

This Game We Play

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This Game We Play

by [theeventualwinner](#)

Summary

As the Siege of Angband takes hold, Mairon and Melkor must find ways to occupy their time. But how far does Mairon dare push his master, and will he like what he finds?

An expansion into the main events of the Silmarillion from the Angbandian POV, from the Siege of Angband to the last moments of the War of Wrath.

And now introducing the SEPTEMBER 2014 REMIX: A slightly longer, slightly more complex take on the original which I hope that everyone will very much enjoy!

Slash; non-con, violence, general debauchery. This is not a fluffy ship. Flout my tags at your own risk.

The Lieutenant

Chapter Notes

Welcome one and all to the September 2014 Remix of This Game We Play!

Think of this as an Extended Edition, or a Director's Cut if you will. The overarching plot has not been changed from the original version of this story, but many new small elements have been introduced, or scenes and characters have been added or nuances have been refined that did not make it into the original verse. Because if this is the fic that is going to send me to Hell, then I'd better be damn well proud of it when I get there!

And, as an added bonus, my writing style has been cleaned up a lot in the interim year and a half since I first began publishing this fic, as I have kind of sort of figured out how punctuation works as a thing. :3

So I greatly hope that you will all enjoy the slightly longer, slightly richer and slightly dirtier version of Melkor and Mairon's twisted little romance. As always, much love, and yours most humbly, theeventualwinner / markedasinfernal (Tumblr)

THE LIEUTENANT

Hands caress his neck, winding as soft and lascivious as snakes over his skin. A pale finger slides up from the hollow of his throat, a fingernail leaves its blushing graze over his skin and in its wake he shivers. Clad only in doeskin trousers, the chill air of the hall clings to him. It sets his skin alight. The hands slide upwards; a finger hooks about his chin and tilts his head back slightly, setting the blond waves of his hair to spill over his shoulders, their ends caught in pale radiance by the torches that stud the hall's wide walls.

A thumb scrapes along his jaw-line, toying, teasing, and he feels his breath quicken in unconscious response. The lithe, strong muscles of his abdomen flex in brilliant definition, shadows clot and jump in the hollow of his clavicles as sharply he inhales, as at last he breathes, "My lord..."

Slowly, irresistibly, his head is forced back; fingers tinged a muted grey press into his chin, and his gaze is shifted. The sculpted metal of the throne before him sinks, its scythe-like spires slip from his view as his eyes are pushed to the vaulted ceiling some fifteen metres above him. Velvet drapes and steel metalwork vie there for mastery, flint greys strive with midnight cloths amid crossbeams gorged with chains. Manacles drip from them to hang sullen and lonely in the twilight as the last glimmers of the failing sunset struggle through the arched windows set high into the walls.

Below them tattered flags hang limp, the ruined memoirs of enemies long since vanished pay silent witness to their conquerors' delights. Crumpled stars stand miserably upon sheets of battle-stained white, their silver threads dull and despoiled in the torchlight as greasy flames gutter and flick from the bracketed flares set into the walls.

Upon the dais at the head of the deserted hall he kneels before the throne, and he quivers before him who sits upon it. A pointed fingernail traces from his sternum to his chin, and his pulse beats just that much stronger beneath his skin. Every nerve in him sparks alive at that touch, at once

perilous and abhorrent and wrong, and yet so deliciously *right*. Something carnal in him stirs, it inhales, it unfurls, and no matter how hard he tries to stifle it, it refuses to be muzzled.

The crisis engine of desire reaches its crux. For centuries untold he has tried to run from it, he has tried so valiantly to ignore it. Though his lord, his *master*, might tempt him, or might use him, might permit him a fleeting night of pleasure that he is never entirely sure that he wants, never yet had he fallen utterly. He would not fall; he would not give into base desires or sentimentality. He *would not*, not now, and not ever. He has more pride than that.

He is still himself; though by his own words he is sworn to his master in fealty, in fear, in loyalty, in deference, and in a million other clever emotions that so long ago he had convinced himself were real. The emotions that he tells himself that he feels simply have to be real: a sense of honour, of duty, of noble servitude to his lord in all things dry and crisp and academic. They are real and solid and final. They serve not as a mask, but as the truth.

They override those deeper things, those insidious, worming things inside of him. Those other emotions that he could never admit to. That he would never admit to.

Because they *weren't* real. He did not want them, and so they could not exist.

And yet...

A finger presses down upon his jugular, hard. He can feel his pulse slamming through his skin. Despite himself he moans, a low and breathy exhalation escapes him through a cage of gritted teeth, and too late he comes to stop it. A blush tinges over his cheeks, something burns in the base of his stomach, some dark craving so long repressed now strains at the shackles he has so strictly imposed upon it and to his horror he can feel those shackles begin to splinter.

But he doesn't want this, he *doesn't*. Such things are not proper, they are not *seemly*. He is his master's lieutenant, he is the commander of all the vast legions of Angband, and for so long he has convinced himself that this is all he ever wants to be that perhaps a part of him has come to believe his own lies.

For a dreadful urgency rises up within him: he has to tell him, he has to tell his master that. That he doesn't want this. He has to make his master stop. He is older now; he is not some fledgling youth to be beguiled by smiles and flattery as once he was. He has power of his own.

"My lord, I..."

His master's finger taps against his lips, severing his rather plaintive attempt at speech and with that possessive little gesture what pretences of power or reluctance that he has flee from him. His master's fingers drag downwards; they part his lips at their seam and an unbidden shiver of excitement flicks up through him.

One hand fully encircles his throat now, he feels his master take his hold, gentle and yet so delicately perilous. And in that strange moment he thinks of how easy it would be, how cruelly casual the motion. The clench of a fist, the rupture of bones, the brutal severance of veins and arteries and connective tissues with one swift, decisive crunch and then oblivion.

He looks to that future within his master's hands, and with languid curiosity he finds that it does not frighten him.

So he waits, and with sage wisdom he knows that this decision is not yet his to make. But as the seconds trickle by in all their quivering trepidation something within him twists, and something

bold in him burns behind it. He exhales a breath he does not know he has held and finally his eyes flicker to his master's, he catches his master's stare and he holds it: silver challenges molten gold. And behind his master's brilliant eyes, something smiles.

Nails dig into his skin, and instinctively he feels droplets of blood well up beneath that pressure, throbbing crimson upon his skin. He hisses as he feels his master's grip shift slightly, the sting of it transmuting to some other, darker sensation, and the muscles of his neck strike bold under his master's hand.

Trails of blood smear down the sides of his neck, they drip through his master's fingers, and oh how he loathes it; a part of himself spilled so crassly, so un-mourned. Yet deeper still how he *adores* it, this sublime cruelty, and from the abstract swirl of dissenting emotions within him he feels something coalesce. Something bright, something urgent swirls to a core in the pit of his stomach, for a moment it wavers and then it *seethes*. And gripped by its wild fury, against his master's fingers he suddenly lunges forward.

He pushes through his master's grip, and though every fibre of his rational being screams at him to stop something far stronger spurs him on. He rises to his feet, he knocks his master's hands aside and he darts forward, he lays impious fingers upon that which he holds divine, and desperately, passionately he kisses him.

Lips meet in devastating war; his tongue scrapes across his master's teeth. Such reckless ardour for a moment devours him, it screams with the weight of centuries of denial and he almost does not feel his master soften to accept his gift, such is the tight terror of his passion. His master's mouth opens against his, their tongues twine together, and amphetamine lust shrieks up through him.

One hand runs down his master's tunic, skilfully he unpicks the knots of ebony silk before slipping his hand to his master's chest, savouring the warm ripple of muscles that he finds there. Lower still his hand slides, trailing over his master's abdomen, skating the slant of his hipbone that sends his grip slipping ever lower.

Through their kiss he suddenly hears his master's growl, and the blood runs cold in his veins. Horror-struck he pauses, that bold lust suddenly severs as coldly, *excruciatingly* he becomes aware that he has far overstepped his bounds. Fearfully he stops, he wriggles his hand free and he tries to pull away as a flush of embarrassment mottles over his cheeks. But his master halts him, his hands grip with crushing force about his skull and his kiss becomes biting, hurting; even as he tries to squirm away his master prevents it.

Puissance crackles upon his master's lips, some dark spell blisters against his mouth, it pours down his throat and he feels his master push it into him. At that violation he whimpers, all thoughts of passion are banished as his master shoves into him, drowns him, and beneath that relentless onslaught he just tries to hold onto himself. For within that torrent he can feel himself slipping as his master's power overwhelms him, flooding through vein and muscle alike. It shrieks into his ears, it spews its violent entropy into him, and paralyzed within his master's grasp he can do nothing but endure, endure its hatred and its desire all crushed and warped and made obscene.

I want to take you. I want to break you. Skin you and hang you dripping vermilion across the floor. My lost little angel, I will take you by the hand and I will crown you, in snapping sinews and promises of love. And then I will seize you, strike home this brutal desire to its core, and you can sob, and you can beg, and you can gasp and cry and I will wipe away your tears, but you can do nothing in the end. And it can be violent, and it can be twisted, you pinned so tight beneath me, you strung up before me, but you're caught, little lover, you're mine.

You are mine.

I will break you, and when you lie shattered across the stones I will re-make you. I will stitch you back together, all bold and vulnerable and glorious; and perhaps you will not know how to feel. Perhaps you cannot know how to feel. But I will show you. And you can wage your masochistic little war, a war you don't even know why you're fighting. You can smash yourself against me, you can rip yourself apart, little one, but ever you will come crawling back.

You will kneel bloodied before my throne. Tears will fall down those precious cheeks, and you will beg for me to stop, you will beg for me to continue.

You will plead for mercy at my feet, and you will not truly know if it is mercy you desire.

With one final, desperate jerk he pulls himself backwards, and at last his master releases him. Their lips come undone; he gasps in a breath and it tastes like metal. A wave of dizziness swamps through him and to his horror he stumbles, he keels over backwards onto the marble expanse of the dais and the concussion of the impact is left ringing in his ears. By some lingering stroke of instinct he catches himself with his hands as he falls, partially salvaging a completely undignified collapse. A clot of blood shimmers on his lips, and as he pants in dismay and terror and arousal he spits it across the floor, spraying a fine sheen of red across the black tiling.

His tongue flicks across a livid split in his lower lip and he winces as the sting of it prickles through him. But as he comes back to himself he notices his master rise, and all thoughts of fleeting pain tumble from him.

“S-sorry, my lord,” he splutters, half cringing away as his master steps towards him, a feral light set ablaze in his eyes.

His master steps forward, and danger sounds in his every footfall. Frantically he scrambles backwards, away from those terrible golden eyes, away from the awful intent behind them until all too soon his hand comes down on air, and the steps of the dais fall away beneath him. His master's iron-shod boots tap gently upon the marble and with each predatory step he shivers.

“I'm sorry,” he pleads, the words tripping over his lips. “I – I shouldn't have done that, my lord. I... it was improper... I...”

Desperately he starts to rise, to clamber to his feet, but above him his master stoops. One finger presses firmly into his chest and pushes him back to the floor. Real terror wells up inside of him then, his master looks at him with hunger in his eyes and he hopes that his master cannot feel him tremble, cannot feel the frenzied hammer of his heartbeat within his chest. A bead of sweat slides down his back, the numb, animal paralysis of foreboding grips him.

“W-wait,” he stammers, as his master leans over him, a faint smirk playing about his lips. “P-please, I didn't - ”

But his master ignores him, his smile widens, and behind those golden eyes victory flashes like lightning.

And through a sick sneer of triumph, all incisors and snarling lips, his master purrs, “*How now, little one? Are you ready to play?*”

Also, just, FYI, due to some requests on Tumblr, I have made a little playlist of some of the

music that really helped me along in the writing of this fic. Check it out, if you fancy, by clicking [HERE](#)

Plaything

Light struggles slowly through the small, grated windows set high into the slate walls. Its very presence seems grimed. It sends strange shadows bleeding out across the floor.

The air hangs heavy about him, each breath seems an effort as subterranean claustrophobia claims him: each inhalation is at once stifling and unnaturally thick. Faint curls of smoke rise from the glowing braziers bolted to the walls and they cast their gloomy light across the sparse furnishings. The stones scrape away before him and are interrupted only by an ornate bed and matching chair, discarded tributes from a foreign people long since brought to subjugation. The great ivory horns of some wild beast splay outwards at the bed's corners; black, oily wood carved into intricate geometric designs back the chair and the greased timbers glower in the firelight.

The silence is broken by his whimper. The noise is minuscule, half swallowed back into his throat, but still it reverberates in shock clarity about the chamber. There is nowhere left for him to hide.

With sly entreaties his master had drawn him down to the deeper levels of the fortress, with insinuations that were just too tempting for him to quite refute they had traversed the quiet corridors, and as the lamb trustingly follows its herder to the slaughter he had allowed his master to lead him. Only as the door had swung open before him, only as he caught a glimpse of what might await him had he balked, had he refused, but by then it was far too late.

Half suspended, his toes just brush the floor; the stones below him oddly warmed by the channels of molten magma that burrow beneath Angband's foundations. Manacles encircle his wrists, the iron biting tight into his skin and his ankles are fettered by chains to match, bolted each to a metal ring set firmly into the stone. Firm indeed they must have been, for he had not come quietly. But for all his struggles, for all that he begged his master to let him go, to stop, his pleas fell on uncaring ears. Cold and fey and terrible his master seemed, and at last he submitted himself, though he trembled he had endured his master's fickle touch and he had allowed himself to be restrained.

Maybe it would be easier that way, he had thought. Maybe it would be over all the sooner.

His trousers cling to his legs with sweat, each laboured breath hisses past his teeth. His arms jolt out their protest; muscles cramp and tendons blaze with pain. For how long has his master left him hung so cruelly? Knots coil in his shoulders; each tiny shift of his ribs sends prickles of discomfort flitting through his torso, his muscles stretched far beyond the realm of ease. A livid scratch curves down his neck and as he shifts slightly it flakes, the clotting blood sloughs from him to reveal the raw flesh below, pink and glistening in the torchlight. Droplets of crimson speckle erratically down his chest: such gentle marks of his master's affections.

His master lounges across the chair opposite him, one leg draped with a feline elegance that is strangely at odds with his bulk over its blackwood arm. One golden eye flicks open, lazily his master appraises him, and despite himself he flushes. The sheer carnality of his master's gaze sets something entirely unwanted to twist in his stomach, and as if he could smell it, his master smiles. A sickening grin contorts his handsome features, all sneering carnassials and twisted lips, and with a languid motion he shifts, straightening up in the chair.

