I haven’t.”

“Well back off. I mean it. I don’t second-guess you.”

“That’s what you’re doing right now!”

“No, actually, it isn’t. I’m telling you to quit your controlling patriarchal crap and attempting to draw attention to the fact that you would never ever in your wildest dreams even think about treating another man the way you treat me. If I was a man and I told you I knew what I was doing here, you’d probably think to yourself about how full of shit I am but you’d keep your mouth shut. Because, you know, that’s what guys do. There’s that old-boy respect. You’d know that if you tried to pull on him what you just pulled on me you’d probably get a fist in the face for your troubles. So let me tell you this: the next time you do something like that, I’m not going to say anything. I’m just gonna punch you. Maybe knuckle language is more comprehensible to you. Maybe it will stick in your brain a little better. Because I am sick and tired of having this conversation.”
“Perhaps we should go our separate ways then.”

“Maybe we should.”

I looked at him for a moment and then I started for the market. “Coin. I’m going to go get some. You can do whatever you want.”

I lunged off at a stride, weaving through backs and oncoming faces, climbing the incline of the road and following the increasing pulse of the music. My suppressed anger simmered in my bones, pouring energy into my muscles. I refused to let my mind wallow. I struggled with the urge to undress each word and put it back on differently, in a way that was better, in a way that cut quicker and produced more coherency. I let my instincts navigate me through the crowd. I didn’t bother listening for the sound of his feet because in that furious moment I didn’t care if he followed me or not. The street broadened as it reached the top of the hill. The noise thickened into the roar of a concert crowd and inside the din I heard market sounds: things taken apart, gathered, weighed, advertised in singsong voices, the clucks and bleats of living merchandise, the gunning of engines, and rapid-fire haggling.

Music poured out of hidden speakers and sank heavy in my bones, rapid percussion strumming the fillings in my teeth. Finger-plucked strings flailed over an electronic beat. Voices fell in and out of formless synchronized chanting. The market itself enclosed a plaza paved in black flagstones, stalls and tables mashed together in a convoluted stinking maze around the outer edge. Nylon-bright fringes hung from dusty awnings embroidered with sea glass, bits of mirrors, and the silver pull tabs of pop cans. Bunches of leathery fruit hung around the necks of teenagers. Passers-by pressed coins into their palms and in turn the sellers cut loose pieces of fruit. Skewers of meat smoked and sputtered over braziers, tended and turned by old women. Men sat spraddle-legged on wooden stools with ashy doves in their hands. Birds that resembled tiny magpies perched in rows along the awnings. A burly black woman in a blacksmith’s apron sat surrounded by a display of small revving engines, the plank tables strung with sparkling fiber optic lights. Women sat in doorways on cushions, nursing babies and chattering and drinking clove-scented tea. The center of the plaza writhed with a pack of whirling, lunging, undulating trance dancers. Colored lights flashed to different parts of the music’s frenzied rhythm, illuminating the pall of smoke, gleaming off their sweaty skins. Big patchwork skirts spun out into flowing discs. Hair flew. Many wore long beaded fringes that swung and fluttered and crackled in the stuttering glow of the lights. Spectators clapped and stomped their booted feet to the beat. A woman ululated her enthusiasm and it was echoed back to her from the other side of the plaza.

The wall of stimulation jangled my nerves. The lights disoriented me, and for a moment I felt adrift, unsure of where the ground was or if my feet were touching it. I thought that maybe they were sailing its mysterious dark like twin boats built of bone and skin, my skirt like a sail yearning for wind. My thoughts swam around inside my skull, curled over each other in waves. The urge to twirl buoyed up inside my limbs. I closed my eyes for a split second, shaking it off as I moved around the edge of the trance dancers and toward the huge façade of the palace. My bones solidified, weighing down my ankles, and the ground felt like the ground. The stones rose up to cradle the soles of my feet. The smoke in my wake curled. I looked around into firelit faces, strobelit faces, cheeks and foreheads wavering in and out of shadow, and I wondered what the people lounging in the alleys and seated on the curbs were burning in their pipes.

In front of high gates, arranged in a neat canopied line, sat the moneychangers. They held court at long narrow tables spread with squares of dark velvet, peering at items through magnifying glasses, holding them up to lamps for inspection, measuring them against a set of crafted weights. People stood in lines that looped back over themselves and traded everything: jewelry, clothing, shoes, tools. The briskest business happened in the center, where broken motherboards, dented iPods,
dismembered cell phones, coils of wire, and handfuls of corroded microchips were traded for tiny leather sacks packed tight with small gold coins. I thought of my old packsack, the one I’d had before, with my schoolbooks and my cell phone and iPod tucked away in a pocket, and a hollow space opened up inside of me. The memories of those things burned in the darkness of my mind, weakening in the sensory onslaught of the present moment. They winked out. I had some Nurnen pearls, a pair of hoop earrings, and an embroidered dust muffle imported from the Gorgoroth. I turned my bag around to my front and loosened the laces.

A brief touch warmed the back of my shoulder and as I turned my head, a whiff of intimate scent came to my nostrils. The wind of scent rose into my nose, unfolding, subtle with the secret minerals of skin, soft as newborn fur, nurtured by body heat: the hearts of strange woods carved into she shapes of flowers, rubbed with the skinned roots a forgotten spring, buried in a drift of pale blossoms. The ambient smoke soaked into the surfaces of my brain, wavering there. My blood fluttered. I lifted my eyes. A tall man dressed in a long dark leather coat, swathed from head to toe in a thin black cloak, moved past me with the eddying grace of a river. The flashing lights slowed the cadence of his steps, outlining his shoulders, stitching their broad and elegant shape into the back of my mind; they moved through time and space like the figurehead of a ship, their claim on the beauty of motion enhanced by their wake of silk gauze. I turned with his momentum, circumscribing his outer limits like a hidden dance partner. I put out a hand to stabilize my addled feet. I peered up into his hood and his lower face hid behind a wrought metal veil, a curtain of bedecked chains affixed to a sleek silver frame, and the silver whispered of long skill polished deep into the nuances of the metal, the links ringing with the songs of tiny bells. My gaze brushed him and he turned to look at me. The music melted beneath my skin, pulsing down through layers of flesh until it struck my soul. Resonance flooded my hips, tingled in my lips, and shivered up the course of my spine.

He slowed in his steps and turned all the way around, gave me the full measure of his gaze, I felt like a warm bowl of water poured into his eyes. They were long and slanted, full of lassitude-cloaked intelligence, the thick line of his powdered lashes rising over icy blue like the last remnants of a summer storm. The oxygen in my lungs grew thin. Doors opened inside his eyes, turning on hinges made of smoke and crystal, gates of forgotten secrets beckoning me through them like a wind. I felt sheltered beneath the long arch of his heavy brows. My joints lightened and my feet lightened until I felt like my toes might kiss the earth goodbye. The sky inside his eyes flowered into a silver dawn that I spread beneath, swooning into an ocean, restless from horizon to horizon. The boundaries of their shapes changed and I knew he was smiling. I reached out and caught a long sleek fold of his cloak, and as the fluid material slid through my fingers I felt it tauten, and I thought about the strength of the fibers, how stretched they were, and how the roots of the threads lay close to his skin. I broke out into a sudden prickling flush. He turned against his cloak, and he took hold of my opposite fingers, unfolding my arm to a slow rhythm, that gaze sliding down the length of his arm, over his ringed fingers, skimming the length of mine like a touch, landing somewhere in the roots of my body and sinking down through me until my feet hooked back into the earth. Flowers of movement opened in my hips, shivering petals and stems in my knees, and I held his gaze until I needed to be alone with the sensations they made inside of me. In darkness my hips flicked in circles around the heavy beat of the music and my heels tapped out the counterpoint. My knuckles hummed alongside his, wrapped up in his, the spaces between ringed in silver and joined by lengths of fine chain, and the silver was warm and smooth as his skin, and it seemed to sing with a blood of its own.

The touch of his fingers lingered long after they had departed.

“Janet?”

Jack’s voice made me aware of my dancing. My eyes opened. I looked into the melee of bodies but
I didn’t see him. My hips slowed to a standstill. He put a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m behind you.”

I turned. The market had drifted off and I stood amongst the trance dancers, ensconced in a circle I had carved out for myself. “I don’t know what happened. I started for the moneychangers and I guess I just got…sidetracked.”

“You never could resist a dance,” he said with a smile. “I’m sorry for belittling you. I know that we don’t always speak the same language and that while it is not my intent, it is what you hear. I’ll do my best to avoid such misunderstandings in future.”

I searched the market for the veiled man, but I knew he was gone. I felt it like a dream falling into tatters upon waking.

“I am sorry, Janet. It may not sound like much but I do mean it.”

“Jack, shut up,” I said. “I don’t want to get into this now. I want to get some money and then some food. We’ll talk after. Okay?”

“I suppose it’s going to have to be, isn’t it?”

I didn’t welcome the sense of irritation. I felt lightheaded from the smoke, detached from the inside of my own skin, and I thought about things to say and none of them would salve him, and while I knew that I didn’t want to salve him I thought about the veiled man and his chained fingers. I thought about his eyes as I changed my pearls for a handful of small flattened gold loops and I knew that they would be inside me forever.
Invited

Jack and Janet sat together on the steps leading up to the palace gates and ate drumsticks wrapped in the pages of old magazines.

“This is delicious. Delicious, delicious, absolutely delicious. Have you ever eaten so fine a meal?” Janet sucked chicken grease off her fingers. “I don’t think so. I do not think so.”

Jack bit into a corn fritter still hot enough to steam on his tongue. “I don’t think so either.” He pulled back and blew on the remaining half. “I’m not sure I’ve felt this hungry for something before, but I don’t think it’s about being hungry, exactly.” He took another bite. “It’s about being hungry for what the food represents.”

“The human body loves the taste of fat. And the taste of sugar. So speak for yourself. I love me some fat and sugar, especially when it’s all rolled into one thing.” She unfolded a page from an old *Rolling Stone*, revealing a brownie. “Such as this brownie.” She held it up on her palm. “It’s called chocolate, but what it really is is heaven. I’m in heaven,” she sang, “yes I’m in heaven, this is heaven, oh heaven, yes heaven!” She giggled and made the brownie dance. “All this rich lovely food is making me foolish!”

Jack glanced over her shoulder and cleared his throat.

“Pardon me.”

Janet turned around. A palace guard stood behind her, one sandal-clad foot propped on the stair above her. He bent his head. “My apologies, lady, for interrupting your supper.”

“Do you want us to move?” Janet stood. “Are we blocking something by sitting here?”

“No, no, remain seated if it is your wish,” said the guard. “I only interrupt to bring you this.” He presented her with a small scroll. “An invitation to enter the Dome. It is not a summons and you are free to decline.” He bowed. “Present this scroll to the guards o’ the watch and you will be admitted, escorted to your rooms, and left alone to make ready. When you are sufficiently refreshed, at your leave, the Maker requests the pleasure of your company.”

“What?” Color rose into her face. “Why?”

“It is not my place to question my orders.”

“Oh no, of course not,” said Janet. “I just…I’m surprised, that’s all. Who is the Maker? Is he…she? He?”

“He.”

“He. Is he your ruler?”

“He built this city and all that’s in it.”

“So that’s a yes. He’s your ruler.”

“He would not be addressed as such,” said the guard.
Jack stood. “And what does this Maker want in return?”

“His will is not for me to presume.”

“What is expected of us? Do we have to make a donation, or tell a story, or perhaps do a little dance?” Jack paused. “Perhaps other things?”

“You are not invited,” said the guard. “The lady is invited.”

“All right,” said Janet. “I’ll do it.”

Jack took her wrist and pulled until she turned around. “You’re going to leave me out here?”

The guard put his heels together. “By your leave, lady.”

“Yes, of course.” Janet bowed her head. “Thank you.”

“Wait just a bloody minute! You’re going to leave me out here?”

Janet watched the guard walk off. “Jack…look. I don’t know what this is about, okay? But some guy called the Maker probably knows what there is to know about magic doors. Now I’ve got a way to meet him.” She put her purse of coin into his hand. “Here you go. Take the rest of my money. You’ll be fine.”

“But…but I don’t want you to leave me out here,” he said. “I want to go with you.”

“It’s rude to put conditions on an invitation.”

“What if you don’t come out?”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“What if this Maker wants access to your body as payment for his hospitality?”

“What is it with you? You’re so obsessed with the idea of me…I don’t know, becoming some sort of prostitute or something. Like I might be a whore in virgin’s clothing and you’re so goddamned paranoid that you got bilked. You’re obsessed with my purity and, you know, the imminent threat of me losing it. I hate to tell you this, Jack, but there’s nothing to lose. I wasn’t a virgin. You weren’t my first.”

He flushed and pressed his lips together.

“You won’t be my last, either. If it gets me close to one of those doors? There’s no question. I’ll give it to him. I’ll give him whatever he wants. If I just plain feel like it, I’ll give him whatever he wants. We’re not married.” She put her hands on her hips and glared. “Even if we were, that doesn’t make me chattel. My body isn’t chattel. My nonexistent purity sure as hell isn’t chattel.”

She let out a long sigh. “I’m not your princess, and you didn’t rescue me, and this isn’t a fairy tale. In Janet’s world, sex doesn’t equal marriage. It doesn’t even equal love. Sometimes it doesn’t mean anything at all. It is what it is. I care about you, I do. But despite what you seem to think, I didn’t hand you the ownership of my body the moment I let you put your dick in it. Oh, and you can save your controlling, patronizing brand of ‘concern’ for someone who gives a shit.”

She reached out and snatched her money out of his hand. “I guess this is the part where I tell you to fuck off. To take a long walk off a short pier, or just to get the hell out. I mean it, Jack, though I guess don’t really mean it so meanly. You and I are over.”
The Maker

There was a stream in the floor. It snaked under glass, tumbled over a bed of crystals and down inside two clear steps, flowing across another open level, then down again onto a third, all of the levels open and formed in a loose descending spiral. The fourth level was the bedroom, and it was nestled inside rippling glass walls and topped with a ceiling made to look like a star-speckled night sky. A stylized cedar tree grew out of the headboard and spread its branches, scenting the air with the dreams of forests.

On the first level were red velvet chairs and low tables carved out of driftwood. Hanging curtains of amber-tinted beads shaded squares of soft sunny light and made ornate smoky shadows on the floor. I followed the stream with my feet onto the second level, to a dining table sculpted out of pale bluish glass and decorated in fish-scale patterns with carved bits of abalone shell. The stream swelled out into an oxbow pond, its calm waters blooming with clouds of tiny phosphorescent shrimp. Here the ceiling was the color of a twilit sky and tiny lights hung from it like the sparkling strands of deep-sea jellyfish.

I turned the heat up, dimmed the lights, and pulled up an extensive catalogue of music. Many of the titles I had never heard of. I scrolled through them, laughing at the familiar ones, unaware that there were tears in my eyes until they dripped off my chin. I wiped them away and made a playlist. I touched start.

The volume of the music lowered and a voice that was neither male nor female spoke over the strained sweetness of violins. “Please excuse the interruption. You have an incoming call. Would you like to accept this call?”

“Um.” I swallowed, turning around in a circle. “Can you see me?”

“No. I cannot see you.”

“Is my caller able to see me?”

“No. He is not able to see you.”

“Okay.” I cleared my throat. “Um…who is calling, please?”

“The people of Xe Nahadu call him the Maker.”

I stood in the middle of the room. “What do you call him?”

“I call him the same.” There was a brief pause. “He made me, too.”

“Are…are you…are you a silicon-based intelligence?”

“Yes.”

“Wow, no shit. Really?”

“Your call is on hold. Would you like to accept this call?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. Yes. I’ll accept it.”
I listened to the water flow through the floor. A faint breath cut across the music and a rich male voice spoke. “What is your name?”

“Janet Lambert.” My face got red. “Are you the man from the market?”

“Yes.”

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

I sat. “What’s your name?”

“The people here call me the Maker.”

I looked into the ceiling. “That isn’t your name.”

“No. It isn’t.”

“So what do you want from me?”

He paused. “I find you interesting.”

I touched my collarbones. “I-I don’t understand. What does that mean?”

“Are you comfortable?”

“What?” I looked around. “Oh—yes, this place is…well, I don’t have any words. And that’s a good thing. It’s…well, I’d say it’s beautiful, but that’s understating it by a mile.”

“It means a great deal to me that anyone should find it beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Is there anything you desire?”

“N-No. I could not ask for more. That sounds…cheesy, I know, but it’s the truth.” I watched the shrimp swimming in ribbons beneath my feet. “I could never have imagined such a room even in my wildest fantasies. It’s perfect.”

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Um. Do you have ice?”

“Do you want ice?”

“I want ice water.” I swallowed. “Please.”

“Very well, then you shall have ice water.”

“You haven’t told me your name. Why not?”

“I would rather tell it to your face. I want to see it. Your face. I want to watch it sink in. When you tell someone your name there is a moment, like a flicker, where the sound of it takes up secret residence inside the face. I would like to see this. I would like to see my name alight in your face.”

He chuckled. “Do you like it?”

“Yes. Yes I do. So…uh…what do I call you now? If you’re going to tell me your name later. Face to face.”

“What would you like to call me?”

“I don’t know. I-I’ve only seen your eyes.”

“Tell me. Where do you come from?”

“Maine.”

“Where is Maine?”

“Um…America?”

“America. Yes. I’ve heard of America. In what region of America is Maine?”

“The northeast. Where…where are you from? Are you from here?”

“No one is from here.”

A bell chimed. It startled me. “Here is your ice water,” he said. “Is it cold in the northeast of America? Do you have ice?”

I laughed. “Hell yes. A motherfucking buttload. Our winters are tough.”

“Do you think you’re tough, Janet Lambert?”

I smiled. “I know I’m tough.” I went to the door and on the other side of it stood a guard with a tall glass of ice water. “How about you? Do you think you’re tough?”

He laughed. “Is your water cold enough?”

“Yes.” I sipped and sighed. “It’s icy, and heavenly, and perfect. I’m so thirsty. Thank you.”

“My pleasure. I’d like to talk more with you, face-to-face. I’d like to see you. Is that all right?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Of course.” I looked around for a focal point. “Uh…when?”

“If you’d like to rest, please feel free to do so. If you’d like someone to come and wash your clothes, it will be done. If you’d like someone to come and wash you, it will be done. All you have to do is ask.”

I stepped down into the third level, where a large section of wall dissolved into a mirror. “Is it true that you made all of this?”

“Every cornerstone, every filament, every kindled light, every paving stone. All of these things bear the touch of my hand.”

I curled my legs up beneath me. “You made the computer?”

“Yes, I made the ghost in the machine.”

“How?”
A smile entered his voice. “It would take me a very long time to explain it to you.”

“Will you?”

“If you’d like me to.”

“When?”

“Later.”

“How much later?”

“When you’re ready to come out. Are you ready to come out?”

“No.” A blush swam into my face. “I-I need to bathe, and get dressed. I don’t look very good. I don’t smell very good.”

“Then later. Rest now. The knowledge will keep. I want you to be comfortable with me. Please do what you need to.”

“What else will you tell me?”

“Everything you wish to know.”
I laid on the bed and tried to nap. Through curved branches of cedar I watched the stars, flickering and deep, so like the real thing that looking up at them with a bed beneath me created a giddy sense of disorientation, both luxurious and strange. I thought of Eärendil and the legend of the Silmarils, and I wondered if such a story belonged to this place between the worlds even as the wisdom in all the cells of my body knew that it belonged to the inside of this room.

I got up and decided to draw a bath. The soap held an elusive perfume, subtle and refreshing; inhaling its fragrance brought a flood of images: a hint of ocean, the thin green of new bark, a touch of leather, small white flowers sighing into the first light of dawn. I washed myself and dried myself and went into the bedroom. I looked through my pack. I had one clean dress. It was sleeveless, sewn in purple gauze, and embroidered at the neckline with blood red silk. I pulled it on. The fabric tumbled whisper-soft against my legs.

“Look at me,” I murmured. “Janet Lambert, glorious feminist, wishing for makeup. Forget that. Wishing for Vera Wang. Who knew I’d come all the way here, wherever ‘here’ is, just to have a Sex And The City moment?”

I ascended the levels of my room and walked to the door on bare feet because I was ashamed of my road-worn sandals. I peered into the hallway and saw one of the guards leafing through an ancient leather-bound copy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. “That’s so surreal,” I said.

He looked up and smiled. “Are you ready, lady?”

“I haven’t seen Shakespeare in an age.”

He closed the book. “It’s most entertaining. Are you, lady, from Shakespeare’s world?”

“Yes.” I blinked. “A few hundred years later, of course, but yes. I am.”

“How fortunate for you. I lament that I don’t share such a cultural heritage.”

I closed the door behind me. “What world are you from?”

“Do you know the world of the Rose?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Do you know the world of the Beams?”

Gooseflesh prickled up my back. “See the Turtle of enormous girth. On his shell he holds the earth.”

“You do know it! Hile, lady, and well met!”

“I’ve only read of it,” I said. “There are books in my world about your world. A series of seven. Tales of gunslingers, mostly.”

“Come,” he said. “I’ll take you to him. He has been waiting.”

I blushed. “I know. If you wouldn’t mind, sir, might I ask your name?”
“Elmer,” he said. “Elmer o’ Crossways, that was. I’ve been here a long time and so now I think of myself as just Elmer.”

“I’m Janet. How did you come to be here?”

He put a hand over the small of my back and guided me down a long hallway. “I don’t remember so much of it. I was walking through a wood and then I wasn’t. If I knew better I’d think this was all a dream, but a man doesn’t earn scars in a dream, nor grow old, and I could never have dreamed such a place as this.”

As I walked across a long blue carpet that felt soft as a child’s hair something loosened within my mind and fell open. How many doors? How many worlds? I looked around and it seemed like if I wanted to, if I concentrated hard enough, if I squinted just the right way, I would catch a glimpse of the fabric of Life itself. I wondered is that why they call it string theory? Is it something about the warp and the weft of existence? How many worlds out of books and how many books out of worlds?

“How many doors? How many worlds?”

“Are you all right, lady? You look as though you’ve come over funny. Like a goose walked on your grave.”

“Stop it.” I held up a hand. My breath grew shallow. “Just…I’m sorry, Elmer, I don’t mean to be rude…but please be quiet. I need silence. I need it.”

“Yes, lady.”

We came to an enormous set of wooden double doors. The guard named Elmer, Elmer o’ Crossways that was, stepped aside and gestured to the ornate handles. They were forged into an ornate knotted shape of leafy vines. Half-opened flowers boasting centers of crystal. “I stop here. You, lady, may go inside.”

I took in a breath. I pulled open the doors. I stepped into a sumptuous chamber filled with the faint sweet perfume of apple blossoms and distilled starlight. In the center of the room stood a low-slung circular sofa constructed of gold velvet cushions. I watched him in the act of unfolding, his long hair a reflection of midnight in a gentle pond, moving into his full height. The black of his garment brightened the whiteness of his skin, and the light worshipped it, sinuous and moving beneath its surfaces and back again; his throat was bare, collarbones rising and falling like wings below the loosened laces of his tunic. Here, in this gilded space, he wore no veil between himself and the world. I stepped forward and looked up into his naked face. His beauty flooded into me like the sunrise. He moved out of the couch, and in a dazzling rush I glimpsed all of the faces he had worn in his life: his secret youth, his idle pleasure, his arrogant anguish and the pride of his rage, his tender mourning, all of them flashing like flames fanned by his thousands of little deaths. They lit the smooth high shapes of his cheekbones and smoldered in the curves of his mouth, curves both sweet and dangerous because even in stillness they sang, and there were his magnificent eyes, beautiful and terrible within the architecture of his face, sly and shy with a weight of sleeping knowledge, gleaming with vulnerability, bearing a heavy passion that had been broken in many places. He walked toward me. His tunic flowed around his ankles, rippling into each step. He walked between two rows of flower-filled bowls. His hair rippled around his waist. I took a deep breath and it shuddered out of me. I inhaled, filling myself with awe.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuc.” I gasped. “Holy fucking fuckness…my God…you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life. Who are you? What are you?”

He smiled. It moved through his face and transformed it into something familiar. He looked more like a man when he smiled, and instead of calming me, it had the opposite effect: the sight struck a
deep visceral chord and I began to vibrate. My heart kicked into a gallop. The lips of my cunt grew slick with heat. I blushed. He drew closer to me and reached out. I took his long-boned hand, folding my fingers around his, making a bridge between us.

“I am Fëanor,” he said. “Curufinwë that was.”
The Bones Of Our Dead

Something sharp nuzzled Faramir’s cheek. His eyelids fluttered. A guttural voice uttered a volley of strange words and adrenaline shot through his system, slicing away the remnants of his dream. He twitched to wakefulness. He looked into the starsplashed sky and saw the outlines of orcs. They stood in a half-circle around his dead campfire, their long spears aimed at him. The same voice spoke, switching to accented Westron.

“Where is the pyre? Where are the ashes?”

“I…” Faramir coughed. “I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Where is the pyre?”

Faramir sat up and looked around and tried to find a face but it was too dark. “Maybe I can help you. I will try. But I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

“Where is the pyre of our dead?”

Another voice, this one younger and smoother and possibly female, spoke up. “We know it was your people that killed them.” Faramir heard the unmistakable sound of spitting. “We want the ashes and the bones of our dead.”

“The ashes…?” Faramir swallowed. “There are no ashes. We buried them. They were buried. The bodies. Do…do you mean the travelers out of Mughashah?”

The name of the village incited a flurry of voices, all of them stepping over one another in an avalanche of broken Black Speech words. Faramir was hauled up by the back of the shirt, shaken until his jaws rattled, punched once in the face, and bound at the wrists. Faramir fought with himself to remain limp, but the fear snuck up on him and he screamed at the feeling of tightening bonds. He wrenched his arms away only to have them wrestled back into place. His wrists turned and the claws of his captors broke the skin of his forearms. The orcs jeered at his blood. His struggling feet kicked apart the coals of his campfire, stirring up and smothering a scatter of weak sparks.

“Wait!” He cried out into the darkness. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Only whiteskins kill without question or provocation.”

Faramir regained his shaky footing. “What are you going to do with me, then?”

“The magistrate will decide. For now, though, you march.”

“I’ll tell you where the bodies are!”

“You will tell us anyway. March.”

A blade jabbed at his kidneys and in his night-blindness Faramir took hesitant steps. The soil was loose underfoot and as the pebbles rolled beneath the soles of his feet he lost his balance. His captors yanked him up by his blood-slimed arms. Pain tore through his shoulders. He bit back a scream. One of the orcs cuffed the back of his head.
“Shut up, whiteskin.”

“My name is Faramir.”

“I don’t care if you’re Sauron himself. Shut up and walk.”

“Please. Allow me to tell you what happened.”

“If you don’t shut up, I will gag you.” It was the feminine voice. “Gagging is a dangerous business. People choke. Don’t make me.”

Faramir closed his mouth. He kept it closed through the long ragged march to their camp, where others sat around a big fire and toasted small bats threaded on sticks. Most of them were black-skinned, some wore gray markings like those of snakes, some were mottled the color of ash. All of them wore long hair twisted into narrow ropes and tied back with leather thongs. The men wore knee-length skirts of pleated leather and the women wore close-fitting trousers made of a light fabric Faramir did not recognize. It was woven in many colors, some bright, but all dulled with ash and dust. The women wore plain loose blouses and the men were bare-chested. He noticed jewelry about the wrists, metal hoops threaded through earlobes and nostrils and lips, ropes of small colorful stones heavy upon the breasts of the women and the collarbones of the men. All of the faces bore the distinct heavy ridging of their brows, temples, and noses. Pairs of eyes, some red and some gold, all of them gleaming like an animal’s by firelight, watched him as his captors hauled him toward a dome-shaped tent.

“In here, whiteskin.”

Faramir got a good look at the owner of the female voice as she leaned over and tied his hands to a stout pole. Her skin was so dark that it was almost true black, a hint of blue sheen in her sweat, and her long black hair bore twined streaks of pure white. The color of her skin and the fierce features of her face made the gold color of her eyes all the more striking, as though she shared some kind of distant ancestry with the sleek black cats he often found lurking in the shadows of the alleys in Minas Tirith; she bore gray markings on her forehead and they had all the symmetry of butterfly wings, and the bumps and ridges of bone on her temples were arranged with the same delicate orderliness. Her golden eyes were long and slanted, her sparse eyebrows plucked straight, and her ears were pointed after the manner of Elves and Hobbits, the lobes plugged with ivory and dangling blue feathers. Outside the tent the drums started up. Firelight danced on the outside of the tent and made spindly shadows. The beats overlapped into a rich frenetic welter of sound. Someone clacked two sticks together in a staccato rhythm.

“Are you dancing?”

“I’m not dancing. I’m knotting.”

“I know.” Faramir watched her over his shoulder. “I meant the others. Are they dancing?”

“Yes.” She secured his bonds and rocked back on her haunches. Her long arms dangled between her knees. “They are dancing.”

“Why?”

“Because we found you. Because you will take us to our dead.”

“Are you going to leave me in here alone?”

“Yes. But not alone.” She leaned in and studied his face. “One of the men will be in to keep
Faramir’s neck stiffened. “What are you doing?”

She picked up a length of his hair and rubbed it between her fingertips. Her claw-nails were thick and white, blunted at the tips, decorated at the base with tiny circles of red dye. “I’ve never seen a whiteskin up close.”

She leaned over and sniffed his head. Her nostrils twitched. He blushed.

“You’re very ugly.” She sat back. “The Men of Mordor are far more beautiful than any whiteskin.”

“I brought something for you. Not for you, but for your people. It is a bracelet from one of the… travelers.” Her expression came out of its doze and her eyes narrowed. Faramir flinched beneath the sharpness of her gaze. “I-I was up the mountain for a reason. It is my wish to return it to her family. Here.” He rotated his hip toward her. “Take it. It’s in my pocket.”

Her eyes drew down into slits. She moved onto the balls of her feet and crept backward. A low purring growl hummed in her throat. Her full lips twitched back enough to reveal the blunt points of her white fangs. “I’ll not stick my hand in your pocket and find a nasty trick.”

“It’s no trick!” Faramir’s voice broke. “It’s no trick, I swear on Elbereth’s womb!”

“I’m not a fool.”

“I swear!” Faramir started to sweat. “I swear on…I swear on…Sauron’s balls!”

She folded her legs like a frog’s and moved away from him, her body low and parallel to the ground, her thighs smooth and strong, keeping balance with her hands. She kept her eyes on his as she backed out of the tent. Her strange growl slipped in and out of softness.

“Wait! Don’t go!”

She slipped through the flaps and into the night. Faramir sighed and closed his eyes and bounced his head off the pole in frustration. The pulsing music rattled all around him, loud and accented with the stamping of feet.
“How did Sauron make you?”

Lugmokí moved away from the railing. They were in a small room high up in one of the structures overlooking the market, the balcony doors opened to the opium-scented night. The room was on the eighth floor and the balcony was tiny, carved out of steel and cleaved to building’s stone flank. Her long loose hair was damp from her bath and she had changed into one of her Mordorin dresses; this one was an off-shoulder tunic of translucent silk that was black in the neckline and the colors of flames at the hem. She moved through the light breeze and the warm cast of the electric lamplight and settled on the edge of the bed.

“It would be easier to show you,” she said.

Gandalf nodded and watched her lower herself into a cross-legged position on the floor. She used a handful of coins and a triple strand of Núrnen pearls to draw a shape; the pearls gleamed dark against the smooth wood, the straight lines of coins reflecting darts of light. She fashioned two spirals in parallel descent, precise bridges of coins connecting them. The image brought to his mind a twisted ladder made of the finest materials: hithlain, mithril fixings, the carved wood of fallen mallorn trees.

“Imagine it breaking.” She touched the curves until they were perfect. “Not in disarray, not falling into its many components, but in neat sections. Imagine that there are other strands like this one, dismembered and remembered, the parts of one joining with the parts of the other until a new strand is made. Imagine the new strand as a foundation.”

“I don’t understand.”

Lugmokí looked at him. “This is the blueprint of all living things.”

“He made you after the manner of a god, then.”

“No, it is not so lofty as that. It is the engineering of biology.” She looked away. “Aulendil learned such craft from Melkor.”

“Such craft is a mockery of Ilúvatar.”

Her voice sharpened. “Do you not think Ilúvatar willed the unraveling of the life-ribbons? There is much you do not know, Gandalf, and still more that the Valar will not tell you. If Ilúvatar did not will such skill into existence, do you think it could be done? Would Ilúvatar place bonds on the potential of the mind?” With a careless sweep of her hand Lugmokí jumbled the coins and pearls together. “It matters not, because he did not. There are some who would unravel the very fabric of the world in order to hold it in a reverent hand. There are some in this world and in others who would unravel existence so the threads of it might be repaired.” She got up and put the coins back in her purse. She returned the pearls to her pack. “Enough of this. I’ll speak no more of things you don’t understand.”

Gandalf put down his pipe. “But I want to understand!”

“No.” She pulled the laces of her pack tight. “You don’t want to understand unless the knowledge can be made to fit inside your view of the world. I have not the will nor the patience to do such a
thing. It is what it is, and will be what it will be, whether you should find it distasteful or not.”

Gandalf softened his voice. “It is hard for me to let go of all that I thought I knew.”

Lugmokí sighed. “I know it is.”

“You long for him. I hear the way it permeates your voice.”

Lugmokí sat on the bed. “I miss my home. This place is foreign to me and I have no connection to the land beneath it.” She gathered up her hair and started to plait it. “There is emptiness in me and I try to fill it but it nothing will take. It’s like dead ground. I don’t like it. I want to go home.” She took in a deep breath. She tied off the end of her braid and tossed it over her shoulder. “I want to go home, Gandalf. I don’t belong here.”

“Nor do I.” He cleaned the dead ashes out of his pipe. “Nor does anyone. This place is the net between the worlds. All that it catches comes from afar.”

“I was away from him in the beginning.” Tears crossed her cheeks and she would not touch them. “In the morning of my long life he was in Númenor and I was alone in the Tower. He was in my mind and I was in his and so the distance…it was something I could understand. When he was through the doors he was never gone for more than a day and a night, and there was always an echo of him inside of me, but I can’t understand this distance. He is no longer in my mind and this emptiness makes me hurt.”

“I’m sorry, Lugmokí.” He put the pipe away. “I don’t know how to go home or I would go there myself.”

She touched her face. She looked at the gleam of her wet fingers. She wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her dress. “Would you believe this is only the second time I’ve ever wept?”

“I would believe many things,” said Gandalf.

She went back to the balcony, turned in her sniffling restlessness, and walked back to the bed.

“I would comfort you if you would allow it.”

Lugmokí went into the bathroom and wound her braid up into a bun. She came back out. “You seem tired.”

“I am weary with much travel and thankful for a bed and four walls and a roof over my head. Yes. I am tired.”

“I-I don’t think I can sleep.” She took her cloak off its hook and swung it around her shoulders. She pulled up the hood. “I think I’ll walk for awhile if it is in you to sleep.”

“It is,” he said. “Please be careful.”

“No one will know I’m there.”
The blood in my body rushed from one side to the other, up and down, until I was dizzy with it. “I-I need…” My knees melted. “I need to…to sit down.”

“Please. Do you need help?”

“I…” I squeezed my eyes shut. “I don’t know. I think so. Maybe.” I put my hands out in an attempt to regain my equilibrium. “Give me a minute.”

I felt his arms beneath me, and as he lifted my body the dark world of my mind filled with his strange scent. What strength I had succumbed to the memory of trees living in the subtle odor of his skin. I became a river inside my flesh, flowing through the bends of my knees and trickling over the bones in my spine, back and forth over the strength of his arms, the currents of my emotion channeled within my heated and trembling skin. The rhythm of his body pulsed in my blood. He carried me to the couch, my limbs soft and dangling like those of a slain animal, and draped me across the wide cushions; I sank into them and his hand hovered over my forehead, close enough for me to feel the heat of its shadow, and it settled on me light as a leaf. I sighed, my neck lifting into the sensation, and his hand gained a slow weight as it stroked my temple and stilled on my cheek. I turned my face and put my lips against his palm. His whispered Elvish words fell in my veins like cool rain. The dizziness receded. My mind curled up inside my skull.

“Better?”

I smiled, my eyes still closed. “Yes.”

“Do you need anything?”

I opened my eyes. I looked up his long fall of hair and into his eyes. I held them and touched the bones in his wrist. He looked into my eyes and gave a long slow blink. I closed my eyes, and when my lashes lifted again it was inside a tunnel of hair. He gathered up the skirt of my dress. My breath grew shallow. The hem brushed over my thighs, sparking off a wave of gooseflesh that inundated me and set all of my tendons to quivering. His fingers inched into the hot pool of my cunt and my spine arched up like it was a serpent. He drew the tips of his fingers along my clit and I ran my hand down the outside of his forearm and released a long full-throated moan. He put his fingers in and drew them out again. My body rippled, the motion concentrating in my hips. He put slick fingertips against my clit and made light circles, delicate and humming like a tiny bird’s wings, and I took tight hold of his wrist and felt the slide of his muscles beneath the skin and knew the long ages of skill buried within them. He brushed his nose across my cheekbone. His hair made lacy shadows on his face, and his eyelashes were heavy, the eyes beneath alert the way a cat is alert even at rest, and as the first sparks fired in me like warning shots I
hauled on his neck, my lips cold and trembling, pulling myself up into his face, fighting to keep my eyes open. He eased in a fourth finger and my body flexed around him. He rested his forehead on mine.

“Would you have it all?”

I sighed. “Yes.”

He tucked his thumb into the well of his curved palm and I held on to his shoulders as he pushed in, knuckles twisting, slick and hard. I cried out, clenching at the burn. I slid up close to the edge and trembled there, all of my consciousness funneled tight into my cunt. I felt pushed into my outermost limits, my skin straining to hold me in, the living breathing pleasure unstable in my burning veins and yearning for ignition. He pressed his lips to my temple and they were soft, smooth as the tender petals of an unopened bud, his breath lucid and heavy, and as he let his hand in a tiny bit deeper he kissed my cheek as if to hold down my cry, sweet and tossed about on a storm of breath; the heat of his lips and his hand whispered to each other through the dark and secret tissues of my body, a communication line humming tight and sharp, until the span of his knuckles sank into my hole. I screamed at the magnificence of the pain, my simmering body a vessel, my throat a trembling bed for a coruscating river of sound, my cunt pulsing around him and swollen into a stone; I hauled in air, trying to speak, and my voice smeared all over my breath, held in the trembling hands of my consciousness. I dug my nails into his shoulders. He laid his cheek over mine and rolled his fingers into a fist.

I shook all over, slicked up in sweat. Strands of his silken hair clung to my lips. He pulled back and I looked up into his eyes. I rose up into them. He sank down into mine and turned his hand, tripping the switch, and as I went under the wave I struggled to hold onto his gaze, my mouth wrenched open, my breath hot and wild, my body shuddering like a landslide. My eyes rolled back into my head. He touched my straining brow and as my body slowed into sharp fluttering contractions he pulled out his hand, letting the muscles in my cunt do the work, birthing his fingers a knuckle at a time. He lifted his wet hand to his face and sniffed his fingers. My hands fell from his shoulders. I panted, turning my face into the curtain of his hair. I rubbed it over my face and kissed it. He moved his hair out of my face and used the backs of his fingers to stroke my chin.

“Better?”

I burst out laughing. He smiled and let his fingers trail down to my throat. The laughing turned into giggling. “Yes.” I took a breath. “I think so.” I burst out again, this time into hysterics. Every time I laughed it made the muscles in my cunt twitch, releasing a hot little burst of sweetness, which only made me laugh harder. He put his hand on my chest and watched my face, his smile widening a little each time a fresh gust of mirth blew through me. He showed his teeth and a fresh spark of lust loosened all of my joints. “That’s one hell of a smile.” I touched his bottom lip. “That thing is dangerous.”

His smile went into his eyes. “Do you need anything else?”

I grinned. “No.”

He settled himself alongside me. “Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“How did you come to be here?”

“The doors,” I said. “It was one of those doors. Isn’t that how everyone gets here?”
“No.”

“Isn’t that how you came to be here?”

“No. I made the doors. But that was before.”

“Before what?”

“My death.”

I sat up. “Your… is this hell? Am I in hell? This can’t be hell. It’s too awesome.”

“I don’t think so.” He chuckled. “It just is.”

“Then how did you get here if it wasn’t through the doors?”

“I’m not sure. My time in Middle-earth was only a part of my life. Your time in America was only part of yours.” He straightened up. “It’s a mystery.”

“You made those doors. It was you.”

He took my hand. “Yes.”

In that moment a new truth slammed into me and stole my breath:

_I don’t want to go home._
Lugmokí moved into an alley, favoring its tinted light over the thronged marketplace. Neon lights sputtered. Trash clung to the feet of the buildings, overflowing the gutter. The worn odors of smoke, rotten food, and burned plastic lingered on the stones. Graffiti scratched into their surfaces bore witness to thousands of different cultures. She reached out and touched the letters she didn’t understand. They murmured to her fingertips: names, dates, longing and anger, the wistful sorrows of the misplaced and lonely.

“Hey.”

Lugmokí jumped and turned around. A man stood near the wall, wearing a long brown cloak over trousers and a kind of short-sleeved shirt she had never seen before. He bent his head and lit a match, curling his hand around the flame. The smoke smelled sweet.

He looked at her. His eyes were blue. “Are you lost?”

She held her cloak closed. “No.”

He took the cigarette out of his mouth. He grinned, showing strong white teeth. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She looked him over. “Who are you?”

“People don’t usually come this way unless they’re going somewhere. And you…” He shifted his weight, leaning one shoulder into the wall. “Well, you don’t look like you’re going anywhere.”

Lugmokí lifted her chin. “Are citizens not free to come and go as they will?”

“They are.” He took a long pull of the cigarette. “But you’re no citizen.” He exhaled smoke, nodding at her. “So where’re you from?”

“I hail from Middle-earth, from the land they call Mordor.”

“Oh yeah?” He flicked ash and his eyebrows went up. “Which one?”

“I-I don’t know.” She stepped forward, under a wash of yellow light, and she tilted her head. “You know of the many worlds, then.”

“Oh yeah.” He snorted. “That’s the understatement of the goddamn year.”

“So everyone here knows.”

“Yeah. It’s how most of us got here. Anyway, this isn’t the safest place to go for a stroll, all right?” He gestured with the cigarette. “Go back to the market. There are guards there.”

Lugmokí took down her hood. “It’s safe for you.”

“It’s not safe for anybody.” He flicked the butt off the wall opposite. “I can take care of myself.”

“You think I can’t?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”
Lugmokí circled around him and he turned with her footsteps. “It’s rude of you to make assumptions. You haven’t offered your name, nor asked mine. You know nothing of me, yet seem to think without bothering to question me that I can’t hold my own in a city such as this one.” She stopped, looking at him. “Tell me. Is all of Xe Nahadu so rude, or only men who wait in alleys?”

He grinned. “I’m sorry.” He held out his hand. “My name’s Jeremy.”

“I am called Lugmokí.” She stepped closer and took it.

His grin widened. “Charmed.”

“And where are you from?” Her mouth curved into a small smile.

“America. The year 2009.” He threw back his hood, revealing cropped dark blond hair. “The one where Barack Obama is President and there’s a war going on in Iraq.”

“I know of America but I don’t know of its leaders or its wars.” She inclined her head. “Where I come from, it’s customary to say ‘a star shines on the hour of our meeting,’ but there are no stars here.” She glanced at his face from beneath her eyelashes. “Therefore, I will merely call it a pleasure.”

He chuckled. “Thanks.”

“What are you doing here if it is so unsafe?”

He glanced up the alley. “I’m on my way home.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to delay you.” She looked into his eyes.

“You aren’t.” His grin turned crooked. “Hey. You, ah, want to get a drink or something? I’d invite you back to my place, but I don’t wanna come off too...you know. Pushy.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Forward. I don’t want to give you the wrong idea.”

She smiled. “Do you have drinks at your place?”

“Yeah. I have some terrific bottled Xe Nahadu water.” His eyes twinkled. “It’s even cold.”

“Cold water.” She laughed. “How tempting.”

“It’s the best I can do. Unless you want to go by way of the market. There’s all kinds of stuff there.”

She shook her head. “No. I came from there. It’s too crowded. Is your place crowded?”

“Nah.” He leaned into his arm. “It’s just me.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Well then, come with me.” He held out a hand. “Cold water and silence awaits.”

Lugmokí took it.
Tell Me Something Out Of Your Past

“What is it?”
I looked at the ceiling. “Nothing.”

“Something’s changed. I see it in your face.”

“Why me?”

“No one has looked me in the eyes for a very long time.”

“Not a wonder.” I giggled. “Those things are more dangerous than your smile. More dangerous by a mile, in fact.”

He touched my jaw. “So dangerous you won’t look even now?”

“How did you die?”

He let go of my hand.

“How was it? Did it hurt?” I watched him turn away. “How did you know when your dying was through?” I moved hair off his cheek and he went very still. “Have I found something you won’t talk about?”

He looked at me sidelong. “You would really want to know such things?”

“If I didn’t want to know I wouldn’t ask.”

“There was a great war in which many thousands of…in which many perished. The people who have come here call it the War of Bones, after the river, which in the land near its mouth is full of the bones of the fallen.” He looked down. “I haven’t yet unraveled the mechanics, but the ferocity of this war bled through the weave of the worlds and the mortal remains settled here. Then I came here, I don’t know why I came here when others did not, and why the bodies of some moved through and others did not. The war made a rent in the worlds that no one understands. I…I can’t explain it to you any better than that, and I’m sorry for it.”

“Haven’t yet unraveled the mechanics? You, who have made a city out of…out of interdimensional trash, pushed technology beyond anything I’ve ever seen and I’ve seen a lot, and you built an artificial intelligence? You are going to apologize to me for not knowing the fucking mechanics of the universe? I’m really struggling not to laugh at the absurdity of this conversation. Struggling and failing, I might add.”

“Yes, it hurt. Dying hurt.” He took one of my hands and caressed the shape of each finger. “I knew it was over when the pain was over. It hurt me to come here beyond the pain of any wound. To pass through the rent in the worlds is to be stripped down to each atom and reassembled again by the hands of a ruthless land.”

I smiled. “You know that word. Atom.”

“Yes.” He grinned. “I know that word.”
I leaned my head on the cushions. “Do you know where the ruined place is? Can you go back there?”

“No…I don’t think so. It moves, like all other bridges in time and space.”

I held his hand in both of mine. “Would you want to go back there?”

“No.”

“Why do you stay here? If it was you who made the doors?”

He looked at me. “Where would I go?”

“What…wuh…well, uh, you could go home. Couldn’t you?” I moved closer to him. “Couldn’t you go home?”

He looked away. “No.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There is no place for me there. This is my home, poor and rude as it is.”

“Have you ever tried?”

He unlaced his fingers and stood. “Would you like something to eat? Something to drink?”

“Way to change the subject!”

“Yes or no, Janet. Would you like anything?”

“What have you got?”

“Water, wine made out of dates and wine made out of strawberries, and there is dark bitter beer and Coca-Cola.”

“Aw.” I closed my eyes and sighed. “Gimme a Coke. Can you get it really cold?”

I heard his smile. “There is ice if you would like ice.”

“I would like some ice.”

“Then you will have it.”

He left me alone in the room. I pulled my legs up and tucked my bare feet beneath a blanket made of long white fur. Each shift of my skin reminded me how wet the insides of my thighs still were. I imagined the stain I must’ve left on the velvet and blushed. I shifted around and felt it: damp and fragrant. *I need to stop thinking about this. Heat raged in my cheeks. I need to stop thinking about this right now.*

He returned with a tray. On it balanced a pair of glasses filled with chipped ice and two bottles of Coca-Cola. The familiar logo grabbed my attention. He put the tray down and twisted off the metal cap and I smelled the sweet amber scent of hot summer childhood. He poured. The fizz of the bubbles went through me and brought tears to my eyes.