A knife lies across his lap, the stiletto blade flashes coldly in the light. From a gilt-leather handle it runs, the thin steel tapering to a wicked point. Such delicacies were rare in Angband's smithies, yet in them his master had once shown interest, and he talent in their forging, and with trepidation now he looks upon the blade that he had made those long years ago. Spells of breaking, of rupturing and

unmaking trail in filigree script along its length; the puissant language of Aman twisted to his purposes and made corrupt.

His master grasps the knife's hilt; he toys with it before holding it upwards in a mock fighter's stance, poised and feral. Light moils down its length, the blade seems to shimmer in his hand as slowly his master arises, he steps forward, and pure, sadistic greed burns in his eyes.

With dreadful apprehension he watches his master step towards him; he sees the knife in his hand, the awful smile curving over his face. Instantly he feels his breath quicken, his throat tightens as true panic cuts through him and in his bonds he squirms. If he could work but one wrist free, if he could do anything to protect himself, to cover himself, to shield himself from what is so surely coming... But his contortions do not avail him, a whimper bleeds from his throat as his master steps closer, and desperately, hopelessly he begs, "No, no, my lord, please, p-please don't do this..."

But his master's trap is well laid, his pleas dash to the pitiless stones below him, and he is left exposed to whatever designs await him. He can only hang, a fresh canvas for his master's next tapestry of cruelty or affection or some dreadful mingling of the two. At that realization of his own utter helplessness he whines, he freezes as terror grips him, as the anticipation of pain seizes him and refuses to let go.

Faster than his eyes can follow, his master lunges forward. Something primal in him flinches, he screws his eyes shut, expecting at any moment that slicing, piercing agony of a blade beneath his skin. But the flat of the blade merely taps against his lips, parting them ever so slightly.

His breath steams across the metal, mottling it in cloudy white bursts as he gasps in surprise. His master smiles anew, he tilts the blade upwards, its tip pressing into his upper lip as he struggles to choke down his shock, his fear. Slowly the knife drags downwards over his chin, over his neck, only just avoiding breaking his skin. Its point teases the edge of the scratch upon his neck and at that familiar pain he hisses, the air drawn sharp over his gritted teeth.

The knife plays ever lower, slicing intricate curlicues across his sternum and his chest. White filigree lines bloom in its wake, his master watches with such perverse fascination as that visceral procession leaves its marks over his skin. At the base of his sternum its wandering pauses, his master sneers at him, and a terrible moment of anticipation grips him. But slowly then the knife trails left. It circles his pectoral muscle in a wide diameter at first, but soon it narrows, spiralling languidly in towards his nipple. And even though in his mind he hates it, he dares not move in case his master should then choose to hurt him truly, he watches in horror as his body betrays him. His nipple stiffens into an engorged little epicentre, and shivers prick over his skin that are not entirely prompted by fear.

The blade finds its apex, its tip digging sharp and cold into his nipple, and in uncontrollable reflex he inhales. A noise caught halfway between a sigh and a moan tears from his lips, he arcs his head back, his hair sticking in sweaty strands to his cheeks and neck. And though his mind screams at him to stop his chest thrusts forward, he curls into that insistent pressure, pressing the knife harder into his nipple.

Blood wells up under the knife's tip, and a boiling smash of pleasure erupts in his stomach.

"*Oh, little one,*" his master purrs, the words dripping from his teeth. His cheeks flush pink as shame courses through him: he shouldn't like this, it is wrong, it is *obscene*; but his master trails the knife lower, scoring pink furrows across his stomach and setting his abdominals to clench and roll as pleasure strikes its way through him.

With his right hand, his master strokes his hip. His fingers linger over its swell; they toy with the

waistband of his trousers. One sharp nail moves in lascivious circles over his pelvis, the muscles there splayed taut, before dancing away down his thigh. The knife moves to follow, his abdominals clench as a thrill of delight shakes through him; this humiliation, this joy and helplessness all crushed together and made bestial, and a moan escapes his throat before he has even the slightest chance of preventing it.

His master grips the back of his left leg, tight and urgent, and against that touch he jerks his hips forward, providing some small relief from that strange, uncomfortable hold. Nails tap his inner thigh, they rake across the thin leather there, and hot bolts of unbidden arousal rip up from the base of his stomach. Desperately he tries to stop himself, to tame himself, but the knife's point catches the lowest point of his abdomen, balanced agonizingly between his hipbones, and an undignified little squeak worms from him.

His master's hand slides across his groin, plucking ever so slightly at the lacings on his trousers, and at that sly touch the last shreds of dignity relinquish their hold on him. A whine flickers out of his throat and he throws his hips forward into that pressure, his head arching back in the very image of abandonment. And a part of him is disgusted at himself, it wants to curl up and hide where no one can ever make him feel this way again, but it drowns out in the passion that throbs through him, as such forbidden desires escape their bounds and assert themselves at last.

The obtuse need to please races through him; the need to control, to *be controlled* pounds in his stomach, and before him his master sneers. And he feels himself stiffen against his master's palm, such desire manifested in crude flesh, but oh what *delights* it sends sparking up through him. Breath tumbles over his lips in beseeching little pants, a groan rings in his ears as his master strokes him harder, and his master's grin widens. Unbidden his hips angle into his master's fingers, he near grinds himself against his master's palm, just for one sublime moment he is consumed by the careless abandon of passion.

"*Oh, Mairon,*" his master sighs. "*When was it that you lost your grace?*"

The words chill him to the bone. Abruptly he freezes as ardour curdles to icy shock in his veins. And for a split second he remembers, he remembers what he was: a proud Maia of Aulë's noble house. Skilled he was, haughty even, but esteemed as mighty in his craft, and in his being. Once, it seemed, he was respected. Under the fair light of Aman he was sacrosanct.

And now brought so low, trapped in dungeons of his own design where lords and pawns play their fickle games and he just another one among them. Of his own choice he was corrupted, of his own choice he swore fealty to his master and all that it entailed, for the snatch at power dangled before his eyes. By his own blind ambition then he was entrapped, and he is now beholden to the demands of his master whether he wishes them or no.

Tasks he is set and ardently he sees them done; mechanisms of war he fashions with eagerness, weapons the like of which even the most adroit of the Noldor cannot match zealously he forges, trinkets gorged with jewels he weaves and gladly would give to all who ask them of him. Crafty are his counsels of war, precise are his dealings with Angband's economic matters: to whatever task his master commanded of him he would pay nothing but his best efforts. For so he is bound, so he had sworn on his knees before another throne, in a different land.

His loyalty he sold all those millennia ago, and his skill, and cunning and expertise and resolve. But not this. Though innocent desire might even then have blossomed within him, he did not sell himself so crudely.

So swiftly he recoils, as far as the chains will allow him he arcs his hips away from his master's touch. Loathing sparks amid his desire, it burns incandescent at his core, and fervently he writhes,

wrenching at the chains that hold him. If they would give but an inch, if he could just move he could stop this; he could put an end to this terrible creeping arousal, his master still palming him through his trousers.

“P-please,” he gasps, looking desperately up at his master, “please... I – I don’t want this, my lord, please... Stop. S-stop... *oh!*”

His master’s fingers stroke him a tiny bit harder and he moans as pleasure courses up through him. A smirk of triumph curls over his master’s lips, an eyebrow arcs in wry surprise, and with a sinister note of derision in his voice his master says, “*Come, come, little one. Doubts, now? Misgivings?*”

The breath stops in his lungs.

“It is far too late for that.”

With those fatal words still hanging in the air his master cuts him down, with a swell of puissance the manacles snap open about him. He collapses to the floor, landing hard down upon the stones, and he whines as the blood flows anew into his arms, as blazing tendrils of pain seem to lick beneath his skin.

He scarcely has the chance to begin composing himself before his master grabs him. One hand twines through his hair, the other grasps his upper arm, and with terrifying ease his master drags him across the room before throwing him down onto the bed. His hands scrabble for purchase upon the silken sheets, frantically he tries to rise, he tries to get away, but before he can move much more than an inch his master pins him down. One hand forces his head down into the sheets, his master’s fingers knot tightly into his hair as the other rides the curve of his hip, the knife still balanced in his fingers.

“No...” he moans, the word muffled into the bed sheets, and whether his master has heard him or not his protest goes unacknowledged. The blade slashes down his left leg, his trousers part under its tip, leaving a bloody scratch darting down his thigh beneath it. Shock wars with the last remnants of desire still running in his veins, a whimper caught dangerously between protest and pleasure gags into the bedcovers. But still he shakes, he bucks and twists beneath his master in some last hopeless stand against the inevitable.

The fabric of his waistband jerks into his hips, his master flings his trousers aside leaving him painfully naked and pinioned beneath him. The knife clatters to the floor, and he knows what is coming, he knows it and he reviles it; but some tiny, traitorous part of him welcomes it. Again he writhes, but this time it is gentler, it is resigned as the pointlessness of resistance spreads its torpor through him.

He feels his master unclasp his own robe, one hand still forcing his head into the bed sheets while his knee slams down upon his lower back, with such distressing ease holding him still. Suddenly his master’s knee releases him and reflexively he bends into that relief, raising his hips, until with dreadful certainty he feels his master position himself behind him. Something cold drips down him, *around* him, and the muscles in his back knot in such horrid anticipation as he waits.

Time seems to congeal, what gasping breath he can draw in seems to stick in his throat, it crawls through his lungs in some nightmare viscosity. His hands clench into fists around the bed sheets, his eyes squeeze shut in horror as his master pulls him closer, as the horrible, seductive words crash through him.

“You can scream if you want, little one. No one will hear you. No one is coming to save you. No one will care.”

“No... no please, *please*, my lord, d-don't...”

“*And this is going to hurt.*”

And with that awful proclamation still ringing in his ears, his master slams his entire length into him in one savage thrust that punches the air from his lungs.

He shrieks as the pain explodes through him, he sobs as his master rocks him against the bedcovers. Lieutenant he is no more, commander, betrayer; in those hot, aching moments it all comes apart. For now he is just a toy, a thing to be debased and abused at his master's whims; not a Maia, not a being, just a *thing*. Just a thing for humiliation. A thing for pain.

And he sobs as gradually his master's thrusts change, as each press of flesh into flesh loses its sting, as slowly his master rubs up against something exquisite inside of him. And to his abject horror that pain transforms, that *wrongness* blends and shifts and prickles within him and it becomes something else.

It becomes something torrid and gasping and *right*.

Lessons

Trapped within the confines of Angband, time had worn slowly. The Noldor were ceaseless in their vigilance, and none might pass in force of arms beyond the bounds of the barren Anfauglith. By clandestine means messages still passed from their spies abroad into the fortress' dark holds, but the news that they bore was of ill tidings. Their foes were of fey and stern mood, the borders of their lands stood firmly closed, and any bands of orcs that trespassed into Eldarin territories paid dearly for their boldness.

Only in the North did Angband yet reign supreme. The Thangorodrim towered over the Anfauglith upon their southern flanks, and to the north they looked out over the tundra where none of the Quendi dared to tread. Yet still life flourished in even the harshest of winter climates; a hardy breed of orcs shaped long ago by their master's manipulations patrolled the bitter glaciers and ice floes even unto the borders of the Helcaraxë. The orcs' hairy pelts and thrice-thickened blood insulated them greatly against the cold, and through their efforts the most difficult of pathways remained still open, providing one slender lifeline of aid to the besieged fortress.

The shepherds of the Noldor and the Edain alike had moved their flocks southwards, and little succour came from the orcs sent to plunder their abandoned farmsteads in search of fresh stores of meats or grain. Angband's wiry, inbred stock of cattle and sheep, kept in darkened, stinking pens under the foothills of the Thangorodrim began to wither; their vast stores of grain and preserves dwindled faster than their own slave-worked farms could replenish them, and for a while the threat of famine had loured over the fortress.

Unpleasant indeed was the afternoon upon which he was forced to broach that topic with his master. Though the bruises had faded with time, the task with which he was charged lay heavily upon his shoulders. He was to find a solution to their mounting crisis or else bear its consequences.

For weeks he had laboured, consulting military captains and agriculturalists alike about what might be done to rectify such an issue. Tenuous was his hope, and as experiment after experiment with breeding patterns failed truly he grew nervous. Even with the assistance of Maiar puissant in matters of biology their clumsy cross-breeding of the meatiest stock of their remaining cattle or the augmentation of their life-cycles proved for naught, what stems of grain that they managed to synthesise grew blighted and sickly, and day by day starvation loomed a little bit closer.

But from the most unexpected of sources came his salvation. A party of orcs returning from the northernmost stronghold, a fortress of packed ice set scores of leagues to Angband's northwest, had reported a surprising surplus of oceanic meats. The thought of such bounties had never occurred to him, distant as Angband was from the sea and beleaguered upon their western borders by the proud sons of Nolofinwë. Eagerly then he listened to all that they had to tell. The walrus had spawned in unprecedented numbers this year, so they said, and immense pods of whales breached mere metres from the sturdy edges of the ice floes, chasing great shoals of fish just beneath the surface of the gentle waves.

Zealously he leapt upon the opportunity, and within months Angband's stores were filled once more with meats aplenty. Through blizzard and gale great hauls of seal and walrus and whale meats were brought to the fortress, and were accompanied by countless barrels of fish in all their myriad varieties: pickled, smoked, or compressed into some frankly terrifying concoctions that the orcs swore blind to him were a delicacy among their kind. Politely he had excused himself from sampling that particular gourmet, and focused his attentions more upon the great spindly crabs that the orcs transported inside hollowed-out blocks of ice, or the red lobsters that they brought, or the

very rare fillet of fresh fish that he might be able to procure for himself.

The seemingly inexhaustible supplies of seafood the orcs trawled day and night from the ocean to fulfill their masters' sudden demands, and as by his resourcefulness Angband's coffers were filled once more, his name had rung in cheerful toasts about its drinking halls for weeks.

For a while he had departed the fortress, travelling amid the bitter winds to their northern holds to greater improve the efficacy of their supply routes. Great halls were burrowed into the sides of what lonely hills might spring from the snowy wastelands, the natural caves that occurred in the strata beneath the shifting snowdrifts there had long since been expanded and fortified as Angband's outposts. Battalions of orcs had for centuries been stationed there at the ready, and in the chill depths of those caves lurked monsters of horn and fur and ivory that they succoured and nursed to their services with ensorcelled meats.

The main posts along the coastlines he frequented, spending his time there refining more reliable methods of fishing. Sturdier nets he fashioned to snare more fish with each cast, he forged harpoons that would hold even the most stubborn of whales at bay, colossal hooks of re-curved iron that even the leviathans of the deep would soon come to fear.

Hours he spent in the warm confines of his hastily assembled forges, and hours more he spent in grudging envy of the local orcs who seemed near impervious to the cold. In quilted furs he rugged himself, gratefully he accepted the thickest sealskin cloaks that they had to offer, yet ever the wind seemed to slice through him in the most disagreeable of manners. But for the harshness of the weather he spent many an enjoyable day amid the alien terrain; examining the fractal patterns of the snowflakes that caught amid his hair, or debating the merits of fiery rum or malted whiskey as better wardens against the cold with an ever-changing chorus of orcs, or simply watching the wildlife pass him by; the schools of fish that wheeled beneath the grey waves, or the pods of narwhals that swam with queer, sinuous grace on their migratory routes.

But with the turning of the year summons had arrived in the gloved hands of a rather frostbitten captain from the South. His presence was demanded in Angband's halls once more, by direct order of his master. With a slight air of reluctance then he departed; strangely fond he had become of the frigid North and the friendly, merry orcs that commanded it.

Upon his arrival back to the fortress, and after a few days spent straightening out the projected increase in supplies with the economists and store-keepers, his master tasked him anew.

The Noldorin forces to their south had remained suspiciously static during the long months of his absence, the reports from their spies indicated, and investigation into such claims was necessary. With the famine quite neatly resolved, his master thought to turn his guiles to matters of war and he was charged with scouting upon the southern borders of their territories, to ascertain by subtle means whether the blockades and siege-lines of the Noldor still held firm.

Upon the next morning he departed, spurring his horse over the dusty paths that patterned the Anfauglith. He was to take command of a small legion of Valaraukar stationed at one of their concealed watchtowers towards the bottleneck of the Sirion, and from there carry out his orders.

The great hall of Angband throngs. The noise of the amassed denizens bounces off the walls. Murmurs and chatter, raucous laughter and growls meld into a cacophonous din; dissonant shreds of sound rise in an ugly clamour towards the vaulted ceiling. The fading sunset bathes the hall red, and crimson glints off of every exposed facet of metal within the restless crowd.

Jaws gnash, stubby fangs and stiletto teeth snap and laugh, crooked grins split across unlovely

faces. Limbs of all shapes and sizes are clad in reeking leather and chainmail armour, sweaty and stained from a day's combat training. Bodies lithe and deadly stand and mingle among them, soot-dusted and weary from a shift at the forges, or trekked up from the kitchens or stores or a myriad other stations at the mere mention of the evening. Blade hilts glimmer in the baleful light; steel scimitars jostle alongside crude gutting-hooks, riveted crossbow bolts rest in quivers of hide and bone. Plumes of crow's feathers sprout from squat helms, insignia of many a strange shape curl over pauldrons and shields, near as varied in form and quality as those who bear them.

The crush swells as yet more of Angband's citizens attempt to pile into the hall, with snarls and jeers and pointed elbows cramming into every inch of available space. About the base of the dais a row of Valaraukar stand, defending a slight space about the stairs with bellowed word and the occasional flick of a flaming whip. Incarnate in semi-humanoid form, their wing arches stretch half-unfurled from the backs of their dark armour, but even with that imposition the object of interest behind them is morbidly apparent.

To the right of the throne stands a grim wooden frame, its sturdy beams of oak scored and flaking along their surfaces. Dark stains spot at random over the wood, and from the topmost beam a pair of manacles hang, one from each corner, with little flecks of maroon left peeling from their heavy chain links.

Anticipation swells through the crowd and only with difficulty can the Valaraukar restrain them. Flames drip from their flails, they sizzle in oily droplets upon the floor. Before their bulk the crowd settles once more, their patience set to a tremulous simmer. But for their varied merriments all eyes glance towards the throne, all of them know that they have gathered here for the same purpose, that they all await the same exhibition.

The evening's entertainment.

With a braying herald of trumpets suddenly the crowd parts, and silhouetted between the great iron doors of the hall a tall figure stands. Raven hair frames a handsome, rugged face, a crown of sculpted iron sits proudly upon his brow, set with three searing gemstones that glitter bloody in the light. Golden eyes survey the now silent masses and with a lazy confidence their master strides forward. The crowd parts before him, melting away like butter sliced through with a heated knife, and heads bow in solemn respect as he passes them by. With regal purpose he ascends the dais, and as he takes his seat upon the throne the ranks of Valaraukar bow low, their wings folded neatly at their backs in a display of reverence.

With an elegant crease of his robes their master arranges himself upon the throne. Idly he runs a finger down the fluted metalwork of its arm, the faint hint of a smirk curling about his lips. With languid curiosity his eyes flick at last upwards, he looks out upon the ranks of his servants standing hushed and so deliciously expectant before him. And with a dark, indulgent proclamation, finally he says, "*Bring him in.*"

Within the gape of the doors, two new figures appear, one clasped firmly in the talons of a Valarauka chieftain. Clad only in a simple black tunic and leggings he is propelled forward into the hall, and at the force of the Valarauka's rather enthusiastic push he stumbles for a few paces. But before he can fall, before he can add that fresh indignity to his current predicament his captor darts forward, a singeing hand grasps around his upper arm and pulls him upright once more.

More soberly than they continue onward into the hall. Barefoot he is marched past the assembled ranks of his underlings, his hands bound tightly behind his back with thick, coarse rope. Such dramatics are of his master's devising, of that he is sure. Without protest he would have come, his actions fairly deserved consequences, and he would not try to plead his innocence nor shirk from

that truth where so clearly he had erred. But at these extraneous little touches of humiliation; the ropes that hold him fast, the Balrog's hand clamped uncomfortably down upon his shoulder, he feels the beginnings of a blush prickle over his cheeks.

Grimly he gathers himself, but for all that he keeps his face carefully impassive he is powerless to stop the dreadful hammer of his heartbeat, or to quell the coils of nausea that flip in his stomach. His blond hair hangs in disheveled strands about his shoulders, the undersides of it sticking with nervous sweat to his cheeks and neck. A livid bruise stands high upon his left cheekbone, marring his usual pallor with a purple crackle of burst capillaries.

If his master's pleasures were at times painful, then his rages were cruel. He is only thankful that the blow had not broken the bone.

Each footstep seems to take a lifetime; the piggish, slanted eyes of his audience seem to reel out every inch of his discomfort, and he dares not look at them. He dares not look at his friends as he is marched by them in disgrace, past the Valaraukar captains and the Maiar and the decorated orc commanders who stare at him. He dares not witness the anger in their eyes. Or worse: the pity.

At last he is hauled up the steps of the dais, with a swift kick to the backs of his knees he is forced to kneel before his master's throne. With his hands bound he wobbles, his balance thrown wildly off kilter, but though his abdominal muscles burn with the effort of it he quickly rights himself. Demurely then he kneels, awaiting his master's judgment, and only the rapid rise and fall of his chest and the tight clench of his fingers betray his apprehension.

After a few awful moments of silence his master acknowledges him, and in a dark, luxurious purr that seems to reverberate from the very foundations of the hall, he says, "*Do you know why you are here, Mairon?*"

His throat tightens, the words hook into him and will not budge, and in what feeble answer he can manage he nods his head, his eyes squeezed shut against the sudden horror of that admittance.

"We don't!"

A gravelly voice booms out from the crowd, and a smatter of laughter follows that bold cry.

"*Peace, Gothmog,*" his master drawls, a wry smile playing about his lips. "*All in good time. Though, let it not be said that my rule is unjust. We are gathered here for your lieutenant, as well you know, to address the recent failings of his command.*"

Though perhaps it is fitting that Mairon explain to you himself the precise reason for this congregation, hmm?"

His master rises, his fingers dig suddenly into his arm and roughly he is drawn up, he is spun about to face the assembly. Thousands of eyes watch him, and in them something sadistic glitters. A wave of horror cracks through him, the sheer *hunger* in their gaze for a moment is all too much, and miserably he stares down at the floor, his pulse jumping in his throat.

"*Well, Mairon,*" his master purrs, and all too clearly he hears the brush of impatience in his voice. "*We are waiting...*"

With every ounce of his willpower he forces himself to look up, from the terrified squall of his mind he attempts to smash together even a fragment of coherent speech. But his efforts fail him, a shuddering inhalation rattles through his lungs but the words won't come, they seem to gouge through his throat but they refuse to clamber over his lips.

And in a rather un-lordly squeak audible only to his master he gulps, “I can’t... I... I –“

“No?” his master asks, and the percussion of his voice echoes menacingly about the hall. “*Come, Mairon, it is not like you to be shy.*”

But with a tiny, quivering motion he shakes his head, gritting his teeth to stop his jaw from visibly trembling. With an admonishing click of his tongue his master arcs an eyebrow, and to the audience then he sighs, “*Oh, Mairon, how could you let this happen? You: most trusted, most loyal of all my servants. I expected better from you.*”

It was so simple, Mairon. Observe, detail and report, that was all. That was all I asked of you. Yet you overstepped your authority. You ordered an attack, and perhaps to you it seemed like wisdom, an exploitation of the weakness of our enemies, a loose thread left dangling for you to sever.

I would expect you to know a trap when one is laid so prettily before you. You ordered an attack, against my explicit orders, and for your arrogance ten of my elite have perished. Ten lives gone, needlessly, all because you wanted to play your little games. All for your pride. Perhaps now you will understand the cost of losing.”

Anger burns behind his master’s eyes and under that fury he crumbles, he would have fallen were it not for his master’s bruising grip upon his arm.

“*Come now,*” his master entreats, encompassing the entire hall within his gaze, “*my faithful servants of Angband. Let us taste the price of Mairon’s disobedience. Ten lives lost, ten lashes rewarded. Maybe then your lieutenant will remember to whom he swore obedience.*”

At his master’s nod two commanders step forward: one seizing him roughly about the shoulders while the other slices the rope free of his hands. Together they drag him over to the wooden frame, ignoring the faint struggles that he mounts more out of instinct than of any real expectation of escaping what awaits him. They fasten his hands into the waiting manacles before with one quick tug his tunic is ripped from him, leaving him splayed half-naked before the court with the cold air lapping at his skin.

His master gestures, and with almost ceremonial gravity a coiled whip is laid in his hand. And though he cannot see it, he knows exactly what horror will be put to him. From a handle of polished bone knotted thongs of leather spring thin and cutting. Strung at their tips lie tiny shards of metal, cruel splinters to cleave deep through skin, and at the thought of it he trembles. Behind him his master unfurls the whip, turning it slowly in his hand so that the metal shards catch the light, and before him each sadistic grin widens a little further.

He hears his master ready himself, the metal strands tinkling as he raises his arm. The muscles in his back clench in awful anticipation, bunching under his skin. And in that moment time seems to clot, marked only by the painful thud of his heartbeat. Desperately he stares down at the floor, flinging his hair over his face, that small mercy shielding him from the brutal gaze of his audience: all of them assembled here to witness his punishment, his humiliation, their proud lieutenant for once brought down to mortal terms. Nausea churns in his stomach, like parasites squirming in a wound they have all come to revel in his disgrace, and he can do nothing but let them.

But he’s not going to scream, whatever happens he’s not going to scream, he won’t give them the pleasure, he’s not going to -

CRACK

White lines of fire rip across his back, and desperately he forces down the shriek that claws up his

throat. A grunted moan of pain punches past his teeth and despite himself he writhes as instinct that he is powerless to tame tries to tear him away from the source of that agony. But the manacles hold him fast, and soon he is still once more. He hears the first stifled sniggers, tiny ripples of laughter burst amongst his savage admirers, and with burning passion he tries to ignore them, he tries to ignore the shame that they dredge up within him. He clamps his jaw shut, the whip tinkles once more behind him and –

CRACK

Sparkles of light explode across his vision. The impact slams the air from his lungs, sending it spinning over his teeth. His back arcs, his feet scabble upon the marble as for a moment he slips, dragging cruelly hard upon his wrists above him. But at last he forces his trembling knees to support him, though he pants with the effort of it, and at his ear suddenly he hears his master's croon.

“Oh, little one,” his master whispers, with such bitter tenderness in his voice that his heart aches. *“I thought that you could take it. I thought that you were stronger than this. Would you disappoint me again?”*

Shame flushes through him and he shuts his eyes, his face contorted in a grimace of pain. Hard he inhales, the air sticking in his throat and –

CRACK

Seven more times he endures it. Each lash sears across his back, messy dribbles of blood run slowly down what unbroken skin still remains to him. Each minuscule movement sends fresh bursts of agony shooting through him, the pain grappling with the odd numbness that seems to settle over him in the aftershock of each blow. After each strike the promise of unconsciousness beckons to him a little more urgently, and so desperately he longs to answer its call.

His audience is but a blur to him, just an indistinct tangle of enraptured faces as their eyes fixate upon every curl of the whip, every sharp contraction of his muscles beneath his skin. Tongues lick across lascivious grins as he gasps, as the metal tips of the whip carve into the sides of his ribs with a particularly cruelly angled blow. Agony defines him; it paints his universe in crimson strokes and uncaring it throws him into it, cradling him in strands of crude, throbbing, *deserving* pain.

With the final strike he sags in exhaustion. Limply he hangs in the manacles, and for a moment it is only the laboured hiss of his breath that assures his master that he is still conscious. As if caught in some hideous nightmare he feels rivulets of blood inching down his legs, soaking the backs of his leggings. At his master's gesture the two commanders step forward once more and unlock the chains about his wrists. He drops down to the cold floor made slick with droplets of his own blood, and at that impact he whimpers as bolts of pain rip through him anew. The audience chuckles, they drink in his destruction, so utterly transfixed on the spectacle that he presents.

After long, creeping seconds at last he rallies himself, though his muscles drag with shock and torpor at last he pulls himself upright, gripping tightly to a blood-flecked beam of the frame to help himself up. Dizziness pulses through him but with vicious intent he slams it aside, he focuses on his master now standing before the throne and he steps towards him. He winces with each faltering step, but after a few shaky seconds at last he stands before his master as he knows that his master expects it of him, and he looks up into his eyes.

Grey fingers cup his cheek; they tilt his head as one would prelude a kiss, and with such soft, awful sincerity his master asks, *“Have you learned your lesson, Mairon?”*

The condescension in the question nearly chokes him, the tenderness of the touch is obscene; and at that terrible murmur something defiant kindles in his eyes, some last shred of rebellion in him unearths itself and shows itself bold. Instantly his master recoils, a snarl of disgust twists over his features, and viciously he backhands him across the face. The impact splits open his lip, it sends him staggering back a few wobbly steps, his right hand clasped to his cheek already reddening from the blow. A livid silence settles across the hall, mutters die in hollow throats as all eyes fix in sadistic surprise towards the dais at this unexpected continuation of events.