“This drink is of your home world.”
“Yes. Yes it is.”

He handed it over. “The home inside you calls to its memory. You’re crying.”

“Oh yes, I suppose I am.” I wiped the tears. “Don’t mind me. I’m full of sentimentality.”

He poured his own glass. “Don’t apologize.”

“I’m…I’m not. Oh hell. I guess I am.” I held the glass under my nose. The bubbles tickled. “I don’t know how I feel about home. I don’t imagine I’ll ever see it again and some days that makes me really angry, because, you know, I didn’t choose this, I didn’t choose to be here, though I suppose if I had I’d still be angry only I would be angry at myself instead of angry at God or the universe or whatever there is to be angry at. I suppose I should be angry at you for making the doors in the first place. But I can’t. You’re too…I don’t know, really. I don’t have the words for what you are.” I sipped and a huge smile broke across my face. “There are no words for the deliciousness of this Coke. It’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

“I have tried. I have gone to the doors and waited for the scent of home to come through them.” He took a long drink. I watched the sinuous motion of his throat with frank fascination. “It’s never happened. The doors have opened to many worlds but not to that one. Not to that place in time or in space.”

“After awhile you stopped trying.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“I’ve noticed that you have books. Books from my home world. Have you come across *The Silmarillion*?”

“A poorly wrought thing, shabby and incomplete in both content and execution.”

My eyebrows went up. “I see you have.”

“Such an account could only have been written by one who wasn’t there.”

“How so?”

“It would take a very long time for me to tell it to you.”

“The Silmarils? Are they real?”

“Yes.”

“And the Trees?”

He took another drink and said nothing.

“I won’t ask any more.”

He put his glass down. “It is difficult to talk of the past. Is it not so for you?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Yeah. Sometimes.”

“Tell me something out of your past.”

“Okay.” I put my glass down and looked at the floor while I gathered my thoughts. “Um, when I
was a child and had summer vacation, I would watch it pass by through the flowers. When summer got out there were irises, and as it aged there were the wild hot pink roses that bloomed on the beach. Later on, when it got hot, there were daisies and these little cone-shaped flowers that I don’t know the names of, little and low to the ground like pineapples. Those would come out when it was hot enough to crack the ground if there hadn’t been enough rain. By then, the dandelions had all gone over into fluff.” I sighed. “Of course all of these flowers overlapped with each other, and as one was coming another was going, but I kept watch on all of it…like if I didn’t none of it would unfold.” I rubbed my eyes. “I was a strange child.”

“Your eloquence pleases me.”

I blushed. “Thank you.”

“An eloquent woman is a gift and a pleasure.”

“Oh stop it. My face is going to catch fire.”

He took my glass out of my hand and held it to my cheek. “Cool it this way.”

“Fëanor, I…”

“Say it again. My name.” He touched the wet glass to my other cheek. He looked in my eyes. “Please.”

I sighed. “Fëanor.”

He wiped smears of condensation off my cheeks. My eyes drifted shut.

“Come back to me. Open your eyes.”

I did. I couldn’t resist the light in his face. “Would you kiss me?”

“Yes.” Hunger flooded his face. “I would kiss you.”

Lugmokí moved into the room. It had one window and a tiny balcony. A narrow bed hid in a curtained alcove, framed by a string of tiny multicolored lights. There was a small wooden table with low stools to sit upon. It was a small room, its plaster walls yellowed with age and smoke, but it was clean and organized. Jeremy took off his cloak, hanging it on a peg beside the door. He looked over.

“I’ll hang yours.”

Lugmokí handed it over. He shook it out, hanging it on top of his. He opened the window. She moved into the center of the room, turning around, looking at the pictures on the wall: buildings, scenes of nature, other things she didn’t recognize. Lugmokí touched one of a stony coastline. There were wild pink roses in the picture and stormy surf. The surface was cool and smooth, hairline creased in places. Her mind flashed back to the junk-strewn beach, to the wad of paper she’d pulled out of the sand.

He went to a small refrigerator and opened it, pulling out a bottle of water. “It’s from a magazine called Down East.” He opened it. “It’s where I grew up.”

She watched him. “What’s a magazine?”

“It’s a book of mostly pictures. It’s thin, though, and floppy.” Jeremy held out the bottle. “Here.”

She took it. It was ice cold, the curved plastic dampening with condensation. She sipped. The temperature was a pleasant shock to her throat. “Thank you.” She smiled. “It’s good.”

“It’s nothing.” He pulled out one of the stools. “Have a seat, if you want.”

She gathered the folds of her dress and sat, keeping her eyes on his face. “Where is Down East?”

He laughed. “It’s a figure of speech, actually. I grew up in Maine, which is the easternmost state in America.” He sat opposite her. “They just call it down east. I don’t even know why. It’s in the north. I guess it should be up east, but…” He shrugged and looked at the table. “It’s not.”

Lugmokí took a long drink of water. The sounds of the city simmered in the silence, muted by walls and distance.

“I don’t…” He flashed a grin and rubbed the back of his head. “I don’t usually do this kind of stuff, you know.” He looked at her. “Ask strange women to come back to my room. Um…so. I just wanted you to know that, and I don’t…expect anything. From you.” A corner of his mouth curled. “Unless, you know, of course.” His eyebrows went up. “If…if you’re interested in something.” His face turned pink. He glanced away and back at her face. “I think you’re beautiful.”

She looked into the bottle. “I know.”

“You know.” He put an elbow on the table and looked at her sidelong, fingers curled under his chin. He laughed. “Of course you know.”
“No, no, I don’t mean…wait. I do mean, but not the way you think.” She touched his hand. “I-I see it in your body language. It’s just something I do.” She picked up his hand and kissed the knuckles. “That’s all.”

He watched her mouth. “No one’s ever done that to me before.”

She put his palm on her cheek. “What will make things easier for you?”

His face softened. “I don’t know.”

“Is it more comfortable on the bed?” She released his hand and he kept it there, tracing her chin with his thumb.

“I feel like I’ve seen you before,” he murmured. “Is that weird?”

“No.” He brushed her lips with his fingertips. She smiled. “In dreams all things are possible.”

He touched her throat. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long. Days.” Her eyes closed. “Weeks. How long have you been here?”

“Months. Maybe years. A long time.” His hand moved away. He stood. Her eyes opened. “It is more comfortable on the bed.”

Lugmokí removed her sandals. She stood and took his offered hand. He walked ahead of her, parting the curtains, tying them back as she climbed onto the rumpled cotton blankets. He stretched out alongside her, pulling the pillow beneath her cheek. “When you came here,” she whispered, “was there a door?”

He moved an arm around her shoulders. “Yes.”

“It was the same for me.”

He rested his chin on the crown of her head. “I think it was the same for everybody.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She played with the collar of his shirt. “Have you collected many stories?”

“I think everyone does when they first get here. You know, compare and contrast.” He brought his lips to her forehead. “Right after talking about all the things you miss from home.”

“What do you miss the most from home?”

“My daughter.” He reached over her and took a photo off the wall. “Her name’s Jasmine. She’s five years old.” He handed it to Lugmokí. “Or she was, when this was taken.”

She took the photo. In it a girl stood before the trunk of a large tree. She had pigtails and a gap-toothed smile. “I see you in her eyes.”

“I was a farmer.” He sighed. “Not much of one. I inherited the farm from my father, who left my mother when I was five. I’d only had it for three years and it’d been run by a hired guy for two. I harvested exactly one crop before I had to go to Iraq.” He pulled back enough to look at her. “How about you?”
“There was a door,” she said.

“What’d you do before?”

She handed back the photo. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?” He leaned over and tucked it back into place.

“I don’t feel like talking.”
In His Hands

I have wanted to do this all my life---it was a thought tied to no meaning, yet it burned through me with truth and ardor; my blood bloomed into readiness, my lips went soft, my mind went to its knees and prayed upon the altar of my flesh; he touched my face and my breath exploded like the wings of a startled bird. It soared high into the roof of my mouth, caught inside my nostrils, and he leaned in with the soft heat of his breath and loosened it, catching it as it flew free; he moved a thumb across my temple and his hair landed on my chin as he let my breath fall into me with a brush of his silky lips. It was a kiss that began with gentleness and came apart for the space of a breath and fell back into itself, gaining potency with each turn of the mouth, laying down moist quivering layers until my jaw caught hold of it and his tongue touched mine and it became all new, like I had never been kissed before, each sensation unfolding along new roads inside of me. I put my hands on his face and tasted life, secret light, a frightening measure of desire and yet I am not afraid.

He kissed all the surfaces of my face, reading the topography of my years with his lips, and he traced my earlobes with his tongue and nuzzled the trembling hollows of my neck, sucked my nipples through the thin cotton of my dress. He got on his knees and opened my legs, palming my inner thighs and stroking the thick tendons in my groin. He rested his forehead on the rise and fall of my belly and pushed my skirt up and I whispered that he didn’t have to, that I didn’t need it, that I was sated and I couldn’t ask more pleasure of him, that I wouldn’t, but he opened my cunt and inhaled the constant heat of my womb, and he gripped my hips and kissed me there with all the depth and earnestness he had given to my mouth. I fell back and open and broken upon the cushions. I rose and fell on the tides of my breath. A hard-earned weight of millennia rode on his tongue, curling tight in the strength of his fingers, and he rubbed his face into my thighs until my breath couldn’t contain its rising song. Everything in me contracted, squeezing out long slow draughts of pleasure, the sweat keening as it left my skin. He took my hands and waited as I gasped for the last trembling notes to end.

He rose into a hasty embrace and closed his mouth over mine. I returned the kiss with all the breath that I had. On his tongue lived the spirits of flowers, aggressive salts, and rain.

He took my hand and pressed it to the shape of his cock, hot and hard and pulsing along the line of his hip, and the gesture said you dare question my desire for you and he closed my fingers tight around its crown and when the pad of my thumb pressed into the patch of wet silk covering the tip he let loose a hot broken breath and made a sound too rich to remain inside a human throat.

“I won’t do this here.” I ran my hands over his hair. “I want a bed, and time, and no interruptions.”

“Yes,” he panted. “Yes.”

I didn’t see the hallways or the darkened empty rooms as I passed them, I didn’t look into the lights or want to know any sound other than the sound of clothes falling and hair on skin and bare feet leaving smooth stone; I wanted out of the moments that had already happened and I wanted out of my dress and out of my mind, and I wanted, oh heavens and hells, how I wanted---all of me became a vessel, all of me was, and my wanting made me blind, filled my ears with the rush of unbridled blood, stood every hair on my skin to aching attention. My tongue dreamed of the taste of him. You have all of me. He pulled my dress over my head and the fabric trembled in the grip of his hands. Have me. He pushed me back on the bed and I ached when he entered me, arching up into the long sweet flood of his breath, and he wove his fingers into mine and held my hands as he pounded me.
The fortitude of my joints shuddered beneath the onslaught of his desire. His grunts thrilled my blood. The sweat on his body smelled like thunder. He came full of anguish and shuddering sweetness, crying out into the curve of my shoulder, squeezing my hands until the knuckles blanched.
Urzok Of Ausha

Faramir led them by torchlight, across the long and rocky miles, to the place of burial.

Once their burning had finished he had given his men precise instructions to bury the bodies one at a time, to pile the graves with rocks, to drive a sharpened branch into the mound and mark each grave with a personal object. They had complained of the heat and the insects, muttered under their breath, but they had done it.

The graves were in a clearing filled with bluebells and the tender rustle of leaves. The Orcs slowed upon entering, moving into the scented darkness with the sleekness of cats. One of them tied Faramir to the base of a tree and from his vantage point he watched them. They moved among the graves, a softening filling their bodies. The torchlight was too fitful for him to see their faces, but wrapped in flickering shadows he glimpsed reverent fingers touching the hilts of swords driven into the ground, the looped necklaces, the rings strung on thin branches. Their muttering filled the clearing like rain hitting the dry earth.

One of them came out of the shadows and squatted before him. He looked at Faramir for a long time, his brown gold-tipped braids spread across his shoulders, his elongated eyes the color of jasper. His long black hands dangled between his knees. In his face, Faramir read a long-ago imprint of the Haradwaith.

His heavy accent brutalized the words. “You don’t lie.”

“No. In my pocket.” Faramir turned. “There’s a bracelet. Take it.” He swallowed. “Or untie one of my hands and I’ll take it out. There’s nothing in there but a bracelet, I swear.”

The Orc made a low growling sound. He looked Faramir over and the growl softened into something like a purr. He shifted his feet on the stony ground, turned sideways, and dug into the proffered pocket. Faramir smelled woodsmoke on him as he leaned over and something else, something waxy and redolent of spicy sap. The Orc pulled out the bracelet. The beads clacked together, falling over the dark skin of his fingers. He rubbed the discs between his fingertips. He looked at Faramir. He lifted his chin.

“What is your name?”

Thank Eru. “I am called Faramir. Faramir of Gondor.”

The Orc nodded, touching his chest with the bracelet. “Urzok of Ausha.”

“Urzok.” Faramir inclined his head. “An hour…a star…” He closed his eyes and let out a shaky sigh. “Long nights and pleasant days.”

Urzok leaned back on his heels and chuckled. It sounded like the chuffing of a wildcat. “To you as well, Faramir of Gondor.”

“Would you untie me?”

“Not yet.” Urzok put the bracelet in his pack. “First we take you to the magistrate. She will decide what is to be done with you. But…this will go a long way toward softening her heart.”
Faramir nodded. He looked into Urzok’s face. The longer he looked, the more humanity rose to the surface: he saw it in the shape of the jaw, the full lips, the sun-browned hair of the far south, like heavy wool. “I understand.”

Urzok studied his face. He sat on the ground and folded his legs. He unbuckled his scimitar and balanced it on his thighs. “Tell me, Faramir.”

"Yes?"

"Are you hungry?"
I startled out of sleep and inhaled through my nose. *I smell like a hot-buttered jizz factory.* Fëanor slept asprawl on his back, the meager light from the bathroom silversing his profile. *Fuck that makes it sound like a cheap hotel room or something, and lord knows its anything but, but...shit.* I wished for a cigarette, a bath, and a sandwich, never mind that I hadn’t smoked since I was seventeen and stealing them from a friend’s sister’s purse because I was too young to buy them and that I never inhaled anyway. I looked up at the ceiling. It was the same as the ceiling in my little room, but this one was much bigger and deeper; I saw the constellations of another world, a remembered world, a tapestry cobbled together out of bits in the mind. *I need that bath. I fuckin stink.* I slipped out from beneath the covers and padded on bare feet to where my dress lay in a crumpled heap. As I bent over to pick it up, the voices tuned up inside my head:

*You aren’t running away from this.*

I’m not running. I’m going to my damn room to have a damn bath and I’m going to see if the damn computer will get me a sandwich. Or get a damn guard to get me a damn sandwich. Then I’m gonna eat the damn thing. Then I’m gonna try and get some goddamn sleep.

You are not going to run away from this.

I’m running to my damn room! To rinse off the slut smell! I’m not actually leaving!

I put the dress on.

*Janet Marie Lambert. You get your ass back into that bed right now.*

Brain, I am not going to listen to you when you put on my mother’s voice. My mother’s voice does not belong in this room with a noseful of burnt-out cunt smell.

Charming. That’s just charming.

Oh, excuse me: burnt-out cunt smell smothered by dead leaves and river mud. I wiped my eyes. *Oh wow. Look at that. The mother-brain can be shut up. I stand astounded. Someone call the Vatican because I think we have a miracle here.*

The living legend sleeps. Watch him sleep.

I walked around the big bed and watched my shadow fall across the shapes of his legs. I saw the shadow shaped like my body stretched out and made flat and black and a sudden raw flush of shame lit me up. *Stop thinking of yourself. Stop thinking of only yourself for just one moment, stop imagining all the ways in which you are filling these moments in time and just look. Look at him. Watch him sleep. Don’t fear his beauty for it is far away in dreamland and here and there, and here, and open your eyes all the way. Just do it. Just once. See it. See something other than yourself in this moment.* I looked at him. I let my eyes settle on the outline of his nose and looked at it until it became something separate from him, something like a mountain view or clouds backlit by a setting sun. I did the same with the curve in his eyebrows, the shape of his mouth, the deep spreading river of his hair; his belly sloped like a dune or a drift of snow or something carved out of soapstone, and my mind took him apart and made architectural elements of his body, filed them away in separate places, thinking I could dismantle their power, but it was the distraction of categorization that allowed me to see, and all at once he was there, held within the boundaries of
his flesh and time and space. The moment ticked into place like crystal and split my emotion into colored flashes. I’m going to be sick. I’m going to throw up right now. This is nausea like a stealth assassin. This is my belly cramping on me. This is---

I ran into the bathroom and threw up. A whiff of half-used Coke made me burst into tears. I held onto the toilet and knelt with my awkward ankles crossed beneath my butt and struggled to be as quiet as possible. I breathed like a knife on a whetstone. I put my forehead against the seat.

Fëanor’s voice drifted out of sleep. It spoke a handful of drowsy and melodious words that I could not understand, and then, “Janet? Are you well?”


He came around the corner, naked with disheveled hair. “You’re crying?”

“I told you I cry over everything.” A heave struck me and I coughed into the bowl. “I’m okay. For real. Get back in bed. You must be cold.”

“No colder than you.” He took a red robe of its hook and draped it over my shoulders. It felt like cashmere. “I’ll get tea.”

With a shaking wrist, I wiped the cold sweat off my face. “Do you have Pepto Bismol?”

“Yes, but tea works better when it’s made with ginger and nadadh.”

“Nadadh?”

“It’s a water-herb.” He wrapped the robe around me and blotted the sweat off my head with a towel. “I’ll be back soon. Or should I have Elerrína call for it and stay with you?”

“No, I said---”

Fëanor stepped back and looked at the bottom of his foot. His toes were smeared with blood. He got on his knees and moved the robe and my dress away from my thighs. I looked down. I saw the blood on my knees and my guts turned into stone. A cramp came over me that blanched my vision. I grit my teeth against the pain.

“Janet?” He looked at me, and when I wouldn’t meet his eyes he took hold of my jaw and turned my face to his. “Janet, are you…are you pregnant?”

“I don’t know. I-I could be. I don’t know.” The color drained out of my face. “I don’t know! Oh my…my…I’m gonna be sick again.” I took a deep breath. I started to sob. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Fëanor spread some towels under me and got on his knees. He put a gentle arm around my waist. “Lean back.”

I clutched the seat and cried into the toilet.

“Lean back.” He put a hand on my head. “It will end. I’ll hold you.”

“I feel so bad, I was thinking all these…nonsense thoughts about you and my shadow and…I feel so fucking awful…ouwwww, ouwwww, this hurts.” My voice sounded like a little girl’s. I grit my teeth. “This fucking hurts so much.”

“I know. Lean back.”
My fingers ached. I let go of the toilet. He put his arms around my shoulders. A gush of blood felt hot on the insides of my legs and the floor turned slimy.

“I’m so messy.”

“Shhhhh.”

“Fëanor, I---”

“Shhhhh. Let it come.”

My nausea throbbed. Bitter silent tears dripped off my jaw. My thighs shook and the cramps let up a little before tightening into a grinding fist. “I’m sorry,” I whimpered.

He kissed the top of my head.

“I’m bleeding all over your floor and I’m sorry and I…I…there’s such stupid shit in my head.”

He shifted his thighs and pulled me into his lap. “It’s okay.”

I cried and snorted laughter, wincing as snot covered my upper lip. “Great, and now I’m going to bleed all over your junk. This is so humiliating. I’m so humiliated. I hate this. My puke breath…smells like…puke.” I fell to weeping. “Make it stop. Just make it stop.” I put my arms over his arms. “I’ll never do anything bad again. I promise.”

He murmured something in Elvish, let out a short sigh, and said, “I know your sorrow is deep and your pain is great, but you must let go with your body. Don’t fight this pain. Relax into it and it will let you go.” An accent lilted into his voice. “I forget my Westron words when I’m tired. I’m sorry for it.”


He covered my hands with his. “You’re doing well.”

The blood freshened. The clot-thing landed on the wet floor. The sound it made was indescribable. A wave of nausea overcame me. I gagged, and Fëanor leaned with me toward the toilet, but nothing came up. I spat once into the bowl.

“Better?”

The pain subsided. A few small clots slipped out. “Yes. I want a towel.”

“Then you will have it.” He leaned back and grabbed one and put it in my hands. “Here.”

I folded it like a sanitary pad and held it between my thighs. “I have blood on my dress.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to see the fetus.”

“Are you sure?”

New tears burned in my eyes. “No.”

“Okay.”
My womb ached. My knees were numb. I was tired. I was cold. “I need to get up now.”

“Do you need help?”

I sniffled and shook my head. I braced my hand on the toilet and held the towel to my cunt and shifted one tingling foot beneath me. “Just give me a minute. I’ll be okay.”

Fëanor put a towel over the blood on the floor. “Step here.”

“Okay.”

I did. I pushed myself up. The dried blood on my skin felt sticky. I could smell it. “I-I need to wash. I need my pads. Oh God, I’ve got blood all over me. Look at this. This dress is ruined.” I had a brief moment of vertigo. “I need…I need…”

Fëanor put a washcloth over the remains. He did it gently.
Jeremy’s hand went to Lugmokí’s heavy knot of hair. His fingers worked into the strands, brushing the curved end of a carved bone pin. “May I?”

She nodded, bending her neck to offer better access. He worked the pin loose and read the configuration of her hair with his fingers, finding all of the pins, pulling them out, uncoiling her sheaf of black curls. The bed creaked as his body shifted. He put the pins on the floor and moved his hands through the roots, massaging away the lingering weight.

Lugmokí sighed and closed her eyes, inhaling the scent of skin-heated cotton. She put a hand on his chest as he finger-combed her hair, shaking out the curls, spreading them over the pillow. The blankets rustled beneath the slow movement of her feet. He smoothed loose strands back from her forehead, kissing her hairline. Her drowsy hand went to his throat, turned over, and stroked. He breathed into the space between her eyebrows. She ran her palm over the skin of his jaw, back and forth, listening to the faint rasp of his stubble. He curled his hand around her wrist.

“D-Do you want me to…?”

Lugmokí brought her lips to his. “Shhhhh.”

He kissed her. She wove her fingers into his hair. He moved astride her waist and sat up, peeling off his shirt. His back arched and the muscles slid inside his arms. She put her hands on his belly as he let the shirt fall, sliding them up his flanks as he leaned over.

Lugmokí lifted up her head and kissed him. “Let me.”

He grinned. “Yes ma’am.”

Jeremy turned onto his side, watching as she rose from the bed. The dress came up and off in one motion. He slid over the blankets and reached out, tracing the dip in her waist. His fingers trailed down the full curve of her hip. “I do like other things about you. I like the way you walk and the way you talk, and how quick you are with words,” he murmured. “But under all that you’ve got to be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” He looked up at her. “I know women don’t like being thought of as just a body, and I wouldn’t either, but…I have to say it.” His gaze roamed the turns and swells of her body. “I can’t help it.” He ran a fingertip up the curve of a breast. “You’re not even like a model.” A corner of his mouth turned into a small smile. “You’re like a goddess.”

Her face turned pink. “You honor me with such words. Thank you.”

“Nah, it’s just facts.” He sat up, his hands moving over her hips. Lugmokí touched the top of his head and slid her hand down around the nape of his neck. He kissed the curve of her belly. “I’m sorry.” He put his arms around her waist, resting his cheek against her ribs. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“It’s…it’s…” She let out a ragged sigh. “Don’t be sorry.”

“Okay.” He tasted her skin. “I won’t.”

She rested her hands on his shoulders. He rubbed his face on her belly, leaving small kisses on her ribs. Her breath quickened. He rested his forehead between her breasts and ran his fingers down the
backs of her thighs. “Come here.”

Lugmoki pulled back, lifted her knee, and climbed onto the bed. She got on her back and he moved over her, mouth hovering over hers, fingertips grazing her pubic hair. She moved her thighs apart. His fingertips burrowed down into hot wetness. She started to pant. He leaned his forehead into hers. He spread her lips and stroked her clit, hand slow and steady against the rhythm of her breath. Her legs jerked. She pulled him down and buried her face in the curve of his neck, her breath rising into whimpers.

“Yeah,” he murmured. He moved his fingers inside and out, spreading slick wetness around her clit. He made slow circles. “That’s it.”

She grabbed his wrist. “Y-You’re….you’re going to m-make…make me…”

“I know.”

She started to move. He steadied his hand, keeping his fingers in place. Her breath got ragged.

“That’s good.” He nuzzled her sweaty temple. “That’s so good, yeah.”

She pulled him into a kiss, her breath breaking down. She moaned into his mouth. The spasms came quick and hard and she arched up against him. Her hips stuttered as she reached down and unbuttoned his pants. The zipper parted beneath the pull of her hands. He started to pull away but she held on to the tough fabric. “Now you,” she whispered, working the pants down over his hips. He turned onto his back and she rolled over him, landing astride his thighs. He took hold of his cock with fumble fingers. “Inside, yes,” she whispered, her hand over his, guiding the blunt head down the fissure of wet hair, letting it slide up into where it wanted to go. He gripped her waist, breath rushing through his clenched teeth. She leaned back. His belly fluttered. He cupped her thighs, pulling her into the rise of his hips.

“That’s good,” she murmured. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He let his head fall back. “Oh yes.”

She moved into the crests of his thrusts. He moved faster, pulling her down as he pushed up, slapping into her. At first he made no sound, teeth bared and the cords standing out in his neck, but his eyebrows knotted. His throat unlocked into a vulnerable moan. He shoved upward, fingers digging into her flesh. He shuddered a little and fell back, gasping. She stretched over him, watching the tension in his face and how it mirrored the last departing pulses in his cock. The set of his mouth softened and she smiled. He put his arms around her damp back.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

She climbed off him.

Jeremy turned onto his side, considered his pants, and rolled back over to take them off. He flung them onto the floor. “Is this the part where you bail?”

Lugmoki paused in mid-step. She looked at him. “This is the part where I get a drink of water. Do you want some?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

She went to the little fridge and opened it, retrieving a second bottle. She opened it on her way back to the bed. “Here you are.”
He took the bottle and looked at her. She sat on the edge of the bed. He took a drink. She moved her dress aside with the tips of her toes. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No. I mean, I know you have to, eventually.” He put a hand on her knee. “You don’t have to go. Not right now.”

She took a long drink.

He stroked her calf. “You’re not here by yourself, are you?”

Lugmokí put the bottle on the floor. “No.”

He shrugged. “I’m no better. I’ve got a wife.” He turned onto his back and put his hands beneath his head. “She’s not here, but still. I have her.”

“Oh no. It’s not like that.” She unfolded herself and stretched out beside him. “The person I’m with…I’m not married.”

“You want to know how I got here?”

Lugmokí put her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes. “If you would tell me.”

He ran his hand up and down her back. “There was…an ambush. A fucking ambush out in—” He paused, taking a deep breath. He closed his eyes. “It was on this road in the middle of nowhere. You think there’d be nothing out there amongst all that nowhere, but there were goddamned, I don’t know, shepherds. Goat herders. Farmers.” He opened his eyes and stared at the rippled plaster ceiling. “Whatever. Except these guys had guns. So anyway, the humvee rolls over an IED and the back end just blows up. Seriously. Like a fucking dog or something walking on its forelegs.” He half-rolled and picked up the water bottle. He held it close to his lips. “There’s a lot of gunfire. Most of the guys are dead except this one dude who runs off screaming for the hills. It’s just me and this other guy left, you know, all in one piece, so we bandage up the other guys as best we can and call in for an evac.” He took a long drink, bubbles rising up through the bottle. He sighed. “Something happens to you when you’re waiting. You know it’s life or death, that there’s guys dying on the ground in front of you, but time gets weird. Or it did that night. The other guy, his name’s Brian, he goes off to take a leak and he doesn’t come back. I dunno, maybe the guy who ran screaming came sneaking back and did him with a knife, right? I just don’t know. I’m too afraid to move and I don’t want to leave the guys who are also dying but they’re just doing it slower. Time keeps doing that fucked-up thing, where sometimes it feels like it’s only been a few minutes and sometimes it feels like it’s been hours. Even the light, the stars, are doing weird things.” He laughed. “I’ll tell you something honest, though: I thought I fell asleep and was dreaming the whole thing.” He gestured with the bottle. “The war, the ambush, the desert. It’s like when you dream about the night sky and you look up and you can see galaxies and nebulas and stuff, and shit moving around, but it’s normal. Because you’re in the dream, and even though it’s fucked up you can’t tell the difference.”

Lugmokí said nothing.

“There was a door.” He played with her hair. “It’s like being near it made me think everything would be all right. I thought I heard a helicopter coming in, you know, and I wanted to keep a low profile in case there were more out there. But there was that door. I kept thinking, I just want to check it out. I kept thinking, maybe it’s some artifact or whatever that we didn’t see before. I wanted to touch it and hell, once you touch one of those things it’s game over. But you know that.”

She lifted herself up and smoothed hair back from his brow.
“Brian came through too. He—uh, he didn’t last.” Jeremy finished off the water. “He lost his shit. Ate a bullet.”

“I’m sorry,” Lugmokí whispered.

“I never told that story to anyone before,” He tossed the empty bottle across the room. He snorted. “Hell, I never even told it to myself.”

She kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“Now I work at the Dome. Coordinating security.” He looked at her and rolled his eyes. “Babysitting a bunch of guards. Oh well.” He sighed, stretched a little, and reached for a cigarette. “It’s good work if you can get it. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Not at all.”

He lit up. “So do you feel like talking now?”
“I…I don’t think I can sleep.”

Fëanor hauled back the covers. “You can try.”

I looked at the bed, at the mattress with its body-creased bottom sheet, at the faint light cast by the stars in the ceiling. “What if I bleed?”

“I’ll take care of it.” He patted the mattress. “Come here. Your body heat is nice.”

I took a breath and climbed in. He pulled the blankets up around my shoulders and put his arms around me and pulled me against his warm skin. “It’s okay,” he said. “Relax.”

I put my head on his shoulder. “I don’t know what to say,” I whispered.

“You don’t need to speak for me. I understand silence.”

“I didn’t…I’ve lost…”

“Shhhh. It’s okay. Try to sleep. I imagine you’re very tired.”

“I’d lost…a lot of weight.” I rubbed my eyes. “My periods weren’t right.” I put an arm around his waist. “I didn’t…I didn’t know. I didn’t. I…would’ve told you.” My eyes filled with tears. “I would have said something. I’m not like that. I’m not that kind of person.”

He stroked the back of my head. “I know.”

“I think really badly of myself right now.” I wiped my eyes. “I should’ve known. Dammit, Fëanor, I am not stupid. I know about babies and getting pregnant. How did I miss this? Why did I miss it? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing is wrong with you. No one is at fault.”

“I can’t do this.” I pulled away. “I can’t. I-I…I think I need to be alone. I bled all over you.” My voice thinned into a whisper. “I’m not a very good guest.”

“Janet.”

I pushed the covers off. I started to slide out of the bed. He grabbed my wrist and pulled until I rolled over. I pulled on my arm. “Let me go,” I wept.

“Janet. No. Not yet. Look at me. I want you to look at me for a moment. Will you look at me? Please?”

I turned my head. He sat up and put his hands on my face. He blurred, doubled, trebled. The tears landed hot on my cheeks.

“Listen to me,” he said. “Every word. It will be hard, but I want you to do it anyway. Will you try to hear me?”

I sniffled and nodded.
“I want you here. I want you to stay in here with me. I want you.” He wiped my eyes with his thumbs. “Do you understand?”

“No.” I struggled not to burst into sobs. “I ruined it.”

“No…no. You didn’t ruin anything.”

“The magic’s gone. I d-don’t know what you thought I was…but now you know you were wrong…a-and in the morning you’ll think I was a mistake…and you’ll be nice about it but you’ll put me back where you found me…and that will be that.” My chin trembled. “S-So I-I’m just gonna go ahead a-and save you the trouble. I know when it’s time to leave.” It wasn’t even a whisper: “Please…let me go.”

“It’s hard for you to be wrong,” he said. “I see it, I know it, and I understand it. I don’t want you to hurt anymore tonight, but I have to hurt you now. I have to say it. You…are…wrong.”

“I’m not,” I sniffled. “I’m not.”

“You are…you are.”

I held onto his wrists. “I-I h-h-hate you so m-much right now.”

“You’re still wrong. I’m so sorry for it.”

The resistance went out of me. It deflated and left me on my back. I cried and cried and covered my face with my hands. He pried them loose. “Shhhhh.” He kissed me. “Shhhhh.” He moved to wipe my face but I turned away. “Please don’t cry for me. Cry for your loss but don’t cry for me. It’s a waste of your tears. Please come here. Let me comfort you.” He caressed my face. “I want to.”

“I-I can’t.”

He sighed. “Okay.”

I looked at him.

“I don’t want you to be in pain.” He pulled away. “If you need to take comfort alone, please do it. I don’t want you to stay here for me. I want you here with me, but if it will ease your pain, I will let you go.”

I climbed into his arms and put my face in his neck. The contact of my skin rippled through his body, tightening his embrace. He pulled me close and I took his face in my hands and kissed wherever my lips landed, murmuring a nonsensical string of words, and I found his mouth with my fingertips before pressing a soft kiss onto his lips. He took hold of my face and the kiss turned firm, drawn-out, and opened into sweet thoughtless depth.

“Thank you,” I sighed. “Thank you…for listening.”

“Go. Go and be at peace. I’ll be here.”

I laid down with him until he fell asleep and I left his room, climbing into my own cold bed, and for a dark while my sleep floated on a thin lake of solitude. I dreamed broken dreams of Jack and every time my womb twinged I snapped awake and listened to the ragged sound of my breath as it drifted back down into a calm place. I don’t know how many hours passed. I know that when I went back to Fëanor’s room he was still asleep, and that when I climbed in beside him he did not wake, and that when I fell asleep it was deep and true.
Pepper Beans

One of the Orc-men brought lightweight metal bowls filled with a steaming concoction that smelled spicy and sweet and savory all at the same time. It came with a flat wooden spoon and a folded loaf of rough unleavened bread embedded with white seeds. Urzok untied him, and he handed him the bowl. Faramir held it in the palm of one hand. He peered inside. It was a thick stew, more like a porridge, made of tiny red beans he had never seen before.

“What is this?”

“In your language it is called stew.”

Faramir scraped up a bit and tasted. He held the spoon at eye level. “What are these peppery little beans?”

Urzok ate a spoonful. “In your language we call them desert eyes. They grow well in the dry places.” He shrugged. “And sometimes they are called pepper beans.”

Faramir tasted onion, some sort of sweet yellow root and pepper, and there were other spices too, things he didn’t know. Once, when he was a very young child camping in the Ithilien, a man had passed through. He had been a dark-skinned man out of the south, swathed head to toe in bright reds and purples. He and Boromir had crept away from the campfire over the objections of their uncles to spy on him. He carried the curved sword of the south and covered his head in wound cloth, something neither of them had seen before. They had followed him into a small grove and hid behind the trees to watch him, squatting beside his cooking fire, the firelight red upon his leather-dark skin. Faramir held the bowl beneath his nose and inhaled. The cooking pot of that long-ago traveler had smelled like this, enchanted by seeds and barks grown sweet beneath a fierce sun.

“It is delicious.” Faramir smiled. “In it I taste all the long miles between here and the places such spices call home.”

Urzok nodded. “The bread.” He broke off a piece and dipped it in the soup. “It is eaten like so.”

Faramir scraped up the beans and spread them on the bread. He folded it up and took a bite. In the bread were spices too, some variety that left a soothing coolness in the mouth. The seeds were of a kind unfamiliar to him: oily and full of pine smoke. Urzok watched him. Faramir chewed and felt the man reading his face.

Unsure of what to say, Faramir looked at him and nodded and swallowed. “Good. It’s good.”

Urzok set down his bowl. “Why did you bury? Why not burn? Is that not the way of your people?”

Faramir flushed. “It is and it is not.”

Urzok’s eyes narrowed. “How do you mean?”

“We bury our kin.” Faramir cleared his throat. “We burn our enemies.”

Urzok leaned back. He looked at Faramir for a long time.
Faramir dipped his bread into the soup. He paused. “We burned them at first. I didn’t think they should be burned. So we buried the bones and the ashes.”

“What happened?”

“We startled them, I think, and they attacked. They were eleven in all and my men killed ten, all adults, but for the eleventh.” Faramir gestured to Urzok’s pack. “She was only a girl just past her first bleeding. The bracelet belonged to her. She bore mortal wounds and when she had passed I commanded my men to bury her rather than burn her. It came into my head that I should come over the mountains and bring with me the bracelet.” He paused. “She died asking for her mother.” Faramir held Urzok’s eyes. “No mother should have to bury her child.”

He nodded. “It is so.”

Faramir finished his stew.

Urzok placed his bowl on the ground. He passed a waterskin to Faramir. “We will take you to Mughashah. It is they who will decide what to do with you.”
Lugmokí looked at the ceiling. “What do you know of Mordor?”

“I know what’s in the books.”

She looked at him. Her brow creased. “What books?”

“The Tolkien books.” Jeremy blew smoke at the ceiling. “I’ve heard a little, some stuff that’s different. I guess old Tolkien didn’t get it exactly right.”

“Who’s Tolkien?”

Jeremy looked at her. His eyes searched her face. “The guy who wrote the books.”

“How did he write these books?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see. What have you heard?”

“Well.” He shifted. “I guess all those old legends aren’t right. Now, the guys I talk to don’t talk much. They aren’t exactly big storytellers. Like everywhere else, there’s more than one.” He looked at her. “You know there’s an America where George W. Bush was never President? I’d give my right nut to live in that world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That fucker was responsible for the war.” He took a drag. “The ignorant half-wit.”

“I see.”

“Yeah. So let’s see. There was a guy who came from a Middle-earth where there was no Sauron. Well, there was a Sauron, I guess, but he was a legend more than anything. He’d been defeated at the…the…I don’t know what.” He sat up, reached over, and ground out the cigarette. “Some ancient war.”

Lugmokí sat up. “I don’t come from that Middle-earth.”

He looked at her. “Which one do you come from?”

“It’s not the way you’ve heard.” She looked at her hands. “Mordor.”

Jeremy grinned. “Well, according to Tolkien, it’s one nasty place.”

“He was wrong.”

“Okay, then.” Jeremy laid back down. “How?”

Lugmokí sighed. “I’m not sure how. I’ve not read these chronicles of the man Tolkien. I have nothing to compare them to, save the tales of Gandalf.”

“You know Gandalf?”

The Books
“Yes. He is my traveling companion.”

Jeremy’s eyebrows went up. “No shit.”

“No,” she said. “No shit.”

Jeremy chuckled. “Go on.”

“The West prizes itself above all other modes of thought and that we, who dwell in Mordor, consider Western modes of thought to be backward and uncivilized.”

She took a breath. “In the mode of Western thought, kingship and lordship are favored. Mordor is governed by elected council. In the mode of Western though, education belongs to an elite few. In Mordor, all children are taught to read and write.”

“It doesn’t sound so bad at all.”

“I would bow before no man, before no person, unless it was my choice. In Mordor, there is choice.” Lugmokí looked at him. “This is the world I come from.”

He stroked her thigh. “You said there was more.”

“Yes. I am...I was...I am the Mouth of Sauron. I don’t expect you know what that means but it is like being queen, or president, but it is also being a diplomat and a liaison. This is my job.” She slid down onto her back. “It is my life.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I told you, there was a door. I was traveling across the Gorgoroth—it is a volcanic desert plateau—and there was a door. You know how it is with the doors.”

“There’s no resisting them,” he murmured.

“No, there isn’t.”
Do I dare disturb the universe?

I watched Fëanor as he drew things on the wall, symbols that I didn’t understand. He connected them to lines of numbers and symbols that I did understand, and I watched them, I watched them flow out of his hands, but I couldn’t make the connection happen in my mind. When I looked at him the room weakened. The walls succumbed to him the way the light did; the light ran to him, fitted itself over his skin, dove into his hair.

The room was small, cozy. I sat on a lush couch and watched him write out the kinds of equations that take up both time and space, that wear fresh pieces of chalk down to the nub. He wrote on the walls with a finger, summoning forth lines of light. The long strings and branches of his equation linked in chains across the walls, moving in a broad circle, wrapping the room with lines of light.

Do I?

It was warm in the room, just warm enough for me to forget the cold. The room was full of odds and ends, there was a desk, there were chairs as well as this couch with other things piled on top of them, gadgets that made no sense to me, hand-bound books, a few rumpled scrolls left forgotten in the corners of the floor. It was a well-used room. The air said I am well-occupied; the light glowed because it loved. I felt the way it had acclimated itself to his continued presence. Everything about the space declared that it was a place that held the work of the mind, a cozy place that held in all of his thoughts, that contained his wild and fermenting energy. I had no doubt that elsewhere in the Dome was a lab, and a smith, that there were workrooms set aside for the construction of furniture, for the designing of buildings.

I ached. My womb, sullen and empty, pulled back into itself. Fëanor gave me medicines to ease the passage of the remnants and to bring my spirit in alignment with my body. He would give them to me with tea to drink and I would say things like but Fëanor I don’t believe in God or in the spirit and he would say there are many things your people don’t yet understand and he would murmur in a voice of water be at ease Janet and all is well, all is well, all manner of things are well. He did this thing where he undressed me and laid me out on a warm padded table, and he put his hands on me, my nape and my knees, on the small of my back, and he willed the feelings to my surface and passed them back and forth between his hands. It energized me and filled me with the kind of drowsy calm that I associated with childhood and hot summer days, with long bright hours spent on the beach. I would drift in and out of waking dreams while my skin crackled.

“Do you see?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He turned.

“But that’s okay.” My eyes traced the outline of his form and marked his space. “I like watching you work.” I smiled. “Watching you work is very beautiful.”

His smile turned dazzling. “See? I’ll make it simpler for you.” He walked to a corner, limbs prowling beneath his loose robe. He found some space on the wall and drew a much shorter equation: \( E = MC^2 \). He looked at me. He tapped each letter. “What of this? Do you know it?”
I grinned. “I know it, I have heard of it, but I don’t understand it the way you do.”

“Shall I break it down for you?”

I shifted on the couch. I propped my elbow on my thigh and dropped my chin into my hand. “How long do you think it would take?”

“To follow it all the way down into its simplest units would take three more days like this one. You would need to understand the smallest units in order for me to make a foundation of them.”

He waved a hand toward the walls. “It is the cornerstone.”

I sighed and shook my head, still smiling. “You don’t have to. I’m afraid such effort would be wasted on me. It’s enough to me know that you can do it, and that you’re willing to do it, even though I don’t have enough lifetime to understand the things you’re trying to show me.”

“I’ll make it very simple, if that is your wish. Imprecise and metaphorical but simplest to understand.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

He sat down on the couch. He picked up my hands and held them apart, bending the fingers so they went every which way. He looked at me. “Your hands are worlds and the fingers are lines of energy. They are always drawn to each other but don’t have the strength to make connections between themselves. Well...sometimes they do.” He moved my hands together until the tips of my index fingers and my ring fingers touched. “This, this here, it is a door that occurs in nature. When I wrought my doors, at the time of their building, this, a natural door, it would happen only a handful of times in an age. I had never seen it happen yet the math told me that it could. There were always stories of those who disappeared from Arda, and while it was told in Aman that Morgoth had hold of them, it wasn’t always so.” He moved my hands apart again, and this time he put his own hand between them, lining up the tips of his five fingers so they touched all of the tips of mine. “Here is a made door; here is how it works. The material of the door strengthens the lines of energy and makes a bridge between through which the energy is exchanged. It holds them long enough for the way to open. There are other things to anchor them, to show them in the land.” He looked at me. “Those things make the door that you see in the physical world. It is something different but the same. Do you see?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I think so.”

“I made them and I let them go. It was the only way. They sail between the worlds like lost ships until a snare of energy makes a harbor.”

I shook my head and sighed, turning my head away from him. I spoke beneath my breath: “Do I dare disturb the universe?”

His hands covered mine, wound them up in their soft strength. “In a minute there is time, for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse,” he murmured. “For I have known them all already and known them all---have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons.” He touched the smooth skin of my nape. His accent turned the words into ripe fruits. “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.”

I blushed.
Gandalf’s sleep was thin, restless and unsatisfying, torn through with half-remembered fragments of Valinor, so he threw off the blankets and rose to walk to the windows. Below him the market seethed with noise and humanity, frenetic, a motion of laser-framed bodies that never slept. He looked up over the black spires of the city and the clouds in the sky seemed lighter, a shade that had shifted from dirty blood to a dark sickly orange.

He got dressed, knew Lugmokí was near; he felt her fëa as a crisp glow that was both cool and hot, a fire banked low on the rim of his consciousness.

He gathered up his things and carried them out into the street. Down here it was dirty, there was trash, silt, ash, the hot mineral smell of drugged-out bodies rode the wind and mixed with the scent of the river. He followed the worn stones, reading the trace of Lugmokí’s fëa upon them like traces of fading firefly blood. He thought all the while of his strange dreams with scent of Valinor upon them like the breath of Manwë, how strange it was to be dreaming of Valinor here, in this place that was nothing like anything he had ever known. It was sterile, homeless, empty, it did not even hold the traces of its wars, the beings who had lived and died upon it; the buildings bore no trace of the hands that built them even though there was something about them, something familiar, some ancient language murmuring to him in joints of metal and glass: *thou knowest me, Olórin, as I know thee*. He pulled up the hood of his cloak.

A door opened far out in the wilderness. He felt it as a hollow space in his guts. It came into him, the emptiness of whatever lay in between the worlds, a strangeness blowing through it that seemed familiar: *the stones in her bones if she kissed Legolas she would taste those savage secret blossoms she would touch something feel the insistent stone beneath her fingertips and then the longing would begin she would dream of doors and think of doors no one would see her because she wouldn’t be able to see herself she would walk balanced on the fringes of their long shadows each day would drift apart like milkweed fluff and all doors inside her would remain closed* it danced in his mind, turned cartwheels on the razor’s edge between what had happened and what would happen, what might’ve happened, what could happen—what was happening on the other side of the veil. The door opened and his mind flowed through it.

Gandalf quickened his step. He looked around at the buildings, their dark stone, the mysteries of their metals. The facades all looked the same to him, like multiple reflections of a single truth.

The glow of Lugmokí’s fëa strengthened. He knew she was close, felt that she was at ease somewhere, lying down. She had spent herself in bed with a man. Gandalf cast his mind about, tried to see him, but he felt nothing.

*Then it is not Sauron*, he thought. *It is good*.

He came to a building that was not so tall as the others, it was a bit plainer, but he knew by its graceful lines that it was both sturdy and very old. The doorway was open to the road, it was filled with loungers, men and women smoking opium in glass pipes, thin ragged children, cats crawling over laps dressed in rags. A woman moved over so he could ascend the stairs. He felt their eyes on him as he entered a foyer lit with white sparklights. Their glow moved over his skin. He didn’t like it, it was cold, the light did not bear the living qualities of fire. The white light held no kindness. There were stairs of metal and stone. He climbed them slowly. He smelled cooking food, the ghosts of meals long eaten, drying laundry, soap; it smelled of people who were poor but industrious.
He came to a door. He took a breath. Lugmokí’s fëa wafted through it, warm, scintillating; she felt tender, soft as the skins of certain fruits.

Gandalf knocked.

A man answered the door. He was not tall but he was muscular, wearing trousers and barefoot. His face was hard, his expression watchful. He looked Gandalf up and down as he leaned against the doorframe. One arm braced over his head. The other remained out of sight. He lifted his chin.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve come for Lugmokí,” said Gandalf.