Before the throne he freezes. His back howls in pain, one hand presses into his throbbing cheek and with crushing certainty he knows that he has crossed a line. He has challenged his master one hurdle too far, pride has spurred him far beyond decorum, and the expression upon his master's face nearly stops the breath in his lungs.

With unearthly coolness his master stalks over to where he stands, but beneath that collected veneer he can almost feel his rage as a tangible force, and his words cut down to the bone.

"It seems," his master says icily, *"that you still need a lesson in humility. Happily I will oblige, to... further your education."*

With that his master shrugs off the outer layer of his robes, casting aside the rich fabric to a crumpled heap aside him. Clad then in a loose black shirt and trousers finished in golden filigree his master stands before him, and in paralysed horror he awaits his master's decree.

Slyly then his master regards him. His ashen fingers toy with the laces of his trousers, teasing the slender threads that rest between his hipbones.

"Mairon," his master purrs, and for the gentleness of that utterance still he flinches. *"How lucky you are to have such an audience. After all, you have such a flair for theatricality. Now, get on your knees."*

"W-what?" he splutters: for a split second he fails to grasp his master's meaning.

"On. Your. Knees."

He blanches as suddenly he realises what his master wants from him, what he is going to have to do. But though everything in him loathes the deed, the terror of what should happen were he to refuse now grips him the stronger. It forces his knees to bend, he sinks down before his master, and though he trembles with the degradation of it still the words stumble over his lips.

"P-please, my lord, I'm sorry... I'm sorry, please don't – don't make me... Not here, not here, please..."

But his piteous speech is stopped, his master steps forward and seizes him by the jaw, his nails digging hard into his cheeks.

"Get on with it."

With shaking fingers he reaches up, slowly he unlaces his master's trousers, and with a blush of utter mortification he feels his master already stiff beneath the soft leather. The first sniggers break in the crowd behind him, half stifled chuckles flit around the hall, but in his ears they might as well have been screaming.

He shuts his eyes, he inhales one shuddering breath as he steels what brittle resolve he has left, and finally he parts his lips for his master. He runs his tongue from the tip of his master's shaft to its base, before slowly drawing his head back up his master's length. Reluctantly his hands curl

around his master's thighs for purchase as he sets his rhythm, and shame pulses through him with each awful slide of his tongue.

For a few more strokes he continues at his own pace, until with a sudden growl his master thrusts his hips forward, pushing himself hard down his throat. At that invasion he gags, every weary muscle in him strains to push himself backwards, to free his airway. But his master holds him firmly in place, his fingers knotted through his hair, and even as his lungs begin to burn his master pushes him further down until his nose almost touches the taut muscles of his master's abdomen.

At that unyielding pressure he chokes, thin ribbons of saliva drip from his lips to pool humiliatingly between his knees. Only as he truly begins to asphyxiate does his master take mercy upon him, and drags his head back a few inches. He gasps in a few desperate breaths around his master's length, a strangled moan bleeds from his throat only to be cut abruptly short as his master slams back into him.

Ripples of poorly smothered laughter spread amongst the crowd, smiles crack in such awful delight at their lieutenant's subjugation. All eyes fix upon his flayed back, upon their master's hands wound so tightly through his hair, upon his flushed cheeks as their master stands so triumphantly over him. Viciously his master thrusts himself forward, ramming his shaft in hard, brutal rhythm down his throat, heedless of his whimpers at each new, gagging impact.

His master surveys the room with a grin; a victorious snarl curves over his lips, dark and salacious and twisted. Deep and low in his throat he chuckles, and like a dam burst under the pressure of the river's torrent his servants *howl*.

Jeering, raucous laughter explodes through the hall, their mockery shrieks in his ears, and to his abject horror he feels tears running unbidden down his cheeks, tracing their hot, shameful lines across his aching jaw. And as it continues he wants to run, to run away and hide where no one can ever hurt him again, where no one would ever find him, he could curl up with his misery and they would all just leave him alone. But harsh reality slashes through such fantasies; his master grips his skull even tighter, slamming himself roughly down his throat with each roll of his hips, his breath quickening as he nears his peak.

With one final thrust his master comes. Ropes of hot seed spurt down his throat, and still gagged by his master's length he is left with little option but to swallow. A tight little sob catches in his chest as he feels his master finish, and then suddenly he is thrust aside, his master discards him roughly to the floor.

Pain racks through him as his back arcs, fresh droplets of blood splatter down upon the stones with that impact, but amid his pain he reaches up. With the palm of his hand he wipes the tears from his cheeks, he wipes his master's seed from his lips, and a sudden retch bubbles up his throat as he realises what exactly he has just done. And how cruelly he hears his efforts rewarded. Cackling, hysterical laughter stabs through him, every common denizen of Angband looks upon him with mirth in their eyes, and he dares not raise his face and see them. He dares not look to his *friends*. He could not bear to see whatever emotion might be caught across their faces. And for one crushing moment he drowns beneath the weight of that ignominy, he splutters like a fish left gutted and forgotten on the floor.

Slowly he staggers back to his knees, he hears more than sees the hall beginning to empty; the sadistic appetites of Angband's soldiery seem well sated by his performance, and bitterly he grudges them their pleasure. Small and forlorn he sits upon the dais, his face downturned. He can hardly bear to be seen before his master, already composed and smirking from the throne.

No one touches him. Though in truth more than one sympathetic wince flickers up at him from the

ranks of the Valaraukar and the Maiar, none dare to step forward. He is far beyond their jurisdiction, and camaraderie now, however well intentioned, would seem nothing but salt in the wound. So ruefully they take their leave, ushering the meandering orcs from the hall and as their heavy footfalls gradually recede, aloud he whispers the fatal question.

“Why?”

“*Why what, little one?*”

“Why do you do this to me? Why do you make me do these... *things?*” For a moment his master does not answer him, and as a dull, throbbing ache begins to pound through his back, he gulps, “Do... do you hate me that much?”

“*Hate you?*” His master’s voice is almost surprised, and all the more horrible for it. “*Oh, Mairon, no. No, nothing so spiteful.*”

I do it because I love you.”

The breath hitches in his lungs, a half hysterical little bubble of grief and wonder and perhaps even the tiniest, traitorous hint of *gladness* seems to burst in his chest. But through that hideous smash of emotions he moans, he whispers, “You don’t understand...”

Perhaps it is fortunate that his master does not hear him. Slowly then he clambers to his feet, he bows rigidly before his master before limping his painful, lonely way from the hall. But with each step that he takes towards the corridors outside and through them to the mercy of the infirmaries his master’s words hound him. Not hate, he had said. *Not hate*. Not hate, but love. Cruel, warped, violent *love*. But his master didn’t understand, he is not even sure if he *could* understand.

Not hate, but love.

That makes it so much worse.

Fealty

He sprints down the corridor, his footsteps echoing wildly across the black lacquered walls. Each step sends a twinge of pain jolting through him, the mass of yellow and purple bruises speckled across the left side of his ribcage make themselves felt, but stoically he ignores them. His right hand snakes across his chest, pressing down hard upon his ribs, and he hopes that with a steady pressure it might ease the discomfort that pounds through him.

Hard he grips himself, and beneath the fine cotton of his shirt he can feel the trauma done to his flesh: the skin swollen and raised and aching to the touch. But gritting his teeth he staggers on. His own comfort is no longer the priority here.

The Noldor had improved their mastery of siege ballistae, so it seemed, and bitterly he grudged them that knowledge. Had he been distracted for even a second longer, had he been leaning even a foot further to his left before his second in command had grabbed him, had *shielded* him from the barrage of rock that came toppling down around them, then all would have been lost.

With a desperate burst of puissance he had blasted their way free of the rubble, passing his unconscious saviour to the reserve team of orcs that had scrambled from their hidden bolt-hole to assist him. He had reformed their own lines of catapults and trebuchets atop Angband's ramparts, performing emergency repairs where necessary and otherwise coordinating what machinery still remained operational into an unrelenting barrage that sent the Noldorin forces reeling back in dismay.

He had done what his master had commanded of him, and he had done it well. Angband prevailed, and though the tides of battle had swirled, though their enemies had grown cold and steely in their warfare Angband still stood triumphant. And yet...

He had been lounging in the bath when the news had come to him. The strategic location of his rooms encompass a natural geothermal pool, where mineral-rich waters are pleasantly heated by the turbulent volcanism that underpins Angband's foundations. In those cloudy waters he had lain; prodding tenderly at his ribs, combing the last smears of soot and oil from his hair, and readying himself for the tiresome series of post-battle meetings with his master and the war-councillors. With a self-indulgent groan he had idly considered the truly irksome amount of paperwork that would soon be required of him, and then the fatal knock had come at his door.

Perhaps more vigorously than he intends to he twists around a corner, and a blaze of pain sparkles through his ribs. His blond hair plasters in damp strands across his cheeks and neck; he had barely stopped to throw on a shirt and pair of breeches before dashing to his master's side. He cares not for the slightly incongruous spectacle that he must present: the lieutenant running barefoot through Angband's upper levels, tearing through the groups of surprised-looking servants who scramble out of his way.

Such strangeness would swiftly fade to inconsequence. If there is one thing he has come to be thankful for over the past centuries, it is that the denizens of Angband were extremely rare to hold grudges or to dwell over past humiliations. Punishments were meted out to lord and commoner alike, and once served in full they were quickly forgotten. The orcish sense of justice was fickle enough to match their master's, and once whatever wrong had been committed was deemed to have been redressed so ended that matter. Dissent upon such topics among the ranks was viewed no lighter than treason, and dealt with as such.

Panic clenches in his stomach as finally he sights the doors to his master's chambers, as he bursts

through them, sending the ponderous metalwork squealing open on their hinges. He sees his master prone in the bed, lying limp and half-covered by the black silken sheets, his hair a tangled mess across the pillows, and worry jabs that much more sharply through his innards.

A Maiarin attendant bends over his master's torso, obscuring him from immediate view, but all too clearly he can see the Maia's hands moving. Fingers as thin and brittle as matchwood probe at his master's torso; the Maia's slanted, catlike eyes fill with worry as urgently he leans forward to inspect something upon his master's chest. Upon the opposite side of the bed's wide expanse the herb-mistress stands, grinding a pungent set of herbs within a blocky mortar, and the set of her jaw is grim.

For a moment both attendants turn to face him, and swiftly they nod to him in terse greeting before turning back to their charge. His throat constricts, cold dread swells in his stomach as slowly he steps forward, as he forces himself to put one foot in front of the other. He crosses over to the Maia's side, his master is revealed fully before him, and with that sight the awful numbness of shock seems to settle into him.

Livid wounds curve over his master's abdomen. One hews across his stomach, another cleaves through his right pectoral, its edges raw and glistening and split apart to expose the muscle beneath. Mercifully his master is unconscious, though whether it is from some battle trauma or an administered sedative he cannot tell, and he cannot quite find the impetus within himself to ask. The Maia threads a needle and catgut string through the topmost edge of the gash and deftly sews it shut, snapping off the thread to leave a neat row of sutures pinched through his master's skin.

The Maia then turns to the wound across his master's stomach and calmly repeats his sewing, joining the ragged clots of flesh together with a precision that even through his shock sends admiration rippling through him. As one then they look to the deep scratches that lance over their master's cheekbone, the bloody furrows marking where the talons of the great Eagle had torn. With a brownish liquid poured from a small vial the Maia washes the wounds clean, and anxiously he watches as his master flinches, as fresh drops of sweat break in an unnatural sheen across his forehead.

"My lord?" The herb-mistress' voice sounds suddenly at his elbow. He had not even heard her move. "My lord, please step aside. The wounds upon his foot have been dressed, but I must attend to these now."

Numbly he moves away, he perches himself upon the end of the bed, turned inwards to watch the attendants' actions. The Maia dips his bone-like fingers into the mortar that the herb-mistress holds, and she does alike, then together they smear the green unguent over their master's wounds. The strong scent of herbs redoubles in the air and as their gentle hands touch the paste to his stomach their master twitches, he stirs faintly before lapsing into stillness once more.

His hands clench into fists about the bedclothes, his knuckles feel like they might rip through his skin as desperately he tries to compose himself, as he tries to bite down the panic and the horror and the *guilt* that come bubbling up his throat.

"My lord?" The herb-mistress calls softly to him, and violently he whips himself around to face her, an instant later he grimacing as pain flares once more up his side. For a moment she eyes him, her knobbly brow furrows into a frown of irascible concern, but gently then she asks, "My lord, might you fetch for us a light? A candle, or –"

With a snap of his fingers a flare bursts into existence, hovering like an incandescent little orb a few feet above the bed. The herb-mistress' eyes widen in astonishment, but smoothly she says, "Thank you, my lord. If you could lower it but a fraction, to better illumine our work."

Swiftly he complies, with barely a flicker of thought he lowers the flare, setting it to shine a moderate distance above the attendants' bent heads. A strange sort of gratitude seeps through him; well he recognises a distraction when one is put to him. But despite that foreknowledge he feels it take effect, having something to concentrate upon no matter how small seems to soothe him, it cuts through the tight clutch of his panic and for a moment makes it bearable.

With a more measured curiosity than he looks back to the attendants. Gore streaks across the herb-mistress' knuckles, and as his flare tilts a little to the side to follow their movements, he watches as the Maia's pupils dilate in the light following some alien reflex that even he finds perturbing. For a while then he waits as they finish their ministrations, until at last they begin to pack up their things, and sternly the herb-mistress bids him send word should their master worsen during the night.

The blind assumption that he would be staying at his master's side throughout the night digs slightly at him, he is not entirely sure that he likes what it implies, but now he senses is not the time to press such an issue. Hoarsely he assures her that he will send word if necessary, and he bids the two attendants good night.

The doors click shut behind them, and wearily he sighs. Slowly he rises to his feet, he drags a chair over from the corner of the room and sets it at his master's bedside. Gingerly he lowers himself into it, taking care not to jostle his bruised ribs, but still they seem to ache no matter how delicately he sits. Mournfully he stares downwards, he scrapes his hair back from his face and he looks over his master's maimed form, and the *vulnerability* that he finds there scares him. In that strange moment he knows that he will wait, like the graven image of some benevolent guardian he will await his master's arising or his fall. If he could do nothing else, if he could not save him then at the least he would witness this broken, bitter end. That last duty he would perform.

Under the warm glow of his flare he sits, with each inhalation of his master's breath he remembers, he remembers those moments not hours ago etched in stark, unyielding clarity within his mind.

He had run then too, he had sprinted through Angband's subterranean halls to his master's armory. He had ripped open the doors to find his master arrayed for battle. Spiked pauldrons gleamed over steel-wrought chainmail, a reinforced cuirass rested across his master's chest, its obsidian dome set with dark runes and infused with puissant spells of strength and swiftness. Clad in midnight splendour his master stood, and even as he skidded through the doorway his master's mailed fist closed about the hilt of his war-hammer: an immense iron mace forged for one purpose only - to crunch through whatever or whomever had the audacity to stand before it.