The look on the man’s face changed. “Are you Gandalf?”

“Yes.”

He moved aside. “Come in.”

Lugmokí sat up in bed. She held a thin sheet up over her breasts and her hair was let loose to roam around her shoulders. She sat up. Her face looked naked as well, undressed.

Gandalf turned his own face away. “I’ll wait until you’re dressed.”

Jeremy glanced back and forth between them. He carried his water and his cigarette to the table and took a seat.

“What is it?” Lugmokí gathered her hair back and groped around on the floor for her pins. “What has happened?”

Gandalf went to the window and rested his hands on the sill. “There is a door.”

“How? How do you know?”

“I feel it. Don’t you feel it?”

Lugmokí pulled on her dress. “This is Jeremy.”

Gandalf turned to look at him. Jeremy nodded and tipped him a little salute.

“Greetings, Jeremy,” said Gandalf.

Jeremy put out the butt of his cigarette. His eyebrows went up. “Hi.”

Lugmokí got out of bed. She carried the pins to the table and sat down and ran her hands through her hair, pulling it forward, working the kinks out with patient fingers. “What is this door you speak of?”

“It’s far outside the city,” said Gandalf. “In the wilderness.”

“The wilderness isn’t such a safe place to be,” said Jeremy. “There are thugs out there who’ll eat you as soon as look at you.”

Gandalf looked at him. “What manner are their weapons?”

“Things you probably don’t have.” Jeremy took a swig of water. “Things like guns and grenades
and other things that go boom.” He smirked. “I can get you whatever you want. I got a price, though.”

Gandalf lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? And what’s that, pray tell?”

Jeremy looked at him. “I go with you through this door.”
“Legolas?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“How much further do you think we’ll have to go?”

Legolas reclined on his bedroll, head tipped back, and he watched the stars brought close by the high flanks of the mountains. The air blew around him, sharp. “Far.”

Sam squatted beside the fire. The wind raked the flames flat against the stones and on it a kettle of water boiled. He moved it off the flames. “I think it’s strange, you know, how the those at Rivendell turned us away.” He glanced up as he poured a small bag of tea into the steaming water. “Beggin your pardon of course, sir.”

Legolas put his hands behind his head. The wind skimmed over his face and brought with it musty dreams of snow. “They did not turn us away.”

A warm flowery fragrance of tea wove into the air. “No?”

Legolas seemed at ease the way a cat seems at ease, relaxed in every muscle yet attuned, lying in wait. He turned his head. “By the time we arrived there the council had finished. Elrond advised that we wait. You aren’t safe at home. So together we wait.”

Frodo sat with his back up against a rock, wrapped up in blankets against the chill. He stirred. “Is the road to Mirkwood very hard?”

“No. It won’t be until we reach the borders.”

Frodo watched Legolas in the dark. Firelight flickered on his face, reflected in his eyes. “What happens at the border?”


Sam shivered. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Don’t worry.” With a fluid motion Legolas sat up. The shadows followed him, made sinuous dancing shapes upon the ground. “I know the ways of the forest. It will be all right.”
“It’s going to involve some breaking in,” said Jeremy. “The Dome has a hell of an arsenal. I can get us in there, we can load ourselves down.” He looked back and forth between them. “Then we blow this town.”

Gandalf looked at him. “You are close to the Maker, then, of this city?”

Jeremy shrugged. “Well I’m not close to him, but I do work for him.”

Gandalf turned around. “What is he like?”

Jeremy put his shirt on. “Kind of a strange dude. Tall, keeps to himself, has the computer do most of his talking for him.”

Lugmokí cocked her head. “What is a computer?”

“It’s a very fancy machine,” said Jeremy. “It’s like a mechanical brain.”

“It thinks,” said Lugmokí.

Jeremy tossed a pack onto the bed. He took things off the shelves and flung them onto the sheets. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Lugmokí smiled. “How delightful!”

“Diabolical,” muttered Gandalf. “Have you seen his face, Jeremy, this Maker of Xe Nahadu?”

He shook his head. “Nah, he keeps it covered to the eyes.” He slowed in what he was doing. “He’s got a voice, though, it’s hard to explain, it’s like when he speaks you start to forget things. It’s very smooth, commanding but in a quiet way, a subtle way.” He shook his head. “It’s hard to explain.” He grinned, stuffing folded pants into the pack. “My sister could do it much better if she were here. She’s a writer.”

In Gandalf’s mind a hush fell. “Is she?”

“Yeah.”

Lugmokí braided her hair and tied it off with a length of cord.

“She is a scribe, then,” said Gandalf.

“No. Not really, not what you’d think of as a scribe. She is a storyteller.” Jeremy tugged the laces tight. “She makes up stories and then writes them down.”

*After the manner of this woman Winterson,* whispered a voice far back in Gandalf’s mind.

“Tell me more about your sister,” he said.

Jeremy paused. He looked up. His eyes were blue and mild but behind them Gandalf saw the calm before a storm. “Why?”

“I used to know a woman who called herself a writer.” Gandalf paused, watching his face. “I knew her in a dream.”
“She’s younger than I am,” said Jeremy. “We have different fathers. Between my mom and my stepdad there’s no way she could’ve turned out to be any way other than the way she is.”

“Which is?”

“Brilliant,” said Jeremy.

Lugmokí took down her cloak and wrapped herself in it.

“I knew her in a dream,” said Gandalf. “A dream that is not a dream, but more like the memory of something that has not happened yet.”

“Look, dude, I have no idea what you’re talking about. My sister doesn’t know you. Well, she knows you, but it’s out of a book.” He slung the bag onto his shoulder. “Look. She’s at home, in our world, where she’s safe. She’s a student. She’s studying.” He laughed a little. “She’d have to leave her room in order for anything to happen to her.”

“What is your sister’s name?”

“Janet Lambert,” he said.
I read things, I crammed words into me simply because I could, because there was a hollow space in my that cried out for them the way it always had, and because I had gone so long without words that I started to think maybe that space had been bricked up by my industrious mind, that maybe it had been repurposed: rented out to the new tanning skills, the butchering skills, the bartering and harvesting and living with pain skills, all the skills I needed to acquire in order to live in a primitive world. In a quiet place, in a calm place, the stillness weighed heavy on the walls. It tore them down. The written word rushed into me, it filled me to the brim and anchored me to the world. Elerrína, the computer, held thousands of books. Millions. She translated them from language to language, from world to world, so that each book became a multiplicity, a flower, each petal shaded with the individual nuances of translation. I had known someone in my old life, a fellow student who collected translations of Nabokov’s Lolita; he claimed that each one was like a child, that they were all different from one another and yet the same, that each one was like a reflection of the whole and gave an expansive view, a god’s view, of the work. At the time I had nodded, I had read the translations of Gabriel García Marquéz and Marguerite Duras and could see the traces of the mother language in the translated copy, the indelible fingerprints of French and Spanish syntax, a whisper, the ghost of the mother hovering over the type; I had nodded, I read Lolita, I thought I knew. I didn’t. I read books written in Westron and translated into English and translated back into Westron again; I followed what happened to Black Speech when it passed through Westron and into Sindarin, out of Sindarin and into French, out of French and through the woods of a Russian winter before washing up on the shores of the English language and my breath was taken away. I wept. Inside words I saw kingdoms of ash and light. It was all so very beautiful.

I spent many days stretched out on my bed reading. Elerrína arranged with guards to bring me food, she adjusted the light, she forged the temperature of my rooms into the temperatures of dreams. Fëanor brought me food. He fed it to me. We read together from the works I had never heard of, rare texts hailing all corners of Middle-earth, from all ages, from all worlds. He laid beside me in the dark, pressed his velvet breath to my ear, recited to me the lays he remembered from his youngest days. He overwhelmed me and I swooned into back into my own mind, got lost in its tides. He fished me out again, made me into a siren. With the crumbling pages of old books, unlaced verses, and silken phonemes laid against my skin, he taught me how to sing.

When I became well enough, I danced.

There was so much music. Elerrína opened the electronic vaults, it came pouring fourth, an auditory stream, pulsing rivers of bass, currents woven of strings, beats plucked forth like jewels of the riverbed, hidden treasures loosened and washed down from the hidden places of the soul. I weathered the storms of memory living inside the familiar tunes and let the strange ones teach me things I did not know. Fëanor had math for everything. He took the music, ran it through a seine of numbers. It was no less beautiful with its soft parts rubbed away. He held it out, it was hard, raised, a serpent made out of gold, a structure spiderwebbing the sky, its symmetry crystalline. It moved inside my mind and stood up well to the fury of breath, to the wild beating of the heart.

Fëanor held me. He held me a lot. I cried and I raged and I got stupid with lethargy as the hormones cycled out of me. My breasts leaked. He touched the droplets, wiped them away the same way he would wipe away tears.

My body plumped, it happened so fast, the skin thickened and paled and glowed with fat and it burst into my blood stream with wild explosions of energy, my body detonated and turned my mind
into a blur of speed. I had forgotten how much energy I had before, when all I did was sit at a desk with a buffet at my fingertips. I grew restless and roamed the Dome, laden with words, slaked with music; I roamed the palace to burn off the extra energy. I learned the hallways and the hidden rooms. When my blood surged it both surprised and delighted me. I spent a lot of time in bed with Fëanor. I grappled with him, held him down until he whispered and the trembling burst forth, galloping through his skin. I moved into the flow of my head, the rocking of my hips, the loose ribbons of my joints; the movement of my body drew its own symbols on the parchment between us.

It was then that I began to write. I sat down, picked up a pen, opened a leather-bound book full of blank pages. The scratch of the nib gave me goosebumps. All that mellowed white space trembled inside of me.

I worried for Jack. Elerrína found him, he was living on the outskirts of the city, he was getting ready to wander back out into the wastes. I made it so he found food when he needed it and was safe until one day Elerrína couldn’t find him, the guards couldn’t find him, the stories had dried up. He had taken himself outside her sphere of influence. He was gone. I wondered if prayers would reach Eru from this godforsaken plane. I went outside, found a butterfly, caught it, kissed the tips of its wings. I whispered into my cupped hands. I let it go.
A First Glimpse Of Mirkwood

As they descended out of the mountains, Sam and Frodo caught their first glimpse of Mirkwood. They took rest in an open stony field, looking out over the tops of stunted trees, and from there they saw the broad sward of the Rhovanion like a border of tattered dun wool at the base of the mountains, patched with weak green and stitched through with a broad ribbon of metal.

“That’s the Anduin,” said Sam.

Legolas nodded. “Yes.”

“My goodness. It’s so very big, even from up here!”

The water cut a wide sharp curl into the grassland and beyond it lay the undulant country once known as Greenwood the Great: layered in vast blue folds, it was hazed with a cold mist, the tops of the trees billowing, the mountains lost in the haze, the line of trees stood like a wall on the sward, a locked door, dark and foreboding. The distant sky over it was a cold shade of blue, it looked hard, like it was always full of a sudden frost that wanted to drop down on you, unsuspecting, as you were trying to bloom.

“We go north,” said Frodo, clutching his cloak tight around his shoulders. “Once at the base of the mountain. I keep forgetting.”

“Yes,” said Legolas. “We will stop for warmer clothing.”

“Where?” asked Sam.

“There is a post at the ford,” said Legolas, shouldering his bow. A wind blew up the face of the mountain and it smelled like grass. “We will stop there.”

“How long till we get there?” asked Frodo.

“A week,” said Legolas. “Less if the walking is good.”

“Til we get to the post?” asked Sam.

“No. Until we get to the forest road.”

“Do we take the road through?” asked Frodo.

“I don’t think so. We can cut across country.”

“Isn’t that dangerous, sir?”

Legolas smiled. “It is, Master Gamgee. But it is less so than taking the road. The road is a wild place preyed upon by yrch and other bandits of foul character. In the wood there are only its creatures.”

“I’ve heard tale of those creatures,” said Frodo. “Bilbo once spoke of the spiders. Giant spiders, he said they were, wont to prey upon trespassers. He said they were very aggressive.”

A look passed over Legolas’s face, it was swift and deadly as the shadow of a raptor. “I know their ways.” He looked at Frodo. “This journey, Master Baggins, it is nothing to be afraid of.”
Frodo blushed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” said Legolas. “There is no need.”

Frodo glanced at Sam. He didn’t look convinced.
The three of them slipped into a cavernous room and when Jeremy flipped a switch soft white globes flickered to life.

Lugmokí drifted across the smooth stone floor, the look on her face was one of soft rapt concentration; she went to a wall dressed in velvet the color of water and her hands reached out, reverent, they lifted a pair of silver guns from their brackets. They were automatic pistols, the lines smooth, the curved grips fit her hands as though they had spent the entirety of their cold and brooding lives yearning for her touch. Each weighed no more than a rose. She pointed the filigreed barrels at the floor. The metal was light, smooth, it gleamed like moonlight upon smooth water.

Jeremy watched her. “It’s mithril. The metal is, I mean.”

“Yes.” Lugmokí pulled back the slide. She peered into the chamber. “I know.”

“You know what that is,” he said.

“No.” She aimed it at a distant wall, narrowed her eyes, sighted down the barrel. “But I know by its look what it can do.”

One corner of Jeremy’s mouth curled into a grin. He held up a carved box. “I’ve got your bullets, Calamity Jane.”

Lugmokí’s eyes lifted up to his and a smile flickered on her lips. “The projectiles.”

He nodded. “Yep.”

“Is there a place where I may fire these weapons?”

Jeremy laughed. “All in good time, sweetheart.”

Gandalf lifted a shotgun off a black wooden rack. It was wrought out of a strange reddish material, it had been dulled but he could see in the potential for the color of flame. He held it up and looked at its ornate strap, it was made out of pale leather and embedded with gems, embroidered in bright colors that made him think of fireflies, the phosphorescent fish, the garish tubelights in the city. He cradled the blondewood stock in one palm and held the barrels with his fingers. “Is this a weapon after the manner of Lugmokí’s?”

“It is,” said Jeremy. “It’s what we call a gun.”

“A short brutish word for a brutish weapon, no doubt,” said Gandalf.

Lugmokí rolled her eyes.

Gandalf looped it over his shoulder. He turned his attention to Jeremy. “How does it work?”

“A spark is kindled and this sets alight a small store of potent fuel,” said Lugmokí. “The heat longs to escape its prison and the only way out is through this.” She reached out, ran a finger down the length of the barrel. She looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. “It pushes the projectile with the force of its burning.”

Jeremy’s eyebrows went up. “I couldn’t have explained it better myself.”
Gandalf brushed her hand away. “Is there a range where we may practice?”

“Yeah, but it’s pretty easy,” said Jeremy. “You just point and shoot. Don’t shoot unless you’re pointing at something you want to kill, and never point it at something you don’t want to blow full of holes.”

Lugmokí wandered back to the velvet wall and found the holsters that matched the mithril handguns. They were made of soft leather so dark it was almost black, with narrow straps, they were worked with mithril fittings in a design of tiny delicate leaves. She strapped them around the fullest part of her hips, crisscrossed them below her navel, set the buckles, eased the guns into their tight pockets. She looked down one side of her body, cupped the shapes of the guns through the leather; she molded them to the round, silk-covered swells of her thighs.

“I like these,” she said, looking up. Her eyes were dark. “I like the way they feel on me.”

Gandalf’s eyes flicked away from her and his cheeks turned the lightest shade of pink.

“I see that,” said Jeremy. “We’ll see how good you are at handling them.”

She looked at him. “I’ll be good.”

“A lot of people think that, darling,” said Jeremy, chuckling as he took down a shotgun for himself. He selected a black sidearm that looked heavier than hers, stouter, and fitted it into a holster at the small of his back. “And a lot of people are wrong.”

“She will be,” muttered Gandalf.

Jeremy tossed Gandalf a sack of shells. “What’s that?”

“I said she will be.” He tied the sack to the belt at his waist. “You, my fine friend, know not what you have gotten yourself into.”

Jeremy’s face stilled, it hardened a little; he showed his teeth when he laughed. “I can handle myself just fine.” His eyebrows went up and his expression opened in a way that was slightly mocking. “But thank you.”

Gandalf picked up his staff. He glanced to where Lugmokí stood at the far side of the arsenal, handling the curved swords that were so like those of her homeland. “She is beyond your ken, young man.”

Jeremy took a lazy step forward. He put his feet together and bounced on the balls of them. He tilted his head. “But not beyond yours, right?”

Gandalf looked down at him. “Where is the range?”

Jeremy stepped back. He flashed a smile sharp as a blade. He made a popping sound with his mouth. “Follow me.”
Lugmokí peered in the doorways of the rooms they passed. Many of them were darkened, most illuminated with lights embedded in the floors or the ceilings, multicolored light that confused the shadows. In one of them they were bright, a golden hue that was warm like autumn sunlight. They were focused on slingback chairs and couches, furniture made soft for long hours of lounging. The room itself was warm, cozy, the sight of it lulled the eyes. It was fashioned out of comfort.

A tall woman stood before a tall shelf. Her white shoulders sloped back from a long neck, they were broad and delicately powerful; a silk gown the color of dusk draped from them and the shape of her figure, hidden beneath long loose folds of whispering fabric, brought to mind endlessly shifting dunes, the pale snows of Gandalf’s memory, ancient statues left to fall in the forgotten parts of the world. This tall strange woman held an open book in her hands. Her head was bent. She wore it shorn of hair, the dark roots tinting the pale skin. Old henna designs swirled up the sides of her long skull. Heavy earrings pulled at her lobes. Lugmokí stopped, a hand on the inside of the doorframe.

The woman’s upper body turned. Warm light fell across her body. She looked over her shoulder. Her long gray eyes had thick lashes; the dark eyebrows were thin, graceful, they followed their underlying arches of bone. The falling shifting light drew light shadows in the hollows of her cheeks. Her face looked long and narrow, her forehead high; her pale purple mouth was a tightly strung bow, her nose the beak of a raptor. Her hands lowered. She turned all the way around and in her face Lugmokí saw the carved stone princesses of Far Harad and the endless white of the north.

“Hello,” she said. “I haven’t seen you before.”

“No,” said Lugmokí.

The woman’s eyes traveled down to the guns she wore. “Are you a guard?”

Lugmokí shook her head. “No, no.” She put her other hand on the doorframe, standing in the center of it. “In your voice, I hear things. I hear granite and roses and salt.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Who the hell are you?”

Lugmokí stepped into the room. Her dress swirled around her ankles. Her voice lowered. “Are you a sister of Jeremy?”

The woman closed the book. She put it down. She folded her arms. Her mouth tightened. “Who are you?”

Gandalf appeared in the doorway. He saw Lugmokí and started to speak. He looked over, saw the woman, and his words faltered.

Her face paled. She took a step back. Her gaze went from Lugmokí to Gandalf and back again; the dimple in her cheek flashed and for a moment she couldn’t speak.

“Well I’ll be,” said Gandalf. He reached up, slow, and took off his hat. “The dream made flesh.”

“Gandalf?” Janet took a step forward, her voice softening. “Is it really you?”

“Yes.” He nodded. He started to smile. “Yes, dear child. It is I.”
A trembling smile shattered her reserve and she ran to him, pushed past Lugmokí, flung her bangled arms around him. The moment her body touched his he was in all times; the repository of his vast knowledge pushed through the veil of dreams, fitted itself together, and wove all through his fëa. She buried her face in his desert robes and he laughed.

“My goodness,” he said, molding a hand to the back of her head. “I am happy to see you too.”

Jeremy appeared in the doorway. “What the f—”

Janet looked up at the sound of his voice. She went still.

The expression fell out of Jeremy’s face. It hit the floor, shattered, filled the room with silence.

Gandalf released Janet, who had started to sweat. She trembled.

“I have got to be seeing things,” she breathed. Her eyes were wide, terrified. “I have got to, this is nuts, I’m dreaming, I’m…I’m fever-dreaming, this isn’t fucking funny.”

Jeremy’s face opened up. It filled with light. A small smile wavered onto this face. He looked at Janet, his eyes wide and sparkling; his expression was so naked, so vulnerable, that it made Lugmokí feel uncomfortable. She pulled her robe tighter, turning away.

“Janet,” he said.

“Jeremy. It is you.” She sounded lost. “Isn’t it?”

He shrugged. His smile widened. “Yeah.”

Janet took in an uneven breath and her face crumpled and she burst into loud raw sobs. Her hands clawed over one another on her face, struggling against the noise. Jeremy entered the room, went over to her, and pulled her into his arms. “I am so glad to see you.” His voice started to break down. He rubbed his chin on her scalp, kissed the top of her head. “I have missed you so much.”

Janet made herself small in his embrace and wiped at her face. She tried to calm her spasming breath. “How l-long have you been here?”

“Awhile.” He rubbed her back the way a father would. “Years, I think.”

“Me too!”

“God.” Jeremy wiped his eyes. His smile trembled at the corners. “Imagine that.”

“I wasn’t always here, though.” Janet kissed Jeremy’s cheek and stepped back. “I came through a door. You must know about the doors.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Janet jumped up and down. “There was one that went into one version of Middle-
“I have not known the love of a sibling.” She saw it now, a pulsing thread that flashed from
tenderness into stone, it was woven of fëa yet separate from it, a thing both built and birthed. She
returned to Gandalf’s side. “What a magnificent thing this is.”
He smiled.
Legolas was on his knees.

“Remember,” he said. “Keep everything covered.” He looked at them, back and forth, from behind his veil of silver mesh. His eyes were solemn, dark and deep. “Everything.”

When the wind pushed through the tall tops of the trees it made a harsh whirring sound. It blew into their faces, passed through the veils and was softened by them. A long, disconsolate howl rose up from the heart of the wind, it rolled to them through the branches; it was animal, somnolent, it was like a woman with a throatful of frantic moths, her mouth torn apart in the throes of lust and fear. Sam looked everywhere at once; he saw shadows, mockery, a scent of moss filling him, no tiny flowers showing their sweet faces. He went still like if he didn’t move he might disappear. He clenched his fists. He did what he could to hold in the fear, to soothe the crawl in his skin.

Frodo stepped close to him. He put an arm around Sam’s shoulders.

Legolas stood, bow in hand. “Come.”

He strode into the trees. Sam hesitated. The trees themselves were foreign, many-trunked, they were like snakes forced up out of the ground to lie with one another before being turned to wood. The treetops were wild, shaggy. No light penetrated the leaves. A distant chorus of those strange wails rose up, shimmered, twined with the canopies like ribbons of smoke. Above the trees, a close sky like a slab of porphyry.

Legolas circled around, rested his hands on the hobbits’ shoulders. “Come.” He lowered his voice. “It will be all right.”

Sam started to walk. Frodo took his hand, their fingers clasping through both layers of thin gloves.

“Pay attention,” said Legolas.

Darkness thickened, swelled with earthy humidity, sank down over them as they stepped into the forest. Sam looked up into the high rustling branches. Hanging up there like forgotten party-ribbons were long thin skeins of hair; they were of indeterminate color, translucent, they seemed to float out from the branches, long and gleaming but somehow decayed, drifting like tiny poison parachutes to the forest floor. He turned around in a circle, watching, and as his eyes adjusted he saw that the strands bore a very faint glow; at times it was pale yellow, some were a strange metallic green, and still fewer were a very dark blue, a shade like the last dying hue of a summer sky. A slow lightening crept into his head; his eyes felt buoyant, there was a vague weightlessness in his blood. His feet seemed like they were drifting away even as he heard them shift in orderly fashion, one at a time, snapping twigs and stirring up a crackling layer of dead leaves.

“Do you see?” whispered Legolas. He pointed up, his arm a black shape against the faint gloom. “Do you see the silks?”

Frodo nodded.

“Y-Yes,” murmured Sam.

“They will fall.” He squatted between them, still whispering, bringing his mouth to their ears. “You must never let them touch your skin.”
Frodo’s head turned. “Why?”

“The lightness in your head, it will pass.” The weak light reflected in his eyes. “It is the silks.”

As Legolas spoke, a long thin strand of yellow floated down before them; light and graceful, it twirled to the ground, seeming to dance itself down into a loose coil. Sam looked upon it, watched its load of light fade into the dirt, and he grew wistful at its beauty. A memory rose up from the sleeping part of his mind and whispered of Rosie Cotton.

“As what they are made of breaks down, it releases the traces of dreams, like the faint scent of a flower.”

Frodo leaned over. “Why are we whispering?”

The howling came. This time it was in long soft waves that rose in pitch, undulated up and over one another. It moved through Frodo’s breast, pulled at him; it was haunting, plaintive, like a song trapped inside the sea.

“That is the Spiders,” whispered Legolas. He tipped his head back to look straight up. “It is they who make such noise.”

“It’s so…” Frodo trailed off, looked at him with big wet helpless eyes.

“Stay close,” murmured Legolas. “If at any time you feel as though you have strayed into a dream, you must tell me at once.”

“How do you mean?” asked Sam.

“If you hear music. If you see family and friends hiding in the branches. If you smell things from your childhood. If you feel…” Legolas trailed off. “If, while walking, you are overcome with unexpected love, or great anger, or a deep despair that seems to come from outside.” He looked down. “If you feel lust.”

“Aye, sir,” said Sam, his face hot. “I will.”

“Yes, I will as well,” said Frodo.

Legolas stood.
Bickering


“Aye.” Gandalf nodded. “It is.”

Janet looked back and forth between them. “What do you mean? There’s a door?”

“Yes,” said Lugmokí.

“Elerrína.” Janet lifted her head. “Where is Fëanor?”

Gandalf’s attention shifted to Janet. “There is a guard here called Fëanor?”

“No.” Janet shook her head. “He is the Maker of Xe Nahadu. That is his name.”

Gandalf’s eyebrows lifted. “Curufinwë that was?”

“Yeah.” Janet cast her glance aside. “He is the one you know.”

“There is only one to know, I think.”

Janet fidgeted.

Elerrína’s gentle voice filled the room. “He is in the forge, Lady.”

“Tell him I wish to speak with him,” said Janet.

“Yes, Lady.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes. He mouthed the word lady.

Janet stuck out her tongue at him. “Thank you, Elerrína.”

“So who’s Fëanor?” Jeremy looked back and forth between them. “I can tell by the looks on your faces that there’s some kind of notoriety involved.”

Janet opened her mouth. Gandalf raised a hand. “It’s a tale for another day.”

“Why are we telling Fëanor about the door, again?”

“Because he’s been waiting for one?”

“So you think he’ll be coming too. Great. That’s just fucking great.” Jeremy tossed his hands up. They slapped back down onto his thighs. “Peachy. Why don’t we just sell tickets, huh?”

“Fuck you, Jeremy.” Janet snorted. “Jesus. No one’s going to sell tickets. Hyperbole much?”

“Yeah, yeah. Because we really need one more person, right?”

“Do you think you’re the only one who wants to leave? Do you know how long he’s been here?”

“Well, I know I don’t care,” snapped Jeremy. “I know that much.”

“Now, now. Children.” Gandalf looked stern but his eyes were twinkling. “Please. Be calm. There
“Janet.” It was Fëanor’s voice; it created a sudden silence that it flooded with its own restless warmth. “What is it?”

Janet looked up. “I need you to come to the library.”

“Is everything all right?”

His voice came down from the ceiling, drifted like ash winking out. It lulled the others into reverent silence.

“Yes, everything’s fine.” Janet’s eyes shifted from Lugmokí to Gandalf. “I have news. It’s the kind best given in person.”

“You are not alone, are you?”

She shook her head. “No.” She looked at her hands. “There are three others.” She paused. “One of them is my brother.”

“Is that the news you wished to tell me?”

“No,” she said. “It isn’t.”

“Very well. I will join you soon.”

Janet looked at Jeremy. “Sit down, will you?”

He sighed, rolled his eyes, and dropped into a chair. “Are you happy?”

“Fucking ecstatic!”

“Please,” said Gandalf. “Stop. I cannot bear your bickering a moment more.”

Janet folded her arms. She looked at her brother with an arched brow and she bit her bottom lip, foot tapping on the soft carpet.

Jeremy set his jaw and looked away.

“Thank you,” said Gandalf. “Blessed silence.”

The stillness remained until Fëanor came. He moved around the corner, blew into the room; he wore dark trousers and a long white shirt beneath his apron, his hair was drawn back from his face and braided down his back. He smelled of hot metal, leather, and musk. His face gleamed with a thin layer of sweat. He saw Janet and relaxed. He stood at the center of the room, looked around, took measure of everyone; his eyes flicked over Jeremy, lingered on Lugmokí, came to rest on Gandalf.

“Fëanáro Curufínwë,” he said.

They locked eyes.

“Olórin.”

Gandalf inclined his head.
“The years between us are long,” said Fëanor.

“Long and long indeed.”

Fëanor looked at Janet. “What is this news?”

“There’s a door,” she said.

“It stands in the wilderness.” Lugmokí walked up to him. She moved to catch his eyes. “Beyond the city, along the River Alph.” She paused. “It likes the spirit of the water.”

Janet glided forward, reached out, let a hand settle on Fëanor’s arm. She watched Lugmokí but turned her mouth toward Jeremy. “Funny, isn’t it? It’s like the Coleridge poem.” A tiny smile, brittle and hard around the edges, tucked the corners of her mouth. “The old man really must’ve glimpsed this place in a dream.”

Fëanor’s hand drifted across her flank, wound down to the curve of her hip. His fingers slanted over the long bone. He lowered his face to hers. “It was no dream,” he murmured.

Janet turned red. She put her hand over his and their fingers curled through one another. She glanced at Jeremy, looked down. “We’ll speak of Coleridge later.”

“Yes, I know the door.” Fëanor looked from Lugmokí to Gandalf and then back again. “It has come to that place many times before.”

“We’re going through it,” said Jeremy. “All of us.”

Fëanor looked him over. “Your fear, it does not become you.”

Jeremy got to his feet. “I am not afraid of you.”

Fëanor lifted his nose. He sniffed. “You stink of it like a dog in the street.”

“Look.” Jeremy’s mouth was thin as a blade. “I am taking my sister, and I am going through that door.”

“Your sister has her full measure of years.” Fëanor held his gaze. “She will make her own choice.”

“Would you stop touching her like that? Because quite frankly, it’s grossing me out. I mean, what are you, seventeen?”

“Jeremy, you have about five minutes to shut it,” said Janet, her fists clenched at her sides. “After that, I am going to shut it for you, I swear to fucking God!”

“It is the fear in his mouth,” said Fëanor, turning his back. “When he has coughed it loose, spits it out, he will be fine.”

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but…”

“Jeremy!” screamed Janet. “STOP!”

“We’re going home!” Jeremy’s bottom lip started to shake. He rubbed at his mouth. “I don’t care about him. I have you.”

“Janet.” Fëanor looked into her eyes. “Is this what you want? Is it your wish to pass through this door?”
“I don’t want to leave you.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Jeremy!” Janet lunged forward. She shoved his shoulder with both hands and he staggered back. “I am not a child anymore! Stop trying to run my life!”

“I’m just…”

“Acting like a ridiculous patriarchal fuckwit! When did this happen? Was it the army? God! You used to be so much cooler than this!”

“Hey hey, come on, I’m just trying to make sure you’re safe.”

Janet started to laugh. “You know, it’s really funny in a sicktastic kind of way.” She put her hands on her hips. “But I could teach you so much about how to live. Because if you’ve been here the whole time, you’ve had it really soft.”

“If you would have me go with you through this door,” said Fëanor, “I will go.”

“I mean, you have electricity and shit, and you live in a real house, and you have real clothes, and you don’t have to kill your breakfast. I’ve had to do that. I know how to do that.”

Fëanor put a hand on the small of her back. He leaned in and spoke over her ear. “Janet.”

“So…you know, whatever, Jeremy.” She reached behind and took Fëanor’s hand. “If you end up in the forest or whatever you’re gonna be so fucked.”

Gandalf grabbed the back of Jeremy’s shirt. He hauled him toward the door. “That’s about enough of that, young man.”

“What the f—?”

Gandalf tossed him out into the hallway.

“Really? Really?”

Gandalf shut the door. “Yes, really.”

“Janet,” said Fëanor, “I’ll go with you if that’s what you want.”

“Excellent.” Gandalf leaned against the door. “Let’s talk preparation, shall we?”
Janet went through a box of cosmetics, taking out each piece; she examined them, held them up to the light like artifacts. One, it was like a crystal, holding red lipstick. It was old, but fresh. She thought it might’ve come through wherever it was the trash came from, the veil or seine or whatever it was; she thought it might’ve hailed from the nineteen twenties, the shade was just the kind of shade that belonged on a flapper’s lips.

She opened it. It was creamy, waxy, and it smelled strongly of roses. She touched her pinkie to the pristine surface, smeared it all around, and leaned close to the mirror. She daubed it onto her bottom lip.

“You don’t need it,” said Fëanor. “The color of your mouth is beautiful. It’s like a winter sunrise or a lilac blossom, pale and soft.”

“I look dead.” Janet filled in the outline of her lips. She leaned back and looked at herself, the color was too bright for a moment, it lay like a wound on her face. Then it was more like a flower, and as her mind adjusted to the shock of it she could see the shape of her mouth, how sharp it was when drawn in the red. “I look like a corpse without any color in my lips.”

“Do all the women of your world paint themselves so?”

“Not all of them.”

“It’s like a wound. Such an aggressive color.” He got up, walked close to the mirror-wall. “I see the beauty in it but it is a beauty that screams.”

Janet looked into the reflection of his eyes. “Where I come from, you have to be loud.”

“Do you think that’s where we’ll go? To your world?”

Janet shook her head. The earrings swung from her earlobes, bumped the skin of her neck, and it was an ungainly sensation, it made her feel like child just beginning to walk. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I want to go back. It’s a hard way of life.”

“How do you mean?”

She turned her back on the mirror. “It’s crowded, Fëanor, crowds that you can’t imagine, these are the kinds of crowds you’ve seen at war but there is no war. It’s loud, it’s dirty, the competition to just be seen, to be a face in that crowd, is thick.” She looked away from his face. “I don’t know how you would do there. I don’t know how well I would do. I’ve forgotten how to live that way. Here, it’s manageable because of the great space surrounding it, Xe Nahadu is like an island almost, but it’s also an outpost, it feels good to be here because the alternative is so much worse. In my world there is no escape. It’s impossible to live off the land because there isn’t enough of it. There’s no wilderness.”

“Such a world is difficult to imagine,” he said.

“Yes.” She closed the crystal pot of lipstick. “It is so even for me.”

“These are the things you want to take with you?”

Janet shook her head. “No.” She tossed the lipstick into the box. “These are the things I want to say
The sky here, it’s always blood. New or fresh or old or cracked in cloud, wrapped in ash, flung to the ceiling of the world and forgotten.

The door stands beside the river. Beneath the stony ground the river reaches out, curls into itself in the dark. The energy of the river runs in a spiral. There are queer things blown into the rock, particles out of the ancient volatile past, and they exert their own weak glow, they hum in their own voices. The weakness in the world breaks open here. It settles on the spiral, hovers, sighs apart like a tired old woman at the end of a long backbreaking day. It falls into the arms of the rock and goes to sleep. It opens its mouth, snores, time pours through its rotting throat.

The door stands.

When Lugmokí closed her eyes, she saw imperfect blackness. It was layered, transparent; it shifted around on itself and held maddening mysteries in its folds. It was different than all other darknesses. She knew it came from outside but she could not put a finger on it; it held no fingerprint, no wisp of familiar scent.

Gandalf sat moodily in a chair and wouldn’t speak. Lugmokí sat on the floor, her eyes closed; she looked into the blackness, opened her eyes again. She tilted her head back. Starlights hung down from a void-ceiling. The lights swung at the ends of long black strings. A slight shift of air sent them to swaying, weaving, making shapes of the light. She watched them and felt that imperfect blackness in the back of her mind, waiting.

“When I close my eyes it looks different,” she said. “It isn’t like it was before.”

“It’s only a headache holding its breath,” muttered Gandalf.

“No, it isn’t.” Lugmokí kept her face toward the ceiling. She closed her eyes. “It’s from outside. It comes from outside.”

Gandalf struck a match, brought it to the bowl of his pipe, and cursed when it went out.

“It cries,” said Lugmokí. “This imperfect blackness. It howls. It’s howling into me, a rising welter of voices; the howls flow through me. Like time.”

Gandalf put the pipe on the table. “Have you eaten enough?”

Lugmokí’s eyes were closed. Her face was serene. “Yes.”

“In many ways you are adolescent,” said Gandalf. “It irritates me.”

“I feel the door;” she said.

“Yes.” He struck another match. “I feel it, too.”

“It’s cold.”

Gandalf looked at her.

She swayed back and forth, her hair brushing from side to side, her eyes shut. “It’s c-cold, where it
goes to, the world, it’s land is on the cusp of winter.” She cupped her hands. “Cold, cold winter of
frost and floss. Floss everywhere, crystalline with cold.” One hand lifted, unfolding into a salute,
her fingers moving like water; it hung there in unspeakable grace as her head lolled, the eyes soft
and still shut, as though in deep sleep. “And the howls.” Her hand flowed downward, boneless and
soft, describing a ripple of waves. “The howls, they fill the air, float on it,” she whispered. “Like a
dream.”

Gandalf rose from the table, lit match in hand. It burned down to his fingers and he hissed and let
the blackened stub drop.

“Lugmoki?”

“Yes, Gandalf…Mithrandir…Olórin that was?”

He walked to her and got on his knees. “Ask of the darkness one thing.”

“Yes?”

“Its heart,” he whispered. “Is it wrought of evendust?”

Lugmoki shivered and opened her eyes. “What did you say?”

Gandalf sat on his heels. His hands rested on his thighs. “You don’t remember?”

“Heart,” she said. “That’s all. Did I sleep?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I don’t have to sleep,” she said. “Like you. But I like to.” She sighed. “I like to dream.”

* * *

The door makes an arch against the bloody sky. It’s black against the red, the drying orange, the
fresh livid red of the new day. It stands with its feet on the stone, like it yearns for water, the noise
of the river passes through it, the wind passes through it, in one side and out the other because féa
is needed for transition.

A stunted bird, broken by this place, malnourished, shedding feathers, it flies through the perfect
arch. Its stone is still smooth, the proportion balanced to within an infinitesimal decimal. The bird
is gone, there, gone. For a split moment is here and not here, here/not-here, it appears as a smear
in the air that shakes, is held in place, vibrates. Then it is gone.

It begins to call. The siren song of the door passes through low-flying electrons, is handled from
one to another like a bucket brigade. Little mice climb out of their burrows, skitter forward. A
circling murder of crows breaks from its pattern three miles away and starts for the river.

* * *

“Jeremy.” He navigated his voice through the words, kept it right down the middle. “I understand
that you’re upset. But there’s no room for that now. If we’re going to go through with this then we
need all the room we can get. This animosity you’re carrying has to go.”

Gandalf and Jeremy sat in the library. The grit in Jeremy’s eyes and the low-pitched pain twitching
in the big muscles of his body told him that it was late, that midnight was hell and gone.

“You don’t get it, man,” he said. “That’s my sister. She’s all I got in the world.”
“I know.”

“You don’t, though.” Jeremy shifted on the soft chair. “Not really. You don’t have siblings.” He looked up at Gandalf’s face, looked away. “Not like we do. Like Men do.”

“No,” he said. “You’re right.”

“I worry, you know?” He shrugged. “I’ve always looked out for her, you know, she’s special. People pick on her for that. They take advantage. I don’t want this Fëanor guy taking advantage of her, because, you know, I see it in her.” He rubbed his forearms. “She loves him. She’s... she’s gone.” He laughed, short and sharp. “Over the damn rainbow.” He fixed Gandalf with his eyes. “This is no place to be that way, man. No place at all.”

“Fëanor, he is...” Gandalf sighed. He paused, thought for a moment, and took a breath. “He has a merciless sense of loyalty and a stupendous ability to focus. If he has taken her, truly taken her to his side, he will protect her with his own life.”

Jeremy twiddled his thumbs. “Carefully worded, and it’s not exactly a ringing endorsement.”

“It has been ages since I have known Fëanor as one knows a friend,” said Gandalf. “But I knew him then and I have seen him now and I read in his face the accumulated weight of all of those ages, and of solitude, and of reflection, and I believe that despite impetuous beginnings he has evolved into the kind of person you should be proud to name as a brother.”

Jeremy’s face turned open and went soft. “Do you think he loves her?”

“I know it as sure as I know myself.”

Jeremy flushed and looked down. The table was smooth, so smooth it gleamed like an unbroken surface of water. He saw his own reflection, pale and banded with long transparent loops of wood grain. “I’ve been an asshole. I’m sorry.”

Gandalf smiled. He patted Jeremy’s hand. “Love makes raging fools of us all.”

“We leaving in the morning?”

Gandalf watched Jeremy’s face stretch and crack into a yawn. “We leave when everyone has had enough rest.”

* * *

_The mice begin to dream._
As they walked in the dust, through low hills scoured down by the wind, Lugmokí moved beside Fëanor. She kept even with his steps, her feet tugged into his cadence. She turned her head, she watched him, her mind took in his posture and the flow of his limbs. His fëa felt tamped down, yet took up the space of a field, an open body of water, a temple. To be inside it made her hum, ran long slow notes through her bones. Janet walked on his other side. All three of them walked abreast, filling the road with the heat of their bodies while Gandalf and Jeremy walked downwind.

Hesitant, Lugmokí touched his mind. It was a silver place, full of wires and flowers, it was crystalline and charged with a thousand facets that were the faces of a million more, all of them flashing, all of the colors a choir of voices. The voices were sad, heavy, replete, endless. Looking into it made her dizzy. Like a child, she reached up and touched his elbow. His head turned. She withdrew her hand, tucked it into her sleeve. His regard fell on her with a humid blue weight. It settled onto her brow like mist in the morning, cool, kind; his gaze was like the morning itself, remote and blue, abandoned by the receding stars and waiting to be filled with sunlight.

“Yes?”

Lugmokí turned her face away. A soft shame overcame her; it trembled with the unease of a summer flower in the cold.

“I would know of the multiplicity.” She looked at her feet and her voice got lost in the sound of footfalls. She glanced up at him, squinted at the light in his face. “The worlds. Would you tell me of the worlds?”

His smile moved into his face like ice cracking and the brilliance of sunlight was in his teeth. “Of course, Móriel. What would you like to know?”

Made strange and delicate on his tongue, her name fell from his mouth, it scattered up her back, landed silken as cold petals. Her body twisted in a shiver. “Everything,” she whispered.

He murmured into each step. He kept his voice so low that Janet could not hear it. When he spoke he released the images in his mind; they flew out from behind the facets, out of the mouths of the faces, swam with powerful strokes up through the low currents of the humming voices and broke the surface, flooding her. He spoke of Valinor, the Kinslaying, the visions came before his words, rolling out in banners of splendorous flame; she tasted the depths of his misery, the powder of burnt bones, a bitter juice of Valarin fruits spilling down her throat. He reached out, touched the back of her neck. He brought with his touch the long deadly calm of solitude. Her face burned. The fingers whispered feelings of childhood, fatherhood, brotherhood; he passed them to her like garments to try on.

Lugmokí moved away from him. Her chin quivered but her eyes remained dry. “No more.”

* * *

Frodo awoke at dusk to the full-throated sound of a woman wailing. He looked up through the trees at the purple sky, listened to the long solitary cry, a river of woman’s grief. Her voice was deep and melodious, strange; the sobs melted into one another and smoothed into a long burring moan. It dropped off into silence.

Sam sat up and looked around.
Legolas squatted beside the dead fire. He tied his bedroll. “The Spiders.”

Frodo pushed the blanket off his legs. He sat up. “They cry?”

Legolas fastened the bedroll to his pack. “Sometimes.”

Sam’s eyes followed Legolas around the camp. “You’re sure, then, that it’s not a woman?”

He shouldered his pack. “Yes.”

Frodo stood. “What else do they do?”

“Sometimes they will moan as if caught in the throes of love,” said Legolas. “But not often.”

“This place is creepy. Beggin your pardon, sir, and all that, but I don’t like it much.” Sam tied up his bedroll. “Crying spiders? That’s the limit!”

Legolas gave him a one-sided smile. “Aye, Master Gamgee, so it is. I take no offense. It is a hard land to love.”

They came to the river. The door stood visible from a long distance. The sky was a calm shade, a thin terracotta polluted with mist.

Lugmokí’s head clamored. She walked behind the others, watched them, Janet walking close to Fëanor, Jeremy off to one side and moody with it, his posture self-contained, a long gun clasped in both hands. The cacophony in Lugmokí’s mind came from the door, it reached out to her as a river, a long turn of whispering and singing that she could not make any sense of, it flowed into her veins, throbbed there, ascended to the vaulted space inside her skull. It hung there, whispered down to her body. It said *move in new ways, your bones belong to me*, it said *the music is here, the music of dreams*, it was of the hunt, it said *come to me and you will learn how to kill.*

“You are the knife,” she whispered. “I am the arrow.”

“I’m sorry?”

Lugmokí looked over. Gandalf was there, looking at her, his face relaxed in the tan light. She looked to the ground. On it, long thin lines of ants wavered, blowing like grass in the wind toward the door.

“I was speaking only to myself,” she murmured.

“This is a strong one,” he said. “The other, it did not feel this way.”

She shook her head. “No. It did not.”

“I believe the coming of this door is the will of Ilúvatar.” He paused. “It frightens me.”

Lugmokí looked at him. “It frightens me too.”

“It says things to me that I don’t understand.”

“Aye.” Lugmokí looked up, saw the door silhouetted against the sky; she watched tiny birds circle it as if confused, knew from the taste of the air that some had fallen and begun to rot. “It does to me as well. Though I would not remain here.” A wind came and ruffled her hair, smelling of clean
water. “It is too easy to remain here.”

“Yes,” said Gandalf. “It is as though the longer one stays the heavier one becomes, the more bound to this forsaken soil.”

“It gives a choice.” Lugmokí looked at him. “This door, it is not like the other. The other was overpowering in its will.”

“This one is not a seducer.”

Jeremy fell back. He looked back and forth between them. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” said Lugmokí.

“Gandalf?”

“It’s fine,” he said.

“We’re a wheel out,” said Jeremy. “We’ll be there soon.”

* * *

Sam froze.

The thing was up in the trees. It clutched the branches with its many arms and looked down at him, breasts hanging like fruit, the hair fell over its shoulder like a woman’s hair but it was rough-looking, dark, tangled like the hair of a horse’s tail. Tied to it were feathers, leaves, bits of flashing metal.

It was an eight-legged woman, then a spider, then a eight-legged woman; his mind flashed back and forth as his terrified eyes took in the feminine shape of the torso, the arms and the legs. The backs of its limbs were coated in a thick glossy pelt of brown hair that thinned as it reached the wrists and the ankles. The undersides were pale, fuzzy. The heavy musculature of the abdomen was coated in a gleaming layer of fine hair, the muscles beneath were segmented like the belly of an insect but sheathed in soft skin. It hung, perfectly still. There was too much bend in its spine, the belly thrust down, bent back nearly in half once, and then again. The underbelly was pale, creamy, it looked downy except at the crotch, where it thickened into a shaggy triangle. The breasts were small, hoisted up by the reach of its forearms; they were shaped like a young woman’s, fuzzy, like white peaches, the nipples big and swollen and red. It wore ropes of dirty beads around its neck. It was obscene, the nipples hurt him more than anything else, even more so than the thing’s face; it had a woman’s face, the face of a virgin, sweet and smooth and mild, but it was too smooth, too blank. The eyes were dead. The small mouth held no emotion. The firelight of his torch reflected back at him, turning the eyes into polished coins.

It watched him. As he looked it opened its mouth, the muscles of its abdomen twitched with breath, and it let out a long wail, it raised gooseflesh; it was a ululating cry full of tears.