He strode across the room and at his footsteps his master turned to meet him, the three gemstones upon his crown glimmering even in the gloom of the armory. Heedless of decorum he planted himself firmly before his master, his own armour shining silver and bright against such a spread of blackness.

"You cannot do this."

Surprise flickered in his master's iridescent eyes, he could see the flare of affront at the vehemence of his tone, but soft still was the reply.

"Mairon, you forget yourself. Do not presume to command me."

"I do not command, my lord," he countered firmly. "I merely advise, in the most stringent of terms." His master arched an eyebrow at him, and under that admonishing gaze he had tempered himself, and he sighed, "Subtle difference."

A disbelieving snort of laughter crackled in his master's throat, but stern then grew his mood.

"If this elf," he said darkly, "if this fool seeks to challenge my strength, then let him. He will smash himself upon my iron, his blood will pour across the thirsty earth as I throttle the life from him, as I grind it from his arrogant bones."

Doubt must have flickered across his face, perhaps the shift of his hips betrayed his apprehension, for quickly his master had rounded upon him, he had growled, *"Do you doubt me, Mairon? Do you think me craven, or weak? Or is it you now who shows their weakness?"*

"It is not weakness that I plead, my lord," he said evenly, "but prudence. This is needless. The Noldor are desperate, they would throw everything into this fell gamble because they know that they have not the strength to defeat us in arms alone. Let them break themselves against our walls, for they have not the art to undo us. They know that we cannot be routed. Here we have the victory, and when the last of them falls or is taken to his ruin, then we shall be as kings in these mighty lands.

"King I am already," his master snarled, and his fist clenched all the tighter about his hammer. "And kings do not permit their slaves to challenge their rule."

In frustration he had sighed; all too well he knew the stubbornness in his master's tone, and in the grip of such a fey mood it would be impossible to sway him. But he had to try, he could not simply let his master walk out there alone, and beseechingly he had said: "Please, my lord. If you will not be changed from this course then let me help you. Let me come with you, at the least. You do not have to do this alone."

"Did you mishear me, Mairon?" his master snapped, and reluctantly he fell silent. "I will face this elf alone, for what have I to fear? Some upstart Noldo challenges me; the mightiest of the Valar, and you would have me cower behind my ramparts and sue for peace? I think not."

With that final, biting remark his master stepped forward, with such unquenchable confidence in his stride seeking to brush straight past him. But before he even knew quite what he had intended his master's path was stopped, his bare hand rested suddenly upon his master's breastplate. Curlicues of runes ran there like a dark mirror of the veins tinged across his knuckles as with some nameless sorrow, with some dreadful foreboding that he could not understand he halted his master. He dared not look up, he dared not look into those fathomless golden eyes, and in futile frustration he pushed harder against his master's armour. And in a voice low and trembling he could only ask, he could only plead.

"Please don't go."

At his whisper he felt his master soften. The pressure under his fingertips changed, he exhaled a breath that he did not know he had held, and for a moment that seemed to stretch on into yawning chasm of infinity he awaited the terrible reply.

His master's fingers tilted his chin, his master's lips brushed up against his own. Softly at first they met, light yet firm, and with his fingertips still resting upon his master's chest he could feel him shaking, though with passion or fear or some strange mingling of the two he could not tell. But at his master's kiss something bright flared in him, something urgent, and he pushed hard into that embrace, his tongue sliding across his master's teeth.

And he felt his master's lips fully part to accept him, their tongues twined desperate and raw and savage together. Lips met in biting, crushing kisses lit by such reckless ardour, and yet ever tinged by unspoken anxiety. And so hard he fought to lose himself, to be swallowed up in the moment and

to never let it end, to never let him go. His master would just stay there forever, with him, in their fortress they would rule, and they would be safe.

But suddenly his master broke away, his head snapped decisively back. Cold sorrow drenched him, desperately he looked to his master but in his heart he already knew the outcome.

“I am honoured by your concern, little one,” his master murmured. “But I need it not. Farewell, then, until my return.”

Abruptly then his master had turned, he picked up his hammer and strode away, leaving nothing but ringing silence and shadows in his wake. And him, standing there alone in the gloom of the armoury.

He could only stand there as the world began to crumble down around him, and even then he didn't have the courage to admit to himself why it hurt so much.

The sound of his master's whimper jolts him from such reveries. A soft moan echoes from the hollow of his master's throat, the muscles of his neck shiver and flinch beneath this skin. He leans forward in his chair, intently he watches as his master shifts, as the tendrils of a dream reach out into the waking world. Again his master stirs but his eyes do not open, and uncertainly he hovers over him.

In a heartbeat he would have leapt forward, he would have done whatever he could to help, but under his concerned gaze his master relaxes once more. The muscles in his neck and torso unknot, his breath steadies, and with a sigh of relief he sinks back into the chair. His hair hangs limp and straggly across his tired face, and absently he flicks it back behind his shoulders before resuming his silent vigil. And as his eyes wander the planes of his master's face he wonders what he dreams of, and he only hopes that such dreams might be merciful.

<Flies crawled through sockets of bone, buzzing, scratching insidious inside my head, bubbling under my skin. And I shook, and I twisted and I tried to claw them out but they wouldn't come; just blood, red golden blood scored out of my veins, spurting across my skin. And I could feel them moving, I knew they were there, crawling behind my eyes and I screamed, all alone in the silence I screamed. I had to see, I had to look, ((there were spiders crawling up my spine, thick and black, they were tangled through my hair, dropping, scuttling arachnid across the floor)) into that pool of water spilt across the stones and I struggled, the chains were so heavy ((ants were dropping from my lips, they squirm on the floor, chitin gleaming black in the corpse-light)) but I turned and I looked, frantically peeling back my eyelids squeezed so tightly shut. Maggots gleamed fat and white; they gnawed through my irises, writhing against the pink flesh there and as I opened my eyes they fell, they fell like wriggling foetid tears down my cheeks and I screamed and I screamed and they were slick with blood and viscera and squirmed in such joyous, sickening motion and I couldn't move, I was trapped and>

The quiet shatters as his master whines, as he curls up tightly beneath the sheets. Again he leans forward in the chair, dragged from his own ponderous thoughts and though it pains him he watches the tremors rip through his master's abdomen, he watches as the claws of a dark past regain their power to wound. And in that moment he simply doesn't know what to do. His palms seem to slide with anxious sweat against the arms of the chair, as with such terrible helplessness he watches his master writhe; he watches the spasms of pain flit across his face. Strands of raven hair lie stuck to his master's forehead, they tangle together as he shifts, as he moans once more, his lips peeled apart into a wordless whimper of agony.

At that dreadful sound anger ignites within him, unbidden and unexplainable but moving, and he

succumbs to its flame. It wasn't fair, it *wasn't*: this wasn't supposed to have happened. It is all so useless, he can't do anything here; this is no earthly ailment of the flesh that he could have a tentative hand in mending, and the sheer futility of his presence burns with rancour within him. Why couldn't his master have listened to him? Just for once, could he not have laid aside his pride?

But he didn't, and perhaps he couldn't; and all too keenly does that knowledge press upon him. With a trembling hand he reaches forward then, with a gentleness that surprises even himself he brushes the fallen strands of hair from his master's brow and smoothes them back behind his ears. But for all his care as his fingers touch his forehead his master flinches, he recoils from his touch as though his fingertips were full of venom. True dismay clutches at him, he snatches back his hand, and some awful emotion that he does not dare give name to throbs within his stomach.

Before him his master flinches, his legs shift restlessly beneath the covers. And suddenly, in a voice so utterly alien to him, in a voice full of *pleading* his master calls a name out to the waiting shadows, and that name that rips right through him.

"Mairon!"

For a second he freezes, above his master he sits paralysed as a sudden memory washes over him. But how silly it is, how stupid and childish and utterly incongruous, and hastily he thrusts it aside. His master whimpers again, a sound of such unbearable misery curls out from his throat, and in that moment instinct seizes him.

"Shhh," he whispers, reaching out and taking his master's hand, slipping his fingers between his master's own. "Shhh, it's all right, my lord. I'm here. I'm here now, it's all right..."

Tightly he clutches his master's hand, and so fervently he hopes that somehow his presence might pierce through the treacherous realms of dream and bring comfort. And though for a moment it feels wrong, it feels almost improper to be caught in such a moment of intimacy, the *justness* of his cause burns within him; the cold, rational logic of comfort he throws up like a shield within his mind. He tries to drown out all of those other feelings that well up in his stomach.

In some sudden dream-reflex his master pulls him closer, tugging on his hand and arm with near bruising force. And trapped now within that grip he shifts, delicately he positions himself upon the edge of the bed as his master's fingers close upon his and at that urgent, wrenching touch memory slams across him.

The first time, the very first time his master had touched him like that, and all the entropy that it had spewed.

For years unnumbered he had been content in Aulë's host; he had been happy, even. Adept he was, and masterful, and the others looked to him for advice in the arts of metallurgy and jewel cutting. Freely he poured forth his knowledge, of his skill he was not jealous, yet as the time flowed by on that sacred isle he found himself stifled. Projects in which he once took pleasure no longer delighted him; even the most technical or subtle outlets for his skills became monotonous. Ideas then he had of his own, things to make or to shape, but when he discussed them with his friends or his patron he was met with shocked gazes and disparaging looks. Lightly he had shrugged, he had waved away their dissent with a smile and continued with his commissioned works, but ever their disapprovals niggled at him.

Why were his ideas so wrong? *Why* was such innovation forbidden to him? He did not wish harm his brethren, but merely to bring forth things bright and new and cunning into the world; meldings

of organic and metallic tissues of such wondrous form that the Valar themselves might not rival them.

An abomination, they called it, when in secret he had formed but a small, young thing; a hybrid of clockworks and squeaking flesh. They had burned it, like they had not hours before destroyed his fragile silver flowers under the decree that such unnatural things should never be allowed to live.

He had run then, far into the wilderness he had run in his despair. His creation was so beautiful, he had thought. It had nibbled little squares of cheese from his fingertips, its clockwork heart had whirred with pleasure as he stroked its furry back, its thin mechanical legs had tapped about the confines of his forge as it explored its world, and lovingly he had watched it. It was mere trifle, just a thing to keep him company, some innocent little thing. Why then did it deserve to perish simply for what it was?

That was where the Vala found him, sitting alone and despondent upon a high peak of the isle's northernmost mountains. Distant the Vala seemed, fey and terrible, but kind were his words, and after a while spent in terror of his discovery he began to truly listen to what the Vala had to say. Upon that and many other meetings, in wild places where even Manwë's emissaries held no sway, the Vala had spoken to him. Of secret things he had told him, of powerful things, ways of making and of magic that the others of his brethren knew not, or if they knew then they did not dare to attempt. And though at first he had listened with skepticism, the Vala's words were pervasive.

Hours he spent in ponderous thought over what he had learned, manuscripts of half remembered incantations he hid in the crevices of his forge, and by the cold light of Illuin pored over them whilst the others of the household slept. His increasing absences from Aulë's halls he explained away as expeditions to discover new sources of minerals, and blindly his compatriots, and even his patron had accepted his lies. Days he spent in the Vala's company talking of forbidden things, peering at glimpses of power and innovation that piqued him, and at his first tentative admissions of his own designs the Vala was enthused.

Highly the Vala praised him, exalted him even, and little by little the barriers between them began to erode. Small things he began to notice, and they pleased him. The Vala's eyes gleamed with such pure, golden light as he spoke of his ambition; the slight, arrogant tilt of his hips as he spoke became oddly endearing, and at a word of commendation or encouragement from the Vala's lips his cheeks would flush with pride.

There was no grand moment of revelation, there was no dramatic appeal of passion: merely with a warm certainty he knew. In the golden radiance of Ormal, the Vala leaning from a mountaintop with his hair streaming back past his face, telling him so ardently, so *passionately* of the secret potencies of volcanism, he knew that he loved him.

Innocently he loved him, for what he was and for all that he could offer, and therein perhaps was his undoing.

Short months later he had done the unthinkable. He had abandoned Aulë's austere halls, he had come before the Vala and proudly he had sworn his fealty. He had chosen his new master. Upon one knee he had knelt, the words had poured in all their truth and all their strength over his lips, and perhaps if he knew then what he did now he might have chosen differently. But open was his heart and blind his desires, and to loyalty then he was sworn.

Graciously his master had raised him up, and with such pride he had looked upon him that it had sent his heart tumbling. And before he ever intended them to, before he had even the slightest chance of stopping them, the words that had coiled within him for months came in a giddy, uncontrollable whisper over his lips.

“You are very beautiful, my lord.”

His master’s slap caught him clean across the face; it sent him stumbling back a few paces. His hand flew to his smarting cheek, through eyes blurred with sudden, shocked tears he looked up at his master, as guilt and such terrible embarrassment rocked through him. But his master stared at him with shock to match, his hand left hovering in the air, and faintly he could see the redness that marred across his palm.

“I’m s-sorry,” he stammered, as horror wound about his throat and began to squeeze in earnest. “I’m sorry, I didn’t... I didn’t mean to say that, my lord. I – “

Slowly then his master had stepped forward, and it took every ounce of his willpower not to run away, to force himself to stand there and await whatever retribution such dire impropriety would wreak. And with such misery he had closed his eyes, with such shame and regret he braced himself for whatever might now happen.

“Do not apologise, Mairon.” His master’s voice was gentle, but despite it still he flinched. It took an effort for the words to sink into him, and softly then he felt his master take his hand, drawing it away from his cheek and holding it earnestly within his own. *“It is I who is sorry. I did not – I did not mean to strike you. Such sweet sentiments should not be checked with violence. That was uncouth of me.*

It is poor excuse, but you took me by surprise. Nobody has ever said that to me before. That I was beautiful.”

“Really?” His voice was barely more than a squeak, but kindly his master had smiled down at him.

“Yes,” his master replied simply. *“And I am unsure now if I am deserving of such noble words. Will you forgive me this trespass, Mairon? It was not my intent to cause you distress.”*

Such sincerity rang in his master’s voice, such tenderness; and despite the pride that coiled up like a wounded thing inside of him, he heard himself whisper, “Yes. I forgive you, my lord.”

At that his master had smiled, such a look of relief had spread over his features that it near set him ablaze to see it. Kindly then his master had bade him come to his hall at Ormal’s second hour of waxing, and while Illuin reigned he bade him rest. Gently his master had squeezed his hand, he had raised it up; he had planted but one tender kiss upon his knuckles before he departed.

Funny he had it thought then, and ruefully he thinks of it now. That kiss had lingered upon his hand long after the pain had faded from his cheek.

Again his master cries out, he clutches all the tighter to his hand. Upon the pillows his master tosses, his hair flicks across his face; the edges of his closed eyes crease in little contractions of pain. It was so simple; so small and insignificant and so stunningly powerful, and in that moment it feels like something is breaking inside of him, some brittle thing so long held rigid now smashes clean apart.

And he no longer cares for the implications of it: in this moment the boundaries of master and subject dissolve, and instinctively he knows that it is right. Not breaking his master’s frantic grip upon his hand he shifts, delicately he arranges himself to curl around his master’s shivering form. His master’s sweaty forehead rests into his chest, and for one worrisome second he feels his master flinch against him. Warily he awaits the rebuke, he waits to be pushed away and scorned for his boldness, but then his master softens. Through feverish delirium his master curls into him, pressing

his face into the cotton of his shirt and settling there.

With that unspoken acceptance he holds his master in return, cradling him into a gentle embrace as the first lulling waves of sleep begin to wash through him. As a silhouette etched in dust and pain and love, what point is there even in denying it now, in love he would stay. Should the very mountains come crashing down around them he would stay, he would not leave his master's side to a future of uncertainty and peril, not again. Never again, though the long ages of the world condemn him for his arrogance.

There he lies, under the dimming light of his little flare, and it is all that he can do to keep from crying. So long ago it had begun, that fleeting kiss upon his knuckles seemed to bind him tighter than any words ever could. It bound him to emotions that he did not truly understand, that with the long shift of the years had evolved into something that he was not even sure that he wanted. Yet still those emotions exist, they dwell inside of him in all of their terrible conundrum, and powerless he is to yet resolve them.

But in that moment some puissant mood grips him, and though he knows that it is desperate, he knows that it is pointless, still it forces the words from his lips. His flare dies away, the shadows of night grow thick about him and his master cradled in his arms, and into them he finally whispers, "May you never be broken again."

Rubble

For ten days his master lies abed. Under his watchful gaze and with the aid of the herb-mistress' poultices the stitched wounds of his master's torso and foot close cleanly, and only the gash across his cheekbone shows some slight signs of malaise. Swiftly though that infection is dealt with, and in body his master becomes hale once more. But abed still he languishes, in pride wounded perhaps more deeply than in flesh, and in his master's absence he takes command of Angband's affairs.

Upon the fifth day he pries himself fully from his master's bedside. The seemingly eternal stream of messengers bearing news from every corner of the fortress shows no signs of abating, and with his master so clearly on the path to healing he relieves himself of his vigil.

Grimly then he tasks himself to setting the fortress aright. Wars ever proved costly and this one is no different: for hours he debates with the economists of how best to fund the repairs that would be needed to the fortress and the not inconsiderable amount of crude materials necessary to replenish their armies. The battle tacticians present their losses: entire legions of orcs had been slaughtered at the bright sword-points of the Noldor, and at that ill news he sighs.

Decades of breeding programmes were cast into ruin; again they must distil the strongest of the orcish bloodlines to have even a chance of recouping their losses. Alternatively, one of his Maiarin advisors suggests, they might begin anew the corruption of elven flesh, as their master had done in times long past. Upon that point he lingers: in the black mires beneath the Thangorodrim there is yet the technology to do so, disused and rusted as it is. Vile ashes and slag were melded through difficult and arcane magics to muscle; viscous poisons were pumped thick and reeking through veins, not designed to kill, but to corrode. Blood was curdled in those dread machines; bodies were morphed into beings of tooth and granite, of muscle and stone, twisted and yet immensely strong.

That option tempts him, yet in the end he turns aside from it. Biology of that persuasion is no particular love of his, and while he is competent in its nuances, the magics and knowledge required for such a task could stem only from his master. If, upon his recovery, his master wished to pursue that course then let him do so, and readily he would assist in it, but he would not be the one to issue that command. Their current breeding stock might be augmented, he supposes, their life-spans and output might be influenced, and though that prospect seems the most tactical still he sighs. Already the mountains of work that would be required of him pile up in his mind's eye, and dealing with this new issue seems rather the irksome cherry atop his troubled cake.

Really, he thinks, it would all be so much easier if these wearisome Noldor would just accept their defeat gracefully.

Glumly he rests his head in his hands, and with a baleful reticence he eyes the Valarauka who steps forward to hand him a military report brought up from the armouries. As he flicks through the parchment several annoyed breaths hiss over his lips, and he groans as he sees the projected numbers of repairs and re-armaments required. Entire battalions required re-outfitting, and those newly spawned would necessitate additional resources: the iron ore that would facilitate such works would be near enough to bankrupt their current reserves.

Snatching a rare break from such disheartening meetings, he delivers the armament designs personally to the forge-masters, tracking the winding walkways beneath the fortress to the smithies. Longingly he looks to his personal forge as he passes it by. It looks so forlorn, he thinks, all cold and silent with his tools hung neatly upon the shelves, and he bites down the rather childish urge to wave to it. He distracts himself then with hailing a soot-blasted orc nearby, and

bids it summon its overseers to the central rooms wherein he explains his new designs.

Before the Noldor's sudden onslaught he had been languidly working upon a series of armour modifications for implementation within the soldiery. Pauldrons might be spiked at more serrated angles, the tang of the Valaraukar's broadswords would be much steadier should they be forged a solid half-inch wider and these things he eagerly explains, rather enjoying the rapt attention caught across the faces of the forge-masters as they listen. But more urgent than that, he presses, is the re-armament of the troops as a whole, and he bids them keep the forges lit night and day, to un-dam the reserves of magma and let them flow unhindered, and to use their turgid pressures in their industries.

That for the moment set in motion, he accompanies Gothmog to oversee the damage to the fortress itself. He runs a hand irritably through his messy, unbound hair as the Balrog points out to him the great rents in the exterior stonework caused by the Noldorin catapults. Upon closer inspection, and despite Gothmog accidentally dislodging a minor avalanche of precariously balanced bricks, the damage appears to be quite superficial, which brings him some small relief.

Striding further out onto the plains of the Anfauglith, the ground is scarred beneath his feet. The once unbroken expanse of grey, dusty rock now is pitted with the marks of war. Here and there a half collapsed trebuchet lies in a heap of splintered wood, and about them craters punch into the dirt where their own catapults had struck. Smears of blood swipe across the stones where the dead had been dragged away, the black ichor of the orcs mingling with the crimson blood of the elves, their lifeless corpses now mere fuel for Angband's hungry fires.

The wind whips his hair across his face as he squints up at the fortress, and after a moment spent enshrouded in dust he subtly maneuvers himself to stand directly downwind of Gothmog; the Valarauka's bulk providing a rather neat windbreak for him as clearly at last he surveys the damage. With a dismayed wince he notices yet another ruined tower along the battlements, the entire structure collapsed into a slumped bruise atop the main rampart.

“Didn't one of those fall on you?” Gothmog drawls, idly following his line of view towards the slide of rock far above them.

“Yes, it did,” he replies crossly. The bruises left upon his ribs are nothing short of spectacular, and in unconscious reflex he crosses his arms over his chest, his fingers probing for that ache beneath the quilt of his jacket.

The Balrog hums appreciatively, a deep noise like stones being grated together echoes out from his fiery throat. **“What did you do about it?”**

“I got out,” he pouts. Still he remembers the sick adrenaline of that moment, the dreadful crack of the stones above him, his second-in-command's tug upon his arm before the rubble came toppling down, the puissance that sparked just a fraction of a second too late upon his fingertips.

“And no thanks to you,” he snaps, the memory stirring him to ire. “Where were you, anyway? Weren't you charged with destroying the enemy's catapults specifically so that they *couldn't* attempt to decapitate me atop the walls?”

“Oh, Mairon,” the Balrog rumbles, but friendly teasing glints in his tone. **“Did I hit a nerve?”**

He harrumphs in response, his eyes still scanning the rubble-strewn ramparts, but for all his moodiness he is secretly glad of Gothmog's banter. Too greatly did time and responsibilities press upon him of late, and far too little did he see of his old friend.

“Ah, the battle went ill for me,” the Balrog says, and no hint of shame sounds in his voice. **“Some slippery spawn of the High King had us pinned at the utmost left of our flanks, and only with great loss were we able to pull free of his snare. By then, I fear, the enemy’s catapults had done their damage, though I rallied what forces remained to me and cut them down. But never mind that, eh? We scraped through, and none much the worse for wear!”**

Rather enthusiastically then does Gothmog pat him on the back, and the force of the Valarauka’s strong arms nearly sends him sprawling. Thinly he smiles back, ignoring the twinge of pain through his ribs, and together they meander back to the fortress, enjoying for a while their moments of easy company long since overdue.

Finally he comes to it, the task that he most abhors. For days he has procrastinated its doing, assuaging the orcs who urge him of its need that he has far more pressing things to attend to, until at last it stands unveiled before him. In his master’s absence this duty falls to him, and resolutely he steels himself, he pushes all of his resignations deep down inside of himself and he carries out his master’s commands.

In the dimmed light of the great hall he receives them. In a grand chair of splayed, burned wood he sits at the base of the dais, his fingers tapping impatiently upon its charred arms as he watches them enter. He bids them hurry, and with a zealous set of snarls from their orc guards they shuffle as best as they can into the hall. The guards prod them into a raggedy line before him; the latest prisoners, nay, *guests* as his master likes to call them, to grace their fortress. Chained together at the neck and with their hands bound behind them they present rather a sorry sight, and distastefully he eyes them.

The tattered remains of their clothes garb bodies of myriad shapes and creeds but together they present a uniformity of despair, highlighted by their unkempt hair or the odd weal or burn visible across a cheekbone or arm. Some glare at him and some shrink away, their eyes wandering vaguely over the walls or the floor, cowed already by a brief sojourn in the dungeons.

As if inspecting a row of cattle he surveys them, lazily he arises and saunters along their line. With some dark thrill of sadism he watches as they flinch back from his gaze, and tightly he clutches to that emotion, he pushes it out before him like a shield. Better that, he thinks, better cruelty than unfitting caginess, and along the line he continues. They cringe away from his touch as he grasps the odd one by the chin or the hair, casually checking the condition of their teeth, or noting with vague disinterest a particularly livid burn mark across their skin.

“Don’t touch me, traitor!”

A hissing voice suddenly spits at him, and he almost jumps in surprise, not only at such insolence but also at the peculiar quality of the voice that had spoken it. Curiously then he inspects the elf that spoke, and after a moment of genuine astonishment a dark bubble of laughter wells up in his throat.

“Well,” he sneers, “truly you Noldor must be desperate. I had not thought war a womanly pastime amongst your people. What says that, then, when even the *nissi* are brought to heel by their *neri*’s ruinous ambitions?”

The she-elf does not respond, a snarl simply twists across her dusky features, and at his feet she spits a ragged, bloody goblet of saliva. At such an insult the guards instantly start forward, their whips raised, but with a word of command he halts them.

“No,” he says, “let her be. Soon she will discover the price of such behaviours, and she might think

kindly of me for my leniency.”

From beside him the guards leer, and noting none other among the mob of prisoners of any interest he bids them be gone. The guards begin to drag the elves away, leading the foremost one by a length of chain attached to his collar down to the mines, condemning them to their futures of toil somewhere far beneath his sight. A pall of glazed shock seems to settle over the retreating elves, even the feisty she-elf seems cowed, but one among them suddenly finds it within himself to struggle. He tugs sharply against his chains; he squirms and twists back around to look at him, to shriek at him.

Traitor, he screams, betrayer, foul and abhorrent, accursed. With some terrible sense of amusement he watches as the elf inhales anew, with a strange, smug delight he awaits what new vitriol might come pouring out of him. But before such fancies can be satisfied a mailed fist smashes into the elf’s stomach. The blow doubles him over, pulling sharply upon the chain that coffles the line at the neck, and an instant later the guard backhands the elf across the face, spraying blood and broken teeth across the marble.

Impassively he watches as the prisoners are pulled from the hall, leaving him for a time to his own devices. The elf’s words slide over him, they echo shrilly about the hall’s cloisters but to them he is impervious. Funny, he thinks, where such names once stung, now they hang listlessly about him. Long ago he had accepted his actions for what they were, he knows full well how hatefully the Quendi speak of him, and as the centuries had dragged by such words had ceased to concern him.

Yet a slight edge of unease prickles through him. Should the tides of battle have been reversed, should utter calamity have struck and the fortress been overthrown too easily could he have found himself in the elves’ place. After all that he had done, after all of his master’s malicious works that he had contributed to, he rather doubted that their retribution upon him would be dainty.

With that unsavoury thought ringing about his mind he seats himself once more upon his chair. Irritably he crosses his legs, his shoulder-blades prod hard into the wooden back of the chair as those thoughts dredge up memories that he would sooner ignore. Not that he hadn’t enjoyed himself at the time, he thinks, and on one particular occasion somewhat more than usual. It was more that if by some unfortunate twist of fate he was ever brought to account for his actions, if he was hauled before that one Noldo or any of his kindred, then he was not entirely sure that he would survive that redress.

They had made the long walk down to the dungeons together, he and his master, all of those long years ago. His master strode ahead, clad in robes of black and lacquered gold, and his crown inset with those bright gemstones blazed upon his brow. Behind his master he had followed, his footsteps silent and his plain work clothing concealing him perfectly within the shadows.

From his forge his master had collected him. He had looked up from the jewel-spangled necklace that he had been polishing to find his master unexpectedly standing above him, and dutifully then he had followed his master’s summons. His master did not appear displeased with him, quite the opposite indeed: he commented most handsomely upon the necklace that he had wrought. But even so, such an unheralded appearance rarely boded well, and he was powerless to stop the dread that curled faintly in his stomach as he followed his master yet deeper into the dungeons.

Outside a solid oaken door his master halted, so abruptly in fact that he had nearly walked into the back of him, so caught up was he within his own thoughts. Questioningly then he looked up as his master turned to face him, and within his golden irises he saw the challenge flare; the *dare* even, and something sadistic played about his master’s lips. A faint thrill trembled through him, his curiosity piqued, and though he longed to ask what the purpose of this sojourn was, in the end he

held his peace. He simply followed his master through the door, and he would have been lying if he said that he hadn't felt himself stir a little in excitement.

The rusted doorframe flaked under his palm as his hand brushed over it, although he had not noticed it until some hours afterwards. It stained his fingers in a grainy, red residue.