Legolas touched his shoulder. He crouched. “Remain still,” he breathed. “There is only one. It will tell others and they will follow us through the wood, but they know my smell, the smell of Elves, and they fear it.” He put a hand on each of them. “It is your smell that interests them so.” He smiled a little in the dark. “They don’t know what to make of you.”
Frodo looked up. “Are they dangerous?”

“Yes,” said Legolas. “Very, but not in a way you might expect.”

Frodo looked at him. He swallowed. “Will they kill?”

“Yes, but only out of hunger.” Legolas looked at the creature, and when he brought his bow forward all of its joints rippled. The branches creaked. “There’s lots of prey in the forest. It is the poisons of their skins and hairs that must be avoided.”

He fingered the string. The creature’s body contracted and it scuttled up to a higher set of branches. It turned, showed the symmetrical brown patterns on its back, blended in with the shadows, and when it looked over its shoulder it let out a long undulant hiss. They could see its mouth open wide, its upper body move up and down as the hiss broke into a series of short rustling chuffing sounds; it sounded like a bird trapped in a barn.

Legolas raised the bow. “They are very potent. The waking nightmares are enough to throw a man upon his own sword.”

The hiss turned into a bloodcurdling scream. Legolas drew the string back and it ran off into the dark, loped across the branches. It fled even though he had no arrow. He let it twang and the thing screamed from a distance.

“Is it the same with the silks?”

“No,” said Legolas. “The silks are a source of dreams. They seduce with beauty, not with fear.”

“It is the foulest creature I have ever seen,” said Frodo.

“They are the eaters of orcs and of the big bats that live in the highest parts of the trees,” said Legolas. “Both are far more dangerous to us. And they leave their silks everywhere.”

“So?”

“The silks are harvested, refined, broken down into powders,” said Legolas. He nocked an arrow and held the bow so it pointed down. “Does the Shire know of evendust?”

“No,” said Frodo. “What is it?”

“It comes from here,” said Legolas. “It is a dream-maker, used by the lake men and the men of the forest and whoever else they care to trade with for pleasure.”

“It’s like a drug,” said Sam. “The kind used in idleness.”

Legolas nodded. “The most expensive, the rarest, it is one part in every thousand of harvested silks, it is called lady-nectar, sometimes it is called the sweat of Yavanna. It brings only dreams of love and passion.”

“Goodness,” said Frodo. “That sounds…”

“Like the devil’s work,” muttered Sam.

“Much of it is kept in reserve,” said Legolas. “At festivals a small amount will sometimes be added to the wine. Very small, just enough to make one happy without making one immodest. The rest is sold and it commands a great price.”
Frodo looked at him. “And the poisons on the skin?”

“We do not touch it,” said Legolas. “There is no cure.”
The Doorway (III)

At the door Gandalf said

*Cover yourself.*

He whispered it. He yelled it.

*Cover yourself, every inch, he said. Shield your eyes.*

The man, the young one, he wouldn’t listen.

He went through the way the birds went through

He flapped the way the birds flapped

The air shivered with him caught in it.

Fëanor robed himself as though at a funeral.

Janet thought of *niqab* and *burqa*

She respected the words of Gandalf with a scarf.

She covered her hands with Fëanor’s gloves.

A tide of ants poured over her feet.

A storm of moths writhed around her head.

Even the clouds made a spiral over the door.

Lugmokí went last.

She watched the hungry shivering space take Jeremy

Then Fëanor

Then Janet.

Gandalf waited for her

He struggled to wait.

The effort pained him until it pained him no more

He slipped through.

The door swept him through.

It whispered many things to her

In many languages.

She understood them all.
Even the old ones
The ones without form
The ones half-thought and discarded by the Valar at the time of creation
The ones uttered by cells at the time of their dividing
The ones dreamed by chromosomes at the time of their replicating
The ones made of light.
Her fear turned into stones.
They fell down inside her.
They pulled through her guts and made holes
The holes filled with whispering
She was helpless.
Inside the door there was nothing.
No smell
No taste
No temperature
No texture.
She was alone.
She was empty.
She was a vessel.
She poured herself through herself
Into time
Space
Through the chromosomes of light.
Inside the door there was nothing.
Inside the door there was everything.
Thranduil

The arrow sang across the gloom, rode moss-scented wind through a vale of silk; it struck the neck and quivered there, scrawled its diminishing pulse onto the gloom.

_A good shot, fair and true_, he thought, and his shoulders softened beneath the departure of the stag’s fëa. He slipped through the rough-skinned trunks and he knelt and when he reached out, put a hand on the animal’s flank, it was dead.

“Do we dress the meat, sire?”

“No.” Thranduil shook his head. “Not yet.”

The stag lay on its side, the pale belly dirty. The limbs twitched and fell still. The life was gone; the animal laid there, still softened by its lingering traces, the backbone sagged to the ground with surrender. He grasped the antlers and drew a knife. With a swift lunging sweep of the arm he cut its throat. Thick steaming blood spilled onto the ground.

Thranduil squatted. He leaned over, the blade pierced the fur, just the tip of it breaking the skin; it circled the genitals, drew a thin red line up the center of the body. He grabbed the edge, pulled back the hide. The guts were messy and red. They smelled of metal, of lightning. He pierced the muscle beneath the ribs. He leaned forward, arms pushed into the slick flesh up the elbows. He withdrew the heart and lungs.

He held the heart in one hand, felt its weight, the heat still gathered in its chambers and leaking out into the world. It was dense. He lifted it to his mouth, dug his teeth into the thick muscle, felt the reluctant breaking of its strength.

In the sudden silence he looked up. A woman stood at the rim of the glade. She looked at him, her head cocked to one side; she watched him like a forest creature naked in the curiosity of its innocence. He chewed, molars forcing the blood out of the meat; the rich salts and metals of it burned on his tongue.

His companions stood at attention. They were still as stone, as the trunks of the trees. Two of them aimed their arrows.

She was swathed head to toe. The material came from the South, it was thin, light, black; its sheen was soft and muted, like evening light on the petals of dark flowers. She wore the dusk as a princess wears a gown. She reached behind, uncovered her face.

Bowstrings creaked.

“Sire?”

He held up a scarlet hand. He put the stag’s heart on its pelt, nestled it into the cut, and he stood.

“No.”

She didn’t flinch. Her eyes were dark, they were pools of changing shadow that followed him as he rose, slowly, to his full height. The weight of her gaze touched him, her eyes were cool, they came to his skin like a gentle breeze out of the darkest watches of the night. He read the South, the dreaming deserts, in the bones of her face. Not a whisper of fear trembled in her expression.

“Sire?”
Thranduil’s head whipped to one side and the eye contact broke and he felt it down deep, below the
rumblings and tumblings of his guts, buried in his fëa like a soft child’s bone.

He snarled. “No, I said!”

The elf’s posture broke; he lowered his bow, withdrew into himself. Thranduil’s eyes flicked back
to the space between the trees and she was gone, melted into the shadows. On the underside of his
own skin he felt her hot heart. He followed the wild flutter of her pounding blood like a thread into
the deep woods.

“Sire,” hissed the guard at his right hand. “Would you leave such a prize for the Spiders?”

“No.” Thranduil’s boots settled in the patches of ground abandoned by her feet. His body turned,
flowed from step to step. “I would leave it for you.”

“Yes.” They passed through a wallow of sun-patched underbrush. “You will.”

“My liege, I…”

Thranduil halted, turned around; he scowled and thrust his face into the face of his guard. “Go!”

He drew up straight; he nodded and he backed away. His brow remained impassive though his
body was tight with fear. “As you will.”

Thranduil ran. He ducked branches, reached out for the slim trunks of saplings, propelled himself
forward. Her cadence echoed inside of him, the rhythmic slam of her bones, the forest floor
shivering up inside them to ballast her breath. The beguiling scent of her body rode the air, a
curving slipstream of spice and simmering salt; her lungs drew in the cold forest air, heated it,
pushed back out again. The richness of her steam blew into his face. He opened his mouth, tasted
the exotic bouquet of her blood.

No elleth. The words hammered in his heart, surged in his blood. No elleth. No elleth. No elleth.

The trees released the sight of her, loosened their branches, drew back their curtains of leaves. She
was far ahead, shading into the gloom. Her long dark robes flew behind her. In their midnight
currents, her white ankles flashed.

*             *             *

Lugmokí flew across the cold and sparkling ground. Her teeth chattered.

This place is so cold, so still, there can be no movement in such chill, the air is dead. The land is
asleep and the air is dead. The air is sharp. She looked around. The trees dream in fallow voices.

Up ahead, Jeremy was on the ground. He was surrounded by bodies, hemmed in with warmth.
They held him down. The rotten silk clung to his skin, glowing yellow in the thick gloom; it began
to fall apart on contact, it melted into the finest floss, slippery, it was difficult to touch. It crumbled
to dust at the touch of a glove, burrowed into his blood. He screamed. Words spilled from him,
spangled as a troupe of clowns; they cavorted, they were disgusting, they roared and tossed
nonsense up over their heads in pretty patterns. Gandalf had hold of his wrists. He had taken off his
gloves and they were skin-to-skin. He murmured; he gathered up his own light and patted it onto
Jeremy’s fëa. It did not hold. The madness of the silks was stronger.
Beneath the roar of her own body she heard the hunter, the Elf, her pursuer. He ran alone, he smelled like the forest, his clothes rustled with the leaves and sighed with the wind; his hair moved through the air with a sound of feathers. She tore through the woods and though she pushed herself, though she ran fleet as any deer, he used her blood like a rope: hand over hand, breath over breath, he pulled himself closer.

He reached out, grabbed her by the hair. She had no choice. The throbbing in her scalp caught her up in the momentum of her legs and the impact of his body moved through her; he was hot, his heat rose through his garments and curled into her skin. She coiled up onto the tips of her toes. She bent backward. Their bodies hung in the balance, trapped in a frantic weft of breath; he gathered up handfuls of her silk robes and flung her to the ground.

A strange softness poured into her, a weakness; she tumbled onto the forest floor. She fell loose, boneless, unrolled like a length of silver ribbon. Her blood raced. The cold of the earth was harsh against her skin. He pinned her, his long body stretched over her, hovering there, breathing.

Her mouth opened. He held her wrists fast to the earth, twisted together in the grip of his fingers. He watched her face. One hand hovered over the frantic rise and fall of her throat. He looked into her eyes. His grip settled like a necklace of bone. The length of her body stiffened. Her breath came faster.

Lugmokí looked into his eyes. They held her, trapped her; they were the color of deep water, cold, troubled by summer storms; the narrow angle of his jaw, the sharp curve of his nose and the way it sloped down from his brow, the strength of his heavy dark eyebrows, the furrow carved in his forehead by anger, all of it bore down on her; the ferocity of his face made her blood evaporate, made her weightless, like she was blowing around inside the empty cavern of her tremulous skin. He brought his face close to hers.

“What are you?” he panted.

His voice, low, soft, polished with years, made tender with secrets, frayed at the edges, it climbed into her, stretched out, it fitted its skin with her skin, its limbs with hers. Her breath thinned beneath its weight, turned shallow. The tension of his face rolled out on the tide of his breath and the furrow softened, became the ghost of a riverbed that ran below his nose and surfaced at his upper lip. The blood in his breath, the scent of it on his chin, it brushed its red wings over her face.

“There is not a word for what I am,” she whispered.

He held her eyes with his, calm in his face, a sharp glint in his gaze. His hand tightened on her throat. His voice lowered, turned breathy, turned silken. “Do I kill you?”

“No.” She breathed hard and fast. “I am no danger to you.”

He brushed the bridge of his nose along her cheekbone. She shivered. “Not now.” He lifted his nostrils and sniffed her skin. “Not here. Not this way. If I release you…” He moved his mouth over hers, spoke close to her lips. “I don’t know what you’re capable of.”

His mouth was small, delicate; it could’ve been a girl’s mouth but for its stoniness, its sharpness, the way it wore the blood of the deer like a robe of state.

“I-I am no danger to you.”

His fingers loosened. Her breath slowed. His lips hovered over the corner of her mouth. “Are you armed?”
Soft skin brushed her fine hairs. His breath poured into hers, filtered past her teeth, filled up her mouth. Her breath quickened. She turned her head to one side, smeared her bottom lip across his top one. He let out a short sharp breath and pulled back. He looked down at her. His face had softened; there was room in his eyes.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

“Sire?”

Thranduil released her wrists. He moved astride her hips and sat up, his hand still wrapped around her neck. “Bind her.”

“I am not alone.” She held his eyes and the words came out of her in a heated rush. “We are five. There is another elf, two of the race of Men, and a wizard.” She swallowed. “The man, he is sick. He raves.”

One of the elves wrapped rope around her wrists.

“The stuff of the trees, lord,” said Lugmokí. “The floss that glows. It has got all over his bare skin.”

Thranduil stood. The guard pulled her to her feet, turned her around to face him. He looked down into her face. “Where?”

“Yonder, east southeast, but half a wheel,” she panted. “If you listen you will hear his screams.”
“Bind him as well.” Thranduil looked around. “Bind them all.”

“I see your hospitality has not improved,” muttered Gandalf.

Thranduil stalked the outer edge of the clearing. “A party of five appears in the wood. It appears. Think of this. Imagine it. This party appears, it comes out of nowhere, like the thin air itself conjured five.” He held up a hand. “A wizard, an Elf, a man, a woman, a female of no race.” He walked up to Gandalf, looked into his eyes. Thranduil’s voice rustled with calm. “Would it be wise of me to let you go?”

“No.”

“Does this happen to you a lot?”

Thranduil turned toward Lugmokí.

She kept her eyes on his, tilting her face downward. “Do things appear out of nothing at all? Are we the first you have found this way?”

Jeremy wailed. He writhed against his bonds. A pair of guards tied him into a pod-shaped hammock and tied the hammock to a sturdy sapling. They hoisted the raw ends of the sapling to their shoulders. Jeremy panted, it was alarming, he sounded like a winded horse or a dog whimpering at the feet of a cruel master.

Gandalf watched them. “What hope is there for him?”

“The dreams can be cleansed from his blood,” said Thranduil. “But such takes both time and rest.”

“Please, lord.” Janet remained composed, she held onto Fëanor, yet the tears fell down her face. “Take care of him. He’s my brother.” She wiped her face. “He’s the only family I have left in the world.”

Thranduil looked at Fëanor. “I have not seen you before.”

He put an arm around Janet’s shoulders. “You have not seen all there is to see in the world.”

“Ellon but with a mortal wife,” said Thranduil. “It seems I would hear of such a thing.”

Janet watched him. “There are more things in heaven and earth, lord,” she murmured, “than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Thranduil turned his back on her. He walked to Lugmokí, slowed down. He picked up the ends of her hair. He rubbed them between his fingers. He held them up. “Do you have an explanation for this?”

Lugmokí lowered her face, watched Thranduil out of the corner of her eye. He leaned forward and smelled her hair.

“There is an explanation,” said Gandalf. “But it isn’t one that you’ll like very much.”

He let the hair fall. “I am listening.”
“I am a made thing,” she said. “I am not a bred thing. I have no mother. I have no father.”

He chuckled. “I don’t believe that.”

She turned her head, looked at him. “You know I’m right.”

He held her gaze for a moment, dropped it, circled behind her.

“You know with your instincts.” Her head turned to the other shoulder. “I don’t feel right. I don’t smell right. I don’t taste right.” Her voice dropped, thinned out into a whisper. “You feel otherness in me. You reach out with your mind and sense incomplete fingerprints: like an elleth, but not an elleth. Like a woman, but not a woman. Like a witch, but not a witch. I am all of these things and none of these things.”

“There is something else, too.” Thranduil paused. “There is a darkness, and it knows all the reaches of the night. It’s in your breath. The smell of a secret.”

She turned her head back enough to look at him. “We are not the first.”

His voice lowered. “No.”

She smiled.

“Take this smile off your face.”

It widened, flashed a glimmer of teeth.

He lifted his hand, palm down, hovered it over her face. His shadow fell across her mouth. She looked away from him.

“I am not here to please you,” she said.

“You’re cold.”

Her teeth chattered. “Yes.”

He gestured. A guard came to his side. Thranduil looked at his cloak; it was heavy wool, dyed green and trimmed with rabbit fur. “Take it off,” he said. “Cover her.”

“Of course, sire.”

He did. Lugmokí found herself enveloped in a scent of rain-soaked moss, woodsmoke, and the low simmering scent of salty skin. Warmth built inside her bones. Her shaking began to ease.

*             *             *

The guards tied them together in a long line. They marched through a deer path in the gloom, the world lightening as the sun rose. The fine scrim of frost melted away. Their breath lightened, disappeared. Shafts of sun fell through the leaves. It passed over them, warming them with its lingering, gilded touch.

One of the guards gave Jeremy a sip from a small leather flask. It calmed him, put him into a deep sleep even as it rose a thick and odorous sweat on his skin.

“It will sweat them out,” he said to Janet. “It will calm him until we can get him home.”
“How far is home?”

“A day’s journey on foot.”

She nodded. A pale smile flashed across her mouth. “Thank you.”

He bowed his head.

Thranduil walked beside Gandalf. “How did you get here?”

“There was a door,” said Gandalf. “We came through it.”

“A door to where?”

“To here.”

“From where?”

“From a place that is no place at all,” said Gandalf.

“Speak plainly.”

“I am.”

Thranduil scowled at him. “Where did you come from?”

“It is called Xe Nahadu,” said Gandalf. “It is a city, but it is no place at all. It lives in the spaces between places.”

Thranduil lowered his voice. “Now is not a time for riddles.”

“It is no riddle, King. It is only the truth.”

“How does a place exist between places?”

“I don’t know,” said Gandalf. “It is a mystery of Ilúvatar.”

“And what of the doors?”

“They are less of a mystery,” said Gandalf. “The doors were built by ancient hands and then they were forgotten.”

Thranduil said nothing.

“You have found others here. In the forest.” Gandalf watched his face. “With no explanation.”

“Yes.” Thranduil exhaled through his nose. He looked straight ahead. “But when we found them they were all dead, fallen prey to the Spiders or to each other or to goblins.”

“And other things? There are other things as well? Objects, perhaps?”

Thranduil nodded. “Yes.”

“The doors were built in stable times.” Gandalf kept his voice quiet. “These are not stable times.”

“Yours is the first party we have found alive,” said Thranduil.
Gandalf nodded. “I see.”

“We know when it will happen,” said Thranduil. “When we will find the bodies. The Spiders act differently, and there is something else, a hush. A silence that comes from the land.”

“It is a silence of the mind?”

“Yes.”

Gandalf nodded. “It is so in other lands as well, in all lands that the doors come to. The land will know it first, then the animals.” He looked at Thranduil. “There’s no longing here? The doors do not speak to you?”

A troubled look passed over Thranduil’s features. It made them hard, turned his profile harsh with shadow. “No.”

“And your dreams?” Gandalf’s voice softened. “Have your dreams altered in their courses?”

“What of the Noldo?” Thranduil nodded to Fëanor’s back. “What’s his story?”

Gandalf sighed. “Why don’t you ask him?”

* * *

Dusk fell with a bitter swiftness.

They made camp in a small glade of old growth trees. A fire was built in the center, inside a ring of old blackened stones. There were two deer from the hunt, both stags, and the meat was cut up and roasted on the flames. The trees themselves were dark-skinned, had many trunks and low gnarled branches. The roots entwined to make a smooth bowl of mossy earth. Long beards of sharp moss dangled from above. The canopy was thick. It rustled at the top but beneath, in the gathering dark of the glade, the leaves were still.

“You have made me slow.” Thranduil squatted in front of Lugmoki. “So now we must stop for the night.”

“Untie me.”

He looked at her. “Why?”

“I will dance for you,” she said.

“Is that what you are?” He lowered his chin and the firelight sharpened his nose, turned his eyebrows into bird’s wings. “A dancer?”

“I am many things.” She lowered her voice into a whisper. “A dancer is but one of them.”

“And what would be your music, then, dancer?”

She held his eyes with hers and she smiled. “I don’t need music.”

“It’s wondrous thing, the dancer who dances without music,” he said.

She leaned forward. “Untie me and I’ll show you,” she whispered.

Gandalf chuckled. “I don’t think that would be a very good idea.”
“I would like to see it,” said Thranduil, studying her face. “I would like to see it very much.”

Gandalf sighed. “Suit yourself.”

Fëanor leaned in closer. “This dance would be a bad thing?”

“I don’t know,” murmured Gandalf. “I know it could be. I have seen it before.”

Thranduil reached behind her. She drew in a gradual breath. She turned her face away as he breathed into her neck, loosening her knots.

“There.” He unwound her ropes. He slid back to look at her. “You are free.”

Her hands went to her waist as she rose onto her knees. She unbuckled her belt. “These are my weapons,” she murmured, releasing the clip from each gun. She levered the bullets out of their chambers. “You must keep the projectiles separate.” She looked into Thranduil’s eyes. “You don’t understand how they work.” Her voice dropped. “They are very perilous. In giving them to you I am showing great trust. Will you accept my great trust?”

He took them from her. “Do your dance.”
Lugmoki unraveled her braids. She sat beside the fire, unmaking them with great patience, she loosened the dark waves of hair with her fingers. She brushed the heavy weight until it fell over her as a veil of black water, gleaming in the firelight, the moonlight, the pale phosphorescence of spider silk caught high in the black branches. She stood, lifting her curtain of hair; she settled its weight on her back and unfastened the cloak and let it fall. She unfastened her own cloak beneath, thin and black, and it fell away from her body like smoke, rolled on the heavy cold air, it billowed before dropping on top of the wool and fur with a sound like rain. Beneath she wore a thin dress, voluminous, thin as the dusk itself in its shade into dark purple, as it’s giving up the last of its light, and the bottom hem looked like blood in the firelight, blood-soaked silk that smoldered on the edge of flame.

She stood and tied on a simple belt sewn with coins, they were the coins of the South that were round and hollow in the center, a flat metal the color of ash; the belt was wrought of dark leather and the coins looked old and worn, the greedy touch of a thousand hands had robbed them of their shine. There were bloodstones worked onto the leather, and lapis; twilight crystals carved in the shapes of beetles hung down, their spread wings wrought of smoky quartz, the wings clacked against the round shapes of the coins. The coins tinkled together with each of her body’s movements. Tassels had been wrought of hair, long straight locks of it, smooth, in black and gray and white, the soft hair of old women braided and bound; individual hairs clung to the diaphanous folds of her skirt. Beneath the dress, trapped in layers of cunning shadow, the white of her body shone through, the shape, the deep valleys and sweet curves of her flanks, her fierce shoulders, the undulant river of her spine, all of it washed in the luminousness of moonlight: it moved in a welter of shadow and whispered sinuous thoughts, sinister things.

She moved through the flickering reds, the gilded oranges, the flashes of gold, hard sharp cracks of the wood falling into the tinkle of coins, their dull faces flashing, her body swaying into a rhythm so subtle that in the beginning Thranduil did not know whether or not his eyes saw it or his body felt it; it came to him in the wind, the current of it as it shifted through the topmost branches, the flow of his own breath. She circled the fire, did it once, slow; she slowed again, her sheaf of hair rippling into each step, walking on bare feet with the heels turned in, arms lifting into the slow pace of the circle. The breath of the watchers lulled into silence. At the outer edge, a long slow keening began, it flowed out of the darkness, coiled around Lugmoki’s long white arm and lifted it, curled it up into the cry; it took a ripple in the shoulder with a turn in the Spider’s cold and fearsome wail. Another one picked up the echo, further back into the woods, it lifted its piercing call up over that of its sister, and Lugmoki stopped, locked into a hard pose, her other arm drew the shape of it, carved it in white, shifted it through a tapestry of jittering shadows and red light.

She paused, turned her head over one shoulder, the shoulder itself slid backward, leading the gradual swing over her upper torso. The light crawled over her dress, made blood-lights in her hair; it glazed the shape of her nose, the blades of her cheekbones, the delicacy of her chin. Her eyes were closed, their darkness veiled in flesh and shadow, her expression was revealed one flicker at a time, one heartbeat at a time, the concentrated rapture of it bloomed through her cheeks and spread into the minute quiver of her lips, the flutter of her eyelashes. Her shoulders led the flow of her arms, her chest rising and falling with her breath; her hands molded the shadows, cupped the shifty light, brought it up around her cheeks. A heavy branch snapped her hips forward. The movement was sharp, sudden, ruthless. Thranduil jumped and a gasp flew around the fire, a rustling of wakened limbs. His heart pounded against his ribs. A flurry of softening logs collapsed into the slow circle made by her hips. She ground them down with the roar of the flames, found the rhythm in their flutter; she tossed it back and forth, her hips moving rapidly, the movement was small, tiny,
almost like a vibration. The coins shivered.

A flight of birds stirred from their perch, rustled into the night. Her hips turned into wings. They fluttered into her steps, the slow measure of her feet, her hips fading as her arms coiled up and around her body. The hands were like birds, turning and swooping, lifting up, casting graceful shadows across her face. The breeze stirred her hair and her arms shaped slow waves of wind, twists of air; the sway of it blew into her chest, rocked up from the stillness of her hips. Her ribcage drew an ellipsis that dragged her hips into its slow wake. The wind rippled her dress. She followed it, led with her navel, the soft undulation flowing from the fabric and into her body and back into the fabric, it closed her eyes as it slowed into a mournful sound, a leafy sound, empty, asleep beneath a burden of dead silk. Her body turned into a dream, it lightened, it seemed to hover on the air, afloat on the darkness, fragile; she fell to the ground light as loosened bit of silk, her white skin glowing, her joints loosening one my one and turning like petals into the breeze. She collapsed with grandeur to the ground. Her hair fell like night, it covered her, it swept across the moss as she folded over her legs, hands landing like upturned flowers, spine still undulant, still a slave to the wind. A spider shrieked and her arm unfolded, reached up, dropped back into the Spider’s strident ululation. Her wrist quivered her in time to its throat.

“Stop,” whispered Thranduil.

Her neck moved as a slow snake, her shoulders picking up a new rhythm: one-two, one-two, like breath, like a heart, and upon this realization it quickened. Her head rose up, her body twitching, it cut the air into beats. She unfolded to her feet. Her hair hung in her face, a loose veil through which her eyes, dark and deep, made into wells by the firelight and the night, looked into his. She swayed. Her gaze struck deep inside him, pulled at soft hidden parts. She walked, she swayed, hips moving, up-down, up-down, so simple, sharp, strong. Her body was tight, the skin held to itself; he saw goosebumps and felt them rise up on his own skin. They crawled upon his nerves, he looked into her eyes, watched her belly move in slow quivering waves, his scalp prickling, he watched her face soften, the expression sliding off it and dropping deep into the hollow of herself. She cut the darkness in her eyes loose, he watched it flow out of her, he tasted it, and there came a whisper of heat, an awakening in his loins. He felt the sigh of a stone, the blood of a night-blooming flower smeread upon it. His mouth filled with forlorn perfume. The undulation of her shoulders drew him down into his breath, the heavy rhythm of it, he watched it flow through her flesh, riding her bones; back and forth, up and down, and his pulse, the hot red beat of it, ran strong in his wrists and steady in his throat, it filled his chest with wet thunder, and her hips, her hips lived in each beat, crowned his bloodstream, quivered with it as it ran faster. His mouth opened. He looked into the soft rapture of her face, the doorways of her eyes, her lazy mouth. He breathed hard. The erratic rhythm stuttered down into her belly, rolled between the sharp shimmy of her hips, his heart, his breath, the pounding of his blood.

He grew dizzy. He closed his eyes, shook his head. “Stop.” He put up a hand. “Stop.”

Her poise collapsed and she slid to her knees before him, breathing hard, untying her belt. She leaned forward, looped it around his neck. She smelled of flowers and smoke. “As you wish.”

He looked into her eyes. His breath went shallow. “Who are you?”

Lugmokí sat on her heels. “The Mouth of Sauron.”

“The Mouth is a man.”

She smiled. “Not where I come from.”
Thranduil tried to talk to Fëanor and Fëanor wouldn’t talk. He sat in the dark, looked at him with his burning eyes, uttered answers in his singsong voice and his tongue would polish them; they tumbled out pure and beautiful and utterly empty. He picked them up, tried to make sense of them, but all he saw was his own reflection split into prisms.

Janet would not leave his side. The sight of her grated on him, the tightness of their bond suffocated him; Thranduil winced at the clumsiness of her name, her face looked rough, the bones were like raw stone left to the elements, her skin like vines clambering over it, withered stalks in ragged bloom. But it was a hot stone, smoldering, full of restless fire. She held onto Fëanor’s arm and looked at him out of the brooding darkness, watched him with open distrust. Thranduil looked back at her. He supposed that was the draw: like will call to like, even across the gulf between races.

_Not where I come from_, she had said. He looked at her. Where does she come from?

_Fëanor will explain it to you, if you are open_, she had said. Her voice coming to him out of the dark, like a touch, a moth’s wing soft on his cheek. Are you open?

She speaks to him as though they are alone. She looks at him and her eyes turn into a room, he finds himself there, invisible walls cutting him off from the rest of them, from the rest of the world. In her eyes there is no time. There are no multiplicities, no hidden faces. She is only herself, pure, distilled, she is empty, a vessel for him, he would fill her up. He wants to. Every time he looks at her he is in her eyes, trapped the room made between them, and all of his blood surges toward her, like she is the moon.

Fëanor wouldn’t talk.

Is he open? He doesn’t know. He revisits the question and doesn’t know how open feels. Is he set in his way of viewing the world? Is that what she means? His mind, old and underground, is it made of the kind of stone that is porous, that fills itself and then gives way to water, or is it the kind that does not bend without breaking, the kind will shatter at a stroke? Is he open, then? Even his shards would tumble together in the palm of a hand, murmur in the tone of her voice.

Thranduil sat down before the fire. He stared into it, listened to the distant rustling of branches. A wind came and it smelled of dreams.

In one of them she sat beside him, moored in the silence, surrounded by it, entombed with him there. The echo of her breath was in his ears and in his blood.

He didn’t remember the reaching, the motion of her body like an arrow out of the dark, the striking; she lifted the sheaf of his long loose hair—there is no hair like it in the kingdom, his mother would tell you, no shade matches it: riverbed red, sunlight tumbling onto a drift of brown and yellow leaves, it is like the striated brown feathers tied into his braids, like silk, so soft, soft as down—in his dream Lugmokí whispered these things with her fingers, she went for the skin on the back of his neck, its softness, she whispered to him that its whiteness was like a rose; she moved aside his hair, stroked his nape’s long and cobbled road. He trembled.

Is it a dream? Somewhere, buried deep within his intent, is it already happening? Are her fingers on him, light, filling him with awe, her mouth soft, a kiss on each stone, within the hollow of each bone, her breath hot in the roots of his hair? Are her words burning on his skin: _you have fascinated_
me, lord, I am fascinated, I would eat the wildness in your heart and claim it for my own, I would take you now, here; we are alone in this room, in this dream, the walls are your woods and my blood... (inhale)... my blood... (inhale)... it is our bed. She is baring a shoulder to kiss it. She is laying her lips on him, they are soft and smooth and shaped around a hot, trembling hollow.

He covered his eyes with his hands. He took deep breaths.

The others were asleep. The watches stood just beyond the perimeter of the dying light, their backs turned to it. They were relaxed yet alert. They were acquainted with the darkness.

Thranduil stood. He went to a pack of provisions, pulled out a skin of wine. He squatted, drank. A robust flavor of elderberry filled his mouth. He moved to replace the stopper, turned his head. She was awake. The orange glow of the fire painted her skin, cast her nose in shadow. It flickered in her eyes. She had pulled the cloak up past her nose. He saw just her eyes, open like an animal’s eyes, bottomless tarns reflecting the endless dance of shadows.

He carried the bag of wine to her. He offered it. Her pale fingers tugged the cloak’s fur trim down below her chin. She reached up, took the spout. She lifted her head. She put her lips to it. He handled the skin, cradled its fullness. Her eyes lifted to his as she swallowed. He put a hand on her hair, it was a light touch that rode its unbearable softness, its heat. She pushed the spout away. Wine spilled on her chin. She rose up beneath his falling hand, propped herself on one forearm. He put his tongue to the stain. He fell into her breath. She curled a hand around the back of his neck and he licked the wine off her skin. He nuzzled beneath, followed its thin trail, erased it with kisses. He sucked the drop from the hollow of her throat.

When he kissed her, her mouth tasted of deer’s blood.

Is this real? The softness of her tongue, her mouth reshaping itself to his, the thin song of her breath, her taste, her luscious taste, the meat and flowers and honey flavor, the minerals of her body, the bitter smoke of her desire; all of it feels real, real as the cold ground beneath his knees, real as the naked fear inside him. She picks up his hand, puts it on the rise and fall of her collarbones. Her skin is so warm, so yielding. She draws it down, slides it inside her dress. Her nipple turns into a stone. She curves his fingers around the hot weight of her breast. He gasps. Her heart cuts loose, gallops tight and hard against her ribs. Her body trembles. Her lips are slack against his, she shivers, it’s uncontrollable, her breathing comes in flutters and brushes itself across his mouth.

Is this real?

She took hold of his shoulders, pulled him down; she swathed him in the cloak. Underneath it was warm, dark, it smelled of skin and tender sweat, forest smells. He climbed on top of her, slid over her limbs; his face pressed into her skin, mouth tight on fabric of her flesh. He smothered a soft moan. She opened, restless, she trammeled him with her thighs, held him, gentle. She pulled up the front of her dress. He balanced on his hands. She reached for his breeches.

She is clothing him with kisses; the heat of her mouth is dressing his shoulders. She is touching her tongue to the rim of his ear, resting it there, her softness trembling, the rhythm of her breath is a butterfly trapped inside his head; she is shaking all over, she is like a kill.

She rolled him, crawled down, the leaves crackled and the cloak went with her. He shivered. His cock went into her mouth. He inhaled the world. She swallowed him and the base of his spine set adrift on a burning sea. His arms, restless, slid down, his hands shaped her shoulders. He gulped air, his mouth stretched open, throat arched up into the night; his breath dredged deep, flew out of him, it was a harsh flood. His arms flung out from his sides. His belly labored.
She is unlacing his breeches. He is throbbing in her grip. He is finding her wet and diving in, driving in. Her fingers are light on his neck. Her gasps are like little animals climbing in his hair. Her body is like a fist.

He grasped the back of her head.

It is still there, endless, the movement, the gesture, the cold air sliding down his hairline; she is still moving his hair, she is still leaning over to kiss the back of his neck. The kiss is still happening. Her lips are still tender, soft, slain against the shyness of his skin.

He grunted. The muscles of his face slackened, then pulled up and back, grew tight. His back arched. He gasped once, twice, three times.

Its whiteness is like a rose.

He woke up. He looked up at the sky. He was alone. The fire crackled. He felt heavy, hollowed out. A wind came and it smelled of dreams.

Is he open?

He doesn’t know.
The Enchanted Stream

In the morning the camp rose in silence. The air broke silver through the trees, filtered down into rolling mists that clung. The moss glittered with frost.

Thranduil looked at her. She was pale in the morning, her lips the faint color of a winter sunrise, her hair unkempt. She had dirt on her face. When she glanced up at him, her eyes bruised underneath—her skin, her body, it does not like the cold—it felt like tripping and falling. She held her things tight to her body, she moved ahead, the woolen cloak wrapped tight around her shoulders. He heard her teeth clacking together.

Instead of tying them all together, the guard walked surrounding them, bows at the ready. They carried Jeremy the way they would carry a deer and he talked in his sleep, muttering; his language was tattered, a mystery.

That evening they came to the stream. It flowed swift and dark, its murmuring on the stones carried a promise of heavy dreamless sleep. There was a boat tied to a small landing and the others climbed onto its planks. The planks creaked. Lugmokí went to the water’s edge, lifted the hems of her garments. She squatted on the gravel.

Thranduil left the landing as the guards led the captives into the boat. He stepped down onto the ground, smelled the cold trapped in the stone, followed the scent of her hair to the water’s edge where she leaned over it. Her braid twisted and turned in the currents. Thranduil lunged forward and grabbed her arm, moved to fling her back from the water’s edge, but she twisted out of her crouch, swift, swifter than the rushing currents, she was fast as an arrow. She moved back while she pulled free her arm and yanked his legs out from beneath him. His back hit the cold ground. The air left him. She left him there, turning back to the water. Its reflection filled her eyes. She leaned over. She put her hands in it.

“Lugmokí,” said Gandalf, turning away from the boat. “Come away from the waters.”

Her fingers turned gray in the water and a lassitude flowed through her. Her joints loosened. Her eyelids lowered and a smile swooned onto her face. “I like this water,” she murmured. Her head lolled back. “It makes me forget.”

Thranduil rolled over. He stood.

Lugmokí leaned to one side, a hand lifting up, unfurling; she bent the wrist, tilting her head back, and she watched drops of the water run down her forearm. “I see dreams,” she sighed.

Thranduil squatted. She was on the ground and he gathered her up. Her body melted, heavy in its skin, she was like something slain in his arms, her limbs soft; her head hung. He stood. Her wet braid touched the ground. She reached up. Her cold fingertips touched the hollow in his throat. “Like a white rose,” she whispered.

One of the guards watched him. “Why does she not sleep?”

“I don’t know,” said Thranduil, stepping into the boat.

Lugmokí said something in Black Speech, half-moaned it.

“She will be all right,” said Gandalf.
Thranduil looked at him. “The enchanted waters bring sleep to all.”

Gandalf settled in the stern while the guards rowed. He held his staff across his knees. “There is more to Lugmokí than meets the eye.”

Thranduil put her down. She slumped against the bow, watching him, the tilt of her face was sly and her eyes huge, darkened by the waters, the pupils unfurled and luminous. He sat. The boat pushed off, floated onto the waters, rocked. He looked at her, the cast-away posture of her body, the paleness of her limbs against the dark wood. Her looked at her face, her expression, her mouth like an underripe fruit and thought came into his head: in this image, he saw his hands on her robes, parting them, showing the skin beneath. It was soft and tender, pale as the face of the moon, he longed to touch it separate from her regard, without her eyes on him, as she slept. She stirred. Her arms slithered on the bowed wood. Her hips slid from side to side. Her eyes moved in her face like a cat’s. Her hand slithered toward him.

“She is perilous,” said Gandalf, watching his face. “And she is even more so than that, in that she does not know the depths of her own power.”

“So you say.” A faint scowl line appeared in Thranduil’s forehead. He looked away. “What is she? Tell me, Mithrandir. What witchery is this?”

“She is as she says,” said Gandalf. “She is the Mouth of Sauron, forged by him, knit in his essence.” He looked at her. “She is Mordor.”

Lugmokí climbed out of the bow. Her limbs were slow, they moved as if independent from one another and yet in concert, a collection of animals creeping. Her torso shifted. She crawled up beside Thranduil, touched his hair with the curiosity of a child, let it move through her fingers. She came up around him like a vine and murmured something in Black Speech into his ear. Thranduil stiffened.

“Yet you do not toss her over the side,” murmured Gandalf. “You trust me against your better judgment.” His eyebrows twitched. “You are enchanted by her. It is written plain on your face.”

“Long and cobbled road,” whispered Lugmokí. The words floated on a tide of slow breath. “Is it real? Is it real? Am I real?” Her fingers walked on him like a spider. They moved the hair back over his shoulder. She brought her lips close to the tensed muscles in his neck. “Are you…are you…are you…are you…are you…”

The guards rowed. A cold silence filled with the sound of water.

Thranduil looked down at her. Her eyes were lakes. With one finger she touched the tip of his chin.

“Take care, Oropherion.” Gandalf’s voice was kind. “That is all the counsel I have to give.”

*             *             *

At Thranduil’s halls, under the rapid fall of darkness, the guards carried Jeremy to the rooms of healing. Janet went with him, and Fëanor, who put up his hood and veiled his distracting face.

Gandalf insisted that Lugmokí be taken to a bedroom instead, where he would keep watch over her. Thranduil carried her to the bed. She poured onto the sheets, twisting half-out of her clothes, whispered words that he did not understand. She shivered. Gandalf built up the fire, stoked it until the walls glowed red and there was sweat on his face.

“It will be all right,” said Gandalf. “I’ll watch her. The waters will find their way out of her body.”
Thranduil looked at him. “Will she say in bed?”

Gandalf sat in a chair beside the headboard. “She will stay in this room. You have my word.”

“We could give her evendust,” said Thranduil. “A small measure. It would make her dream.”

“It may not,” said Gandalf. “We can’t be sure how it might affect her. I think a tincture of athelas, perhaps, if she will drink it, and time.”

On the bed her body made a landscape. White hills, white valleys, a stone here, a stone there, reddened by the heart of its earth. Her hair made a forest full of waters. The firelight made her eyes disappear. She turned and looked at Thranduil with holes in her head, the blackness velvet and hot, her strange fëa banked at their bottoms like coals. Her creeping smile turned her into a skeleton woman.

“This place,” she half-sighed, half-sang, her voice full of dreadful beauty; it ached inside him.

“Such darkness, such lovely terrible beauty, it is the edge of horror that refuses to destroy, it will not, it does not deign,” and more words poured out from language to language and truth cowered in all of them, truth stripped down and beaten and made to perish in the loneliest hour of the night, “I have the love for it I would have of the dirt in my womb were it fertile, I have the love of rotten things that make way for the new, I have the love of the sword hitting the sword, the wild love of blood gushing out of a wound, of the heart struggling to pound the flesh but I am no mother, I have no mother, I come from no womb, I rose up out of dreams and wear their skins beneath my own…”

Thranduil couldn’t move. He wanted to, he told his limbs to wake up, but they wouldn’t. They couldn’t.

“My birth,” she whispered. “Would you hear of it?”

Gandalf leaned forward. “I would,” he said, forgetting that Thranduil was there. “I would hear.”

Thranduil held still. He knew the fear of the animal at the other end of his bow.

“In the beginning,” whispered Lugmokí, her hands curling up by her face, “there were dreams, a vast lake of them, it was as a lake filled with the senses I knew, and none of them were sight. There are many lives within a dream. Legion,” she sighed. “My lives of the mind, in the days before I was awake, they were legion. Made of scent and sound for my tongue it was dead in my mouth and the words in my head were incomplete, they belonged to my sense of touch, I could feel them on my skin, under my skin, in my blood before I knew of the wide outer world.” She closed her eyes.

“In the beginning, I didn’t know there was a world outside my flesh. In the beginning, my world was His world, it came to me through the mind, it told me the things I would learn again and again and again through the instruments of my own senses.”

“What happened?” said Gandalf.

Lugmokí looked at the ceiling. “I woke up.”

“Inside this body of adult stature?”

“Yes. When I woke it was in a lake of my own making. It was a womb made of glass. My birth-string had been cut ages ago and there were others to bring me the nourishment I needed, the air my mature lungs needed to breathe. My skin was too tender for air, my muscles soft, the hair of my head and my groin like silk. All of me was as the flesh fresh from a mother’s womb, all over, I had been grown carefully, the life-ribbons woven with precision, all of my pathways monitored, the length of by bones predestined, the stream of my blood managed. The lightnings in my head had
been parked, put there, grown there, illuminated there. The lightnings made a net for my fëa. It held my fëa down to my flesh though many times it had struggled for escape. I woke, here I was, floating in my bed like the sea. I knew no nipple, I did not toddle, I did not wean, these are your words. I knew no cradle, I did not crawl, I did not babble, these are your words. I woke and knew how to speak. I woke and knew how to walk. I woke and knew how to feel. I woke and my hands knew all the secret things Sauron wished them to know.”

Thranduil thought of the door behind him. He imagined it, saw himself backing through it, he dared not turn away from her haunted face.

“I opened my eyes. I saw him. I had never seen a real face before. I could not fix in my mind the pattern of his features, it seemed to change, falling in and out of my dreams of him, my memories that were his memories and my memories that were of his memories, the remembering, the straining of my own mind. I looked at it and it came to me as the numbers, there is the one that is round signifying empty and also the place of significance; 0 and 1 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 5 and 8 and 13 and 21, and on, the numbers, 34 and 55 and 89 and 144 and 233, this, this is what I saw in his face, the light of his face, light held as flames in the archways of bone and tamped down by flesh, by the red flush. The skin.” Her hand lifted up in front of her face. Her fingers drew tengwar in the air. “The numbers.”

“I don’t know these numbers,” murmured Gandalf. “I’m afraid, Lugmokí, that I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“He put them there.” Her body stretched, the stretch moved through her in a wave. Her feet flexed. “He. The numbers. 377 and 610 and 987 and 1597.” She looked at Gandalf. “Ilúvatar hid them inside the snail’s shell and bade the snail keep watch over them for eternity.”

Gandalf smiled. “What came next?”

“Nothing. I was. I was as I am. I came out of the water and my skin toughened and my eyes toughened and my tongue came to life and my hands went to work. I wore clothes on my body. I made something of my hair.” Her eyes were closed. Her body sagged into the bed, tempted sleep. “I was. That is all. That is the story of my birth.”

Thranduil’s feet moved. It startled him. The movement returned to his body but it was slow and rusty. He looked at Gandalf. Gandalf looked at Lugmokí like she was a child, some soft and tender thing, some sleeping beloved thing. Thranduil’s gaze shifted to Lugmokí. She was asprawl. The sheets made countries and her limbs made boundaries that he wanted to cross. Her face was light, soft, sublime in its ease; her mouth had reddened. The shadows had left her skin.

“It’s too hot in here,” he said.

Gandalf’s face shone with sweat. “She is unused to such cold.”

Thranduil took off his quiver and his bow. He took off his cloak. He left it on the floor. He took off his belt and his tunic and his boots and Gandalf watched him, eyebrows lifting.

“I’ll keep watch with you,” he said. “But I will not bear this heat. I cannot make myself do that.”
He didn’t know how long he had been sitting there, in the chair, his skin painted red with fire and
with sweat:

“I smell you,” she whispered.

Thranduil shook off his light shroud of heat and the room sharpened until he saw her face,
shadowed, her bottomless eyes lengthened with languor, one breast spilled free of the looseness of
her dress. Her knees rustled the sheets. The long lines of her pale arms lay up around her head,
broken, the hands moved like wounded birds.

“I smell you,” she sighed and her eyes closed, neck arching, her face like that of a saint trapped in
ecstasy. “It maddens me.”

Thranduil colored and his eyes slid to Gandalf, who would not look at him.

“Tell him to go,” whispered Lugmokí, “and he will go.”

Thranduil shifted in the chair and he became aware of the sweat, how it remained still on his skin it
until it couldn’t; it became too much, it made heavy drops that screamed down, his skin started to
crawl. It happened slowly. He looked at her, into her eyes. His scalp prickled.

She turned over, pulled herself up onto her belly. Her lips moved, flushed, swollen, they made
silent words that filled with the memory of her voice: *tell him.*

“Gandalf.” Thranduil swallowed. Sweat squirmled beneath the waist of his breeches. “It is my
thought that you should go.”

Gandalf looked up. He sounded tired. “What did you say?”

“Go.” Thranduil locked eyes with him. “I’ll fare well enough alone.”

Gandalf returned his attention to his folded hands. “It is not wise.”

“I told you,” said Thranduil, “that you may go.”

Gandalf looked up. His eyes were tired but kind. “And I told you that it is not wise.”

Thranduil rose to his feet. His voice lowered, scraped the bottom of his throat. “Must I have
marched out of this room?”

“I would not listen to her,” murmured Gandalf. His face turned toward the fire. “She speaks from
an unfettered place.”

Thranduil’s face hardened even as his voice turned to velvet. “And I am not you.”

“He looked into your eyes,” murmured Lugmokí, her eyes were closed, the white expanse of her
chest rising and falling, “he looked, and when he looked he saw this moment, saw it coming at you
from afar. It comes in a rush. It is like the falling of walls. It comes,” she whispered. “It burns you
like a star, hot, falling, falling, falling.”

“One more time, I will counsel you against sending me away from this room,” said Gandalf. He
held his staff over his knees. “One more time.” He watched Thranduil’s face. “If you ask me again
I will leave, and I will do so without another word.”

Thranduil looked at Lugmokí. She was still. Her legs stretched out straight, one ankle over the other and her feet were long, delicate, curved the way his wife’s feet used to curve in the depths of her sleep; her arms folded up beneath her chin and she looked up at him, her hair a mess, it fell like lace against her cheeks. Her eyes opened. Her head turned and she smiled. It was sweet, sly, modest, inviting; it was rapacious, wanton, hard, it struck sparks off his bones; she was a mess, she was a feast, she all of these things at once.

“Go,” he whispered.

Gandalf left. Thranduil followed him and shut the door. He barred it.

* * *

Before he is on her, before she is on him, they are in the room. She is on the bed, they are looking at one another across the room. It’s not big, it’s not small, there’s just enough space for the bed, the wardrobe, the lamps.

Thranduil does not know how he came to be, how he got from the door to this, to her skin, to her bed, and the weight of her skin—it’s soft, only soft, it’s not wet, her face is close, her breath is dry, she smells bitter, flowery, she smells like the rain when it falls on the sea. Here is her arm. It winds up around his hair. She gathers it all into her hand. She makes a fist. She draws it tight at the roots.

I want you open, she whispers, and the sound gets lost in his blood. It drowns inside of him. She pulls, she pulls hard, his neck bending back, the tendons spreading, the column of his throat pushing up.

Her mouth is on the skin; her mouth is by his ear and on the skin, and she bites. She puts her teeth on his throat and breathes there, she trembles, she is made of steel. She bites down. Her teeth are slow and hard. The pain of it comes, of his flesh, she breaks through and it fills his mind. The pain pushes past the body’s urge to contract. It cradles him. With her teeth resting on him, threatening, he feels the way he did on the battlefield, back in the days when he could still feel the curve of the earth beneath his feet, those days before it flattened with age, took on the weight of too much life. Cut deep enough to see the darkness that dwells within, his father had said. He remembers the launch in his body. He feels it.

Open what? Open eyes? Open mouth? Open arteries? Open arms? Open by the back passage, the dark flower, the tiny mouth of his seat—for it is that kind of opening, a peeling back, a shy emptiness that she craves.

What does it mean? He is vulnerable. He trembles. I don’t understand, he is hard, trapped, throbbing between his life and her own, tell me, tell me please, tell me what you want.

She is there. She is on him, her smooth skin, the light silk of her hair; she fills the room the way it is filled with heat.

* * *

“Come here.” Lugmokí sat up. Firelight climbed the side of her face. She spread her knees, put her feet on the floor. Her forearms hung between them. “Bring your fear of me.”

“I don’t fear you,” he whispered as he drew close, as her hands crept around the backs of his knees, fingers curling there like shy animals. He closed his eyes, lowered his face and brushed a cheek against her hair. “I fear how much I want you.”
“You should,” she murmured, her face pressing into the white skin, into the slick moving flat of his belly; her bones pushed into him like they wanted to be inside. “You should.”

He looked down. Goosebumps prickled through his temples, burrowed into his hair. He gripped the back of her head. She licked up a thick oily trail of sweat and the heat of her tongue pressed the blood out of his flesh, forced it down. He breathed hard.

* * *

Let go, she murmurs.

Thranduil doesn’t know what she means. His mouth opens and there are her fingers, they settle on his mouth, he breathes on them; do what you want, she murmurs, what you wanted to do then and what you want to do now, do it, I want it. Her fingertips push past his teeth and she strokes his tongue, the inside of him goes blind and deaf, his eyes close. His breath hitches. I want it all, she whispers, her mouth like fire on his jaw. Give it to me.

He turns his face, her wet fingers lingering on his lips. He takes hold of her hips. He watches her face, digs his thumbs into the taut skin underneath the bones. He waits for a wince. He waits for something to happen in her eyes.

He hauls her up by the pelvis, lifts her, flings her down. He climbs over and kneels, slides hands beneath her, pulls her up again, his breath coming faster at the sight of her spine, its pliancy, his eyes lingering on the way it arches. She lifts her ribs. Her breasts slide back. Her arms spread apart on the bed. He palms her coccyx, pulls away the fabric of her dress with the other hand.

He balances her bowed body upon the span of his fingers, brushes aside the thin black cloth. He lowers his face to her navel. She pants. He closes his eyes, his tongue pushes against the pulse in her belly, his mouth closes on the skin; soft, wet, there are teeth. He holds her flesh in his mouth, feels the echo of her heart pound against his lips. A tooth breaks through. The taste of her blood enters him, builds houses in his belly. She pants laughter. The skin heals beneath the slow massage of his tongue and she puts her hand on the back of his neck and whispers do it again, I like the way it breaks, the little bit of pain that is like a spark.

* * *

Lugmoki unlaced his breeches. She pulled them down, she tugged the cloth away from his muscular thighs. His cock slapped against his belly. She turned, smeared her smile across her face. She drew a light fingertip down the underside of its length. His fingers curled into her hair. “A fear of desire makes you hard,” she murmured, her neck stretched, her lips moved close to the unsheathed tip. “It is strange, is it not? Do you think this is so for all men, that it is the cusp of horror and death that causes the life to surge?” Her breath fell hot on the tight skin. “For you are like the young sapling that quivers in the spring.”

He made a handful of her hair, mashed her mouth against it. “Do what you did so well in the dark,” he whispered, “in the dreams that were not dreams, I know you, I know the smell of your body, of your breath.” She snaked her tongue beneath the ridge, his eyes squeezed shut and he let out an unraveling groan. His fist tightened. He shook her by the hair. His voice was husky. “Tell me they were not dreams.”

Her mouth opened, she sighed, her lips were soft, they rested on his pulsing veins. Her eyelashes quivered as she breathed the words: “They were not dreams.”
She hangs off him, makes herself limp, she is weakened with love. She is prostrate, she worships her own lust, she kneels at the feet of hunger and turns up her mouth to his, she is humble, begs: please Thranduil please I want you I will die of it, give me your breath, wake me with it, her hands stroke him, her fingers memorize his face, they are so gentle.

She rises over him, makes herself hard, she is strengthened with love. She sweeps across him, takes out whole cities. She bites down, devours the heat of his skin. His inner lives are swallowed by her fists, squeezed out, bled dry. She holds him down with her gaze and rubs the blood into the hair of her cunt. I would eat you if I could, she murmurs, strip off the veil of your flesh, swallow your long life in mouthfuls.

Thranduil throws her onto the bed. He flattens her out. He holds her open, pins her at the wrists and thighs, he looks down the quivering valley of her body, her belly rises and falls and fills his ears with the wind of her breath.

She makes herself still, taut and soft, balanced between the rage of her passion and its tenderness. She is a bridge. She is a waiting breath. A scent like brimstone and cut grass rises off her skin. This is what you wanted?

His eyes map her skin. Yes.

She arches, pushes up against him. Only this, your wish to hold me down, to keep me in one place?

He drives in, pierces her, she is tight. Their hip bones clash. Her brows shoot together to take the impact. Her mouth opens like a wound.

Destroy me, she mouths, knowing that he can’t.

He pushes her up into the pillows, bends her head back; the shock of his thrusts travel up through her flesh. She growls through bared teeth and the headboard slams slams slams slams up against the wall.

He makes bruises on her skin. Their flowering fills him with unbearable emotion, his ribs closing tight on the wildness of his heart. She looks at him through the storm of his hair. She reaches up, takes hold of his throat. Her fingers tighten. Her mouth opens. Her half-lidded eyes fill with tenderness.

He grabs her shoulders, slams her down. He bares his teeth and puts his weight on them. He wrestles her arms up over her head and her thighs slip on his skin, clutch at his waist.

Do it like you love me, she whispers.

“Do it to me,” Lugmokí murmured, “travel the front of my body with your mouth, taste my cunt. Put your tongue in it.” She twirled his hair around a finger. “No one has ever done this to me before.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. No mouth has ever been at my gates.”

“Why not?”
“I don’t know.”

He got on his knees.

Sweat beaded up on her skin. She looked down. She rested a hand on his head. The fire crackled and her breath fluttered and wet sounds, hungry sounds, rose into the air.

“It’s lovely.” Her voice softened, melted down into a raw sweetness. “Such loveliness, it’s so soft.” Her breath halted, quickened, burst from her throat. “Thranduil,” she whispered.

* * *

He hauls her up by the pelvis, lifts her, flings her down.
One of the guards turned to Janet. “We put him in here with the other,” he said. “Will that suffice, or would you prefer he be in another room?”

Her steps slowed, she looked from the ornate carvings on the walls, tree branches and leaves rendered to the slightest vein, texture, fold; the bark was carved to the slightest variation of pattern and even the shadows of the branches had their places etched into the smooth stone floors.

“The other?”

“Aye,” said the guard. “It was another party that found him not more than half a wheel from where we took up your brother and bound him. Nearly missed him on account of him being dressed in black and covered with dirt and past the point of screaming. He did not come with you, then?”

“No.” Janet shook her head. She glanced at Fëanor. “We are only five. There is no sixth.”

He opened the door, a warm thing carved of butter yellow wood and set with glass at the top. Janet moved into the room, it was small and narrow, a pair of beds stood one at each end and though they were built of stone and wood wrought to look like saplings, they were still sickbeds, long and narrow, dressed in white sheets and thin blankets.

Jeremy occupied the bed on her right. He had been undressed, bathed, clothed in a thin white nightshirt that clung to the thick sheen of sweat on his skin. The brown blanket covered him to the waist. His breath came fast, jaws clenched even though the expression on his face looked peaceful. Strips of wet transparent material clung in patches to his forearms, the backs of his hands, his throat.

“It helps,” said the guard. “It leaches the poisons out of the skin.”

Janet turned, looked at the other bed. “What about him?”

The other occupant was lean and pale. He was on his back, the bedclothes drawn up beneath his armpits. His shoulders were bare. He stared up at the ceiling, his long arms lay limp at his sides, the hands turned palms-up. Each breath was long and deep; Janet looked at the rise and fall of his chest and thought of radio waves, tides. Long patches on his forearms scintillated in the lamplight. A thin strand anchored itself at the outer corner of his eyebrow, crossed his left temple, disappeared into his hair. More of them stained his ears, the hollow of his throat. Looking at them made her think of gasoline rainbows, the northern lights.

Janet looked at the guard. “Why doesn’t he have the bandages on his skin?”

“The silks remained on his skin too long. It breaks down, fuses with the body when it remains in contact too long and must shed as the skin sheds. There are medicines, but it is time that is needed most, and washing with rough soaps to hasten the renewal of the tainted skin.”

“The body pushes it out,” murmured Janet, looking at the man’s empty and lost face.

“Yes.” The guard nodded. “But the medicines and the washings will make it push harder.”

“Will he live?”

“It can’t be said. He has been badly poisoned.”
Janet looked at him. “Where did you find him, again?”

“A quarter of a wheel out from where we found you, lady, give or take a step. It was to the northeast.”

“Did his clothes make it or did you have to throw them away?”

“They have been burned, lady. He would not have been able to wear them again.”

“What did they look like?”

“Elhador sketched a likeness, if you would like to see it.”

Janet nodded. “Yes, I would like to see it very much. Could you find someone to bring us some water?”

“Aye, of course.”

“Thank you.” She reached out and touched Fëanor’s wrist where he stood beside her, silent. “We would like now to be alone with my brother. What is your name?”

“My name is Meren, lady.”

Janet smiled. “Thank you, Meren, for all that you have done.”

He bowed. “There is a bell if you have need of anything. The healers are never more than three breaths away.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Fëanor watched her face as the guard left the room. “Would you like to be alone?” He put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll go if you want me to.”

“By your own leave, I guess,” she murmured, looking down at Jeremy’s hands. Eight of his fingers were wrapped up and she could see dried blood, the queer blue and silver phosphorescence; both things struggled against the sticky sap that held the diaphanous cloth tight around his tanned, roughened skin. His fingers twitched. His eyes raced back and forth beneath his eyelids. “You may stay or go as you wish.” She looked up. “I’ll be fine.”

“I have some thoughts on the silk and its properties,” said Fëanor, murmuring as though in a church. He leaned over, spoke close to her head. “I should like to find those who make the medicines and make the evendust, to speak with them. I think I can help.”

“Go, then,” said Janet. There was a stool, and she sat down beside Jeremy’s bed. “I’ll be fine, and I’ll not be long.” She sighed. “I’m tired.”

“I will go,” said Fëanor. “Send for me if you want me.”

“I shall.”

Fëanor left and Janet sat alone in the silence, the lamplight heavy and warm over everything, and she listened to the breaths: Jeremy’s quick and rough, the other’s slow and soft. She reached out, rested a hand on Jeremy’s knee. His back stiffened. The muscles in his calf were hard, they quivered and creaked like tightening knots beneath the skin. She looked at his face.

“It’s because he’s fighting it, she thought. He knows there’s something wrong and he’s struggling,
fighting against his mind with his body.

“Hey,” she said, softening her voice and leaning over, “it’s me. It’s Janet. You’re gonna be okay. The Elves are taking good care of you. You know, they say you might be out of this tomorrow, but if not then probably the next day.”

Jeremy’s body remained tight but his breath slowed.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “That’s right. That’s good. You’re gonna be okay. It’s gonna be okay. Try to sleep, okay? Just sleep. Go with it.” She stroked the length of his calf. “They say it helps the chemicals break down faster. Natural sleep, that is.”

One of the healers came in with a carafe of water and three earthenware cups. He left one of them beside the other bed and handed the carafe to Janet as he set the rest of the cups on the nightstand.

“Ring if there is any change,” he said. “Or if there is anything else you need.”

Janet nodded. “I will.”

She poured herself a cupful of water and sipped. It was ice cold, clean, and it held a faint sweet mineral taste. She gulped it down.

“Wow, I’m so thirsty,” she gasped.

She filled the cup again, drank down half of it. Jeremy’s breath calmed a little more and his fingers opened on the blanket, twitching. They flexed into soft curls.

“I don’t want to wake you if you’re just getting into sleep,” she murmured, reaching out and resting a hand on his hair. “So I’ll let you sleep. The water will be here for you later.” She dug her nails into his scalp, made soft circles with them. “I love you, you know. Even though you drive me crazy. I was so worried about over there and even though I know life in Xe Nahadu probably sucked I’m still glad that you ended up there instead of staying in Iraq.” She took a sip of water. “I’m so glad. I just wish I could tell somebody, like Mom, Dad, even Shannon would want to know even though you guys aren’t exactly on the best terms these days.” Janet let out a quiet breath. She smoothed the hair back from his brow. “So sleep. Go off to dreamland, goodnight moon and all that shit. Okay? Sleep as much as you want, it’s okay, you don’t have to fight it anymore.” Her smile turned soft. “We have got it all under control. Terrifying thought, I know.”

Janet sat up and drank the rest of the cup. She put it on the nightstand. She stood. The stool creaked. The stone walls coddled the silence. She looked over her shoulder at the other bed, turned, walked across the room.

She halted, looking at the man in the bed. She stepped closer to the bed’s edge, looked down, he was so pale that the sheets highlighted the faint bluish undertones, the thinness of the skin stretched over long and sparse bones, those places where the veins lie close to the surface. His arms looked even longer in their laxity, they were unblemished, the skin smooth, soft, they belonged to the sort of man who did indoor work. His bony hands were laced with silk stains. They glowed a faint metallic pink that cycled through into gold and the orange of a winter sunset before trembling into a thin misty green. His wrists were bent, his white fingers were long and narrow, half-curled, joints soft. His nails were short and clean.

This is the body of a scholar, she thought, I would know it anywhere, this skin is so white, it’s like a girl’s almost, soft and pale with a lack of sunlight and look at those tendons along the outside of the forearm, strong-looking even in rest; it’s a particular kind of strength, it’s one that comes from
constant typing or handwriting, and—yes, look at this, the right hand is more developed than the left.

“Who are you?” she murmured, “when do you come from? Where do you come from? What world? Is it mine? Someone else’s? What are you doing here?” She looked at his hair, the severe cut of it. His cheeks were smooth. “And you haven’t been here long, have you?”

She reached out and put hand on his shoulder, hesitated, her fingers curled around it and his skin was warm. “Does this sort of thing help you? The touching?” She pulled her hand back. “You don’t have a fever, and that’s probably good.”

Her eyes moved to the cup sitting on the table.

“Will you drink? Can I give you water without choking you? Without spilling it? Without having to touch the poisoned parts of your skin? These,” she murmured, leaning over, reaching for the rim of the cup, “are the answers that all of Middle-earth wants to know.”

The man stared at the hewn ceiling, his mouth soft, very faint lines in his cheeks showed where his dimples would be. Janet tried to imagine him smiling, glanced at the emptiness of his eyes, and found that she could not.

“Why do I want to give you water, anyway?” She got the carafe and poured a few swallows into his cup. “I don’t even know your name.” She smiled a little. “For all I know you’re Jack the Ripper.”

The gentle lamplight kept his pupils dilated. She leaned over and looked into them, big empty rooms where the power had been cut. He blinked.

“Can you hear me?” She halted, cup half-raised. “Will you blink if you can?”

He stared.

“No?” Her arm softened. She looked at his head, the pillow beneath it. She slid her hand beneath the pillow and pulled it out again.

“That’s not going to work, is it?” Janet put the cup down and looked around.

Elhador came into the room. Janet startled a little. He slid the sketch onto the man’s blanket-clad legs. “Here it is, lady.”

Janet picked it up. She looked it over, sighed, handed it back. “Thank you.”

Elhador rolled up the parchment. “Do you know him?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t know where he came from, who he is, nothing.”

“Do you know the style of his clothes, then?”

“Yes.” She looked up. “I do.”
Dreams

Lugmokí slept.

In her dream she stood at the farthest rim of existence and saw the nexus of the multiverses wrought in the shape of a big black tower.

She dreamed of stags and oaks and cliffs of chalk.

In her dream she crept beneath the snows and pressed her cheek against the flanks of the earth where she tasted the slow thought of the rock and she rose up, up through the ice, wearing its crystals, her body a house made of snow and furs, her hair a crown of icicles.

She dreamed of roses and granite and salt.

In her dream she lay in an underwater crypt, in an underwater city, the vast weight of the oceans crushed her fëa until it mocked death in order to escape. Her deep dreams slithered out, rode the dismal tides, crossed the stars to kiss the fertile minds of a thousand young.

She dreamed of dancing.

In her dream she was the sacred river. She opened her mouth and breathed fire. She rose and fell. She sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.

Lugmokí rose up out of sleep, into the heat of the firelight, into its flickering shadows, a taste of salt on her lips. The bed was soft, the sheets tangled tight around her limbs. She turned her face into Thranduil’s mess of hair.

“Thranduil,” she whispered, putting a hand on his waist. “Wake up, I am here.” She smiled. “I’m awake.”

He arched into a long stretch. “How are you feeling?”

“I am well. My head is clear because the waters have left me.”

Thranduil turned and settled his head on the pillow. He brushed loose hair off her cheek. “What do you remember?”

Her smile widened. “Everything.”

“You tell quite a story.”

She took his fingers, tangled them with her own. “And it’s true, every word.” She closed her eyes and murmured, “are you still afraid of me?”

He searched her face. “Yes.”

* * *

Janet sat still. Fëanor ran the razor up the back of her head, maneuvered between the tendons at the back of her neck. He scraped the soap off her skin with the edge of his thumb.

“I can isolate the compounds in the sap,” he said. “They’ve concentrated it, but in doing so they’ve managed to increase the levels of inactive compounds as well and the method they’re using now
skews the ratio. It would be very simple for me to change the method and isolate the compounds in
the sap.”

“Are you going to?”

“Yes, once I have finished here.” Fëanor rinsed the razor. He rubbed a soft cloth over her bare
scalp. “How is he?”

“Better.” Janet watched the firelight climb up the walls. “He was sleeping when I left. He had
fallen asleep and that’s good, they say that’s good.”

Fëanor laid the razor against her temple. He feathered away the last of her hairline.

“I know they don’t always think that having someone in the room helps,” Janet went on, hands
folded between her knees, “but I think it does. I talked to him and watched him relax enough to fall
asleep. Now maybe that’s about the compounds in the sap working, but maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s
about hearing his sister’s voice. A friendly voice, one that he knows.”

“There is much these Wood-elves don’t understand.”

Janet turned her head. “Can you bring the designs down onto my shoulders?”

“I can. Would you like them to touch your arms as well?”

“No, I don’t think so.” She paused. “Maybe a little. If you want to do it, I don’t mind.” She smiled
a little. “I’ll leave my arms to your artistic discretion.”

He smiled. “Very well.”

He mixed the henna and as he waited for it to cool he spread the soap onto her shoulders, between
the blades, and on her upper arms. He held the razor in light fingers, easing the tiny blond hairs
away from her skin.

“What about the fusion?” Janet closed her eyes. “Mmmm, that feels tickly but good. But how does
the silk bond with the skin? Would reformulating the compounds help at that stage?”

“Perhaps a little bit,” said Fëanor, “but not without additional alterations to the mixture. It looks as
though the silk transfers through a sequence of protein-bonding, and the sap as it is prepared now
slows the process.” He dried her shoulders. “But when the process is too advanced…”

“It doesn’t work.”

“Yes. That stage requires different compounds that behave in different ways, and the Wood-elves
have no source for such compounds.”

“Do you think you could make them?”

Fëanor washed the traces of lather off her skin. He wiped it down, massaging her shoulders. He
filled a tiny plastic bottle with warm henna paste. “I may be able to synthesize them from the sap. I
won’t know until I’ve had a closer look at it. Now keep still.”

Janet shifted around a little in her seat before going still. The henna made a line at her crown. Its
heat infiltrated her skin, making it tingle. “It takes a long time, but I like this,” she said. “It feels so
nice.”

“The other man in the room,” said Fëanor, his voice distant with concentration, “he has caught
your attention and held it.” He paused, made several short parallel curves. His breath fell on her scalp. “Why?”

“What makes you think that?”

“I read it in your body,” he said, “whenever we speak of the medicine.”

Janet crossed her ankles up tight beneath the seat. “I am worried for Jeremy, too, you know.”

“Why has he caught your attention?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “It’s not that he’s familiar because I know him, but…”

“He is from your world,” said Fëanor.

“I’m not sure of that, I know there are many worlds like mine, but he is from a world that I might find familiar if I found myself in it, and it is that, as a source of familiarity, that I…that I find myself reacting to.” She paused. “It’s the small things, like the style of his hair…it is, for me, a not-so-pleasant memory. A not-so-pleasant familiarity, I mean.” She flushed and looked at her knees, plucked at the fabric covering them. “There is more to it than that. It’s something about his look that says things to me.”

Fëanor made loops with the henna. “What things?”

“Closed things, cold, unlearned things.” Her shoulders tightened. “He has an ascetic look that I don’t like. His bones are miserly.”

“Janet, you cannot judge a man by the lie of his bones.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I know better, but I can’t help it.”

“Is this about the man who came before?” He wiped a small section of her skin. “Jack?”

“No, he looks nothing like Jack.”

“Is it that he looks the way Jack ought to have looked?”

“What? What does that even mean? There is nothing wrong with how Jack looks, there never was,” she said. “And what does Jack have to do with any of this?”

“You are saying that this man in the bed has ignorant bones, ascetic bones, he has the look of one who does not think. You have told me many times that Jack’s refusal to challenge certain parts of his mind is what drove you away from him. And now you’re using these same words to speak of a catatonic man who is lying in a bed: you say he looks cold, unlearned, ascetic, and I say that these are words to describe Jack’s mind because they are words you have used, and you’re projecting them onto the face of this man because he is from your world.”

Janet breathed through her nose. She said nothing.

“I have made you uncomfortable,” said Fëanor.

“Yes.”

“Do you think what I’ve said is the truth?”

“I don’t know,” said Janet. “Perhaps.”
“Now you’re cold. Your voice. It’s gone cold and distant.” He stopped. “I’m sorry if what I’ve said hurts you, Janet. I didn’t mean it to be so.”

Fëanor continued to work. The nozzle skimmed her head, quick, it moved like a hummingbird and she knew that the designs would be beautiful, that everything to come from his hand would be beautiful.

“How much do you have done?”

“Half.”

Janet breathed into the silence. The fire crackled. The designs dried, they started to itch.

“You’re wrinkling your brow,” said Fëanor. “Please stop.”

Janet took a deep breath. She let it out through pursed lips. “Sorry. I…I’ll try to relax.”

“I understand.”

“He looks…he looks a lot like the men of my…” She paused. “I don’t know, home region? You know how people from the same place, and who are all descended from the same place, will share tendencies, even vague ones, toward certain physical characteristics?”

“You and he have the same long face,” said Fëanor. “And your cheekbones the same tendency to flatten away from a long nose. Yes. I saw this similarity between your bones and his right away.”

“Is there anything you don’t see?”

He was silent. Henna tickled the edge of her temple. He laid it in what felt like a circle and she wondered what it was: the shape of a leaf, a flower, a wave and curl without a name.

“I am having feelings about that,” she said. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

“There is nothing more fiercely loved and deeply hated than one’s homeland.”

The corners of Janet’s mouth tensed. “Yes.”

He started drawing the lines on the back of her neck. “Your homeland, this New England I have heard you speak of, are all of its people cold and ignorant and ascetic?”

Goosebumps rose on her scalp and flowed down her arms. Her nipples ached. She shivered. “No.”

“These things run in some of them?”

“Yeah, of course, those qualities run everywhere.”

“And what of their opposites? What are the things you fiercely loved in the men of your homeland?”

“Great intelligence,” she whispered. “Eloquence, diligence, independence, a fluency of mind hidden behind a certain kind of reserve. It’s the coldness that hides things.”

“When you look into this man’s face you cannot see those things?”

Janet hugged herself and stared at the wall. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”
Lugmokí stretched. “How is it that you reckon night and day down here? Is there no natural light?”

“No.” Thranduil shrugged. “My bones know it. It has always been this way.”

She turned onto her back and played with her hair. “This is what women like me do, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Talk in bed.” She turned her head. “Learn things in bed. Did you know this is the best way?” She smiled. “This is the best way to learn a new language. This is the best way to learn a lot of things.”

Thranduil reached out, he touched the corner of her mouth, traced the bottom curve of it down to her chin. “What do you know about the holes in the forest?” he murmured.

“The thin places.”

He leaned over, kissed the place where his finger had been. “Is that what you call it?”

“I know they exist in all worlds. I don’t know why. I don’t know what makes them.” She ran a finger through his hair. “I don’t know what harnesses them.”

He rested his cheek on her chest. “The wood was never right, not even when it was green.” His fingers laced through hers. “It was never right. There were things.”

“Things?”

“I don’t know what they were. Revenants. Unhoused spirits of the kind that hide in the rocks and roots.”

Lugmokí curled a hand around his nape. “And are those things still here?”

“No. Now there are Spiders.”

She stroked his hair.

“When first we came to this place we called them star-spirits,” he murmured, “you could only see them by starlight and moonlight and there are little charms wrought of ithildin, there are probably some still around, they look like a man made out of sticks.”

Lugmokí closed her eyes.

“The people would wear them in honor. Those are the star-spirits of old, before the Spiders came and they disappeared. There weren’t many of us here back then.”

In her mind drifted the remnants of dreams: the sea, the snow, the river screaming headlong into the ocean’s dark and sleeping heart.

He turned onto his side. “I think they were here, they came to warn us.” He watched her face in the flickering dark. “Of the thin places and the Spiders. That they were coming. That this place would be…unusual forevermore.”

“I don’t know,” Lugmokí murmured. “Perhaps. Like when lightning rides before the storm.”

“Yes.” The tension rose and fell in his body. “Like that.”
“And that is how you came to be underground. It is the story of your descent.”

He nodded.

“The Spiders came and you went underground. You discovered a way to make a profit of the silk. And here you live, in the darkness, inside a cave that has been carved into a forest of monuments, the constant memory of a longing for elder days lived beneath the stars.”

“Your wizard asked of dreams.” Thranduil sighed. “I have dreamed many strange things of late.”

“I have too,” she said.
The halls themselves had been fashioned out of caverns, stalactites and stalagmites carved into tree trunks. The floors were smooth, shiny, adorned with rugs stitched into fanciful shapes out of animal hides.

What had once been an underground lake was drained. The resultant bowl, gleaming pale and sanded into shallowness, made a place where people would sit on the rim and drink lady-nectar wine and watch dancers, the musicians would be down there too, the cool cave air warmed by sweat and scented with flame, perfumes, roasted meat. Lamps filled hollows in the stone. Their white flames burned inside crystal globes.

In the vaults of the ceiling, high up in the places where candlelight and lamplight would not reach, lived colonies of glow worms. Each day they sparkled, wrought the blackness into the illusion of stars. Each day a pair of Wood-elves released clouds of cultivated flies to feed them.

Janet sat on a low divan carved out of dark wood, upholstered in rough deer fur. She watched them. The caretakers wore grey robes that identified their position. There were boxes, like little cages, made out of wood and loose-weave cloth. These caretakers would put out the torches, turn down some of the lamps, and in the dusky light would line up the boxes along the center of the room. Moving in sync as a pair, they flipped them open. Sometimes the flies, which looked similar to mayflies, made a cloud as they rose up. The caretakers had huge feather fans that they waved over the open mouths of the boxes. The gusts of air pushed them up higher. Some of them got lost, headed for the lamps instead of the ceiling, and flared like sparks. The ash twirled in the heat’s upward plume, smelling of woodsy flowers.

The fur crunched beneath her but it was warm. Her legs were pulled up, folded. She wore a cloak between her thin gown and the chill.

Her lap was filled with a mess of parchment.

When the caretakers were done, they picked up their boxes and used long-handled wicks to light the torches. Red and orange crept back into the rich cream lamplight, warming it across the page.

She shuffled through the pile, the strings of handwritten letters flashing by:

_I will give a brief description and history of the grounds. Given what has happened to me, the history has made the leap from quaint to sinister._

_Winter is long and harsh in New England and while there’s still sun you want to drink in as much of it as you can._

_His scowl transforms that ethereal quality into something that might make lightning and crack open the soil beneath your feet. The look on his face and the arrowhead hovering a hair away from the juncture of my collarbones made me feel very much like pissing myself._

_That first day of walking I felt like I was going to die._

_My salivary glands rolled over and surrendered as I watched the dwarf filet a slice and slide it into his mouth._

_My jeans were holding up well, and my boots were fucking troopers, though my cheap socks had not fared so well and my dingy T-shirt looked like the skin of Frankenstein._

**Sparks**
A ghostly smile hovered on her lips.

The voice began in my bones and breathed through my ears and traveled outside, hovering near my panting lips with a taste of lemons and broken roses come in come through come in the arms of the land are waiting and though I feared the words I loved them too.

Obira is a shortened form of the city’s full name, a long and melodious string of syllables that rises and falls like the sigh of the ocean stretching out upon a tidal shift.

I don’t know what this is, Jack, but it’s real. Real as roses, and rain, and…and snoring, and sex. And food! This is real. I am real. You are real!

A tall man dressed in a long dark leather coat, swathed from head to toe in a thin black cloak, moved past me with the eddying grace of a river.

I have wanted to do this all my life—it was a thought tied to no meaning, yet it burned through me with truth and ardor; my blood bloomed into readiness, my lips went soft, my mind went to its knees and prayed upon the altar of my flesh; he touched my face and my breath exploded like the wings of a startled bird.

Janet brought the pages into order. She straightened them, rolled them up, tucked them into their bag. There was a plank to use as a desk and she fished out a clean roll, tucked its edges beneath clips worn into the wood.

She had a pen. An old Bic pen. She made a line at the edge, just to see if it worked. She wrote:

There is another man in the room with Jeremy. There is a man in there with my brother. I don’t like him.

Fëanor spends all of his time in the laboratory. I don’t like it.

I’m always cold.

In a few days there will be a festival. I think this festival is for us. I’m not sure the why of it matters because King Thranduil likes to party. He likes to party down.

My feet are cold. I always think that if I curl up my toes it will keep them warm but it never does.

I don’t like that Fëanor has been in the laboratory for three days. I don’t like that he has chosen not to sleep.

The man in my brother’s room makes me uncomfortable.

My fingers are cold now but only at the tips.

It reminds me of home and I like and don’t like that it makes me think of home.

Diaspora: you take your homeland wherever you go.

Diaspora: it lives within you and you leave it behind, in your footprints, in your words; wherever you go you carry it in your voice and leave it behind in the footprints of your words.

Diaspora: it is the shadow you cannot shake, not even at noon, when it goes to sleep beneath your feet.
Diaspora: because you’re gone and you can’t go home again.

Fuck you, Thomas Wolfe.

Fuck you.

I like and I don’t like that the man in the room makes me think of home.

I don’t like the shapes of his hands.

I don’t like his soft rainwater skin.

I don’t like the shadow of his long nose.

I don’t like the precision of his part.

I don’t like his ungenerous, inverted mouth.

I like and I don’t like his stillness.

I like and I don’t like his ponderous breath.

His eyes scare me.

* * *

“Do you remember the time you took me to the Ozzy Osbourne concert and there were those guys in the line yelling? They were all I’m a fuckin freak of nature! I’m a fuckin freak of nature! And then you, you got up on that cement thing and pounded on your chest and yelled it out too?”

I laughed. My head rested on the edge of Jeremy’s bed, next to his pillow. His profile that close up looked weird, like plastic, like a smooth mountain range. I could smell his skin, the peculiar sweet chemical underwhiff of the silks and the soap the healers had used to wash his hair.

“I missed you a lot.”

The tears came and I bent my face to wipe my nose on the bed.

“I missed you when you moved to fucking Iowa, too, what the hell were you thinking? Iowa? Cornville USA? Seriously? I remember it—I was all like you, a farmer? And then you just kind of shrugged with that dopey-assed grin on your face.”

I snifffled and rubbed at my eyes.

“I don’t think it would’ve worked out even if Shannon hadn’t left you. There’s no water out there, no ocean, cold and miserable as the one we’ve got happens to be. It’s still better than all that land, that flat flat land out there under the hot sun and gasping for water.”

His hands relaxed, tightened, relaxed again. He swallowed.

“People like us need water. I have some stuff to read to you,” I said, sitting up. “Some stuff that I wrote. About how I got here. You wanna hear it?”

He muttered in his sleep. His eyes jittered back and forth beneath the lids.

“I’m going to take that as a yes.”
I picked up the bag of parchments and took out the first one and unrolled it.

“I’m going to keep my voice low so your buddy over there doesn’t hear me because between you and me,” I whispered, leaning over to his ear, “I don’t like him, he freaks me out. He looks like an Ichabod Crane scarecrow nightmare that someone got all coked up and left on the doorstep with its eyes taped open.” I paused. “Okay, so maybe there’s some hyperbole going on there, maybe just a little. I’m just kidding. Only half. Okay.” I shook out the parchment. “Okay.” I laughed. “Just forget it. I’ll start now.”

*             *             *

She begins at the beginning:

“I’ll begin with the action. That’s the part you want to read. How I, a nice girl, ended up in a place like this—Middle-fuckin-earth.”

Jeremy continues to sleep. He is on his side, arms folded, knees bent the way they were as a child; she remember him that way as she speaks, a teenage boy so tired he fell asleep on the couch.

“That day the field was empty. It’s a stretch to call it a field; it’s more a of a large clearing, fragrant with knee-high grass and wildflowers and surrounded by towering oak trees. A number of tumbled boulders sat strewn amongst the grass, bleaching slowly with the seasons of weather. In one corner a claw-foot bathtub was sinking into the earth. Most of the enamel was gone. What little remained had graffiti scratched into it: years of graduation, initials, strange geometric eyes.”

He twitches. He is like a cat dreaming in the sun.

“They conversed in a mellifluous language I had never heard before. It seemed fashioned out of the forest sounds themselves. I had heard Elvish spoken in the movies, but the words I heard in the glade weren’t like the words I heard on the screen. There was a musicality to them, a lilt that only comes from long use, a well-trained tongue, and cherished paths worn deep into the subconscious mind. It was Elvish spoken the way it would have been on the screen if the screen had borne all the weight of its history, its birth and bloodshed, its evolution and its nobility.”

The man in the other bed, he will move. He will keep a pose when he’s manipulated into it, he’ll sit up, so the healers get him out of the bed. It’s good for him to sit. They put a loose shirt on him and roll up the loose sleeves so the stained skin can breathe. They cover his long white feet. They spread a green blanket across his lap. All through this he stares straight ahead, his mouth a short line.

“Lady,” one of the healers says, resting a hand on her shoulder, “If you would like, if it would not inconvenience you, we see that you have shaved the growth off your brother’s face and we are wondering if you would do the same foe the other man too. It is good for them, you see. It helps them to recognize themselves.”

Janet puts the parchment on her brother’s bed. “Why?”

“We are not so skilled with a razor as you.”

“All right. I’ll do it.”

The healers leave the room. Janet finishes off her reading with an excerpt from the Song of Solomon; she does it because Jeremy knows it, she does it because she has always loved it the way he loves it and because the light of the room, the feeling within it, the silence, moves her to:
“Oh thou that wert my brother,” she says, eyes flicking up to look at his face, “that sucked the breasts of my mother.”

She clears her throat.

“When I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea I would not be despised. I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother’s house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of the pomegranate.”

She thinks of Persephone.

“His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.”

She thought about him as her breath pushed the words out, as her mouth shaped them: the man, sitting in the chair, limp hands in his lap. She wondered, *will he drink?*

“I charge you oh daughters of Jerusalem that ye not stir up, nor awake my love until he please.”

* * *

The healers prepared a fresh bowl of hot water and a cake of soap. They brought me three soft towels folded into squares. The razor, the strop, they lay across the towels like weapons.

I wet the towels. I wrung them out, listened to the sound of the water falling back on itself.

The silence came, it bore the sound of my breathing clasped to its breast, of my heart, of the way my hands trembled in the water and over it. The steam curled around the backs of my fingers as I pressed the cloth to his jaw. I cupped it. I looked to one side while I held it in my hot hand. My hand held still. His jaw line felt like the edge of a plate. Water welled up between my fingers, ran down the inside of my wrist in a tepid stream.

I took my hand away. I glanced at his cheek and it held a faint tinge of pink. “I don’t like your rainwater skin,” I whispered.

I soaked the washcloth again and the sound of the water was very loud, I thought of rain, water sloshing on the sides of a boat, being in the bathtub, stepping in mud puddles, windshields. “Waterfalls, showers, garden hoses, fire hydrants, hydrate, water, it’s water making all of this noise, all of this…” I looked at him, pressed the cloth to his chin. “This water’s hot,” I murmured. “But it’s hot because it has to be.”

I wrapped a moist towel around his neck. The steam rose in the cool room as I pressed water into his roughened skin, the dark hairs, a shadow that looked like dirt on the lean bones of his face. I wet my hands, made lather. The soap smelled like quince. Its bubbles were soft. I got up, moved my stool closer to him. I touched his chin so he would lift it up. I stood, hunched over to run the blade up the sides of his throat. I trailed my fingers over the shorn skin to test the smoothness.

I rinsed the blade. “I love doing this,” I whispered. “I love it on myself, I love it on others.”

My blade, tilted at an angle and held in elegant fingers, skirted the rim of his jaw, following that place where the edge of bone stretches the skin. With an arched wrist I shaved the curve beneath his ear. I rinsed the blade, dropped it on the table. I closed my eyes. I laid the inside of my fingertip along the edge of his jaw and ran it down, slow, feeling through the dark for missed hairs.

His breath shifted from his mouth to his nose.
My eyes opened. My finger turned over; I watched his staring eyes as my knuckle traced the edge of his chin. I tilted his face back even more, watched his empty eyes as I reached down with the blade and ran it up; like this, in this position, his face was parallel to mine.

“There,” I said, my voice soft, the hairs gritting against the blade, “clean, almost.” I rinsed the blade. “I feel that, you know. The way you’re breathing through your nose. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?” I smiled a little, leaned over, pulled the skin tight on his cheek. “Did you really think I wouldn’t?”

The razor pushed up a thick line of dirtied foam. He blinked. I cleaned the other side, shaved around his mouth with short, delicate flicks. His mouth trembled. I held my breath. A tiny drop of blood welled into the cleft of his chin and I smeared it away with my thumb. I pressed down on the cut.

Hot breath trickled between his lips.

“I’m almost done with you,” I sighed, “almost done.”

I washed the soap off his face. I stood over him, the soft insides of my wrists sliding down the outsides of his jaws, slow, very slow; I sought out missed spots, rough places where the tender skin would catch. I rubbed them across his face.

I put my hands on it. I brought his mouth to mine, left it there, sighed at the release of it. His mouth was soft. I moved back, tilted my face, closed my lips over it and my breath came in a sudden hard burst that made me tremble, my heart pounded, and this time there was pressure, a faint purse of his lips. I held the curves of his jaw and kissed him, my chest tightening. His mouth opened a little. I moved into his lap and lifted his face, bent his head back, my hands tight against his bones; his skin lured me in. I breathed hard into his open mouth.

“Wake up,” I panted, whispering, my mouth against his, “wake up, damn you.”

I shook all over. My fingers trembled on his cheeks. My mouth was still open, I felt my lips swell, I felt them tingle with blood.

I looked into his eyes.

_I’m going to fall in there, I’m going to get lost._

They were filled with a trapped and vulnerable beauty, a wildness; inside them I saw the raw secret open place where madness and sanity meet.

I kissed him again; his tongue moved against mine and his jaw muscles were soft beneath my fingers, so soft, _I’m falling in, I’m getting lost_. I breathed, the sound of it was loud, skin against skin, my eyes closed, waiting for the movement, for the tension to enter his mouth. When it did I was devastated, wet, my body went soft like it was a hunted thing, it played dead as my insides unraveled. I tried to mimic but he was mimicking me, following me. The sweet rhythm laid out by his mouth was my own. It didn’t matter.

“No more,” I whispered, moving a hand over his hair. His breath came out through his mouth. It was not longer sleeping. “No more. I can’t.”

When I got up I felt like a patient ravaged by fever: my skin was racing, my legs watery, my hands trembling with weakness. The coldness of the room broke against the front of my body, the hollow of my thighs. I started to shiver.
I looked at him.

The glimmer on his arms and hands had diminished from the scrubbing, three times a day the healers came in with special soap and scrubbed him, they unwrapped my brother and washed him too. The line on his face, curling inside his temple like a vein, it looked like a ghost. A blue ghost.

I looked at him and though he didn’t move, he looked like a statue, when my eyes focused on him I saw his heat, I saw his bones with my skin, those long sparse polished bones that I loved and hated and loved and hated with all the blood in my body, all the calcium in my own bones, all the rage and the fear and the longing I had tried so hard to forget: *you can’t go home again, diaspora because you’re gone and you can’t go home again*. He stared off to one side. His eyes had shifted. He looked toward the door and there was expression, it was soft, subtle, it had landed on his face like a petal falling: he was waiting and absorbed in it, those big crazy eyes soft and turned inward, like there was a memory inside him waiting to walk out that door and into the world.

My brother slept. His breath sawed in and out; he snored. I knew from its sound that the fever, the sinister glowing fever in his blood, had broken.

I wiped my mouth. I went to the bell in the wall. I pulled on it. I couldn’t hear it through the stone.

A healer, a young-looking blonde, opened the door and stuck her head in. “Yes?”

“My brother is fine,” I said. “Listen to him sleep. He’ll be awake soon, I think.”

She slipped into the room, firelight painting up and down her body, her pale dress; she went to Jeremy and put her hand on his forehead.

She nodded. “What would you like me to do when he wakes? Shall I send for you?”

“Yes.” I walked toward the door, paused there, one foot out in the world. I looked over my shoulder. “Yes, thank you.” My smile floated on my face. “That would be nice.”
This place is fucked, Jeremy had said upon waking, while he sat in a new bed with a bowl of porridge and a glass of cider. The scars on his arms were already silvering.

* * *

I moved over him and put my mouth to his, whispered that I wanted him.

“This ardor is not for me,” Fëanor said, pulling my hands off his face.

“What the fuck do you mean?” I pulled away. “And why are you telling me what I mean? You know I hate that shit. You fucking know it.”

He watched me. “You know what I’m saying.”

I wrestled with the blankets; even then I wanted out. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“This isn’t about me.” He remained in the bed as I fought my way out of it, cursing the blankets, cursing the cold stone floor as it hit my feet. “This is about you.”

“Oh God really?” I yanked my dress on, shivering. I groped around for the cloak. “So that’s how it’s going to be. Really? Peachy!” The word was a small explosion. “That’s just peachy fucking keen, thank you, thank you so much for nothing.”

Fëanor looked at me. His face was still, beautiful, like a statue, like the surface of a pond. I could not see behind it.

“Fuck you.” I flung my arms at him, wishing I could fling all of myself, that all of me could land on him and crush the calm out of his eyes. “Fuck you and the telling me what I need, all right?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “If it’s for me or not, I will still love you.”

“Oh you still love me, even though you think I want to bang someone else. Even though you’re suggesting that maybe I’m…I don’t know…using you? How big of you!” I laughed. “It’s so modern that it’s postmodern, lucky me.”

“I lay no claim of ownership.” He turned onto his side. “I know it’s how the pairing of men and women is reckoned in your world, that the man will feel his love has earned him the ownership of his lover, but this is not how I see it. You are free to love whomever you will, in any way that you see fit.”

“You’re goddamned right that you don’t own me. No one owns me. If I feel like shutting up I’ll do just that. I don’t owe you an explanation.” I put my hands on my hips, wondered at the assertion that it would make me bigger, that I took up more space. Did it threaten? Did it underscore my words with more weight? Or did it just feel good? “See, that’s the part you have trouble with. I don’t want to talk about this stuff. Sometimes I just want to do it. Just want to surrender to the body. Why does everything have to be a fucking autopsy anyway?”

“That was not my intention.”

“What was your intention?”

“To make you aware when perhaps you aren’t aware. That’s all. There’s no malice in it.”
“Whatever.” I perched on the edge of the bed to put on my shoes. “You say that you love me, but if you did you’d shut the fuck up and just fuck me and then go to bed without always having to do this thing that you do, you know, where you’re reflecting crap back at me that I don’t necessarily want to handle right now. Right now is a good time for fucking and then sleeping. It is not a good time to do the whole dissecting of the feelings thing, this archaeology of emotion, or whatever the fuck, okay? Okay?”

He sighed. “Okay, Janet.”

I whirled around. “No seriously! You’re always doing this…this thing,” I said, plucking the air with my fingers, “this noodly diggy pinchy little thing, you’re always pawing through what I say like it’s a junk heap and it drives me crazy.”

“I don’t know what has happened to make you this way.”

“No, I don’t mean that, I mean what has happened to bring your desire to me, when you do not bear this desire for me.”

“For you! That’s all you can say to me? Really?”

“We could talk about it. Come back to bed.”

“Now why would I want to do that, when you aren’t listening to me?”

“I thought it might make you feel better.”

“Well, it won’t. A nice hard fuck will make me feel better, but you don’t want to do that, no, you’d rather armchair shrink me, and FUCK THAT.”

He put his hands up. “I only wanted to say th—”

“Whatever it is,” I said, flipping up a hand, “I guarantee you that right now, in this golden moment that is happening between us, at this very instant, I just don’t give a flying fuck. You have single-handedly killed all the fucks I might’ve given. You have stomped them to death beneath the boots of your doggedness. You just aren’t big on picking up the hints, are you?”

He turned over and put his arm up around his face. “I’m done,” he mumbled, mouth pressed into his own flesh. “Fine. Very well. Go, and be angry, and have your exit and when you’re done doing what you need to do come back and come to bed.”