Though he did not frequent them often, he could not profess unfamiliarity with the chambers of torment that his master so delighted in. His primary duties lay elsewhere in the fortress, and he did not take much pleasure in the games or sports that the dungeon-keepers engineered to while away the hours. But once in a while a particular command might be issued to him concerning a certain prisoner, or after hours of teasing and flattery he might allow his master to prevail upon him. Against his better judgment he might take his master's hand and allow himself to be led down, and those nights always proved... memorable.

The gloom of the chamber was oppressive. The stench of blood filled his mouth, sharp and metallic, and he flicked his tongue across his teeth, sending a confusing sensation of both revulsion and pleasure rolling through him. Chains clinked softly above him; they hung like iron pendulums from a ceiling swathed in shadows. A furnace glowered in the far corner of the room, and against its reddened glare he could just make out the handles of the pokers and brands left within its maw to heat.

A bench lay at waist-height in the centre of the room, wide and unlovely, and its surface was spattered with intermittent dark stains. Standing at its side he absently ran his hand across them, picking at a splinter of wood as warily he regarded his surroundings, his silver eyes narrowed and gleaming. Yet his master did not touch him or speak a word; he stalked over to an alcove in the far wall and there settled himself, his eyes lingering hungrily upon the door as a wolf awaits its prey to stumble before it.

The purpose of this was not for him then, in so far as he could tell, and tentatively he breathed a small sigh of relief. He contented then himself to wait also. Let his master keep his enigmas if he so chose, he thought, and he leaned back upon the bench, his fingertips drumming softly atop its surface. He did not have long to contemplate the situation though, as a minute or so later the door was flung open, and in readiness he arose.

A leering orc appeared from the corridor, and upon a short length of chain he dragged behind him an exhausted-looking elf. With a sharp yank the orc tugged upon the chain, a collar jerked into the elf's neck, and with his hands bound tightly behind his back the elf stumbled, crumpling awkwardly to his knees upon the stones. And as the elf knelt, his hair fell across his face, and there could be no mistaking it.

That mop of copper he would recognise anywhere.

A snort of surprise burst from his throat, and he glanced quizzically over at his master. Years it had been since Fëanáro's son had first graced their halls, and while his novelty was amusing at the time, the prestige of his bloodline had swiftly faded to inconsequence. Truly he had thought that his master had been rid of the elf years ago, or he had been consigned to the pits of the other nameless slaves that toiled in Angband's many labours, obscure and forgotten. So bemusedly he looked upon his master: what purpose could there be in dragging up this tortured remnant of nobility now? And with rising interest he saw the sly, cruel grin that curved across his master's face in response.

His master nodded to the orc, who promptly seized the elf and fastened the manacles upon his wrists to one of the low-hanging chains from the ceiling. With a tug upon a concealed pulley system the chain links snapped taut, hauling the elf irresistibly upwards until he was half

suspended by his wrists. The balls of his bare, bloodied feet just touched the floor, and the length of chain attached to his collar was left to dangle humiliatingly down his front. The elf endured it all with a puzzling passivity, he just stared dully down to the stones beneath him as he was hoisted up, and he did not even flinch as the door slammed shut in the wake of the orc's departure.

Silence brooded within the chamber as the minutes trickled by, and he did not dare to break it. He would leave that sweet succour to his master, and expectantly he waited, contenting himself with eyeing the elf disparagingly. His patience was soon rewarded; at last his master glided forward before halting with a slow, slick smile before his prisoner. Softly he reached up, one hand toyed with an errant strand of the elf's fiery hair, twisting it around his finger in one lascivious curl.

"Well," his master purred, "what have we here? Another little elfling lost a long way from home?"

"Oh," his master sighed, after a short, teasing pause. And such insidious mockery thrummed in his master's voice that even at the distance it made his skin crawl. "But you are not, are you? You are not just any elfling, and the years have been long since you have come to call my fortress your home."

The elf hung there, staring hard at the floor, and he did not reply.

"What's the matter, Maitimo? Cat got your tongue?"

It was not entirely an idle observation. Tevildo, self-proclaimed prince of his master's great felines, had cultivated a liking for succulent meats amid the years of his servitude, and it was not uncommon to find the kitchen slaves short of a few non-vital parts of their anatomies. The muscles in the elf's jaw clenched violently, but with a defiance that was almost impressive he did not deign to give a response.

"Manners," his master tutted, and his eyes sparked alight with glee. He slipped behind the elf then, and menace glowed in his every footfall. The seconds seemed to crawl by in their anticipation, until with a single, sudden tug his master ripped off the tattered remains of the elf's shirt, flinging the filthy rag aside. The elf jerked in his bonds, powerless to stop the instinctive flinch that ripped through his torso now left so awkwardly exposed in the claustrophobia of the room. Still though, the elf remained silent; although his jaw visibly trembled as his master stalked back to his front.

"Come, Maitimo, there is no need to be coy."

Watching from the bench-side, his lips quirked into a smile as grudgingly he admired the elf's resolve. Though despite the elf's veneer of impassivity the shallow rise and fall of his ribcage was plain, he could almost hear the hammer of his heartbeat from below such bruise-mottled skin. He would see how long the elf lasted. His master could be... persuasive.

"Predicaments, elfling, you leave me in such predicaments. Bold Fëanáro your sire, and yet you come to me as a guest. How might I refuse hospitality to one of such... honour, despite a foolish oath of enmity?"

His master's voice was low, seductive; and as he spoke he ran his nails across the elf's abdomen, trailing little white lines in the wake of his words.

"But you do not seem to be enjoying my generosity, Maitimo. Perhaps one could volunteer to improve their lot, hmm? Nothing difficult, nothing unreasonable, of course; merely the discourse of information between friends. For we are in friendly company here, are we not? Shall we give it a try then?"

What became of your father? For what purpose did you follow me here from Aman? And what plans do your brothers, and the others of your kindred hold?"

Fëanáro had perished, he thought, consumed by the wrath of his own arrogant flames. The Noldor came forth from the Valar's realms upon some foolish quest for revenge concerning the theft of some gemstones. And while the gems in question shone very prettily upon his master's crown, they seemed to him poor motivators for a violent act of rebellion. The answers to his master's first two questions were painfully apparent and quite commonly known, and while the third was admittedly unresolved, the answer to him seemed well within the bounds of reasonable conjecture.

The Noldor would continue to wage their fruitless wars until they drove themselves to annihilation. A rather tedious affair, he thought it, and all in all a curiously redundant thing to be asked.

But his master did so enjoy the game of it; with each question he dug his nails into the elf's sides, eliciting a small wince of pain with each prod but bringing up no answers. Slyly then his master had grinned over at him, and the malicious *knowing* in his golden eyes had stirred something feral to life inside of him. He bit upon the insides of his cheek to stop the smirk from rolling over his lips as something sadistic rumbled into life in the base of his stomach.

Coolly then his master swung back to the elf, and in a voice like molten gold he murmured, *"You are not being very cooperative, dear Maitimo. But perhaps the fault is mine. Perhaps I am asking the wrong questions, and to the wrong person."*

Mairon, fetch me his cousin from the cells. The one with the pretty eyes and those dark braids..."

Venom glittered upon his master's teeth as he sneered into the elf's face, *"Finno, isn't it? I do think that is what he said, thought it was so hard to tell. His tongue was otherwise occupied at the time..."*

Something dark flared in him at the lie, and with a grin that he could not help but indulge in he stepped towards the door. But he had barely moved a metre when suddenly the elf shrieked, "No!"

Upon his heel he turned, the grin widened across his face as he saw the panic in the elf's eyes, as he heard the breath hissing hard and fast over the elf's lips.

"N-no!" the elf spluttered. "You – you lie! You do not have him."

The shake in his voice was unmistakable. That tremor of emotion stretched beyond the norm, the strained note of strangulation in his voice was just a bit too tight, and as it rang about the room it was all the confession he needed. So the rumours were true, it seemed. He choked back the snigger that threatened to rip from his lungs as the elf paled, as his master stepped forward.

"Did you think that we did not know? Did you think that we could not see what you were doing? Even in Aman the guilt was written plain across your faces. Two young princes having a grab at each other in the dark, well, what scandal..."

The elf flushed then, a dark crimson spread up his neck. He flinched as suddenly his master traced a finger across his cheekbone in such mockery of a lover's caress. Slowly his master's hands ran over the elf's body, stroking him with insidious, cloying little touches. His fingers ghosted across the elf's collarbones, they slid down his sternum as his master leaned forward, almost as if he was about to kiss him.

"Did you like it when he touched you?" The false innocence in his master's voice was stinging, but behind it he felt a slight swell of puissance, each word seemed to shimmer in the air slightly longer

than its natural wont. *“Did he whisper in your ear while he ran his hands all over you?”*

His master’s hands flicked across the elf’s nipples, the pink little buds hardening under that fleeting touch. The elf’s gasp cracked through the room, though whether it was of pain or some other sensation he could not quite tell.

“Did he quiver as you kissed him? Did he moan when you touched him, when you took him?”

The elf flushed even further, his cheeks stained a ruddy pink. His master’s fingers wandered over the elf’s abdomen, they played about his hipbones, and even though the elf bucked and twisted in some futile attempt at escape, his master’s touch was clearly having its intended effect.

“Or did you?”

The veins slowly rose between the elf’s hips, pressing hard beneath his pale skin as arousal scored through him; they ran blue and turgid from his stiffening groin to disappear beneath the muscles of his abdomen. Slyly his master continued his touches, his fingers grazed over the elf’s pelvis and he could almost see the crackle of puissance beneath them. A moan echoed about the chamber, the despairing notes of both shame and arousal shone bold within it, and almost fondly he welcomed them.

Darkly he smiled, and whether it was some residue of his master’s power left flowing about the room, or whether it was of his own unconscious volition, he shivered slightly as excitement flashed within himself. That familiar heat prickled out from his core, and subtly he tilted his hips to conceal the rather obvious signs of his own arousal. But his master caught his movement, turning about from where the elf hung to face him, and wicked laughter shone in his eyes.

With a crook of his finger his master beckoned him closer, he bade him run his hands over the elf hanging taut in his chains. And with an eagerness that surprised even himself he had obliged. His nails traced up the elf’s leg, his fingers ghosted across the thin, worn fabric at the insides of his thighs, and he smiled as he heard the elf groan, as his head tossed back and his hips unconsciously splayed forward.

“No...” the elf moaned, but his master’s puissance gripped him and his moans turned to needy, breathless pants even as he protested: “N-no, please... Please, don’t...”

Regardless of the elf’s words he continued, slowly feeling the pleasurable mirror of the elf’s torments radiating up through him. As the minutes crawled by the elf shivered under his fingertips; squeaking pants and mumbled, incoherent protests tumbled from his lips as his master’s power stoked him ever higher, as his body betrayed his control. The elf’s hips rolled before him, pressing desperately against his palm and questioningly he looked over to his master, his silver eyes drenched in lust. The unspoken request lay between them, it shimmered in their gaze, and indulgently his master had smiled, he had *nodded*; and dark, reckless adrenaline had exploded through him.

Blindly fast he reached up, he burst the chains that strung the elf up with a snarled word of power. The elf sank towards the floor, abruptly bereft of bodily support, but in a fluid motion that he had flaunted unceasingly for months after its debut performance, he slammed his boot upwards into the elf’s ribs, quickly arresting that downwards momentum. The elf gagged at the impact, the breath whistled out of his lungs, and as the elf swayed in paralysed shock before him he pushed him sideways, slamming him into the bench-top. Before the elf had even the slightest chance of recovering, slim though that chance was, tightly he re-bound his wrists behind his back with a length of rope that his master so helpfully provided.

The elf's chest, stomach and face crushed into the splintered wood of the bench top, distorting his screams that were now made in earnest. Viciously he kicked the elf's legs apart; he ignored his lame little struggles. One hand pressed mercilessly down upon the elf's lower back, the other ripped away the tattered remnants of his trousers, leaving him so deliciously exposed; and he watched in sadistic delight as the elf braced against him, the muscles of his back and buttocks clenching against the violation that was sure to come.

Pinning the elf in place with one hand, he shrugged off his own shirt and trousers, his lithe body left glistening in the firelight as he took himself into his palm, as he stroked himself harder. Below him the elf thrashed; piteous, broken mewls of protest choked out of his throat.

"N-no... please, *please*..."

"*Then answer the questions,*" his master growled suddenly, stalking around the bench to stand menacingly before the elf.

"I d-did," the elf spluttered, he writhed anew as he caught glimpse of the pot of slick, oily fluid that his master passed over to him. "I t-told you before. I d-don't know anything else."

"*Not good enough, elfling.*"

"No! No, please, *please* I... I d-don't... *ohhh!*"

The elf's faltering speech cut off into a moan as he pressed two slicked fingers up inside of him. A sob rang about the room an instant later, the elf shuddered and squirmed in his bonds as he retracted his fingers, as he pushed them back in but this time spread a little wider; but all the elf's protests earned him was a stinging slap across the buttocks.

He grinned as the elf clenched down around him, hard, but yet not so hard as he would expect. And he knew it was lewd, he knew that it was an abasement even of himself as he said it but some vicious part of him didn't care, it spurred him into utter decadence as he sneered, "So loose, Maitimo. It seems the guards have made good use of you, like the filth that you are. I bet you beg for it. I bet you sink to your knees before them, your cock drooling like the little whore that you are, and you *beg* them for it..."

The elf sobbed beneath him, his tip brushed up against the elf's entrance as he leaned forward, as he crooned into his ear, "Lie there, why don't you, and dream of pleasing your masters. Lie there, whore, and think of Finno."

Swiftly then he straightened, he grabbed the elf about the hips and with one hard, gut-wrenching thrust he buried himself to the hilt inside of him. His groan of relief and the elf's screech melded into one wordless cry, and before them both their master smirked.

Quickly he found his rhythm, he pumped mercilessly into the elf below him, with each thrust of his hips grinding the elf harder into the bench top. The elf's mewls rang in his ears, they seemed to ignite within him, and driven on by blind, roaring lust he reached up, he flicked the few fresh whip-lines that patterned over the elf's spine; their red, weeping marks carving over the scarred mess of his back. He grunted as that little spark of pain made the elf clench around him, sending waves of crude, dizzying pleasure spiralling up through him, and even as he continued his master stepped a little closer.

Ashen fingers knotted through the elf's tangled hair, suddenly yanking his head up. The other hooked through the ring of the elf's collar, fixing his gaze immovably upwards even as he was shoved fractionally across the bench with each new thrust.

Distantly then he heard his master speak, the words dripping like honey from his lips.

“Enjoy yourself now, Maitimo, lest things proceed less kindly. You have learned it already, have you not? Death holds no redemption for kinslayers, and even its silent eternity you do not deserve.