“Let’s make a list of things that piss me off! That! That right there, that’s number one: the implication hiding out in your words that all of this is just some one-act play I feel like putting on for you because I’m bored, when I just want some sex and sleep, in that order.” I pushed up off the edge of the bed. “Number two: you, telling me that I don’t really want to fuck you, with extra special bonus points for implying that it’s because I really want to fuck someone else.”

“Please be calm.” His voice, mild and lost in his hair. “Please. I would like you to listen. Will you listen?”

“I’m going to do that thing, that grand exit, I hope it’s grand and exit-y enough for you.” I was wound, my body vibrated with it, the tension in me struggling to hold back the incredulous tide of my anger. It hid beneath the tremulous calm of my voice. “You better watch, Fëanor. Here I am, walking this off. Don’t bother following me because it won’t work.”
“Go, Janet. Go to him. I’ll wait.”

I screamed. I might’ve slammed the door. I can’t remember.

* * *

This place is really fucked, Jeremy had said, the healers there as he dressed himself, as he stood. I still remember all the dreams I had. All of them. I could make you an inventory. No shit.

* * *

It was cold in the hallways, dark. The Elves dimmed down the lamps at night and put out the torches. They did it out of respect for the glow worms that liked to live on the ceilings, out of respect for the sun that many of them did not see for days at a time. How else to measure the days?

Being in the halls was like being in a crypt, or a castle.

The guest rooms, the living quarters, were better. Some of them had wooden walls, wooden floors; many had exquisite paintings of summerscapes and the risen moon. The room I shared with Fëanor had curtains enfolding the bed, it had carpets on the wooden floors that were beauties woven of bright wool. All of the colors, all of the cloths, were vibrant.

I imagined the baths, going to them and stripping off, lowering myself into hot water, but I was too restless for the ritual.

* * *

Am I awake? Jeremy had said, starting to smile as his eyes opened. Janet held his hand. He blinked. This isn’t another dream?

* * *

I walked. Through the halls, the flickering darkness, past doors shut to me I walked, I did not see, I felt the cold climbing up through the thin soles of my boots.

“For love is strong as death,” I whispered. “And jealousy as cruel as the grave.”

These halls, these rooms. These bedecked and incensed catacombs. Is this what a grave feels like? An underground palace like a tomb? A certain kind of life has been interred here. It is memorialized in carved trees, painted skies, pampered insects cajoled into giving the illusion of a starry night sky and yet all of the memorials in the world will not erase the soot from the walls, the smell of oil, or temper the persistent damp cold only limestone can generate.

It took me fifteen minutes to walk to the halls of healing. I measured it with my steps, my breath, keeping my stride even. I went by the sense of motion in my hips. I followed my center of gravity. There were a lot of stairs between my room and the halls. They came out of the dark in curved chains and I ran my hand along the wall. I pretended I was in a labyrinth.
On These White Shores

Janet went to the bed, pulled back the covers and climbed in, she brought her mouth to his temple, up to the faint blue line. She trembled, blood rushing into her face.

“My people are from Massachusetts,” she whispered, lips moving against the skin. She reached up, fingertip settling on his hairline, it trailed to his brow, followed the long curved bridge of his nose. Her hand went to his jaw and held it, the bones curving against her palm. She licked. The salts of his body kindled on her tongue. “When I see you,” she murmured, breathing hard, sliding over him, bringing her lips to the corner of his mouth, “I want to unfasten things.” She brushed a gentle kiss against his sleeping mouth. “I want to lay down, to cover myself with the heat that comes from your body,” she whispered. “When I see you it feels like you’re in me already.”

Overcome, afraid of herself, she put her face in his neck and laid there, shaking all over, her breath fluttering by his ear.

It got dark inside her mind. Janet suddenly felt as though she were in a kitchen. She smelled leftover pie, a vase full of flowers, dish soap; she couldn’t see but she could feel the shape of the appliances, the dirty gleam of glass, the tiles of the floor waiting to melt out of the dark. She knew there was a window. She groped out its dimensions. There were trees beyond, she could smell them, pine trees chilled with rain, a man out there in his black coat. He was walking up a cobblestone path. Trapped in the kitchen, she sighed into the knowledge of nearby sleep, how it waited on the other side of the thin walls.

She was the unformed room’s heart, arms folded, tapping her foot, smelling blueberry pie and waiting for the kitchen to decide how it wanted to be. She would walk up to the window when it appeared. She would touch the flaking white paint of the casement, lean close to the screen. She would wave into the cold wet air. He would be there, she would see his long white face in the gloom. He would smile. She felt a long white nightgown like the kind children wear, it came into being on her body, the cotton brushing against her bare thighs and the ruffled collar on her neck, but the instant she thought of it the nightdress was gone, the kitchen was gone, all of it dissolved into a flash of imagery: a wooden cabinet full of dishes and high up, there was a pie balanced on top.

A hand moved up her back, big and heavy enough to erase the thinness of it. She lay for a moment bounded by the darkness behind her eyelids. The long fingers were delicate on her nape, precise, they drew lines light as feathers on her drowsing skin. The hand curled around her nape and she gasped, thrumming awake; she became aware of her sweat, the smells of stone and skin, there was the stifling heat of her body on his body, their limbs tangled together in the bed. She twitched, her muscles wanting to unfold. His soft fingers came down on the back of her head. She went still. They stroked the tense length of her neck, his knuckles trailed down her spine, cool across warm skin, and the shiver that entered her flesh was sudden, ruthless, invasive; she arched away from it and into him. His arms went around her.

“My people are from Rhode Island,” he whispered.

Janet started to tremble. He stroked her head, the long smooth slope of skin from her crown to her shoulders and her breath backed up, turned sharp. He pulled the blanket to her waist. Her body surrendered its weight; it quivered where its limbs joined together, where her skin folded back on itself. She put her blind face into his neck. She panted. He put his fingers on her face, her burning cheek.
“I heard you in the dark.” The barest bit of voice broke through the whisper, breaching the silence. “And your voice was like the shores of the world, if such could sing across the waves to a dreaming man’s mind.”

The words shuddered through her. They fell, heavy, and she sighed at the weight of them. He stroked the line of her cheekbone. She felt him on her like the tide, the slow advance of his consciousness, his heat smothering her. She moved her mouth against his fingertips. His voice, his words, the dark currents of his imagery throbbed in her. She kissed each one, felt them tremble on her lips. His thumb traced the shape of her mouth. Everything he did was so light, so tentative.

“I want you to take this dress,” she said, lips touching his, “and pull it off me, and lay me bare, and follow the intuition of my skin, and then come inside, with anything, anything at all, do it until I’m dead and revive me with your mouth, do it again, again, until there is only sleep, only twilight, only water like skin and skin like water and breath like waves and sweat on the moaning shoreline, the crying shoreline, the earth that loves you.”

She felt the softness move into his body, heard it take his breath. He started to shake.

“Would you?”

He nodded, unable to speak.

She turned onto her back. He moved over her, kissed her neck; he followed its rising and falling curve, mouth lingering over each kiss. She arched her back so he could pull up her dress, work the thin material up past her shoulders, over her face. He kissed the undersides of her arms, the unbearably soft skin that had never received a thought, let alone the touch of a mouth. “What’s your name?” she whispered.

“Howard.” He kissed her jaw. “Yours?”

“Janet.” She pulled his tunic up. “Lambert.”

He pulled it the rest of the way off. “Lovecraft.”

“Wait.” She stiffened. “You mean like the writer?”

A long, panting silence. “You…you mean to say…you’ve heard of me?”

She burst into tears.

“Don’t…please…d-don’t…” He covered her breasts with his discarded tunic and touched her cheek. “I don’t understand this. Please tell me what’s going on.”

Janet pushed him away, struggled out of the blankets, grabbed her dress. She got out of bed and pulled it on. “I am not doing this, I am not doing this again,” she said, sniffling, taking her cloak off the chair and wrapping it tight around herself. “I’m…not. I’m just not.”

“I will remind you, Miss Lambert, despite the fact that you will no doubt hold it against me—you got into my bed.”

“Shall I tell you a few things about myself, Mr. Lovecraft? Shall I?” She wiping her nose on her arm. “Okay then! You know what year I was born in? 1975! That’s right! Amazing, isn’t it? We show up here from all over the time-space continuum, and we get all mixed up with each other, and the yous in this equation turn out to be patronizing controlling sexist fuckwits that the Js in this equation cannot seem to resist. Hell, it’s like I can smell you guys out, if there’s one of you in a
thousand mile radius, I end up exactly where I just was, which is underneath you, in a bed, naked. It...” She flapped her arms and turned her back on him. “Never fails! It just never fails! What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“I don’t know what I should say to all that. I don’t know what I can say.”

“I don’t want you to say anything. I don’t care if you say anything. Say whatever you want. I’ll just say this: I’m sorry, and that’s it, I’m never getting in bed with a man again as long as I live.”

“I don’t know what has happened to you in the past,” he said, sitting up, “but regardless, I am not going to force you into something you don’t want.” The words, measured and quiet. He looked at her across the stillness. “If it is your wish to go, then go. If it is your wish to forget what has happened here, I will honor it. This can all be a dream.” His voice lowered. “Would you like that?”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Are you really H.P. Lovecraft?”

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat, “I suppose that I don’t have to be, if we are dreaming. In a dream one can be whoever he chooses, isn’t that right?”

She turned. “That’s not what I asked you.”

“Yes,” he said. “I am.”

She clutched the cloak and gave him a wistful look. “I wish I was dreaming.”

He held out his hand. Janet looked at it and shifted her weight.

His face reddened. “Come to bed.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “This is a mistake.”

He moved on the bed, reached out past its edge. Her eyes opened and she touched his palm, traced the insides of his fingers.

“What brought you here?” he whispered. “What brought you into this room?”

She took his hand. She stepped forward. “My brother was in here with you. He had the silk poisoning, this is where they keep the people who have it. You were in here, and…and I looked at you, and…and I looked at you, and I saw…” She shook her head. “I don’t know.” She watched her feet. “I mean, I do know, but I don’t know how to describe it. Not in a way that will make sense to you.”

He pulled her. “Will you try?”

She put a knee on the bed. “Yes.”

* * *

His face looked so different with life in it; the features were subtle together, watching them was like watching the light change the view out a particular window. When he smiled it was a flash of sun that came and reset all of its lines, drew attention to the eyes.

“Seeing you in here, in this room, it devastated me, it terrified me. When I looked into your eyes, I saw time. I felt it, it was like a river, it was a living thing with currents and tides. Your body, it became a landscape, a still white continent. I related to it this way, to you this way; your body was a country of its own. I looked into your eyes. It was a familiar country. I knew it.” I sighed and turned onto my back. “I don’t know. It’s very hard. It takes up a lot of energy, to find all of these
words, to make them say what I want them to say. I found reasons to hate you and they all came out of me, out of my body. They flew out of me. They came out of the fear. I carry a lot of fear around with me, I drag it behind me, it’s like a bag of bones. But when I read your body it says things to me that I love. It says, fly over me. It says, here is room. It says, lay on my white shores. Bring me your love. Bring all of it, the parts that hurt as well as the parts that heal. Make a house here, on these white shores,” I whispered. “Build it with my skin, bone, blood, breath. Stack it full, stack it to the rafters. I put all these things on your body even though I know it can’t carry them. It’s not made to.” I was breathless, my eyes closed. “I’m crazy, aren’t I?”

I heard his trembling enter his breath and he put his hands on my face; I felt the rawness in his fingers before he kissed me.

* * *

“I’ll give you what you want,” he said it between kisses, “what you said, about taking off this dress, about laying you bare.”

She nodded, unable to speak.

“I’ll do it,” he whispered, breathing against her neck, pulling the dress up, “Janet…Janet…Janet.”

She breathed hard, mouth open, her face lost in the dark.

* * *

His mouth landed on me, chaotic, it connected hot humming lines beneath my skin. His kisses stretched me taut. I quivered.

“Are you on the white shores yet?”

I moaned.

He kissed the inside of my knee. “Now,” he whispered, “are they here now?”

“Nooooo!”

He slid up over me, climbed there, his mouth smelling like my sweat. My thighs opened. I saw them in my mind, they were like gates and I slid a finger down and traced the narrow wet door, lifted my hips, said “Like this,” gasped, “like this…like this, yeah, go in.”

“Do you…d-do you,” he swallowed, hot hand on my belly, “want my…?”

“Yes! Anything!”

* * *

She held onto his shoulders, moved beneath him. It was warm in the room, humid, she breathed in the air and it tasted like cunt, wet stone, hidden sweat. Her flesh was so heavy, so laden. She moved into his harsh breath. “Howard,” she whispered.

He flinched; his name landed like a blow and he moaned.

“Howard.”

His mouth was soft. His eyes struggled to focus. She ran a hand down the side of his face, left the weight of her hand on his neck.
He thrust faster. Her loose head rocked into the pillow.

Her breath backed up, turned sharp. “Howard!”

* * *

It came like water, pressing outward, striking in waves that dragged my strength under; I cried out in surprise and surrender, loud in the small room. I moved into long slow clenches, tension melting, releasing sweetness into the rest of my body and weighing it down. My back arched. My breath roughened. He stiffened, whimpered a little and my hands curled against the wet skin of his back, mimicked the spasms.

* * *

Laying beside her, he kissed her cheek. “How was it?”

“Stacked to the rafters,” she whispered.
I opened my eyes and knew that I had been sleeping.

“I’m not tired,” Howard whispered. “So I’ve been listening to you sleep.”

I yawned and stretched out my legs. “Do you know what year it was when you left?”

“It was nineteen-twenty.”

I turned my head, looked at his profile. “How old does that make you?”

“Thirty years.”

“You want to know what happened to you.” I shifted onto my back. “What happened, where you are, all of that.”

“Yes. Of course.”

I sighed. “I want to go home.”

He took my hand. “Of course you do.”

“No, you don’t understand.” My nostrils burned, getting ready for the tears. “I have been here for years. Well, not here, but everywhere. For years I’ve been everywhere but home and now I just want to go home.” The shape of the word, home, it made my eyes well up. “I’m tired, Howard. I’m tired of feeling foreign. I want my old life.”

“Of course you do.” He spoke with his lips close to my skin. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I didn’t, at first, for awhile. I thought—you know, this is like an adventure.”

He followed the long tendons in the back of my hand, traced them with the tip of a finger down into my wrist. It tickled a little, made me shiver. His touch brought me down into the moment. Time stretched out on me, touching all of my skin, heavy. It was on him too. I heard the weight of it shift inside his breath.

“And then I thought—okay, so this is like growing up, but it’s an old-fashioned kind of growing up, where you do something like join the army and go to war, or go away to the other side of the country for school, and then you met a girl or a guy or whatever and you get married and make roots in a new place. You become generation one in some new place so your great grandchildren will be able to say ‘I’m from California’ and really mean it.”

He nodded.

“And then I thought—you can’t go home again. It won’t be the same if you go back because you aren’t the same: see the numerous works of various authors who have all had to go to war and marry girls who don’t speak English and bring them back to discover that home doesn’t want them anymore.” I looked at him. “So maybe that’s it? Home just doesn’t want you anymore, when you’ve been gone too long, it doesn’t recognize you anymore. You’ve lost whatever it is that makes you from Providence, or from Boston, or even from America or Russia or whichever land it was that nurtured your life.”

“I don’t want to be anywhere but home.” He kissed her forehead. “I never have.”
“I always have. I spent so much time trying to get away, both inside my head and outside of it. Now all I can think about is the little things. Stuff like...fog, and the look of wet granite, its smell, and people who drop their Rs when they say a word like yard, which you do, and I love it. I knew you would and I loved it then, before I heard it, but now it’s something real, it has texture, it feels a certain way when it goes into my ear, and I love it. I love everything about it and it’s not right, I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t tell you these things but I can’t help it, but I don’t have the strength to hold it back anymore,” I whispered, lifting my mouth close to his. “If I could climb into your voice and live there I would.”

“You do it too. I hear it creeping back into your voice. I hear it coming out of hiding.” His hand moved on my face. “It’s been in there a long time, hasn’t it? Hiding away for fear.”

“I’m going to tell you something.” My lips brushed his. “There is more than one universe.”

“How do you know?”

“This is one. I have been in others.” My mouth rested on his skin, on the place where a dimple would show itself as he smiled. “Howard, what do you know about the universe?”

“I know what I think it is, what I believe it to be, but that isn’t knowing, is it?”

“I don’t know how many there are.” It got too hot, too close under the covers, and I had to pull back. “I think there are probably...I don’t know, millions. Trillions. Infinity, an infinity of universes, that they just keep on going, maybe they keep getting born and keep dying all the time, it’s mind-blowing to even think of it. We’d call it a multiverse, then, I guess?”

“It’s a good word.”

“I’ve been in four of them, including the one I was born in, and grew up in. I’m...I’m beginning to think that whatever exists beyond them, or outside of them, is like, I don’t know, some kind of consciousness. Not God, not the way we would think of God, or the way we were taught to think of God, but something that is more like a living thing rather than a machine, you know how people are always thinking of existence like it’s got cogs and other machine parts? It’s too organic for that. It has the ability to evolve, I think. It maybe even has the ability to learn.”

He touched the side of my face.

“It likes writers,” I said. “There have been others. Maybe it likes other kinds of artists too.”

“Like you,” he murmured, his thumb resting on the corner of my mouth. “You are a writer. You must be. I cannot believe an unpracticed person capable of bending words into such beautiful shapes.”

I blushed. “Do you ever feel like the world itself is a living thing?”

“No,” he said. “I find the very notion disturbing.”

“I suppose you would,” I whispered.

He kissed me. “There have been others, you said?”

“I wish I could take my clothes off again.” I closed my eyes. “It never gets old.”

I listened to him smile.
“Did you come through another place before you came here?” I found his pulse with my fingertips, left them there. The tender skin over it beat into my bones. “From the world you knew, to another place, and then to this one?”

“I don’t know. I had many dreams. I remember them, but it’s difficult to say what might’ve been dreams and what might’ve been my experience of another place.”

“I feel your heart speeding up,” I murmured, lifting my face up to kiss him. “Is it a bad thing to remember? It was for the last one. The last one wouldn’t tell me about it, no matter how many times I asked, no matter how many times I insisted that I could handle it.”

“What I remember gives me no pleasure,” he said. “But you do.”

I smiled, nose brushing his chin. “This other place, it would’ve been desolate, like a desert but not, with a long green river flowing on a bed of bones. The sky would’ve been red. There would’ve been a city there, if you were in the right place to see it, a city out of Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, with its pleasure dome and the green river running down to the sunless sea.” I put an arm around him, felt him sigh. “And that’s because it is. The city, I mean. Xe Nahadu becomes Xanadu because Coleridge came through, the way I did and others did, and probably the way you did too.”

“There were mountains,” he whispered. “Black and harsh.”

“Yes.”

“And the wandering tribes.”

“Yes,” I said, “there are those too.”

“I remember it the way I remember the dreams, with too much clarity. My memory of dreams is not like my memory of waking life. There are too many details.”

“It is that way for me too,” I said. “Did you spend a long time there? The memory, is it a long one? For some it is a long layover.”

“Layover?”

“A long time spent in a place just waiting to move on from that place. Like a waystation.”

“Was the part you were in cold? Very cold, enough for ice and snow?”

I shook my head. “No. It wasn’t warm, either. The temperature rose and fell within a comfortable range.”

“I remember cold,” he said. “Snow, ice, and the wandering tribes.”

“I wasn’t there.”

“Maybe it wasn’t real, then. Maybe the cold of it was a dream.”

“I don’t know how big it is,” I said. “The land in between, if it’s big enough for cold and heat. For poles and tropics. Do you think it knows us?”

“What?”

“It? The multiverse? God? Do you think it knows people like you and me, looks in and feels like calling to like? What if everything I think of is real? What if someone like me, a god of my own
multiverse, collides with someone like you, a god of your own multiverse, and then when things happen, when your thoughts bleed into mine and mine bleed into yours, what if we’re making new worlds?” I spoke close to his cheek. “Real, actual worlds, places with their own life cycles, living and dying across a page that is only a representation of the world, the way a map is only a representation of the world? Once upon a time I would’ve scoffed at the idea. Science says otherwise, right? But now I know more than the science of my world, I know what goes on behind it, and I wonder. Maybe we’re making worlds right now. Maybe we’re thinking them into existence and what we know is only a projection of all that they really are.”

He touched my face, fingers moving on the skin as if to summon some symmetry forth from my blood, as if reading it the way a blind man would read the pieces of a broken vase. “I have never known anyone like you. I never thought I would.”

I smiled. “I’m not sure there are many people like me, not this way, not how I am now. Before, there were millions like me. Or I was like the millions that spawned me. Maybe there still are millions like me, the way I am now. Maybe we forget this. Maybe we all go through this learning and then forget it. How cruel that would be.”

He moved over me, lowered his face, I met him and he kissed me as though he couldn’t bear not to. I put my arms around him. He held himself up, kissed as though his mouth had been separated from mine at birth and only now, just now, it was remembering its forgotten lineage.

“No one has ever kissed me like that,” I murmured into his mouth.

“The men who never kissed you this way are all fools,” he breathed.

He kissed me until my face burned and the images in my mind turned over, made way for new ones, unfastened ones, things that bared their skins because there were no words big enough to contain all of the want, the need, the love without form and origin that wove in and out of their breaths. His kiss felt new. It felt new every time it renewed itself, and my heartbeat doubled. He hesitated, lowered his mouth to kiss the underside of my chin. My neck softened. He kissed my throat. My heartbeat tripled.

I knew things: the first alien transmission received in my world would not come from outer space, like they thought, but it would come through a door that appeared in the New Mexico desert less than five miles from the satellite dish. It would not be a signal received from the past, like they thought; it would be a signal from another universe where the past was the present. All meanings, now meaningless. There is no past. There is no future. There is no present. There is all of the above and none of the above, all of it simultaneous, none of it real.

“You’re trembling,” he whispered, his hand soft on my breast. “Are you afraid?”

My heart tapped his palm.

“I’m going to love you, I think,” I whispered, my eyes closed. “I’m going to, and I already do, and that I already have is coming to me now like a postcard out of the past even though there is no past, and there’s going to be something that makes me think I shouldn’t, because there always is; there will be something, or somethings, it will come out of the future even though there is no future and it will make me doubt a decision that isn’t really a decision.”

“I like this,” he said, panting against my neck. “I like your words, I like listening to them find their way out of you and into your voice, your mouth. I feel very much that we crawled out of the same ooze. I feel the time and its distance between us even more keenly now that it is no longer there.”
“Kiss me.”

He did it, hard, hungry, and when it started it was faint at first and then pulsing, my runaway blood careening, the pressure of his body and its slow unconscious slide up and down enough to trip the switch. I arched up, whimpered into his mouth because I wanted him to know what was happening to me.


Words and love: our bodies never knew the difference.

He got his cock into me and thrust, he worked at it, we were so wet together, our skins so slippery, covered in salty ocean goo. He pushed me up the bed. His arms trembled and then he trembled and when the orgasm came he cried out, startled at the strength of it.

“You must be hungry,” I panted, curling a sweaty hand around the back of his neck. “You need a new bed.”
“Why did I shave all of my hair off? Do you remember?”

Jeremy chuckled. “You were pissed off.”

“I was?” Janet lifted her head off the bed. “I’ve been thinking about my hair. My long hair, the way it was before.” She made a face. “I kind of miss it.”

“Yeah, you were pissed, it was some feminist thing. And then you shaved it off and it only made the guys creepier, which just pissed you off even more.”

“I want to go home,” Janet sighed. “Don’t you? How long have you been gone? Do you know?”

“Years,” said Jeremy. “A long time. Like five years. It shouldn’t be possible, but it is.”

“I have to go,” Janet started to stand. She wore a long loose dress, light and silky and pale green. It moved against her limbs. It rippled like water.

“You don’t have to,” said Jeremy. “I’m not tired or anything. I feel quite well, actually. No.” He started to smirk. “You don’t have to go. You just want to get back to The Fabulous Mr. Lovecraft.”

Janet blushed and held up her middle finger.


“But you don’t have to put it that way, all with the hands going like this and making it sound like he’s a Patricia Highsmith novel.”

“That would make him The Talented Mr. Lovecraft, and no offense or anything,” he said, laughing, “but I just don’t wanna know. If you know what I mean.”

Janet wrinkled her nose. “Aw, God, you’re yucky. Honestly, I don’t know why I tell you anything.”

Jeremy grinned. “Because you love me, and I am the wise and sage older brother who always needs to know these things…but not all of these things. Some things would traumatize him beyond all hope of recovery.”

Janet picked up the spare pillow and hit him in the head with it. “Stop it!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll stop it!”

Janet tossed the pillow onto the foot of the bed. “He’s okay, I think. Never mind.”

Jeremy’s brow lifted. “Okay. Huh?”

“I want to go home,” she said. “Like…I think I’d do anything to get there. I didn’t used to feel this way about home.”

“Well, being away will make you funny like that.”

“No, I’m serious,” said Janet. “I feel it, like, its deep in my bones. Like the calcium in my bones came out of the land and it aches for it and yearns to be close to it. I’ve always missed the comforts
of home and the modern conveniences and stuff like that, but this goes deeper.”

“Do your calcium atoms feel this way about The Fabulous Lovecraftian Calcium Atoms?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake shut up!”

“No, I’m serious,” said Jeremy. He rubbed his chin, the corners of his mouth twitching upward. “But…you think maybe his have slimy little electron tentacles?”

“Oh fuck you! Seriously!” She put her hands on her hips. “Can’t you be serious?”

Jeremy chuckled. “I can try, but your love life makes it hard.”

“Stop it!”

“I suppose it could be worse. It could be Hemingway and then I’d have to roll out all of my gun-toting closeted homosexual jokes.”

“Well, I’m being serious.” Janet tried not to laugh. “I’m trying to be serious with you. Look, I know all of this weirds you out, and you’re all about cracking the jokes to make yourself feel better about it, and I get it, I’m with you there, but now it’s serious time. I need you to put on your serious face. Please?”

Jeremy sighed. “Okay.”

She sat down. “Did it hurt?”

He held his thumb and forefinger a centimeter apart. “Just a little.”

Janet looked at him. “How does this happen? Just…all of this? Do you ever ask yourself that?”

“Yeah, of course I do.”

“This is insane. It’s crazy.”

“True that,” said Jeremy, wishing for a cigarette.

“You know I talked to this guy while I was in Xe Nahadu,” she said. “He was from Mid-World, like in the Stephen King novels.”

Jeremy rubbed his forehead with his fingers. He tucked his hands behind his head. “Yeah, I know. There were a few of those guys around. There was another guy there too and his mind was completely blown by Elerrína, you know, the computer. It was all he’d talk about. Then one day he was gone. There were people there from other Earths, other times. At first I thought I’d go crazy trying to make sense of it. Then, one day, I just stopped. I stopped thinking about it. That part of my brain snapped shut. I know you can’t do that, it’s harder for you, but doing it saved my life.” He shrugged. “Sure there are all the big questions, like what does it all mean, will the world ever look the same to me again, but there’s also stuff like love and food and shelter and taking care of yourself, taking care of your own, and to me…” He sighed. “It’s more important, you know? I’m not gonna care about the universe until it falls apart under me. I’ve got you, Shannon and Jasmine, mom and dad, the people I pick up along the way, and it’s enough.” He turned onto his side. “Honey, I love you, I want you to be happy, and if sitting here and thinking about the universe is gonna do that then I’m all right with it. If gettin into bed with Cthulhu’s daddy is gonna do that, I’m all right with that too.”
“Well thank you.” Janet hugged herself. “How big of you, really.” She laughed. “And fuck off with that Cthulhu stuff, okay?”

“Nah, I mean it,” he said. “So don’t get all Friedan on my ass, swinging the mighty hammer of feminism. I’m not stupid, I know I don’t have a say in any of that stuff, it’s your business. But I’m gonna tell you that I support you, and that I won’t bug you about it, and you’re gonna have to just shut up and take it.”

“Well, since you put it that way.”

“I totally put it that way.”

Janet smiled as she looked down. Her voice grew soft, childlike. She drew designs on the blankets with her finger. “Were there a lot of writers in Xe Nahadu?”

“Yeah.” He watched her finger. “There were a lot.”

“Ones that you’ve heard of?”

“Yeah.”

Janet poked him in the wrist. “Will you tell me?”

Jeremy looked at her. “Do the names matter? You know they were there.”

“I guess not,” she said. “I guess I would still like to know. It might help me get my feet under me. It might help Howard too.”

“Does Howard need help?”

Janet looked up. “Sure he does. Don’t we all?”

“I don’t know how it works,” said Jeremy, “but I think there may be more than one, you know, of each. Writers from different worlds.”

“What do you mean?” She climbed on the edge of the bed and put her feet by Jeremy’s head. “Like, you mean, there’s a Shakespeare from every version of our world?”

“I thought I saw you once.” Jeremy watched her face. “It was a long time ago, in the market. She looked like you but she still had her long hair.”

Janet blinked. “Did you speak to her?”

“No,” Jeremy shook his head, “I wanted to, but I never did. One day I stopped seeing her. That’s what happens in Xe Nahadu. You see people, you get used to them, and one day they’re just gone.” He spread his fingers. “Poof.”

“Weird. That’s just…I don’t know how anyone would react to meeting another version of themselves. Did that ever happen? Did you ever see it happen?”


“Maybe you can’t. Maybe…” She trailed off and looked up at the wall, her expression far away.

“I’ll tell you something, though,” Jeremy said, sitting up. “The writers? They were all the good ones. The really good ones. You know, the ones that might’ve been a little bit crazy but ended up
writing the kind of stuff that changed fiction forever. I don’t know. I think that place is like...I
don’t know, a magnet. There’s something in the right kind of brain that’s like iron and Xe Nahadu
is the magnet. It’s the best description I can come up with.”

“No, it sounds good,” said Janet. “Believable. I’ve got the crazy part even if I don’t have the rest. I
don’t write enough anymore to be good, let alone great.” She put an arm over her eyes. “I can’t.
And I certainly don’t write the kind of stuff that changes fiction forever.”

“Too busy livin’.”

“Yeah.” She grinned. “Something like that.”

“It makes you sad, doesn’t it?”

Janet nodded. “Yeah. You don’t even know.”

“It’s good that Howard met you. You’re strong. The others didn’t do so good.”

Janet lifted her arm. She peeked at him. “What?”

“The others.” He looked uncomfortable. “They didn’t do so good.”

She sat up. “Wait. How many are there?” She leaned over her folded legs, arms crossed, eyes
always knows but me! What are you talking about? How many?”

“One that I saw and one that I heard about.” Jeremy’s voice was quiet. “I wasn’t going to tell you, I
didn’t want to upset you, but I don’t know, I guess it feels like a good time for it.”

“What happened?”

“Suicide.”

She recoiled. Her mouth opened, shut again. “That’s awful,” she said, vehement.

“It is.” He nodded. “You know how it goes in Xe Nahadu. They lose their shit.”

“Tell me what happened. Tell me what you know.” She swallowed. “I want to know.”

“The one I saw, he was older than yours. Older, sickly-looking, very thin. He’d sit outside the
chicken place and talk to himself, kind of muttering, you know, with those starey eyes rolling like a
freaked-out horse’s. Cringing. At nothing. The chicken guy would come outside and feed him, you
know, give him a couple of legs or something wrapped up in a newspaper, and he’d eat them,
hunched over, the suit getting dirtier and dirtier until one day he wasn’t there anymore. I asked the
chicken guy what had happened.” Jeremy looked at her. “I only heard about the other one, but that
story is even worse. Both of the guys who went through the ‘Du were gaunt, and gray, and
unraveling. You got a young one. Maybe he’s the one we know, from our world. Maybe he’s not,
but he’s a young one. It’s a good thing.”

“That’s horrible!” Her hands covered her mouth. “How awful!”

“Yeah, it was bad.” The anger crept into Jeremy’s voice. “It was me and the chicken guy, Shawn
was his name. We’d, you know, bring him inside at night and stuff so he wouldn’t get hurt. Shawn
was this huge guy, I don’t know if you ever saw him or not.”

“I know exactly the place you’re talking about,” said Janet. “Red booths, neon sign. Right?”
“Yeah. That’s the place. So, Shawn was this huge guy, he’d hang out sometimes in the dining room with a shotgun to watch over him. As you can imagine, guys tried to roll him all the time, at least at first. Even though he didn’t have anything. But people are just dicks sometimes. I’d sit out there with him when I had the time and since I was a guard and all people stayed away. I’d try talking to him, you know, but…” He shrugged. “He didn’t make any sense. Just word salad. It was okay, though. Lots of people wander around the ‘Du without making any sense at all.”

Janet’s eyes streamed. She wiped at her cheeks. “What a terrible thing. What a terrible, awful, horrible thing. For all of you.”

“Yeah.” Jeremy shrugged. “Ask your guy,” he said, hard and flippant. “This Fëanor of yours, this Elvish prince in exile or whatever the hell he is. I’ll tell you something, in case you couldn’t figure it out already: social services weren’t real high on his list. He could’ve done it, we all know it, with Elerrína, or with some other artificial intelligence. Or he could’ve made an organization of headshrinkers or whatever. The point is, he could’ve helped more. There were lots of guys like him, the Lovecraft in front of the chicken man’s place. I’m so sorry, hon. For a guy with the knowledge of ages he pretty much let the human herd work itself out.”

“That’s…I…”

“The truth. It sucks, but that’s what it is.”

“I don’t wanna deal with this. I don’t even want to think about it. The thought…it hurts me, it rips me up, you don’t even know. He’s so…I don’t know. I don’t know what the word is. That there was another Howard, that there are many of him and many of me and many of everyone—that isn’t even the point.” Her face crumpled beneath a weight of held-back tears. “That isn’t what makes me so sad. There’s something in him, I’ve sensed it, that makes this story easy to believe. A kind of fragility. It makes me sad that out of all of the Howards existing in all the worlds, so many of them find their way out of their home worlds, that they are so tenuously tied to them and that always, somehow, always there is a measure that has to die. It’s like a sacrifice. The thought of it makes me furious, and weak, and sad. That it has to be this way is…well, it’s all of the sadness, the bone-deep stuff, in everything. The worlds, multiverses, whatever exists beyond them: everything. The sadness permeates everything.”

Jeremy held out his arms. “C’mere.”

Janet crawled down to the other end of the bed. “I wanna go home.”

He held her, cupped the back of her head in his warm toughened palm. “I know you do,” he murmured. “We all do. The adventure thing, it gets old.”

“I want to go, and I want to take him with me, even though I know there are probably multiversal laws against that, or paradoxes, or whatever they’re called. I don’t know.” She held onto him and sniffled. “I don’t know. I’d even go with him, back to his time, I guess, if I could do it. It would be weird, but weird is better than being here. It’s a world that makes sense to me. I could figure it out if I had to. If I can figure this out I can do anything.”

“I don’t know how,” he said.

“I feel like such a baby about it, it’s like that, like I’m a baby crying for mama, but it’s all I want.” Janet made fists. “Home makes sense to me. It doesn’t even have to be my world. It can be another Maine, another New England.”

“I know, Janet.” He rocked her. “But home, you know, it’s not the way you remember it. It’s not
going to be, no matter where you go. It’s never the way you remember it.”

“I know.” Janet wiped her eyes as she looked at him. “It’s better.”
Janet thinks *I want to let my hair grow. I’ll let it grow and grow and grow and grow, until it’s curly and black like it used to be, until it exists enough to be brushed out of my face by a sleepy, tender hand.*

Janet thinks *I will sit down while my hair grows. I will spend more time sitting. I will pass the time with a pen and paper while yearning to pass it with a computer and keyboard and while I am imagining it I will think about how I could show Howard how to use them: see, it makes the writing so much easier, it’s amazing, at last your fingers will be able to keep up with all of your thoughts.*

* * *

It was true: once upon a time Janet remembered her homeland with hatred, all of the images and sounds and scent-memories trapped in little iron-bound boxes.

While at school she had floated through her days filled with dreams of deserts, palm trees, big sleek cities laid out on glittering grids. She would take her degree and fly south with it, a bird outrunning winter. She would take it and go west, her car loaded down, looking for the place where her heart would let her build her home.

Far west, the stony edge of another ocean, the members of her tribe: queers roaming free, bellydancers like urban Berbers, hippies and other folk that would take her in, love her, teach her how to love the new land beneath her restless feet. The warm South, far down, past red clay and the Delta, down until she was surrounded by crystalline water and the green was so lush that it rested like silk against your eyes, gleaming and full of flowers. The South, so warm that all cares melted. The South, where food came in bright colors and the air smelled of coconut, imprinting the air with the memory of summer.

South. West. Never the place of her birth.

*I wouldn’t give back to the land that raised me because it was the land that alienated me, closed me off, bottled me up in winter and dumped me, panting from the heat, into a summer that could never decide what it wanted to be: a season always written in water, cold and hot and wet and sullen and fierce. I would not keep my genes in the pool. I wanted to pack them up, take them, carry my love to a kinder place, a gentler place. To somewhere drawn in rich color instead of granite and fog and cold rain and the white of snow, the bitterness of winter sunsets, the dark green of pines. Out there was happy land, gentle land, and an empty place in my heart waited for the right geographical key: I would open it, walk through, move into the sun. I would carry my payment in an armload of gratitude.*

Janet walked out of Jeremy’s room and closed the door with all the gentleness that lived in her skin.

*How many of me have had to die? How many fleshes of my flesh, bones of my bone, carried New England to Xe Nahadu and scattered it there?*

The anger came then, rose up, and she covered it with love. She used the one to push the other down.

*Later. Let it get strong first.*

She walked across the hall to her new room. An unseen servant brought her things down, one at a
time, and when she came into her room each day there was something new left on the foot of the bed: a folded dress, her bag of jewelry, a book brought out of Xe Nahadu and carried, a heavy weight on her back.

Today, it was a pale gray cloak. It draped across the bed, made of something that was like cashmere, soft, thin, but warm. Janet picked it up, wrapped herself in it. The temperature of the stone rooms never stabilized, they were always too cold, or the fires made them too hot, made their darkness stifling.

She went to Howard’s door. She knocked. “It’s me,” she said, leaning over, her mouth close to the wood. “It’s Janet. May I come in?”

The swung open. “Of course.”

She moved into the room’s orange light.

Howard shut the door. “How is your brother?”

“Well, he’s well. It’s…fine. There are no lasting effects.” She turned. “How about you?”

“I’m well.” He smiled.

“Good.” Her face warmed as she smiled back. “Listen, um…if you’re tired, I won’t bother you. I should’ve thought and I didn’t. I just…” She shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. You’re not.”

She looked down. “Okay.”

“Would you like to sit?”

She looked around the small room. It was like a monk’s cell. “Yes.”

“You may have the bed.” He watched her. “Unless you’d prefer the chair.”

“It doesn’t…it doesn’t matter to me.” She hesitated. “This is awkward, isn’t it?” She looked at him. “Or is it me? Am I making this awkward?”

He blushed.

“Howard?” Her voice softened. “Is it me?”

“I don’t…” His back was stiff. He remained in profile as he looked down. “I-I don’t know.”

She walked over to him, paused beside his shoulder. She heard him breathing. She looked down, her face averted. She lowered her voice. “What do you want me to do?”

He swallowed. “I’m not sure.”

Janet closed her eyes, took in a breath. “I need you to tell me,” she whispered.

“I don’t…I-I don’t kn—” He let out a long sigh. “I can’t,” he went on, urgent, half-whispering, “I don’t know how to do this, I don’t know how to navigate this.” Face red, he looked at her sidelong. “I have never done this before.”

“It’s okay.” She touched his shoulder. She didn’t look at him. Her breath came a little faster. “You
just have to find the words.”

“What do people like us do?”

Janet let her fingers touch his without taking hold of them. “Does this make it a little easier?”

His breathing changed. “No. No it doesn’t.”

“Do I make you nervous?”

“Absolutely not,” he whispered.

“Do you understand how you make me feel?” She enfolded his hand in both of hers. “You don’t, do you?”

The words came out husky and a little meek. “I know that you’re trembling.”

“Yes.”

He ran a fingertip along her cheek. “Your skin is so hot,” he whispered. “Febrile. Shall I put you to bed?”

“Um, I don’t…” She glanced up and nodded, face reddening. “Yes.”

He watched his hands as they unfastened her thin cloak. The light material fell away from her low neckline, revealing her pale skin, its flush blooming like flowers up over her collarbones. “I’ll hang this up,” he said.

“What did you see?”

He turned. “What do you mean?”

“In the places between. Not the cold place, not the wandering tribes. Not there.” She paused. “In the other between places.”

He looked into her eyes for a long time. His mouth tightened and his voice scraped up against a whisper. “How did you know about that?”

“I know there’s…something. Once there was… I don’t know how to explain it, but it was like passing some great thing while it was sleeping. When I came through one of the doors.” She paused. “I-I think… the doors are old. Well… I know they are. But I think there are cracks.”

“Yes.” He looked into the shadows. “There are cracks.”

“I never told anyone about that.”

“I would have done the same.”

“Some things in the darkness aren’t in the darkness at all. They’re of it. Sentient darkness.”

He hung up the cloak.

“What did you see?”

“I don’t wish to discuss it.” He didn’t turn. His hands rolled into fists. “And I couldn’t if I wanted to. I don’t have the words.”
She followed the shape of his profile with her eyes. “Yes, you do.”

“Some things are unspeakable. They are unspeakable because the language of men cannot name them.” He paused. “No human tongue could give shape to such monstrosity.”

“Are the cracks getting bigger? Are they widening enough to let these things through?”

“You must pray it isn’t so. We all must.”

“I’m not much for praying in an instance like this one. Prayers have never done much for me.”

“Nor for me, Janet.”

“I’ll stick to something I can hold with my hands. Something like a hammer and nails and boards.”

“I do not think a hammer and nails and boards would be enough. That is not the stuff these doors are made of. They aren’t even made of stone, though they look like stone and mayhap behave like stone once in blue moon.”

“I know that. The hammer thing is a metaphor.”

He searched her face. “A mimic of stone could perhaps mimic many other things.”

Janet looked away. She said nothing.

“In answer to your question...yes. I fear the cracks are widening and that there is no hand skilled enough to fix them. I fear that such crawling chaos would break through and make some sort of ghastly meal out of the worlds we know. Humankind is not built to dwell in the void.”

“What did you see?”

He sat down on the edge of the bed. The lamplight and shadow sharpened the bones of his face. “I fell into the sky.”

Gooseflesh swarmed her skin. “Tell me what that means.”

“I don’t know if all of me passed through or if it was merely some appendage of my mind, but within that absence, that darkness which is a darkness that should be capitalized: inside Darkness there is no sense of direction. No gravity. Inside it was the sensation of falling, but it was of falling up. Within the body, or rather the mind’s representation of the body, it feels the way falling upon the earth would feel, but within the mind, where there would be sight, it is as if you were hurtling straight up into space.” The lamplight and shadow drowned his eyes. “This contradiction, its very dissonance, threatens to tear your mind apart.”

She shivered, both hot and cold. “And?”

He turned and looked at her. “Beyond that?”

“Yes. Beyond that.”

“Great moving gulfs. Pressure. The chaos of a thousand eyes. A million. And out of that come words that your throat cannot reproduce but which the fibers of your being know, know as of old, it is a knowledge beyond knowledge, and it knows just enough to cower. You pray to be made small. To become invisible.”

“It is something utterly foreign, then.” She sat beside him. “Unknown.”
“It is not merely unknown. It is something unknowable.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Why?”

“Because…” She shrugged. “Well…you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve perceived it, in some way. Haven’t you? Trod the paths no man is meant to tread. Stolen a glimpse. You know something of what it is. You have taken its measure, even if only by knowing what it is not.”

“And what is that?”

“That the Darkness is not benevolent.”

“I was a better man for not knowing. I was…complete. Now there are cracks in me and I have no idea what may slip through.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Why not?”

“You’re still breathing.”

* * *

Janet thinks I am hungry and my legs will rot off if I don’t try to walk and that’s just ridiculous hyperbole and what kind of sister am I to laze around while my long-lost brother gets up to God knows what and I am a bad person waste of skin nothing at all nothing nothing just like all of us just like everything and who am I to think that the written word is the most important thing in the world and in another world, in my old world, in the arms of my old place I am at a desk, I have long flowing hair, and I am still in love with my work. Some of the thoughts feel hollow.

She looks at Howard, watches him sleep when he sleeps and watches his face when he doesn’t, when he’s watching her. Her life is easier in the third person: Janet thinks except when Janet fucks. Janet fucks with her thoughts, she rolls them up, gets them hard, gets them wet. She fucks with her mind. Her mind fucks with her. Janet fucks except when Janet thinks, and then the food comes into the room and there’s nothing at all. Sleep.

Where in Rhode Island? Providence, right?

Yes.

In the rest of my memories, all of them laid over one another like film negatives melting in the sun, the black-white images reversed, it’s just another city. Rolling through it on the way to New York —where are we, Mom? Oh. Okay—watching the buildings undress, watching them lose their grandeur, their cold faces, their empty eyes and white flanks. Smell of water. The sky cool, flapping in the steady wind, a pale blue bedsheets. What I remember best about Providence is how it’s the place where the New England architecture begins. You know, the real stuff. In other places it’s like a hybrid, and when you get out into the ‘burbs even you don’t see the real thing, but in Providence the houses always started to look right. And that’s how I remember it, too: with the houses, the buildings. We’d roll through on our way home from somewhere and I’d think: now the
houses look right. Those colonial saltboxes always look like they're waiting for the cold.

He smiles, a close-lipped smile that goes straight to his eyes.

Tell me about the dream.

Which one?

If Maine were a woman she would ignore the blueberries and pink granite. She would go down into the green water because she is a mermaid cold enough to numb the skin, cold enough to make you sleep. Always curling herself around the rocks. Always picking barnacles off her fingernails. Here, she would say, have a sea urchin; take this necklace made of glass. She would turn onto her back beneath an early winter sky. At the height of summer she would pull herself out of the water, grow legs, and gorge herself on wild roses. She would dream of ice.

Howard lies down, stretches out. He is a long winter horizon, the solstice sunset burning in his skin.

* * *

“What is it? Have I done something wrong?”

I shook my head. “I had a miscarriage, it was months ago, and I am…” I took in a shaky breath. My heart pounded. “I’m remembering it. I’m just remembering it, that’s all. It’s not you. It has nothing to do with you.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Fresh tears welled up, scalding, hot as my blood. “Me too.”

* * *

Gandalf found Fëanor in the great hall, where Fëanor had wires in his hands and little speakers that he was rigging up beneath the domed ceilings. He saw Gandalf, beamed out a smile, and began to explain how the speakers would work with the ceiling’s vaults to carry the music everywhere that Thranduil wanted it to go.

“Where is Janet? I haven’t seen her a while, though I trust that she is all right. Have you seen her?”

Fëanor turned, put the wires on a narrow shelf of rock. “I don’t know.” His smile dimmed. “She went to the halls of healing and I haven’t seen her since.” He stepped down. “That was four days ago.”
Overhead, high up in the dark vault of the ceiling, pinprick lights. They waxed and waned, uncurling patterns of light that came in soft shades of green, yellow, a faint pearlescent pink.

Frodo tugged Legolas’s sleeve. “What are they?”

“What are they?” said Legolas.

“Why do they do that?”

“They read the rhythms of the hroär.”

“How?”

Legolas removed his cloak. He shook it out. “It is what you would call magic.”

It condensed out of the air, embraced them in a pulsating scent of smoke. They felt the sound of music long before their ears could parse the specifics of it; syncopated thunder, like the battles of old it crawled up inside them to rattle in their bones. Strange notes clung, quivering, like resin to the hairs in their nostrils.

“This music, it is like flies inside of me,” said Sam, rubbing at his face. “I do not like it.”

The rhythm went on and on, like machines caught and strangling in the stone. Frodo winced.

“It is a festival,” said Legolas. “Come.”

* * *

The silk tells lies. A voice came on the wind, made of dust and heat, quivering: the silk.

I turned. I looked up at the sky and it was so black, so empty between its weak stars that I felt vague hunger pressing down on me. Trees like a crowd, a silent huddled vigil, arms held up, leaves open. Green palms, lifted to the cold and distant glow of starlight.

It will lie to you, sighed the ground.

I blinked, felt the brush of my lashes; the shape of my mouth lagged behind the desire to speak. “But you will not.”

It laughed.

“Then it is as I thought.”

The trees and starlight chided me with the language of water.

It lies, he whispered. It lies in the voices of men in battle and the heat of mating. It lies with a mother’s sweetness. The wind moved across my shoulders. It does so with a child’s innocence.

I closed my eyes. Old thoughts fell like gauzy curtains, old feelings, they tasted musty, they came down full of tattered holes. My skin went cold, my ears filled with the heavy beat of blood. I wanted to see an arbor of grapes and so I did. I wanted to smell the ocean and a ghost of salt perfume floated past my lips. Inside my mind, I stood in a wool dress, my fingers numb at the tips.
I held a pink rose to my nose like a sachet, a charm, a ward with the eye of a dead animal sewn tight inside.

A thin, hot stream ran down my leg.

“All women dream of blood,” I whispered.

*You would know of the forest.* Each sentence a predator’s padded footfall. *You would know of the mountains, the mists. You would know the erosion of time.*

Light that was red but not red, purple beyond the spectrum flashed in the darkness. I smelled things I could not name.

I withdrew.

*The slow, steady power of it, the ceaseless breath of the wind, the endless caress of the water. You seek the touch that takes and does it so slowly, with such care, that the skin remains sweetly oblivious to its own destruction.*

I saw a door built of ancient stone and left to stand on a barren island. The sea around it whipped at the wind.

*And you.* The richness of a man’s voice, smooth, the cadence of the words are foreign, soft, they brushed like moth’s wings lured out of the dark. *You would know the secret of the silk.* Breath fell on my face, heated to tenderness by a swift current of blood. A mouth touched my neck, rested on the pulse. Its lips trembled there like blades. *Would you not?*

“I would know of the spaces between the doors,” I said, startled by the words.

*The man, he of ice, skin of stone, he has whispered these things.* The wind fell quiet. *He carried them out of time and left them in your ears while you slept.*

I thought about the mountains of madness. “No.”

*Color out of space.* Beings borne of the slime, the remainders of Eru’s thought. That which swims the forgotten deeps. *The backside of the moon. Emptiness.*

“Perhaps,” I murmured. “Perhaps not.”

*He dreams of things that never were.*


*Listen*

Lights flashed somewhere in my eyelids, pulsing, dark purple sprawling lace of electronic blood.

*Let me wake up.* Pulsing. Vibration caught deep in the stone. It jittered, juddered, swept up inside a delicate vessel. I braced for the shattering. *I want to wake up.*

*I don’t believe you*

I took a deep breath, deep deep drawing cold into my lungs and smelled bedsweat melted wax cold stone fragrant smoke.

*Because King Thranduil, you know. He likes to party*
The smell came gushing forth, rich and dressed in steam, savory. It prickled beneath Faramir’s tongue. He sat on the rocky ground, watching as three Orc-men hauled the carcass out of a glowing pit in the ground. Two more came forth, using long hooked sticks to pull away the thick wrappings of wilted leaves. The skin of the pig was a dark glazed orange.

The village sat below the windswept ground, tucked into a deep ravine. The dwellings were hewn into the rock, sealed tight with mortar. Their doorways looked like keyholes. Ragged stone overhangs closed in around the ravine’s rim, blocking out half the sun. Faramir looked up and saw fair Ithil afloat in the tiny patch of sky, whittled into a narrow curve of blade.

And old woman leaned forward, her deep purple skin flickering in the firelight, her wizened eyes like gold set in the bed of a swift-moving stream. She wore a loose garment made of deep blue wool. Long hair flowed in ropes of stormclouds down over her shoulders. She lifted a hand, the long wrist behind it wrapped in rows of blue beads, of clanking copper.

“The first cut to the outlander,” she said, pointing at Faramir.

He sat at the edge of the pit; the eyes and teeth of his compatriots glimmered, making him feel his white skin, the vulnerability of it. He tucked his chin down, smothered his awkwardness. He hunched in the firelight. The thick heat was strong on his body. He smelled of smoke and pungent herbs and long days of travel. Sweat gleamed around his eyes. He wiped it away.

“The first,” she intoned, she who was called Ivaki and hailed from the distant and fantastic shores of the Blue Grandmother, “the first slice to he who braved the enmity that has long lived between our races, who overcame his blood to take upon the inhospitable mountains and dared the thirst of our blades in order to do this good thing.”

Faramir’s mouth flooded. He hugged himself. He was so hungry he started to tremble.

Sauron leaned into the rail. He looked out at the darkness trembling over the land. Updrafts blasted hot into his face. Distant flashes of lightning illuminated the broken-tooth silhouette of the mountains.

He lifted his nose, inhaled. He tasted curtains of rain, their bitter tang of brimstone.

* * *

Upon the Gorgoroth blooms a flower out of time. A fleeting house cast of stones. Upon the Gorgoroth, three hinges have turned.

“And from it, a smell of trees,” he whispered.

I know you well. The moss in your breath, the lives nurtured underground, moonlight gleaming on your robes of water. Your madness.

“Your silks,” he said.

He stepped back. The smooth black stone felt warm beneath his feet. He turned, walked back inside. He moved through his chambers and thought of his traveling clothes. He imagined himself in them. He felt the great heat of the land tempered beneath his hand. He would cloak himself, put on his boots, walk the long wheels to the door. He felt it under his skin, beckoning. It itched at him, whispered lullabies into his ear.
You have spent lifetimes upon lifetimes, stacked the spans of both Men and Elves, striving to learn the mysteries of the doors. You have glimpsed the other worlds. You have trod the sands of the In-Between, paddled the human streams of that place called Xe-Nahadu, where Kublai Khan, Fëanor-that-was, did his stately pleasure dome decree. At the shore of the sunless sea did you gain this knowledge: there are other Mordors, other stories. Within the Song of Ilúvatar, a multitude of universes dream themselves into being. Many of them have borne the scars of your pride.

“You are there,” he said, pulling his hair back in both hands. He tied it back. “Móriel-that-was, she dwells in the Murky Wood. She takes her shelter in its belly.” He buckled a sword onto his side. “And I want back what is mine.”

* * *

Janet gasped awake. She stared up at the stone ceiling, eyes darting, the sheets clasp to her chest. Her heart thudded against her tight and trembling fingers.
Evendust

Lugmokí stood, her feet cold upon the stone. Her hair was loosened from its bonds and it flowed back from her forehead, past her arms, a river of night. She shivered in her light gold silk.

“For you,” he whispered, “both the sun and the moon.”

No shoes, he had told her; you will not need them. Not in the hall. Not once the people have brought their bodies with them, not once the music has come, not once the fires are burning. Not when the wine is flowing.

“The sun and the moon?”

“Evendust and her lovely daughter, the sweat of Yavanna’s brow.” Thranduil smiled. “That sweat which arises on her fair skin, in the most tender part of spring, when she makes love with Manwë.”

An ornate box sat on the bedside table, where he had left it. It was held closed by a tiny puzzle lock that yielded to Thranduil’s touch. He lifted the lid, picked up a narrow glass phial with his long white fingers. He held it up to the torchlight. The thin powder trapped inside might have been frost; it might have been moonlight and phosphorescence dredged up out of the darkest depths of the sea.

“Ivonethir,” he murmured, easing the stopper free. “The king’s ransom. Give me your wine.”

Lugmokí held out her cup. He reached over, shook free a wisp of the glimmering granules. She watched them fall, watched them melt into the wine’s dark red depths. “What will it do to me?”

He looked up. “It will bring you pleasure.”

Lugmokí took a small sip. The anguish of the grapes, their robust flavor, bloomed on her lips. It slid down her throat, warmed her belly. Her tongue began to tingle. “And what of the evendust?”

“It will draw you into the arms of your most secret dreams,” he murmured. “And rock you tender as the mother you never knew. It will show you all of the great treasures of your heart.”

Lugmokí blinked. Already she felt her skin softening, her senses becoming permeable. The chill wrestled with the heat rising from the swift currents of her blood. “Only the things I want to see?”

Thranduil added a measure of evendust to her wine. He did it with his fingertips. He dipped them into an earthenware jar, rubbed them together. He stirred the pale powder into her cup and brought his fingers back to his mouth, licking the dangling drops from beneath his nails.

“Thranduil?”

He smiled. “Yes.” His mouth glistened. “Only the things you want to see.”

*             *             *

The torches were red, like the heart of a rose, and their long flames climbed the walls, curled up into the darkness of the dome where the glowworms kindled an intense, churning gold light that rippled, moved back and forth across the velvet darkness.

Huge platters of roast meat sliced into thin puddles of blood sat on the floor where long white fingers pulled them free and ate them wrapped up in sheets of bread. Fruit yielded to the piercing of
white teeth, spilling sweet juices.

Food floated on an ocean of wine.

The music lived, thrummed, it pulsed fast as the heartbeat of a man caught in the throes of terrified love. The heavy cannonade of song vibrated along the paths of bone, burrowed into the soft reaches of the flesh, coaxing open the secret places where kisses are born. Rhythms pushed through the long bodies of Elves stripped down to their sheerest clothing, moved them back and forth.

The shadows swayed.

* * *

Color out of space beings borne of the slime the remainders of—of—

Janet’s breath sliced up and down, harsh, ragged. It floated on the surfaces of her eyes, filmed her sight and softened the shadows.

Of—?

Her eyes searched the ceiling.

Janet sat up. Beside her Howard slept on, his body loose and deep, buried in a drift of heavy blankets. One white hand curled beside his face. She swung her legs out of bed. Her skin tightened at the stone’s cold, wrought itself into sharp gooseflesh. She sucked in breath, lifted the soles of her feet off the stone floor. She yanked bedclothes into her lap, wrapped a heavy velvet coverlet around her shoulders.

that which swims the backside of the deeps the forgotten moon the swimming of the remainders of

Janet took deep, slow breaths. Rubbed her eyes. Closed them.

things that never were

The music came to her as something distant, muted, a heartbeat buried deep within its own sleeping flesh, thrumming, pulling the blood far away from the skin, cooling it. It was like breath as she stood, a thought brushing the hairs of her body, soft and gentle against her skin, barely there, a whisper.

The mountains the mist the silk the secrets of

...oh for fuck’s sake STOP THINKING ABOUT THIS

Janet went to the wardrobe, where she pulled out a gown by feel. The fabric was smooth to her fingertips, its weave tight, she knew without the benefit of light that it was a dark blue, like the sky at dusk. There were embellishments in the cloth made to look like stars, there were little stars made out of silver and some kind of stone she didn’t know, something akin to opals and mother-of-pearl. They were sewn in dancing garlands about the neck and the sleeves. Pale grey fur, silver in places, white tips, the color of snow. The gown slid down over her like it belonged there, seams on her body like palms skimming. She flushed. She shook the heaviness of the furs down onto her shoulders, felt them settle in an embrace that bared her throat to the cold air, left her collarbones naked, chilled the tops of her shoulder blades. She thought she smelled the faintest trace of woodsmoke trapped in the furs.
“Are you sure of that?”

Her heart sped up. To her ears it had sounded like her own voice, at home in her own throat, but it was also like her bones had changed it somehow, filtered it through spice and flames and honey that had long since turned into amber.

Her heart, out of control. It galloped across the inside of her chest. Her mouth filled with a sharp, sweet taste of metal.

* * *

Thranduil reclined upon a platform of cushions, his long limbs drowsy upon their heavy blankets. Tiny silver lamps hung down all around him. They swayed at the ends of their chains, blue and purple glass houses flashing bloodied torchlight. Lugmoki’s hair spread out, her lashes lowered, her face at rest on the curve of his shoulder. Dancers spun fog-colored veils in circles around them. Lugmoki’s spine curved, supple with half-remembered dreams. He reached over her, plucked a flayed-open fig from the small of her back. Sistra rattled in time to the thronging beat as he lifted it to his lips.

* * *

There were deep scullery bowls of elderflower-scented water, its steaming surface floating with dried rose petals and tight tiny buds of lavender grown far away, on the high fields where the deep dark woods gave way into the Dunlands. Frodo imagined those cool purple fields as he scooped up the water with his hands and rinsed the travel-dust from his face. The water felt hot; it shocked following the coolness of the air, sent a passing shiver through his skin.

Once upon a time, Bilbo had bought a jar of lavender honey from the Dunlands. Frodo had been young, his memory of that age made up of disconnected parts that would clink together and spark off a picture: the jar so tiny, round, made with purple glass. Always on a high shelf. Bilbo had taken it down one day, springtime, the light lime green and stinging his eyes. Bilbo spread a dollop of it on a buttered scone. He broke off a piece. Frodo took a bite and thought the color pale and strange, the flavor heady and assertive on the tongue, like being slapped with a woman’s delicate hand, her small bones crystal-hard and sheathed in velvet.

He smelled the honey’s precursor in the scent of the buds, an imprint of sugars grown potent in a hot dry place.

“What is it?” asked Sam.

“Home,” said Frodo, wiping his face. “I was thinking of home.”

Legolas appeared with two small silver cups of wine. He held them out, by the stems, in the fingers of one hand. “Drink.”

Sam took his cup. It trembled in his hand. He looked up. “What will it do?”

“That which is in wine’s power to do,” said Legolas. He smiled. “And just a little bit more.”

“It’s doctored, then.”

Legolas inclined his head. “Tis festival wine.” He watched them, took a slow sip of his own goblet and Sam and Frodo watched a dark luminescence unfold into his features. The firelight moved
restless but kind upon his skin, shadows like soft and stroking wings. His eyes moved from daylight into dusk. “That is its purpose.”

Sam sipped. “The flavor,” he said, looking into the cup with awe. “It’s exceptional. Such vineyards as these grapes must call home…I cannot imagine.” He closed his eyes. A warmth settled through him, a deep sigh that filled his mind with images of sitting by the fire. He saw himself, pipe in hand, a cat upon his lap while bitter snows swirled outside the window panes. “I cannot,” he murmured.

Legolas chuckled. “I see it, Master Gamgee, plain as the sunset falling across the tops of the trees. The evendust has draw her veil across your face.”

The sound of Legolas’s voice jolted him, and the reverie fell away from him like a suit of clothes. Sam blushed.

Frodo took a deep drink of the wine. The sound of the music intensified, throbbing through the stone. It came to him in waves of gentle heat. It pressed against his skin. The music felt like water, rushing currents, towering whitecaps the likes of which he had never seen in life but which his blood remembered, some ancient path down to the sea written in the dark heart of his bones. The wine’s flush rose into his face, but with it came a mad exhilaration, a whirling delirium that crawled out of his exhaustion and threatened to float him close to the source. He wavered back and forth inside his skin. *I am like a flame,* he thought, the words disconnecting themselves. *Borne of air and the desire for heat.*

“Frodo?”

* * *

Faramir woke once in the silver light of dawn, stirred out of sleep by soft, featherlike touches on his face. They came, gentle, fading away with the dream he could not remember. He shook his head. A soft weight landed on his eyelashes.

He opened his eyes, stared up into a milky sky.

It was snowing.
Janet sits at a small desk and as if waking, as if full of new words and wishing to make record of all that has transpired throughout the night, she folds her feet beneath her and bends over a sheaf of paper with a pen and her hair falls, a single curl, it grazes the paper while her pen scratches letters she does not understand into thick heavy parchment and outside the sun retreats behind a swift cloud and

She ascended all of the underground levels until she came to a lone outcropping surrounded by sheer rock faces. It jutted high up, over the rolling tops of the Mirkwood trees, over the slow crawling mists of their leaves, above the shadow-woven luminescence of the Spiders' silks. She climbed up through a narrow vertical tunnel to get there, hand over hand, scaling ledges chipped into the dark stone, her bare toes gripping.

* * *

The heat of the room, generated of breath and blood, dancing flames, of wood crumbling into embers, all of it journeyed beneath her skin. It carried lethargy, followed the roads of her veins, wound itself snakelike through the chambers of her heart.

Sweat broke through her skin, wrought itself into a glaze of tiny beads. A smile awakened in her face, rose to her lips. It passed through her face like a rainstorm.

Thranduil lay sodden beneath her, his skin held to her skin, adrift in a bed of dreams.

She caught a whiff of meadow-flowers, those that will burst from the ground during a brief springtime and yearn, fierce, toward the sun. Her mouth filled with a taste of snowmelt.

Lugmokí opened her eyes. The light of the halls, molded and twisted by the dancers, it fluttered, rippled like silk on the walls.

The waters of Thranduil’s reverie stilled into a mirror.

Lugmokí closed her eyes. She sank down through the tidal flats of his heat, his darkness, his hushed currents. She swam through his idle blood and looked through a window in the house of his memories. Swathed in an embrace of dark velvet, he lay prone within a recollection of his wife’s arms, she, a long-limbed beauty wrought of springtime flowers and moonlight, she that got him Legolas by the fertile floodplain of her body. The basin of her hips was still as a glacial lake, the color of her eyes as the reflected sky. The tide of her desire ran deep and clear and sweetened by the sun.

She left him there, climbed the ladder of her own blood and reached for the inside of herself, sought the boundaries of her flesh. She pressed herself tight against the inside of it. She sewed herself back into her skin; the cool of the stone seeped through, it came to her carried on the gusts of heat. She opened her eyes.

The shadows were only shadows, the light only light cheapened into jewels by facets of glass. The bodies of Elves wove themselves into the air, stuttered the light; they succumbed to the primitive push and pull of drums, the lilt of melody, the weight of a human voice polished with gold. Her ears parsed the music into its base elements, its origin in the thuds of hearts, the rustle of leaves on the wind, the steady stride of water over river rocks, the murmur of rain, the songs of insects and breath and pain and flowers and bones popping loose of their gristled moorings.
Lugmokí stood. The room reeled around her, it wheeled like a cloak snatched by a strong gust of wind. She looked into the darkest corners of the room and saw a blue-black grassland sprawled beneath the deepest part of the night. Stars clung to the low breast of the darkness, they glittered, their shards of light dug into her eyes like tiny chips of stone. The walls, the light, the bodies of the Elves dancing like flames in the wind, all of it fluttered, it rippled, it blew away like a tent snatched by a strong wind and sent cartwheeling across the flat dunes of the Haradwaith desert. She watched it tumble across low undulating ripples of grass, their endless sea stilled into gentle swells. Low to the distant horizon clung a smear of deep red.

There was a fire. Over it spread the branches of a tree, thick, heavy, flat against the sky; it was barren, caught in its winter season though the air was mild and still damp with the dew of an approaching dawn. Lugmokí walked, she held out her arms for balance, the room hung heavy at the corners of her consciousness and jittered with her light footfalls. The air that blew hard into her face smelled of wet earth, a vague kiss of stone, grass, thick leather grown stiff with the sweat of long days spent on horseback. The fire crackled. It sent up a whirl of sparks that blinked, caught inside a plume, and scattered on a long slant away from the tree’s trunk.

The shape of a man moved out of the darkness. The firelight reached out to him, cut him loose from the pitch black. He squatted on his furs, a muscular body clad in rude felt, the legs sheathed in boots to the knee, a tie of blue tassels bound to his waist. He wore a hood, bent his head to the flames and held out his hands, the fingers spread, the skin copper as the rest of him. The pointing finger of the left bore a silver ring set with a sky blue stone.

“Do you know where you are?”

Lugmokí blinked. “Yes, lord.”

“Where are you?”

“Tis the sea of grass, horse lord.” Lugmokí walked to the fire and got on her knees. She sat on her heels, hands on her thighs, and watched the man’s face. “It belongs to the nation of Ulthar, and to the king descended from the line of Ulthar, he who strode first, long ago, onto this sea of grass and gave the land his name to bear.”

“This golden drug in your veins,” he said, lifting his face. “I do not like the weight of it. It drags through you, clasps your perceptions tight to its feverish breast.”

His eyes were dark as the night above them, slanted and long, the cheekbones flat and high, the lips full and dark as the skin of a red plum.

“Tell me. When you look at me, what do you see?”

“I see one of the Ulthari, stout men both brave and strong. I see a horse lord of the great grasslands,” said Lugmokí. “With his black hair in thick braids, and skin the color of red clay, and wide dark lips that make his teeth appear white and strong.”

“Shake off the chains of the Ivonethir,” said the man, leaning back onto his hunkers. Firelight climbed his face, spread shadow beneath his broad nose. “I will wait. I will warn you, though. They are heavy.”

“I feel no chains.” Wind swirled around her, carried a faint scent of skin. She tasted smoke. “I would not know where to begin.”

“Lift up your arms.”
Lugmokí did, and in the beginning there was no resistance, but when she looked down she saw a web of metal dripping from the undersides of her elbows. It jingled into chains, willed into such by the man’s words, but even though they looked like chains they did not feel like chains. They felt like dreams, the castoffs of deep sleep.

“Shake them off. I will wait.”

Lugmokí moved her arms in close to her body, she twisted them, rolled her shoulders until she felt a trace of chains slide down her skin. Their touch was cool; she shifted her spine, angled her upper body in such a way as to trick them into falling, into collapsing away from her beneath their own weight.

“Look at me now,” he said.

Lugmokí did. Where the man’s eyes had been she saw those of Aulendil, Sauron-that-was, those familiar and bottomless pools of dark memory, quicksilver intelligence, and drowned regrets. Trapped in the long shapes of the Easterlings, they gained a measure of strange beauty, like the comfort of dusk falling upon the end of a long day.

“Would you help me?”

“I cannot. The Ivonethir has its roots in your hröa and not your fëa. Your flesh is your own. These chains are laid upon you by your choice and so they are your burden to shed.”

She contorted the joints in her shoulders. With a grunt, she popped them loose. Pain lanced between her ribs. It climbed into her lungs, shallowed her breath. The network of chains grew heavier, it stretched the tendons strung between her muscles and kindled them to burn. Breathing hard, she rolled her spine and the jingling cloak of lead fell. It chipped divots into the grass.

Lugmokí looked up. It was Sauron she saw there, Sauron as she knew him with his wild curls of hair, sand-colored skin, the bold bones of the South in his face.

“Why does my mind make this skin for you to wear?” She looked around. “And why do I find you here, marooned in the sea of grass, at least a thousand wheels from the furthest edge of what we call our homelands?” She looked closer at his face; she was startled, it came up in her cheeks on a blast of galloping blood. His nearness lay on her like the blanket of heat thrown off by the fire. “How are you here? Why? Have you come through the doors? Are you to come through them? Do you come for me?”

Sauron watched her.

All around them, the darkness of the night turned on hinges made of stars.

* * *

“You found this place too, I see.”

Janet saw Jeremy tucked in the corner of the tiny balcony, his face turned toward the distant horizon. He wore a blanket around his shoulders. In one hand, he held a goblet of wine.

“Is this where you come to get drunk?”

“Fuck you, no,” he said, taking a sip. “Is this where you come to get drunk?”

Janet sighed. She went to the rail, rested her hands on the stone. She leaned forward, scanned the
tops of the trees, their leaves illuminated by the sickly glow of the spiders’ silks. The light from the stars felt cleaner, it was sharper, it fell from the stars in torrents that peeled the shapes of thin clouds from the underside of the sky and set them adrift on silver-tinged currents of wind.

“I feel weird,” said Janet.

Jeremy shrugged. “That’s because you are weird.”

“Fuck you, no,” she said, turning her back on the sky. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Everything about this is weird.” He gestured to the panorama with the goblet. “This place is like the fucking king shit of weird.”

“I had some strange dreams. They’re kind of like the kind you get sometimes when the weather is really unstable. Just…weird shit. Barometric pressure dreams.”

“I don’t have those.”

“Okay, fine. Imagine what that’s like, then.” She went to him and wrapped a corner of his blanket around her shoulders. “Or are you too drunk to even do that?”

Jeremy made a face. “I’m not drunk at all.”

“They’re weird. Unsettling.” She watched bats take flight from the treetops and wheel in a scattered cloud across the horizon. “I thought if I came up here the cold air would wake me up all the way and, you know, give me some perspective.”

He put an arm around her shoulders. “How’s that working out for you?”

Janet took his goblet out of his hand. She drank. “It’s not.”
Hold back the chains of Thranduil’s accursed alchemy, Móriel-that-was, and listen. If you cannot do it with your flesh then do it with your mind.

Lugmokí sat cross-legged on her side of the fire and looked up. Stars turned in a slow circle, they made strange patterns; between them more stars, whole constellations of them, disappeared and reappeared only to disappear again, retreating back into unfamiliar worlds.

Yes. I come. I come for you, and also I come for whomever you would wish to carry back here with you, should you indeed wish such a thing.

Lugmokí looked at him. He remained in his shape, his face was still his face, but the topography of him dimmed. His boundaries flickered in and out.

“Why do you come to me as a man of the Ulthari?” Wind rippled into her hair and pulled it loose, drew it into fire-shapes that snapped at the darkness. “Why here, camped at the base of the tree named dragon’s blood? Does something bode ill in that kingdom?”

Ulthar is on my mind as of late. Your mind has dredged these images from mine and made a room of them for you and I to trade words in.

Wind blew her hair in her face. The fire made the darkness darker, it deepened the black of the sky and the drifts of shadow settled in the low places. She stood. Turned in a circle. She paused, caught sight of tiny snags of orange glittering in the far distance, they hovered where the horizon would drop the farthest reach of wheels behind a curtain of sky.

A woman travels with you. She makes her bond with Fëanor-that-was, he who in lands that are not lands at all calls himself the Maker. Tell me of her.

“Janet? I know nothing, except that she is the honored guest of the Maker of Xe Nahadu and that she came, with her blood-kin, out of the In-Between. She pulled him with her as a horse lord will pull the reins of his mount; he, the Elf you call Fëanor, Curufinwë, Kinslayer, Maker of cities, Maker of jewels. He came with her. He came out of his city, he followed her out the way a starving dog will follow any hand that smells of meat.”

I taste such contempt in you. It coats each syllable with a taste of spent brimstone.

Lugmokí kept her eyes on the sprawl of distant campfires. “You asked me to tell you of Janet. I have told you of Janet.”

No. You have told me of her bonds, those she has laid upon Jewel-Maker and those that she has honored in times when those such as herself are prone to forsaking any and all forms of honor. The blood-kin you speak of. The man Jeremy. He is her brother. Yes?

“Tell me of Ulthar,” she said. “What is it that I see in the back of your mind?”

Tell me of the woman you call Janet. I will then speak to you of Ulthar.

Lugmokí turned her attention back to the fire. She sat. Sauron looked at her, looked into her, his eyes remained on her eyes even when she cast her eyes away from him.

“She has come far through the worlds.” Lugmokí tossed her gaze into the fire. “She was taken
from the world of her birth by a thin place between the worlds and carried into one facet of Ilúvatar’s jewel, that which we call Middle-earth. She then traveled by door into that facet which you and I call home. She passed by thin place from Obira into the In-Between and traveled back out again by door to find herself landed in a third facet of Middle-earth, that which houses me now and is the spring from which Thranduil’s alchemy, those chains called Ivonethir, flows.”

_Do not withhold your wisdom from me._

“It is unusual for one of Man-kind to find and pass through so many doors.”

_I will tell you of Ulthar but you need to speak this line of thought to the end._

Sweat prickled at Lugmokí’s hairline. “She is strange. A sliver of her fëa lives both in and out of time, it is there and gone, she perceives things her kind are not privy to but perceives them only as a shadow of themselves, a reflection. Her brother is less so. Whatever she carries, whether you name it by blood or life-ribbon, it came to her through the matrilineal line.”

_She senses my presence and my unrest. It filters down to her sleeping and unguarded mind through dreams. It was not so with Gandalf. I find this curious._

“Are you here now?”

Yes.

“I did not feel you until now.” Lugmokí looked into his eyes. “Why?”

_The weight of the Ivonethir is heavy. Bearing its mantle has been a distraction for you and for the many who have taken it. By its grace I have been able to enter this world without detection._

“Have I satisfied your curiosity in the manner of Janet?”

_You have. I shall ponder all that you have told me._

“What of Ulthar?”

* * *

“I don’t want to try the evendust,” said Janet. “I don’t trust it.”

“Neither do I,” said Jeremy. “I could go for a cigarette, though.” He shrugged. “But of course Thranduil doesn’t have any of those laying around.”

“Gandalf has tobacco. Well. Most of the time he does.” She shivered. She curled her chilly fingertips inward, pressed her fists to her belly. “I don’t know what you’d do for papers, though.”

“In the old days they would use tobacco leaves.” He grinned, twirled the tips of an imaginary mustache. “Like a cigar.”

“Perhaps there are tobacco leaves to be had, then.”

“I should probably quit the cigs, anyhow,” said Jeremy. He shifted inside the blanket. “It’s not the healthiest habit in the world.”
“No.”

He looked at Janet sidelong. “So are you gonna tell me about your dreams or what.”

She looked into the empty goblet. “I didn’t think you cared.”

“What? Me?” Jeremy picked up a jug off the smooth stone floor, pulled the cork out with his teeth. “I care deeply, dahling. Of course I do. Here. Have a bit more tipple.”

She giggled and held out the goblet. “Thank you. It really is delicious.”

“Hell yeah it is. This is the best wine I’ve had in ages.” He poured. “Not that there’s such a variety of vintages to be had in the ‘Du.”

“I guess Elvish wine is the best.” Janet shrugged, took a drink. “I don’t know. I haven’t had wine in ages either. There was some in Obira, but I couldn’t afford it.”

Jeremy looked at her. His face was relaxed, but a hard glitter had come up in his eyes. “Obira?”

“Yeah, sorry. Mordor. It’s port city in Mordor.” She passed the goblet back to him. “I was living there when I came to Xe Nahadu.”

His eyebrows went up. “You lived in Mordor?”

“Yeah. For a year and a half or so. I think. The seasons there aren’t as clear-cut as they are here.” Janet pulled the blanket tight around her shoulders. “It’s hot.”

He leaned back and looked into her face. “What did you do there?”

“I worked in a mercantile.” Her eyes roamed the sky, traced the shapes of the trees. “I made clothes. Repaired them, too. The fabrics were beautiful, well some of them were, it was a port city so all manner of things were always coming and going through.” She smiled a little, turned it inward. “Silks, cottons, linens, some beautiful dyes, I mean they were magnificent even by the standards of what we grew up with. Of course most of what I handled wasn’t anything like that.” She looked at him. “I mostly saw those fabrics as they passed through on their way to better hands and kinder days.”

He took a long drink of wine. He wiped his mouth. “You make it sound like magic.”

“It was.” Janet shrugged. “A little, the way that any place can be when it’s foreign and you’re just learning to dance with it. Obira was a beautiful place. Hot, but beautiful. It was the way you might imagine an ancient Roman city to be: dusty, noisy, full of too much humanity but cosmopolitan in its way. I got by there. I made do. Then, of course, I came to Xe Nahadu which is not so nice a place. It was beautiful in its own way, a hard way, but it was not as hospitable as Obira.”

“Well you can thank the fabulous Fëanor for that,” said Jeremy. “He didn’t care much one way or the other what happened to any of us, so long as there were people to scavenge the wastes for his electronic junk, but I am not going to get into that shit with you right now. I don’t feel like arguing. I’m too tired.” He chuckled. “And maybe getting to be a little bit drunk.” He held up his thumb and forefinger, positioned them a centimeter apart. “Just tipsy.”

She laughed. “Me too. I don’t want to argue, either. We’ve done enough of that already.” He passed me the goblet and she held it; the earthenware stem was warm from the touch of his hand. “I won’t argue with you about Fëanor. I know you’re not going to make shit up just to piss me off. I believe what you have to say.” She took a drink. “If you say that’s how it was, that’s how it was,
and there’s no reason for you to lie to me. You don’t have to. I’ve seen him get lost for days inside his own head. I don’t know what it would take to drag him out again if he got lost for weeks instead of days, and judging by all the things he’s built, I think that’s been a common occurrence.”

“Will you tell me about the dreams?”

She sighed. “They’re starting to fall apart, I keep trying to put the pieces back together but they’re slippery.” She closed her eyes. “There was someone, male I think. I wanted to wake up but couldn’t. He kept talking about silk.”

“You mean the spider silk?”

“I don’t know, maybe. Probably. There was a sense of warning, an admonition not to believe everything I’m told, and to distrust whatever the evendust might show me. That’s why I don’t want to take it. I don’t think it’s as harmless a drug as the Elves would have us believe. I think it does things to…I don’t know, things to certain parts of your mind, maybe the parts where psychic stuff like ESP comes from, or maybe even the parts that control our instinctive sense of fear. The limbic system. Changes to the limbic system, even if they aren’t permanent, aren’t things that we, as human beings, can afford.” Janet looked at him. “There are the only three humans here. In all of these woods. It’s fucking a little with my radar, you know?”

“It doesn’t fuck with my radar but it fucks with my head,” said Jeremy. “Elves are weird looking. Their faces disturb me. I look at them, and they don’t look right.” He poured more wine into the goblet and she smelled it, an essence of grapes, sugars, tannins and sweetness given over to a bitter bite of alcohol. “Their expressions aren’t right. Even though they’ve been nothing but nice to me, it still makes me nervous.”

She looked out at the forest. “There is always a sense of danger in the face of an Elf.”

Jeremy lifted an eyebrow. “You say that like you know it from experience.”

Janet picked up the jug. “That’s because I do.”
The sun sat low on the purple rim of the world, its red fires banked behind the dark and ragged shapes of the mountains. A wind stirred overhead, funneled down into the village and stirred up sparks from fresh fires. It passed through Faramir’s hair and when he inhaled, he tasted rain, lightning, pines growing above the distant tree line.

“Tis a long and dangerous road to the Tower. I would spare an escort for you, had I anyone to spare.”

“I thank you, Urzok,” said Faramir, tying his pack to his waist. “For all that you’ve done on my behalf.”

“The mother of Obînu,” said Urzok. “Remember: she is called Gidobín, and her birthplace is Mughashah. That noble lady, she of the thunder hips, dwells on the eighth floor of the Tower. While many who dwell there may answer to her birth name, she is the only Gidobín to bear the birthplace designation of Mughashah.”

“Fear not.” Faramir smiled. “I have written it all down on a scroll of paper.”

“Good, then.” Urzok makes a fist, rests it over his heart. He bows his head. “Fare thee well, Faramir of Gondor, and may the road ever rise to meet your feet.”

“Aye,” said Faramir, returning the gesture. “Long days and pleasant nights to you and all of your kin.”

Urzok left him to the foot of the high narrow path. Faramir took hold of its ropes and fitted his feet into the steps.

He ascended slowly, watching the village sink down into a pool of flickering gray shadow. He stepped up into the vast twilight of the Gorgoroth. Stretching across the flat face of the land, tiny flickering fires came to life. Wind slapped into his face, hot; he smelled ash and sunlight trapped deep in black stones, creosote, a faint odor of bright yellow flowers like warm honey dripped onto the ground.

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Gandalf left his room. He came out, followed the constant thrum of music up to the halls, wove his way through them. There was food spread across the cavernous room, and he was hungry. He navigated his way from table to table to table and filled a plate. He carried it back to his room, closed the door.

The plate he put on a small table next to the bed. He sat down, covered his lap with the blankets.

He plucked a fig off the edge of the plate. He held it up, looked at it, then split it open. He dug his fingers into the leathery skin until its folds of pink seeds welled up.

“So he will be here soon, then,” he muttered.

Gandalf bit into the flesh of the fig and its sweetness flooded his mouth and cast a haze of contentment over his thoughts.

With his mind he searched for Janet, found her up and out of the caverns, her warmth clinging to its
face and to that of her brother. Both of them looked out at the cold black of the sky and felt unease.

“There is much to be uneasy about,” he said, sucking fig juice off his fingers.

Fëanor he could not find, could not pin him down; his fëa was as a flickering light that passes from cloud to cloud, wavering, like the cold hems of the winter goddesses as they stride across the night skies of the far and frozen North; it seemed to him as though the Elf slept, cast deep in dreams that were not of evendust’s making, nor were they the fault of an ocean of Dorwinion wine. Rather it felt as though they were spun out of a wish to escape, a way to seek comfort deep into the dark places of his own mind, far from memories of hot blood falling into his fingers illuminated by the bright and terrible fires at Losgar, those screaming devil-lights, progenitors of his long doom.

He sighed. There was a lamp in the corner of the room and he stared into its light, the plate of food forgotten.

In the heart of the tiny flame he saw the hearth-fires of the Gorgoroth, the torches of the Tower, and he heard Lugmoki’s voice; it came to him distant and faint, as though murmured down a corridor of long years; it crackled in his ear like the spent syllables of a moment past: I know another road. It is an Orcish road.

“You would show me the dreaming road,” he murmured, “and instead it led me to this.”

His bonds, his long-pledged service to the Valar, creaked beneath their great age.

You do not need to walk the dreaming road. You have gone to Mordor; you have seen the truth undressed and spread in its parts upon a table. The harsh light of the volcanic desert illuminated all that you would wish to know, and laid bare what intimate details existed within those truths.

“I have no curiosity anymore,” he said, and picked up the plate.

No. That is not so. That could never be so. You have lost a mystery and gained an answer. Many would, and have, traded lifetimes to lay hands upon such a thing.

Gandalf took a bite of bread. It was chewy, dense, fragrant with yeast.

All lands are my lands. I am settled back into the palm of the world like bowls nesting together in a forgotten cupboard. All I feel is exhaustion.

He drank the wine; it gleamed in its goblet, darker than blood, calm and rich as desire simmering in the flesh, heavy as a dreaming current lost in the arms of the encircling sea.

Sleep, then, Olórin. You, the Dreamer. Sleep to dream. Sauron will pierce the skin of the world to take back his woman and mayhap she will take Janet with her, she and Jeremy tugged along as though caught in the wake of a ship. Mayhap not. These are not your worries, Mithrandir. Lay them down.

Perhaps I have partaken of the evendust after all,” he mused. “Such thoughts are not thoughts I am prone to having when left to my own designs. Perhaps it is in the figs. I should think that a trace, at all times, may be adrift on the air of this place.”

He ate the figs, the bread. There was cheese too, aged, white with a strong scent. He took a bite.

When he was done, he put the plate aside. He stood. He looked around the small stone room. Its walls gleamed wet with condensation.
He longed for fields full of moon-scented dew and the flutterings of birds rousing beneath the slow rise of the sun. How they would shake off the last of their sleep. How butterflies would unfold themselves from the wet grass, rise up, draw ribbons around clusters of tiny pink and yellow flowers.

Gandalf went to the tiny closet. He took out his pack, unlaced its mouth. Spread its throat. Inside, folded up, his hat.

He took it out. Put it on.

* * *

There was a doe. Wasn’t there?

Legolas stood within a churn of dancing, still; he was the heart, wrapped up in a raging wind driven by the force of blood. He held a goblet in his fingers, looked up. The worms pulsed. He followed eddies of smoke and shadow with his eyes.

In the woods. The moss. Her slim ankles, her blood so hot.

He stumbled through the forest of arms and legs, the music thrumming in his brain, and he put his palm against the cold stone wall.

No. No doe, no blood. No woman.

The flickering torches murmured to him in the words of a desert night, black crackling consonants and vowels drawn of wind.

It was a dream, yet it was not a dream.

* * *

“So what was it like to live in Mordor?”

Janet shrugged. “It wasn’t bad.”

“Better than here?”

She snorted. “Anything’s better than here.”

“Better than Xe Nahadu?”

“Yes. Yes.” She drained off the goblet and handed it to him. “Much better than Xe Nahadu. There was order and prosperity. Crimes were not ignored the way they are in Xe Nahadu.”

“So it wasn’t total anarchy then.” Jeremy lifted the goblet. “There’s something to drink to, at least.”

“Yeah.” Janet picked up the empty jug. She looked into its mouth. She made a face. “God, you know, I have made a lot of really dumb mistakes. Stupid shit.”

“Hey, don’t do that. Everyone makes mistakes. I mean, look at me.” He finished off the goblet of wine and balanced it on the floor. “Joined the Army over yours and mom’s strenuous objections.” He shrugged. “I married Shannon just because she was pregnant. I mean, already the signs were there, but I got blinded by the baby. Then, you know, I thought having Jasmine would make her grow up but…” He snorted. “No. Just…no. I was dumb to ever think that.”
She sighed. “I don’t think. That’s my problem. I just kind of blunder my way into whatever and I understand that I have been so lucky, really, just phenomenally lucky with all of the bad decisions I have made. I have to start thinking before I start doing.” She paused. “I almost had a baby. Here. In this place, or a place like it, with no hospitals or medicine or anything.” She shook her head. “And before you go there, I know that women all over the world as we knew it have babies every day, in fields and huts and whatever else. But, you know. They also die.”

“They die in hospitals, too.”

“I know.” Janet lifted her eyes to the stars. She watched them glitter against the dark and their light was sharp, clean, ferocious. “I know they do. I never thought of childbirth as a life for a life, but sometimes it is. Maybe it always is. It’s not just about the risk of death.”

“It always is.” Jeremy’s voice was quiet. He looked down, shrugged. “You lose a piece of yourself when you have a child. It goes into him, or her, and it lives there forever and when they’re not around you’re always looking for it.”

Janet hugged him. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s…don’t be. It’s all right. Did you miscarry?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how far along I was, but it was far enough for there to be a visible…you know. A little fetus.”

He kissed the top of her head. “It’s my turn to be sorry.”

She smiled. “It’s my turn to say that it’s okay.”

“Is it?”

“I…yeah. I think so. I miscarried it in Xe Nahadu, so.”

“Hey, wait.” He let go of her. He turned his ear toward the trees. “Did you hear that?”

Janet tilted her ear. “Hear what?”

His brows furrowed. He looked at her. “It sounds like a horse.”

Janet held her breath. She heard the thud of her heart, the wind, a faint rustle of stirring leaves. She exhaled, and on the last of the exhale it came to her: a rhythm made soft with distance, steady and familiar.

“I hear it,” she said. “It’s far away, though.”

“I don’t hear anything, though,” said Jeremy. “I mean…I hear the horse, yeah, but nothing else. No Spiders shrieking, no bats taking wing, no rustle of disturbed animals. Do you think the Spiders can imitate that sound, as well? The sound of a person on horseback? I guess that would be a pretty good lure for them.”

“I don’t know,” said Janet.

Jeremy abandoned the blanket. He went to the rail, leaned over. “There’s no torchlight or lamplight either, but I wouldn’t expect to see it through the trees.” He glanced at her. “Or the silklight.”

“No.” Janet carried the blanket to the rail. “I don’t think you would see it through the silklight.” She turned her face, listened into the wind. “Are you sure it’s coming toward us and not moving
away?”

“Can’t tell.” Jeremy held his breath. “I think it’s coming toward, but the canopy may be tricky. Could be that it bounces the sound around.”

“Same with the stream we crossed on the way here.”

“Stream?”

“Yeah. You wouldn’t remember. You were out of it.”
Sauron pushed the cold off him. It came back, breathed its dampness down the back of his neck and carried the smells of fallen trees and rotten leaves like an offering.

*This place.* His horse, a heavy-boned animal with a black hide and a mane the color of dust, rode with steady indifference over the soft ground. *How quickly it has gone to ruin.*

He felt the thin places, saw them like smoke and smudged phosphorescence out of the corners of his eyes; he heard them, gossamer places thin as net, sing in voices too low for most to hear. It was a warbling sound that gnawed with blunted teeth on his bones and put him in mind of a spinning top, a child’s toy with the center taken out of it and left to spin itself out of true and fall… where? Broken and forgotten into a cobwebbed corner? Into a pocket of shadow so deep that the light would never illuminate its face again? Or would it just spin and wobble, spin and wobble, caught like a leaf in the weak eddy of a stream, the spin too lazy to suck it down into a sandy bottom.

He clenched his teeth, ignored it. He pushed away the sensation, but like the cold it kept coming back. It whispered beneath its atonal song, murmured words dragged out of the void.

*It’s as though the land has borne many scars so broad and deep that the weight of them has worn through the fabric that binds the worlds together.*

“Yet it has not,” he whispered. “Thranduil the Great has left his kingdom to rot.”

*I’ve left a spell in the door like a stick to prop it open and it will last hours and not days. I must hurry.*

Sauron lifted himself in the stirrups, spurred his horse. The animal’s muscles flexed beneath him into the shapes of thunderheads and let loose the lightning. Thunder rose in a flurry of hooves. He looked into the dark. He could read the subtle grades of light; the trunk of trees were shapes caught in sound.

In the back of his mind, Lugmokí sat on her heels on the other side of a fire. She smelled long warm hours of sunlight as they released heat from the grasslands like a scent of sweet water. The wind shifted the smoke of the fire and it blew against her face like a veil. Her eyes watered; her irises gleamed, wrought into black opals by a reflection of flames.

*You need to go.* He made the words in his mind and set them adrift on the sound of his voice. *Make ready. Leave the party, for I will be there soon.*

Lugmokí did not move. She looked into his eyes and her gaze was heavy. He felt it pierce his belly. Her words came to him in whispers: *What of Ulthar?*

Sauron closed his eyes. Beneath him the horse made a straight line for the mountain and he heard hoofbeats ricochet off the stone.

He did not think of Ulthar.

Sauron’s thoughts turned to Chyan, a high desert province to its south with long expanses of pale grass that only knew the fleeting kiss of greenness in spring.

The rains would come over the mountains, pushed up by the currents of air circulating over a distant sea, and they would sweep in low across miles and miles of dry brush, grass, and low-lying
evergreens, their trunks and branches pushed into twisted shapes by the wind. They would clash with the heat of the Haradwaith, kindling powerful storms that raged downhill and drenched the soil. Its roots stirred to life, the grass would turn a trembling pale green while bright orange flowers burst forth from crevices in the dry soil, tinting the low light of a setting sun the color of fire.

Chyan, that city-state of farmers and herders.

Trouble lies behind the Silk Wall.

* * *

Janet cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled: “Hello?”

“What are you…” Jeremy wiped his face. “Never mind.” He shook his head. “Forget it.”

The horse startled a little beneath its rider and danced sideways. The sound of her voice awakened the Spiders and their eerie cries rose up out of the woods, rising, falling, overlapping one another as they spread out to all corners of the wood.

The rider looked up. “You would awaken all of this accursed land to bless me with a greeting?”

Janet smiled. The stranger’s voice was deep and polished, melodious, and she liked the sound of it. She switched to Black Speech.

“Yes. Yes I would. King Thranduil is in the middle of a festival, drunk on evendust, and he is in no condition to greet anyone. Despite the fact that he will be annoyed with me for doing it on his behalf, I wouldn’t want you to think me rude. I imagine you knew that I was here.”

“Yes, I did.” He smiled, teeth bright in the darkness. “You speak the Black Speech of Barad-dûr.”

“Yes, lord.”

“Do you hail from that land?”

“No. I lived there for a time, but I do not hail from Mordor.”

He bowed his head. “I have come for Lugmokí.”

Jeremy grabbed Janet’s arm. “Did he say something about Lugmokí?”

“Very well,” said Janet. “She is here. I will come down and let you in if another does not beat me to it.”

“Is that Sauron?” Jeremy whispered.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “I think so. If it is not Sauron, then it is someone sent in his stead.”

“I don’t think he’s the kind of guy to send someone in his stead.”

“No,” said Janet. “I don’t think so either.”

The man dismounted. From their high vantage point he looked tall; swathed in dark blue cotton, the shape of his body blended into the night. He took the reins, led the horse onto the stone ramp in front of the doors. Its hooves clicked. He paused, looked up. “What is your name so that I might thank you properly?”
“Janet,” she called. “Janet Lambert.”

* * *

Lug모끼 staggered out of the hall. She climbed a spiral of stone stairs to her room.

*Xinyang? There is trouble in Xinyang?*

She opened the door. The bed seemed to float on the floor; it rocked like a raft beneath her. She sat on its edge, pulled on her shoes.

*You would send me to Xinyang when I have never been, not once, not even for the sake of pleasure?*

She watched her fingers work the laces. She searched her mind for the campfire, the rolling grasslands, but she could not find it.

Her limbs shook as she gathered her things out of the closet. Sweat welled up on her brow; it ran down the sides of her face. She stuffed her clothing down into her pack. Her fingers trembled as she buckled on the guns she had carried out of Xe Nahadu.

The temperature of the air dropped as she left the living quarters behind. She entered a wide and empty corridor filled with torches.

Janet stood before the doors. She was wrapped in a blanket.

“I am here.” Lug모끼 wavered on her feet, her face slick with sweat. “You would send me into Xinyang?”

Sauron stood beside a large black horse, the reins of his mount in hand. He wore the attire of the Thunderclap nomads. She smelled the long memory of grass in the horse’s skin, the anxiety simmering in its blood.

Janet looked at her. “Xinyang? You mean behind the Silk Wall?”

Jeremy looked back and forth between them. “What are you talking about? I can’t understand you.”

Sauron handed the reins to Janet. He came forward, put his arm around Lug모끼’s waist. She allowed some of her strength to leave her. He looped her arm around his neck, held her free hand in his. “We don’t have to talk about this now,” he murmured, taking a step. “You will go home before you go anywhere.”

Janet’s eyes flicked back and forth between the two of them. She looked at Jeremy, switched her words into English. “You’re going to Xinyang?”

Jeremy watched her face. “What the hell is Xinyang?”

Sauron walked Lug모끼 to the horse’s flank. “It is a country to the far east and south of Mordor.” He eased her foot into the stirrup, helped her climb onto the horse’s back. “It lies behind a five thousand wheel long wall.”

“People call it the Silk Wall,” said Janet. “Because that’s where all the silk in Middle-earth comes from.”

“Yes.” Sauron inclined his head. “It is so.”
“The dress I am wearing now,” sighed Lugmokí. “Its cloth comes from Xinyang.”

“Most of the silk that finds its way into Mordor comes through Obira,” Janet said to Jeremy, her eyes still moving back and forth between Sauron and Lugmokí. “The big boats come in from the outermost shores of Nurn and they come laden, weighed down with bolts of cloth. Natural colored cotton comes out of the East, linen, by the time the silk gets to Obira it’s already been dyed, sometimes embroidered. They pass through another place on the way where indigo and carmine are manufactured and much of the silk gets dyed there before passing on. Merchants pull into the docks at first light and unload all day long.”

“Chyan,” said Sauron. “It is the region of Chyan that produces the dyes.”

“Not all of them, though. The purple comes from Xinyang.”

“Yes,” said Sauron. “You lived in Obira?”

Janet sketched a little curtsy. “I did, lord, once upon a time.”

Jeremy watched Lugmokí. “What is wrong with Lugmokí?”

“Evendust,” said Sauron, fitting his boot into the stirrup and swinging up behind her. The English words sat strangely in his mouth, carved sharp out of sound and unworn by years of familiarity. “It is an infernal drug that must work its way out of her system. It takes days for the body to break it down.”

“Yes,” said Jeremy. “I know. I got the raw stuff when I came here. Silk poisoning.” His smile was tight. “It almost killed me, as a matter of fact.”

“You did well to live through it,” said Sauron. “Most go mad and kill themselves in one fashion or another.”

“So I have been told.”

“I’ll go to Xinyang with you,” said Janet, her eyes on Lugmokí. She looked at Sauron and bowed her head. “If you will have me, of course.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “Didn’t we just have this conversation?”

“What conversation?”

“You know, that one about you blundering into things.”

“I’m not blundering into anything.” She turned. “I’m trying to take advantage of an opportunity.” She crossed her arms. “Maybe, at least, if they’ll take us through the door. What else is there? Do you really think we should stay here in Spiderland? How long is Thranduil’s hospitality going to last, since he’s not exactly known for his overabundance of hospitality? Will he escort us out of here, take us to the nearest town? Will he even take us out of the forest, or will he just take use outside the gates and leave us there to fend for ourselves?” She shrugs, throws up her hands. “We don’t know.”

“We?” He put his hands on his hips. “You think you’re going to just drag me with you to Chee Gang or whatever?”

Janet pursed her lips. “It’s Xinyang, fuckface.” She puts her hands on her hips. “Do you really think I would leave you here? Really?”
“I don’t know.” Jeremy gestures at the empty, vaulted corridor. “You’re in a pretty big hurry to leave Fëanor, and Gandalf, and the fabulous Howard Lovecraft.”

“Fuck you.” She narrowed her eyes. “Stay, then. See how well you’ll get along here without me.”

He snorted. “I think I’d probably manage just fine, thank you very much.”

“Oh really?” Janet lifted an eyebrow. “I speak four languages, you know. How about you? How many do you speak?” She slapped a palm to her forehead. “Oh…that’s right! Just one, and it’s the one that absolutely no one in any version of Middle-earth understands! When was the last time you hunted for your own food? Or foraged? Or slept in a tent? Or did you habitually shoot your dinner through the window of your swanko apartment, the one with electricity and heat and refrigeration?”

Jeremy folded his arms. “You haven’t thought this through at all.”

“I’ve thought this far: if I can get back to Obira, I can fend for myself. I’ve done it before.” Janet shifted lifted her chin. “Maybe I’ll pick up a fifth language once I get there and seek passage to Xinyang on my own.”

“And leave me here.” He raised his voice. “By myself.”

“Yes. If you’re too stupid to come with me, that’s on you. It’s your problem.”

“Yes,” murmured Lugmokí, half-asleep, “they do always fight this much. It is the way of siblings in their world.”

“It is the way of siblings in all worlds,” said Sauron. “Even in the beginning of all times this was so.”

“You have made your decision,” she murmured.

Sauron held the reins. The horse shifted beneath them. “And you have made yours.”

“If you will stop fighting we will go,” sighed Lugmokí. “Get what things you would take with you.” She cast her tired eyes upon them. “There is little time to waste.”

“That horse isn’t going to carry four,” said Jeremy.

Janet took the blanket off her shoulders and shoved it into his arms. “You go and get what we need. I’ll go get us a horse.”

He lifted his brows. “You can ride a horse?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” said Janet, striding past him. “I can do a lot of things I couldn’t do before.”
Makom-bu

Janet woke up, hard white light chinking through the felt seams of the tent. She took a breath. She smelled her own sweat, turned-over sod, horses.

Her bed was warm, the blankets soft.

She closed her eyes. For a brief moment she was disoriented; a memory of her bed in Barad-dûr, her Mordor apartment, still lived in her skin.

The black rock tiles would gleam in the darkness of night. They caught the red light of the torches, the candles, a distant glow of Orodruin; the polished surfaces would reflect the trapped light back and forth, up and down, until it was like being caught in a storm of burning butterflies.

Her Mordor-bed was big. Unlike these cots with their rickety frames and wool-tick pads, her mattress was kind and gentle and dressed with lightweight cotton soft as down. To fall asleep was to abandon the dregs of the day, to float into dreams a flower on the smooth surface of a still pond.

_I miss it._

Janet unfolded her body, stretched her arms and legs. The blankets were heavy. She pushed them off.

Within the kingdom of Ulthar, that enormity of grassland that makes up its heart—what Lugmokí calls the Sea of Grass—is called Big Sky.

Before she first stepped foot on the great Sea of Grass, she would have found Makom-bu a strange name for it, but with her first view of its long flat hills, its mists rising with the first light of dawn, it was the grandeur of the sky that stole her breath. In the Ulthari tongue, Big Sky is rendered Makom-bu, but its literal translation is _the very-blue which covers the world._

The sky of the grassland glows cobalt at the horizon line. It throws off the night with spears of heavy gold light. The first warmth touches the land, burns off the tendrils of mist until they fall in dews upon long soft blades of grass. By afternoon the light is bright and clear and sharp, the shadows on the ground long and crisp. The winds come out of the north, constant and cool, strong and clean.

Looking straight up at the sky is like falling face-first into a fragrant drift of blue hyacinths.

_You are not in Kansas anymore._

Janet turned over, twisting. It cracked the vertebrae in the small of her back. “Fuck Kansas,” she muttered.

“What?”

She pulled the pillow off her face. “I said fuck Kansas.”

“You’re weird.” Jeremy stuck his leg out, toed the edge of her cot. “Get up.”

“Fuck you.” She covered her face. “No wanna.”

“I think Faramir is cooking.” Jeremy turned his head, sniffed the door flaps. “That guy does straight-up voodoo with lentils and jerky. It’s insane.”
“Maybe he is.” She peered around the edge of her pillow. “I don’t know.”

He kicked the edge of her cot. “Get up!”

“Fine.” She threw the pillow off her face.

Jeremy stood and pushed through the door flaps. Light flashed into her eyes, making her wince. Wind snapped the tent walls.

She listened, heard a murmur of voices. She climbed off the cot. Her back stiffened.

“Too many fucking miles on horseback,” she muttered, pulling a long cloak down off the tent pole. She wrapped it around her body.

Janet went out. The sun hurt her eyes and she closed them, waited for the bright red behind her lids to darken. She shaded her forehead. She opened her eyes.

The relentless white of the light retracted, bringing tents and long grass tamped down by footsteps into focus. Smoke from a nearby cooking fire blew up her nose. It irritated her lungs. She sneezed.

“I have tea for you.” Faramir sat cross-legged next to the fire. “Milk and honey, yes?”

“Yes.” Janet looked around, pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

She walked over to him, tucked the cloak beneath her. She sat on the grass. She squinted a little, looked at him. His beard had grown in full and long. The sun filtered through it, polished it into copper. His hair, grown past his shoulders, was braided back. He smiled, handed her a tin mug.

She put her face near its mouth, sniffed. A floral scent, full of warm spices and milk, warmed her lips. She sipped. “You’re not cooking?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I will if you’d like me to.”

“What is there?”

“The usual.” He shrugged. “Smoked meat, smoked fish, salt lard, grain, dried beans. Leftover antelope from last night.” He sipped his tea. “Someone found a clutch of eggs last night.”

“Sounds good.” Janet held the mug in both hands. “Are there any left?”

“I think so,” said Faramir.

“Where’s Jeremy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you miss home yet?” She sipped her tea. “Gondor, I mean?”

“Yes.” Faramir sighed through his nose. He watched the fire. “But it isn’t so bad. There are days when it’s more of…a distant memory. Images in the mist.” He glanced at her. “You?”

“I’m lucky to remember it at all most days.” She sighed. “I go back in my mind to read the story of my childhood, my younger adulthood, and it’s like a book that’s full of holes.”
“But you remember your time in Obira.”

“Yeah.” Janet held the cup. “I remember my time in the Tower more, it’s stronger in my mind, but I remember Obira.” She looked past the tents, the horses jostling, milling people, and into a green and blue haze. “It’s a beautiful city.”

Faramir smiled. “So you have said, with its cobbled streets and its stacked buildings of pink and purple stone.”

“And the green of the lake at the shoreline,” she said. “Lightening from the deep, clear as a gem fished from the bed of Blue Grandfather with its long waves sewn at the edges with tatted lace.”

Faramir nodded. He put his tea on the sod, stood. He dusted off the backs of his thighs. “I’ll go and search for eggs.”

“Good.” She cradled the bottom of the cup in one palm. “I’ll watch the fire.”

Janet watched him go.

She thought of the day he came to the Tower; she caught a glimpse, he was coated in dust and flanked by guards. His skin was so reddened by sun that it was almost purple, blistered and peeling; wrapped in tattered cottons of the Gorgoroth and grimed with sooty black dust, he trembled like a feverish child. The blue of his eyes had faded to gray in the merciless sun. He tried to talk, but the dust had choked his voice down into a rough and breathy whisper. He carried a girl’s bracelet.

Later, Lugmokí would ask her to be his companion in the study of Black Speech.

By the time they met, he had healed. The snow-topped white of his skin had browned and reddened, bloomed with freckles, dimmed itself into a wheat-colored gold. Thin white squint lines remained etched into his temples. He wore a lightweight blue tunic, black pants, sandals. His hair was loose and wet. He regarded me with watchful eyes.

Once he had mastered the basics of Black Speech, following the long months in which they became good friends, it would occur to her that the air he carried about him was far more like that of a monk than a warrior.

Jeremy sat. “Where is Faramir?”

“He went off,” she said. “To look for eggs.”

Jeremy picked up the kettle. He scraped ash off the bottom with a poker. “There’s a delegation from Xinyang en route.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “There’s a what?”

“A delegation. A detachment of warriors, diplomats, I don’t know what else. It’s a lot of people. A lot.” He poured. “They’re on their way here. They’ll intercept us by night.”

“What? Why?”

He shrugged. “Fucked if I know.” He glanced up, jerked his chin at her. “More tea?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. Why not.” Janet held out her mug. “Okay.”

His eyebrows twitched. “You seem disturbed by this news.”
“Well yeah,” she said. “I am. Aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“But…doesn’t it mean anything?” She watched him pour. “I had no warning of this. You had no warning of this. Lugmokí never even mentioned that it might be a thing.”

“No, I imagine she didn’t,” he said. “She’s got a hell of a poker face, but even so I think she’s pretty surprised.”

“Well, I have a shitty poker face, and I am really surprised.” Janet took back the tin cup. “I don’t know what to do. She never covered this particular eventuality with me. What do we do?”

Faramir returned with his cloak all folded up. “I have eggs,” he said. “Who wants some?”

Jeremy sipped. He glanced up. “Sounds great to me.”

“I’ll have eggs,” she said.

“You’re discussing the detachment from Xinyang,” said Faramir, getting on his knees. He spread his cloak on the ground. “Yes?”

“You knew, too?” Janet glanced at him, looked at Jeremy. “Why doesn’t anyone tell me anything?”

“I didn’t know until just now,” Faramir stirred the coals. “As you might well imagine, it is all anyone cares to talk about this morning.”

“So do you know what we’re doing?”

“We are to stay here and wait.” Nestled in the folds of the cloak were six large eggs, their shells a dark dull gray in color; they were speckled brown and green. He flashed a brief smile. “These are fresh, laid six or seven days past.” He reached for a bucket filled with hay and water. “There will be a lot of yolk, I think.”

She watched him wrap the eggs in wet grass. “You think we’re going to stay here and wait?”

He glanced at her. “That’s what I have heard.”

“Are we ready for that?”

He tied the bundles with stems, poked tiny holes in the tops of the shells with a needle. “I am afraid that’s beyond my ken.”

Jeremy stood. “I’ll go and find out.” He wiped grass off the backs of his legs and bent over, snatched up his mug of tea. “All this suspense is ruining the hell out of my breakfast.”

“You do that.” Janet squinted up at him, shaded her eyes. “Make yourself useful.”

He made a face. “I will.”

Faramir sat back, watched him go. “You told me once that he fought in the wars of your country.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “He did.”

“I don’t think this is a time for warriors.” Faramir tucked the wrapped eggs into the coals.
“Mayhap I’m wrong, and Xinyang means to kill us, or capture us, but…I don’t think so.” The wet hay sizzled. “This whole thing, the nature of it, reads to me like a show of curiosity as much as a show of might. They know we are here, that much has been made clear.” He shrugged. “But why send such a sizeable delegation?” He glanced up. “Unless, of course, they mean to make camp in the middle of the grasslands to hold a parlay and keep us on this side of their wall.”

“That may very well be.” Janet drank the dregs of her tea. “I have not begun to even hazard a guess and so I reckon yours is as good as any. Though that last point is an excellent one. That’s where I’d put my money if I had to put my money on anything. Xinyang does have the reputation of being a very insular country.”

“So I have been told.”

“Me as well.”

Jeremy came back, a cloak wrapped around his shoulders. He sat. “It’s cold this morning.”

“Yes,” she said, watching him. “It is. What’s the word?”

“The word is that Lugmokí wants to wait a day. She wouldn’t let me speak directly to her; I got this news from one of her handlers. If the detachment does not intercept by morning, and judging by their speed and the terrain they should, we are to move on toward Xinyang as though nothing is out of the ordinary.”

“Oh.” Jeremy laughed. “There’s plenty to do. We don’t get a day off. Lugmokí wants this whole camp rearranged. The layout, the interiors of the tents, everything.” He rolled his eyes. “So in other words we are to put on our Sunday best and spend today rolling out the welcome wagon.”

Faramir poked at the eggs.

“What are we going to do all day?” Janet glanced back and forth between the two of them. “It’s going to feel strange to not be on the move.”

“Oh.” Jeremy laughed. “There’s plenty to do. We don’t get a day off. Lugmokí wants this whole camp rearranged. The layout, the interiors of the tents, everything.” He rolled his eyes. “So in other words we are to put on our Sunday best and spend today rolling out the welcome wagon.”

Faramir’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“We are to present ourselves in as welcoming a manner as possible,” she said. “And my guess to be ready for parlay.”

“I see.” Faramir poked at the cooking eggs. “Indeed, that is very wise.”

“I do hope there are instructions on how to achieve that,” she said.

“There are.” Jeremy refilled his cup. “Oh, there are.” He glanced at me. “She wants to see you once you’re done with breakfast.”

Faramir hooked burned straw nests out of the fire. He knocked the ash off them, peeled away their damp and wilted inner layers.

“All right.” Janet sighed. “Great.”
Meta/Pherein

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Meta means above. Pherein means to carry.

I sat in an empty chamber wrought of embroidered textiles, walled with bright woven threads. They leapt to life in strong sunlight, sparkled under the yurt’s open vent.

Metaphor: that which is above the literalness of life.

No candles flickered, no lamps offered a glow. Though it was cool, no fire burned in the pit. The smoke-hole was empty.

Each morning, every morning, it is the same.

I sat on a cushion. It was thick and firm, plush, sewn of fur; the sturdy seams were hobnailed with little brass buttons. The longer I waited, the warmer it got.

Lugmokí will arrive and we will talk in metaphors, of metaphors.

Whether it came from deer, antelope, or some other herd animal I couldn’t be sure. When I touched the fur, it was soft. Thick and dun-colored, whatever it had been, it had begun life in the grasslands.

Since leaving Barad-dûr I have found myself here, in some version of here, every day before the sun crests the height of a dragon’s blood tree or gains its full strength.

It had found its end in the grasslands; upon reaching the Ahar, the caravan had rolled out all of its cool silk cushions—black and red, orange and yellow, brocaded, perfumed with lavender and stuffed to firmness with tiny puffy hulls—and traded them. The walls changed, too. The Mordorin banners were rolled up. Beaded curtains disappeared into wool-lined boxes. Folding screens, many of them carved out of ivory and shell or beaded with gems, were disassembled and wrapped in thick felt.

For a long while, the yurt’s walls remained naked.

Lugmokí says it’s the smoke. It’s the constant need out here for a fire to combat the cold, for lanterns and other flames to push back the wintering sun, that lays ruin to the fragile fabrics. Such fine cloth will take on the odors of burned woods, traces of cooked food, and deteriorate. It’ll call to certain insects.

A slight woman, young and just learning to serve, pushed aside new hanging flaps embroidered with the silvered and jagged mountains of Xinyang’s Gaodoche lake region. She ducked their swagged weight, a black porcelain kettle in her hands. Its curved mouth puffed a pleasant white steam.

First, tea.

I inhaled, smelled jasmine and orange, green camellia and Soldier’s Bloom, lavender honey—-the scent of Mordor, such gentility, its subtle diplomacy.
Breakfast will be offered. Perhaps there will be some fruit left, dates or preserved lemons, marmalade or pomegranates; if not, there will be clover honey or wenberries or golden currants, oats or corn. Foods of the grasslands.

The woman squatted, placed the kettle on the carpet. Thunderclap Orkish and dark as volcanic ash, the symmetrical skin-patterns on the backs of her fingers were cloudlike, mottled, a dusky blue. Her nails tapered, glistening red. Her feet were bare. She wore the plain unbleached cotton pajamas of the traveling servant. Her white hair hung in a loose bun at her nape. Her fingertips felt for the carnelian pins in the corners of a petite wooden table. She turned them loose. The top lifted off.

Underneath, tucked into tiny compartments, four small wrapped cups.

She lifted one out. She unfolded its wrappings; it was carved out of obsidian, its drinking edge both fragile and translucent. She folded the wrappings, tucked them back into its place. She replaced the tabletop. A red velvet cloth went over its polished surface. She patted it into place, picked up the kettle. A narrow silver band on her right wrist, carved blue beads clicking, murmured of a husband left behind.

“Thank you, Kikik,” I said.

“Shall I bring you breakfast, Janet?”

“Yes, thank you.” I smiled. “That would be wonderful.”

Kikik glanced at me. Her smile was slight, polite. “Today there are eggs.”


“I’ve had some, the yolks are big and green and meaty.”

I smelled, briefly, the memory of a cooking fire; last night there was some kind of venison, onions, juniper berries out of the north, cakes ground from oily seeds. My stomach rumbled. My tongue twitched. My mouth filled with spit.

“There’s milk, too.” Upon the plush table cloth, circles for each cup were embroidered. Purple, hemmed in with green thread, pink blossoms of beads wrapped their edges. She centered my cup in one of them. She filled it halfway with tea. “Of the doe.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“Very good.” Kikik bowed her head. “I will bring it to you, then.”

Kikik withdrew, left me with filtered silence. The tea was queasy-sweet. Drinking it made the blood rush to my head, filled my face with heat. People and animals rustled together beyond the opened roof. A brisk wind ricocheted inside, whistled through the mouth and smelled of smoke, horse droppings, boiling water, last night’s rain.

Lugmokí walked into the room. Her feet whispered over the carpets. The walls moved. She entered a different way, moved into waiting space through a door hidden by tapestries. Beads stirred, clicked. The tapestries themselves shivered, their scenes of dove-gray mountains, opaline suns, ornate trees, and water gone shadowed and restless.

Some of them are Ulthari, a handful are Mordorin but simple but the rest of them are of Xinyang and old. Treasured colors faded but with age, the silversing worn in places where they’ve been rolled and lovingly stowed, filaments unwound and broken, little mirrors chipped, bits of bead.
gone missing.

“Goodmorn, Janet.”

I cradled the teacup in one hand. “Goodmorn, Lady.”

Lugmokí carried her own cup. She folded herself onto her own cushion, the swaying litheness of her body wrapped in muted silks, her hair bound and covered in a fur hat. Her spine stood, erect as old growth. Her mouth was pale, blued at the edges, stilled by the ghost of a blush. Her eyes were undressed.

For these meetings, she doesn’t veil her face.

“Kikik will bring breakfast,” she said.

“Yes, Lady.”

Now comes the question that is really a command.

Lugmokí sipped her tea. She lowered the cup to its table. Its bottom touched down soft as a falling petal.

“Last night,” she said, her hands drifting into her lap, her voice making itself delicate, “were there dreams?”

Heat from my cup soaked into my palm. I lifted it, admired the reddening in my skin. I took a sip. I shook my head. “There are always dreams, Lady.”

Lugmokí lifted her eyes and they devastated with their deep drowned stars, their belladonna loveliness. She tilted her face. She held my gaze. “Would you speak, then, of last night’s dreams, Janet?”

I fought off a wry grin, drowned the thought---and you know it too, you know very well the voodoo power of your beauty---before it had a chance to form. “You mean…like I do every other morning?”

“Yes.” A voice still as water, soft. “Like you do every other morning.”

I finished off the tea. I put the cup down. “I don’t remember much.”

She held her breath a second too long. “But you do remember.”

I looked off toward the door and there were flashes—a flat mirror of water, mercury-bright and sheltered by mist, a lit but shrouded horizon, birdsong—but I breathed out through my nose and lifted my spine. My hand squeeze the cup. I skipped my gaze across textile patterns but they disoriented me so I closed my eyes. I gulped in a quick breath. “I do, yes.”

“Begin, please.”

“Begin where?” My jaw tightened, a quick flutter, and my eyes popped open. “Dreams are dreams, they do what they want.”

Lugmokí placed her cup on the red velvet cloth, centered it within its circle. “What is the first image that comes into your mind?”

“Water. Flat and calm, mist-covered, the way it can be at sunrise and sunset, if the conditions are
favorable. There are birds. I cannot see them, but I can hear them. It’s morning, I think. There’s that shrill morning birdsong, a scent of dew. The light all around me is white, soft, cloud-filtered.”

“Did you see again the water-blossoms of the last fortnight?”

“Yeah, they’re there.” I blew air out through my nostrils, studied the outline of my empty cup. “The ones that open at dawn. Still.”

“How do you name these water-blossoms?”

“There’s no word for them in Black Speech.”

“In a language of your world, then?”

I glanced up. “Lotus.”

Her face went into a gentle repose as her mouth formed the word, pushed it out: “Lotus.”

I watched her breathe into its sounds and her eyes went…somewhere. Drifted. Her face remained the same, soft and immovable, but her unnatural light faded. I had seen it before, a kind of darkening, a shutting.

_I would think that it’s her going inward, listening to Sauron, or speaking to him with her mind, but…I don’t think so. Not once I take such things past a surface interpretation._

“I think that’s what they are, I…”

She kept her body still, like a statue. Or an animal. Her eyes stayed on mine. Objet d’art or predator, she watched me. Hard as I tried, I could not read the difference in her face.

“But I am not an expert on water plants, they might be just water lilies, which are a different thing.” I sighed, ran a hand over my face. “I don’t know for sure how to tell them apart.”

_However she speaks to Sauron, and he to her, need not show in her face._

“Do you dream often of the plants in your world?”

“No, I don’t.” I shook my head, let my hand drop. “We’ve discussed this before.” I set my empty cup in its place. “You know I don’t.”

“Dreams have much to teach the dreamer, Janet.”

I didn’t answer. Instead I looked past her shoulder and into the shadows, the ripplings of outside movement, and searched for the hidden question. I knew it had to do with meanings, what symbols my world---which most days I could only remember through a thick, cold haze---made of the image. Sure as the sensation of questing fingers, of light touches and lunging, I knew was looking for a key.

_Why?_

I made myself look at her face. Tired and naked, the set of her mouth wore a subtle exhaustion. Distant vulnerability flickered in the depths of her dark eyes. It made me think of deep sea fishes, bioluminescent lures.

“Aren’t there water lilies in Middle-earth?”
“Have you seen any?”

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t. But that doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

“I confess that it interests me, how your mind has chosen this flower over all others. The persistence of its imagery moves beyond choice, becomes…a fixation. An occupation. For how many months have you had this dream?”

“Several.”

“But not every night.”

“No.”

“Yet since crossing the Ahar…”

“What I remember of lotus symbolism is stuff like rebirth, enlightenment, sacredness. It featured in the religious arts of my world, in those regions of it, where these flowers grow as a native plant. Let’s see…parts of it are edible. The roots I think, maybe the seeds too. I don’t know. I’ve thought all this already.”

Lugmokí’s eyes remained on my face. She seemed cool and shadowlike, her skin passing between me and the light. Her mouth stilled.

“But what I don’t understand is your interest.” My face burned. My armpits dampened. I shrugged. “So what if my brain is throwing out lotus dreams? Maybe I’m tired of looking at nothing but grass. Did you think of that? Lotus flowers grow in ponds. I just…why are you so interested in the lotus, and not the pond? Is there no symbolism to be had in ponds, or mists, or in early morning light?”

“Did anything new come into your dream?”

“No.”

Kikik entered the yurt. She put two plates down, did it in silence.

“Though I don’t understand why, you’ve decided not to speak with me about this.” Lugmokí looked away, picked up her plate. “I respect your decision.”

“You might understand if you stopped dodging my questions.”

The sun strengthened through the open smoke-hole, fell in gold shards. The noise of the camp sharpened, stirred itself.

“There is no evasion here.”

My eyebrows twitched. “Then you must think I’m real slow in the mind, or unobservant, or both.” I cut into my eggs. The yolks broke open, smelled of lightning and wet earth. “You say that I’m fixated on the lotus flower, or that my subconscious is fixated, but…” I corralled the corners of my mouth. “I have to say, that where I come from, people call that projection.” I took a bite and the yolk-flavor stormed my mouth. “Because you’re the one who won’t let them go.” I glanced up. “You’re the one who keeps asking, and if I keep telling, it’s because every single morning you lead me right back here.” I tapped the edge of my plate. “Right back to the lotus dream.”

“That the lotus should weigh so heavily in your dreams, that it should weave itself into your sleep
so tightly, speaks of a deep and personal meaning.” Lugmoki’s voice moved over me, low and melodic, the words themselves braided with warmth and silk and the murmur of an almost forgotten sea. “Perhaps it’s an old one, a secret one.”

I swallowed, picked up my wooden milk-cup.

“From what you’ve told of them, and by their very persistence, anyone would reckon it so.”

Milk filled my mouth with a taste of grass, sweet flowers drowned in warm cream.

“The flowers come to you to pass a message but they present it as a riddle, and there is much nobility to be had in work.” She took a bite, lowered her voice past intimacy and into a lull, an entreaty for sleep. “Such fruit is only made sweeter for the suffering.” She lifted her gaze. “It would be a boon to you to solve such a riddle.”

I put the cup down. Heat seeped through my plate, warmed the tops of my thighs. “I don’t understand this investment in my well-being.”

“Is kindness a mystery to be solved?”

“So it would seem.”

“Now I am the one who doesn’t understand. What is there in kindness, in a desire to see another’s contentment, to understand?”

“Hidden motives? Since you brought up mysteries, I can’t help but feel that the lotus seems to be the answer while the question that precedes it remains a mystery.” I put my fork down, lifted the plate off my lap. “Stubbornly so.” I made a ceremony of it. “But only to me.”

“Please, finish your breakfast.” Her head stilled but a ripple passed through her body, subtle as a note. “If it is your wish we will talk no more of this.”

When I stood, the blood rushed to my heart. My ribs clamped down on its vigorous knocking. My skin threatened to lift off my blood, float away. My throat tightened.

I closed my eyes. My head filled with red, a flickering orange. My eyelashes shivered. I took a deep breath.

“Janet---“

“Don’t invite me here again.”

Chapter End Notes

The lines "meta means above, pherein means to carry" and "metaphor: that which is above the literalness of life" are both quotes from Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies*. They have been lightly paraphrased.
Cherry Pits

Faramir sat on a blanket, looked to the east. The sky at the horizon was the color of deep water; stars floated up from its depths, glimmered. They drifted in the deep, their light fragile and sharp.

He turned his face into the wind. A tiny fire crackled beside him. The wind scoured the day’s thin heat and scattered its flames, doused them in blunt humidity. They shed just enough red light to read Lugmokí’s scrolls. He untied one of them and shook it out, spread it open across his folded legs. It was smooth and buttery soft, heavy, an undulant page wrought out of gleaming animal skin.

Firelight flickered across black slashes of Chiyu script. With a fingertips, he traced their shapes. Each tapered into blades, spun into circles, curled into waves. He looked at them and thought of roofs, sticks, waves on the water. Here he found a shape like a flower, or maybe it was a wheel; dots within signified a change in verb tense. A big-bellied curve gendered it. Tucked beneath a roof, it gained articles, hinted at an implied subject: a flower turned into a phrase.

He closed his eyes. He held the image in his head, tried to tease out of it the Westron words.

“Studying?”

Faramir’s eyes blinked open.

Janet emerged from moving shadows. Tall, long-limbed, and obscured by cloth, she made a dark tangled shape against a deepening pewter sky.

He sighed. “Yes.”

She entered the firelight. Though she did not claim Mordor as her birth land, every time Faramir looked at her face he found himself struggling to trace the origins of her features: her pale Westron skin, Northern born; thick dark hair that might’ve hailed from the Haradwaith, but did not; the high flat bones of her face bore a resemblance to those of the copper-skinned Ulthari, but her face was long and not round, her mouth like a hawk’s. Her long gray eyes eluded all his knowledge of the lands of Middle-earth.

A heavy wool blanket hung around her shoulders, enfolded her shivering.

*Three thousand wheels out and heading for winter, yet her blood is still Mordor-thin.*

“If you unfocus your eyes and look at it from a distance, the ideograms look like more sharp edges. Uziyao is rounder.”

“Chyan utilizes curves shapes.”
“It does, but they’re truncated.” Janet grabbed the cork, twisted it out of the jug’s neck. “They almost always terminate two-thirds of the way into the stroke.”

Faramir lifted the scroll closer to his face. He squinted. “You’re right.”

Janet lifted the jug, held it out. “Want any?”

“What is it?”

“Orange blossom mead.” Janet grinned. “Spiced with peppercorns and sweetened with Soldier’s Bloom.”

Faramir chuckled. “That sounds like something we should not be drinking.”

“That’s because it is.” Janet leaned over, passed it to him. “But there’s more than enough to go around, so.” She shrugged. “I don’t see the big deal.”

“You haven’t cultivated a taste for the Ulthari flower wine?”

Janet’s nose wrinkled. Her mouth twisted. She shook her head and jabbed a finger toward her gullet, pretended to gag.

Faramir threw his head back, laughed.

“It’s okay if all you want is to get drunk.” Janet grinned. “And if maybe if you hold your nose when you drink it.”

“I agree.” Faramir lifted the jug to his lips, took a deep drink. “This tastes much better going down.” He closed one eye, peered into the jug with the other. He chuckled. “It’s more likely to stay down, too.”

“Hey, don’t go crazy with it.” Janet leaned forward, plucked the jug out of his hands. “I promised Jeremy I’d save him some.”

“How is it that you are so good at this?” Faramir watched her take a sip. “Learning new languages, I mean?”

“I don’t know.” Janet shook her head, wiped her mouth with the back of a hand. “I just am. I always have been.” She shrugged, put the jug down. “Some things just…I don’t know.” She looked at him. “Stick.”

“I am good with languages,” he said. “But I am not as good as you.”

“I picked up a few words in Obira. The Chyan-Uziyao community there was tiny, but it was there, mostly in the form of traders. They travel the Jing River by barge up past where it meets with the Ahar, then caravan cloth and dyes to a port on the Grandmother.” She lifted a hand, drew a curve in the air. “Then sail it down to the sea of Nurn.” Janet shrugged, watched the fire. “When you hear something enough, even in background noise, sooner or later its rhythms will find you.”

Faramir chuckled. “That has not been my experience.”

“Everyone learns differently.”

“Aye, and some of us a bit slower than others.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Janet sat down and crossed her legs, corked the jug. She leaned
toward him with it. “Chyan is nothing like Westron at all.”

Faramir smiled. “Do you dream in Chyan?”

Janet blinked and looked up. “Why would you ask me that?” Her voice gained an edge, brittle and cold. “Why would you ask me that now?”

Faramir leaned back. “I don’t…” His hands dropped, limp in his lap. “My apologies, lady. I did not mean to offend.” He studied her face. “Have I offended you, Janet?”

“No.” A thin blush lit up her cheekbones. “At least, I don’t think so.” Blood pumped a faint hot glow into her pale skin. “It’s just that…I am exhausted with talk of dreams.”

“Dreams are mystical things.” Faramir looked at the fire, shrugged. “Well…some of them may be reckoned so.” A slight smile flickered across his mouth. “I’m not sure there’s much mysticism in those dreams where you find yourself naked in the marketplace.” He chuckled. “Or in those where your horse is suddenly able to speak, or where your wife tries to speak but all that comes out are honking goose noises.”

Janet snorted. “Goose noises?” Her eyebrows lifted. “Really?”

“Truly.” Faramir smiled. He touched his heart, inclined his head. “That is, by the word, how it was told to me.”

“That’s hilarious.”

“Yes.” Faramir nodded. “That’s all I thought of next time I saw her.”

Janet laughed. “Of course.”

“I did not think such a question would touch a tender place.” Faramir glanced at her. “Else I would not have asked. I only did because I’ve heard it said that the true rooting and flowering of a new language happens when you hear it and speak it in dreams.”

Janet’s voice softened. “Of course.” She stared at the fire. “Yes, I can see that.”

Faramir picked up the jug. “Lugmokí.” He uncorked it. “She’s after your dreams, then?”

Janet’s knuckles flexed. She flared her nostrils. “Yes.”

“Witches, wizards, Elfkind…” Faramir took a long drink. “Other races also, those that carry a tendency toward magic.” He wiped his mouth. “All of them place great importance upon the interpretations of dreams.”

Firelight dimmed Janet’s face, turned the gray in her eyes to black.

“It’s said among them a dream might be a message from Ilúvatar, or a contact from whatever life there is beyond the existence of flesh.”

She exhaled through her nose.

Faramir took a second drink. “It’s also said to be evidence of a spell cast in your direction.”

Janet rearranged the posture of her body, looked up. “That’s what you think it is.”

He shook his head, corked the jug’s wet mouth. “I don’t pretend to have an idea, as such is beyond
my ken, but if someone put a blade to my neck and made me guess…” He leaned over, parked the jug beside her knee. “I would name that as Lugmokí’s fear.”

“You don’t think she would be able to tell?”

“I don’t know.”

Janet glanced at the jug. “I suppose I don’t have anyone here to ask save for you.”

“If Lugmokí were going to explain, she would have done such by now.”

“Yes, I agree.”

Faramir wiped his fingers on the hem of his cloak.

“Should I leave you to your studies?” Janet curled her fingers around the handle of the jug. “Or has it grown too dark?”

“I do have a lantern, I’ve just been too lazy to light it.” He shook his head, smiled a little. “You don’t have to leave, if you don’t want to.”

“May I sit, then?” She lifted the jug, cradled it in her lap. “For just awhile? It’s busy in the camp but promise I won’t bother you.”

“You’re not a bother.” Faramir retrieved a scroll. “The company is nice.”

A burst of wind came, flattened the flames of the small fire. It sent sparks swirling up into the night.

Janet’s spine stiffened and lifted her chin. She sniffed at the air. “Do you smell that?”

Faramir opened the scroll. “I can smell the woodsmoke of the camp.”

“No, not that.” She shifted her legs, turned her body toward the wind. “It’s different. That’s not what I smell. This…this is coming out of the east.”

“Of course.” Faramir glanced up. “We’re downwind.”

“No.”

“Yes. There’s still wood. Not much, but some. There’s enough to make woodsmoke.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Janet closed her eyes. “I meant that it’s not wood.” She shook her head. “Not that smell.”

Faramir blinked.


“Sorry?”

“Cherry pits.” Her eyes blinked open. “Sorry, that’s…” She let out a sharp rush of breath. “I don’t know.” She inhaled a gust of wind. “They’re burning cherry pits.”
Night. Full dark and thick with stars, the air clear and cold, the Mordorin camp hummed down into a fire-torn silence.

A half a kilometer away---it’s a turn, he thought; that measure is known here as a turn, a three-spoke, get your shit together---Jeremy lay on the grass, flattened into the ground. The wind blew across his back and rattled the grass, whined low in his ears. He could smell the last of the sun’s heat departing the soil, a cool mineral trace of yesterday morning’s thunderstorm.

Below him, layers of shadow hid the shapes of tents. Embers, with their weak red glow, unmasked a stirring of horse’s legs

He held a spyglass to one eye. His fingers trembled in the damp cold.

They’re closer than we thought. He turned onto his back, looked up into the sprawl of stars. And trying to hide it. He rested the spyglass on his chest. Why?

He thought about a story Janet had told him. A man and his mother, exiled to Obira. The old woman would speak of her girlhood with broken Black Speech, her young womanhood, the man who had been her husband and fathered her son; in the beginning, she used the brightest bits of a language learned with much difficulty to fashion a picture more notable for its negative space than for its insight into the land of her birth.

Janet had learned to meet her with her own words. First with a handful of Chyan, the Chiyu dialect of the province, the language of the traders.

I passed once through the capital, Gaodoche, and I rode the lake of the Sunset Fish into the mists and the broken mountains floated like ghosts out of the pink sky.

Jeremy rolled onto his belly. He lifted the spyglass back to his eye. He trained the lens-field on a clearing of trampled-down grass.

Two men, still as stone, stood outside the closed flaps of a yurt. Torches flickered nearby, cast nets of moving shadow. Each wore his long dark hair in a braided topknot. Their bodies were long and lean, their faces too. They wore identical outfits of loose black pants, belted tunics, soft leather boots. Their shoulders were narrow, sharp. They looked straight ahead. Their skin gleamed a dark gold in the blooming red emberlight.

The cut of their robes, their posture, their trim waists and the long curves of their sabers, made him think of Jedi knights.


The yurt opened. Jeremy’s hand flinched. His view shivered. The flaps spilled a flood of thick orange light that turned smooth movements into brief silhouettes. The tentlight gilded their black hair. The shape of a third man rose up, exaggerated; it cut the warm orange light, strained it into a giant’s unsteady shadow. He stumbled-stepped out into the night.

Jeremy held his breath. He willed the shaking out of his hands.

The flaps dropped shut. The man was big, well-built; he was bare from the waist up. Even with the droop in his spine he stood a head taller than the guards. Broad and muscled, staggering beneath
his own unbolted weight, the weak emberlight warmed the gleam of sweat on his white skin.

_The fuck_. Jeremy put icy trembling fingers over his other eye, strained toward details. His eyelashes fluttered, those words happening over and over in his mind: _the fuck is this._

The guards tugged the man out into the clearing by a long lead. He wore wide-legged pants, black or gray or dark blue. His naked dirty feet shuffled on flattened grass. It hung slack between them, fastened to the faint gleam of a metal brace locked around his waist.

_Like rope_, Jeremy thought. _Or braided leather, or a long length of narrow iron chain with links leather-wrapped to muffle the noise._

The man’s head hung, a leather mask buckled to his face. A strange, ornate, smoldering metal plate hugged nose and mouth and chin. The eyes above it looked disoriented and dark, the whites stained red, the eyelids unmoored and adrift.

_They’re drugging him_. Jeremy’s hand tightened around the spyglass. _That’s what that is. Jesus fucking Christ._

His breath shot out through a grid, plowed through thin twining curls of smoke. It made a long white plume in the cold.

The man’s arms were tied tight behind his back. His tangled black hair clung to his neck and shoulders. The leather-rope bindings began at the armpits, spanned the shoulders, crisscrossed at the collarbones. Close-spaced loops dug into pale skin and bulging muscle, intersected in a row of elegant knots all the way down to his wrists. His knees and ankles were shackled. Metal cuffs locked his wrists to the armored girdle around his waist. He walked like a man marooned on rough water.

_Mother of God_. Jeremy took the glass away from his face. He let out a slow breath, flexed his stiffened and tingling fingers. _He’s trussed up like a…a…I have no idea._ He curled his hands close to his mouth, breathed warmth into his fingertips. _A criminal? Prisoner? Something else? Whatever he is, though, it’s something really fucking dangerous. Otherwise all of this is...so much overkill._

Jeremy lifted the glass.

The two guards circled him. With a vicious and elegant movement, using the dull side of his sword, one of them whacked the backs of the big man’s thighs. There was no reason Jeremy could see for it, just a flick of hate, a gesture, the discharge of nervous energy. The big white man swayed down onto his knees. His jaws clacked behind their mask. That guard, still holding his sword, lifted his head and looked across the top of the man’s head and spoke to the other one. The big man’s head bent toward the ground. He breathed hard, the rise and fall of his back and shoulders visible, laboring in the dim red light.

Their lips moved. The other guard laughed and reached out, dumped something over the big man’s head. It was thin and had color; it looked like cider or old blood, was perhaps red wine. It wetted the man’s hair, streaked his neck. Like blood it ran off him, dripped. It fell into the grass. Both guards laughed.

The big white man didn’t move. He breathed hard, wetted hair stuck to his cheeks.

“That’s probably a real bad idea, guys.” Jeremy whispered. “And I think you probably wanna hope and pray to whatever gods you pray to that this dude never busts out of those chains.”
So what’s a white guy doing so far east?

Jeremy rolled onto his back. Stars glittered in the deep, their light sharp and prickling. He relaxed his limbs. He watched his exhaled breath float up.

A meteor winked alight, drew its slow pink fire across the night’s dark belly.

He thought about Obira.

Exhausted and unused to wagon-travel, his grip on reality had been tenuous underneath those early pewter hours of the morning.

He remembered wet stone docks, charcoal fires. Birds. The constant churn and boom of the dark sea, footfalls, the murmured voices of a market just stirring to life. They boarded a ship. Huge and with creaking rigging, the smell of wet wood, creosote, fish. The wind, loaded with salt, scoured his face.

Once on the water, out of sight of land and ensconced in a hammock belowdecks, he had been able to sleep.

The crossing, it took three weeks. By the time he and his sister and Faramir and Lugmokí stepped off on the far side of the Núrnen Sea, the sunlight had grown hotter and heavier and when the wind blew it smelled like…a forgotten place unblessed by rain, a dusty dry-shimmer of nothing.

Robed and veiled against a barren desert, they entered the Haradwaith.

*Even there, in such a cosmopolitan city as Obira, we were thought strange for the paleness of our skins.*

Long weeks later, having abandoned the Haradwaith for the grasslands, they reached the River Ahar. Broad and flat, its banks lazy and its blue currents home to boats and barges, it separated the high desert of Khand from Ulthar. They crossed.

In each small village, stepping on and off both docks, the four of them had worn the only white faces.

*White men seldom cross the Ahar, Lugmokí had said. Even fewer than that make it as far southeast as Chyan. Fewer still are the white men of the Northwest who step foot onto the Makom-bu, or who make it to within sight of the Silk Wall.*

Out here, in the great empty heart of the Makom-bu, the few shepherds and sod homesteaders he’d seen had skins of either a dark copper color or carried the dark golden-earth undertones of Chyan.

Jeremy went still.

*Yet here they are, this detachment from Xinyang.*

His scalp heated up, pricked.

*And they have a white man with them.*

Sweat formed on his upper lip, inside his clothes.

*Lugmokí knows.*

He looked up at the sky. His eyes narrowed.
Because Sauron knows.

His heart beat faster. The knowledge landed like a kick in the gut. His throat spasmed. His body jerked. His hands clenched around the throb in his blood, swelled it hard and hot until the skin of his nailbeds pulsed.

So this is what we’re doing out here.

An understanding flapped free in the hollow of his gut, a cold and panicked bird.

What we’re really doing.

Jeremy put the glass away. He turned over, heart pounding against the sod. His breath trembled.

Mordor and Xinyang have business between them, all right, and it comes in the form of this big white dude who is so dangerous that he not only has to have both his knees and his ankles shackled together, his arms Shibari-tied behind his back, and his wrists cuffed to his waist, but they need to strap a fucking bong to his face just to keep him eight miles high and…what? Docile? Disoriented? Numb?

The wind came, blew smoke up his nose. He smelled a ghost of wood, the pungent marigold stink of marijuana, something like rosemary or sage, and a resinous sticky sweetness, pine-laden and subtle, that he was unfamiliar with.

What the hell can he do, anyway?

He buried his mouth in one palm, coughed. The world flickered.

It’s strong, whatever they’ve got strapped to his mouth. Damn.

He dug his hands into the sod. Inched backward. He slithered down the hill with a shiver caught in his bones and his teeth tight, a taste of metal on his breath.

And now it’s the middle of the night and they’re close, they’re leading this dude outside on a chain like a dog just to dump wine on his head, and no one in our camp has any idea.

A chill awakened under his skin.

He pushed himself to his feet.

He ran.

End Notes

Looks like this is the end, folks.

Thank you for all of your support.

Love,

Pink Siamese
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