I will take your lover, I will take your precious Finno in my hands, and I will make him gut you. And when he has done it, you peeled open before me, I will make him sew you up again. I will make him kiss you, and he will make it hurt. There will be no end for him. No quick death nor merciful silence, and it will be because of you.

Yet still you might barter for his freedom. To him a better fate might be allotted. If you would but answer the question: where are your brothers, and what are their plans?”

Suddenly the elf went limp beneath him, but still he continued, tremors of sheer, animal pleasure racing through his body. The elf whimpered, his master said something else, something inaudible, and the elf cringed, a whine flickered out of his throat.

“I d-don’t know,” he sobbed. *“I don’t know. I t-told you already... I told you e-everything, I - “*

With a final shudder he climaxed; he slammed his hips against the elf as he spurted deep up inside of him. He gasped as raw waves of pleasure coursed through his body; a wild grin twisted across his face as below him the elf sobbed, hot tears of humiliation running down his cheeks. Swiftly he withdrew, and as the very last beats of orgasm still throbbled through his core he shrugged back into his clothes. That bold ardour faded quickly from him, more soberly then did he turn back to the bench, scraping the slightly wild ends of his hair back into neatness.

His master looked down at the elf; helplessly the elf opened his mouth and shut it once more, but nothing save a series of panting sobs came over his lips. In all likelihood, he thought as the hazy bliss of climax slipped from him, there was nothing more *to* come. The miserable elf before him did not strike him as having the capability to lie anymore.

Yet still his master’s lips twisted, with one hand he dragged the elf up by his hair, and with the other he delivered a vicious slap across the elf’s face; splitting open his lip in a spray of blood. With a snarl of disgust his master pushed the elf backwards into his arms, and he staggered as the elf’s weight pressed awkwardly into him.

“Get this vermin out of my sight,” his master growled, before stalking towards the door and departing. *“Take him, and put him somewhere that I will never have to see his wretched face again.”*

An image flashed through his mind in a burst of his master’s golden puissance, he felt the firmness of his master’s will behind it, and he knew to what sad fate the elf had been consigned. Hurriedly he pushed the elf away from him, his proximity sending a sudden ripple of unease through him.

The elf stumbled back, his eyes wide and fearful, and from that unease *disgust* welled up inside of him. Distastefully he eyed the elf in his scrawny nakedness, the fresh abrasions scored across his chest and stomach from the rough wood of the bench, the creamy trickle of his seed running down the elf’s legs; and beneath even that disgust perhaps the slightest hint of embarrassment flared also. But quickly he stamped it down; he clung on to his disgust and let it suffuse him. It was safer that way, it was cleaner, it seemed to dampen the little shreds of disquiet that wormed through him.

From between the elf’s legs he retrieved the dangling length of chain attached to his collar and with a sharp tug pulled him towards the door, the elf struggling desperately to keep his balance with his hands still bound behind him. Up through the fortress they wound, and though they stared off at a

fair clip, as the minutes wore on he found himself slackening his pace. The elf limped behind him like a whipped dog, but though his ankles were unfettered no amount of jerks upon his collar could persuade him to walk much faster.

Puzzled then he glanced down at the elf's legs, and as the elf scurried to a quick halt behind him he espied what might have been the source of his troubles. A great scabbed weal groped down the elf's left inner thigh, from the innermost crook of his hip to the joint of his knee. With each step it cracked; the sensitive, raw flesh flexed underneath it, but at the mark's outermost edges he could glimpse a margin of thick, white scar tissue. Whatever it was, it had been inflicted more than once, and once recently no less. A tiny curl of sympathy flicked through him; it was no great stretch of his imagination to suppose what sports the orcs might concoct when they were bored. But though he slowed his pace a fraction he was no less resolute in his purpose.

As they traversed the busier corridors the elf seemed to cower into him; he cringed away from the jeers and catcalls that crashed down upon him from soldier and servant alike. Beyond them they walked; up into the outdoors, beyond even the disused walkways of uppermost ramparts. He led the elf up by narrow, crumbling stairways, providing an insistent pressure upon the elf's collar to aid him when he foundered upon the arduous climbs, and gradually they traversed the precarious pathways that littered the Thangorodrim's steep sides into the regions where only the most potent of his master's servants dared to tread.

The wind howled at them; he shivered within his tunic, and he hardly dared imagine the state of the elf left exposed to such wild elements. More than once he had thought, as they edged past a particularly sheer drop, that the elf might try to jump. It would not be hard; indeed there would be little that he could do to stop it if the elf did. And graced with the foreknowledge of the fate to which the elf was condemned, he would not have grudged him the effort. What difference would it really make, in the end?

But numbly the elf followed where he led, and at last they came upon the place. A small iron band was set into the rock at just above head-height; it was an old device of his master's long gone unused. Quickly he turned, he pushed the elf against the shale wall, yet caution played strongly upon his mind. His boots crunched upon the narrow ledge: the drop that yawned for fathoms beneath him would be remorseless.

The elf seemed almost catatonic with the cold. His eyes were glazed, his split lip shone with a bluish tinge, and he offered no resistance as the iron collar and rope bonds were removed from him. Only as he pushed his arm up, as the iron clamped down upon his right wrist did the elf cry out, writhing against that bond to no avail. His back ripped open against the razor-sharp shale, spattering it in droplets of dark, steaming blood. Weakly still he tried to pull himself free, but he screamed as the iron seemed to bite tighter about his wrist, and then he stood still.

Before the elf he stepped back, appraising his master's trap and Fëanáro's unfortunate son snared within it. The wind sliced through them, the elf slumped miserably against the shale, his trembling legs only just holding him up. Fresh tears tracked silently down his cheeks, his chin crinkled as desperately he tried not to cry in earnest.

"P-please..."

The elf's whisper seemed to shriek in his ears. But by now it was far too late; though a wince of sympathy crossed his lips, with that iron manacle about his wrist the elf was beyond his aid now should he ever have been persuaded to give it. It was not malice that moved him but duty; until an hour or so before he had been unaware of the elf's lingering existence, and still he remained largely indifferent to it.

So with softness, and perhaps even with kindness in his voice, he replied: “No.”

With that he turned, he left, he heard the elf begin to cry behind him and he walked away, tracking no short distance back along the path until upon an entirely different peak it looped back upon itself, and several hundred metres distant he could see the elf. Bleakly he looked up, he steeled himself, and he uttered a few harsh, guttural syllables of black puissance before turning away.

He had barely taken three steps further when he heard the rumble of sliding rock, the crash and grind of slate as the ledge upon which the elf rested collapsed, and a moment later the shriek as the elf’s weight twisted down into his shoulder and wrist, caught fast there to dangle for as long as his master willed. But in that he took no pleasure: grim was his long, lonely walk back to the fortress, and strange were his thoughts.

How quickly his master had thrust the elf aside. How swift he was to condemn him when he no longer could scrape from him his pleasure. How eagerly had his master watched him suffer and then discarded him when he had gotten bored. Such thoughts swirled darkly within him, though he could not give voice to the precise reason why.

The guttural speech of an orc jolts him from his reveries; and he blinks swiftly to find himself still ensconced within his chair. Eerie shadows coil across the floor of the great hall as night sets in, and rousing himself he turns more attentively to the orc, and bids him deliver his message. The beginnings of a headache throb in his temples, and only half interestedly he listens as the orc clears his throat and mumbles through the formalities.

But at the end of his message, the orcs utters, “My lord, our Master has awoken not one hour past. He wishes to see you, at the earliest possibility.”

Eagerness bubbles up in his heart, quickly he dismisses the orc and follows him towards the ajar doors of the hall. But as he slips between them, he glances back at the dais. His master’s throne looms atop it, spired and deadly and crowned in iron, while his chair lies like a twisted, forlorn thing at its feet; beautiful, yes, but frail against such riveted metal.

For a moment he stares at them, and unease prickles in his stomach. But rallying himself he slams the doors shut, he strides quickly through the corridors to his awaiting master. For though he goes freely, and he goes happily, to say that he goes without even the faintest feeling of reservation would be a lie indeed.

His Lord's Command

His master's silken voice bids him enter the bedchamber. Tentatively he inches the doors open, hesitating there only for a heartbeat before slipping fully inside and closing the doors behind him. His dark tunic melts him into the shadows; the only light within his master's chamber emanates from two lit braziers bolted to the wall above his master's bed. Flames writhe like lapping tongues from mouths carved in the likenesses of snarling wolves, and with a twinge of fondness he looks upon them.

How long ago was it now since he had gifted those to his master, and though they seemed almost crude in shape now compared to his recent works, he still thinks them handsome.

Their glow spills across his master's bed; the black bedclothes shine as the light plays upon their threads. And beneath them, propped up against a veritable mountain of velvety pillows his master sits. Idly he sets aside the book that he had been flicking through, his golden eyes jump upwards and for the first time in what seems like a lifetime there is both lucidity and power in them.

As his sight swiftly adjusts to the gloom he lingers by the door, suddenly unsure of whether it would be terribly improper for him to stride over unbidden. Indecision tugs at him, and caught in its sway he furtively examines his master. His face remains carefully impassive, it is only the slight narrowing of his eyes that betrays his intent, and he greatly hopes that from the distance and shrouded in the shadows as he is that his master cannot see it.

Subtly he glances at his master's bared chest, his eyes dart over the huge scars of knotted flesh that tear across his muscled torso, shining pink and oddly wax-like atop his master's skin. Thin white lines scrape over his master's cheekbone where the eagle's talons had torn, and at the sudden asymmetry of his master's face he is momentarily thrown. It lends him a hungrier look, he thinks, meaner; now that vulnerable flesh had faded into blank scar tissue it only enhances his master's severity.

But it is not unpleasant, he thinks suddenly, and behind that thought a rush of relief and excitement bounds through him. His master is here; he is whole and hale once more. He is *his*. He flinches as that dangerous thought flicks through him, and surreptitiously he leans back, stilling one trembling hand upon the iron doorknob.

His master's lip curls into a lazy smile as he catches the movement, and slowly he adjusts himself against the pillows, pulling himself up into a fully sitting position. The sheets catch around his legs as he moves; the edge of the covers rests only gently over his waist and as he shifts it falls lower. It slides over his master's stomach; it sweeps the muscled indentations of his hipbones, teasing its way ever lower, and his master's smile is playful enough to match. Tantalisingly low the covers slip until at last they catch upon the waistband of his master's trousers, slung low about his hips by his movement.

A poorly muffled noise midway between a cough and a hiss emanates from nearby the door; some involuntary reflex of desire punches its way through him before he has quite the chance of restraining it. But through his embarrassment and the blood that rushes to his cheeks he sees his master's grin widen, revealing two slick, pointed incisors. The gleam in his iridescent eyes flickers, one eyebrow arcs knowingly at him, and with a slightly mischievous sigh his master entreats, "*Mairon, do stop hovering by the door and come in. We have things to discuss, you and I.*"

He moves slowly over to his master's bed, his metal-capped boots clicking against the lacquered floor as he casts about for the spare chair in which to seat himself. To his mild consternation he

does not find it, and he lingers then by the bedpost, his hand unconsciously tracing the golden filigree inlaid into the ivory pillar. The proud tusk of some ancient creature curves gently above him; rubies the size of swan eggs glint beneath his fingertips. He glances questioningly over at his master, who nods in reply, and gingerly then he perches himself upon the edge of the bed, a sudden discomfort at their proximity seizing him.

An odd tension stretches between them, a tension that he is entirely sure that he is the cause of, until at last he breaks aside it. His hair worn loose about his shoulders shrouds him in a blond veil as solemnly he eyes the bedpost once more; he can almost feel the force of his master's gaze brush over him, but still he cannot find it within himself to break that silence. His hand clenches around the embroidered edge of his tunic, he fiddles absently with a loose thread as the quiet stretches on, immutable, unbreakable...

"I dreamed of you last night."

His master's murmur seems to reverberate from the very walls of the chamber; every syllable is thrown into a weird, hyper-extended clarity. But eagerly he turns back around, glad for an end to that terrible silence, and with a playful grin curving across his face he asks, "Of me? My lord, you flatter me too much. Tell me, what was it that you dreamed of me?"

Slowly then his master sighs, his golden eyes slip from him to stare into the shadows beyond the warm annulus of the braziers. Distantly, and with an oddly melancholy tone to his voice his master replies, *"No, Mairon. It... it would not do. You would not want to know. Dark and strange have been my dreams of late... I should not have mentioned it."*

But still he perseveres, affecting the churlish sulk of a child rebuked. Gently he teases, gently he prods; a near coquettish smile curves over his lips as he leans in towards his master, his fingers stroking over the soft covers.

"Please, my lord?" he beseeches. "What says it then, that you dream of me but might not speak of it afterwards?"

"Mairon..."

"Please, my lord, tell me. Was I happy? Was I smiling?"

"I dreamt I was gutting you with a knife. Through all your sticky striae, through snapping tendons and muscle I clove; from groin to sternum you lay open before me and over you I smiled. I could hear you moan, I could feel you writhe, but I didn't care. You were nothing to me."

Slowly I reached into you, I could see your heart beating below your chest and I wanted to grab it, I wanted to hold it, and I reached into you. My fingers slid below your ribs, I touched your heart all slick and quivering in its cage of bone and I could hear you choke, I could feel you buck but for a moment it was perfect, for a moment it was almost blissful. But then it started burning, it burned me like those infernal jewels but I could not let go, I did not want to let go, and you started laughing. Blood frothed on your lips, it drooled over your chin, but still you laughed as my fingers blackened.

Then my fingers closed, they punctured into you and backwards I wrenched, gore heaved and spasmed in your chest and for a moment then there was silence. There was such pristine silence that I thought the world had stopped breathing. And then you started screaming..."

The silence that rings about the room is suffocating.

Stiffly he turns away from his master; he avoids the terrible sincerity of his gaze. His heart thumps painfully within his chest, his throat cinches in tight, and with that a wave of icy nausea slicks through his stomach. Abruptly he stands, he strides a few paces from the bed. Hard he swallows, he tries to push down the horror that threatens to drown him, and he leans unsteadily against a wall as a wave of dizziness sweeps over him.

You were nothing to me.

As if from some great distance behind him faintly he hears his master shift beneath the covers, he hears the slightly irritated prickle in his voice.

“Come now, Mairon. You did ask, after all. It was only a dream: ephemeral, insignificant. Surely you can see that?”

His eyes squeeze shut as that dizziness for a moment grips him, before gradually fading back to a plateau of vague nausea. Viciously he fights to still the tremors of his breath, he bites down hard upon his lip, and he is only thankful that the fall of his hair and the set of his shoulders hide his face from his master’s view.

“I am sorry, little one.” His master’s voice is scarcely more than a murmur. *“I should not have told you that, no matter how much you pressed.”*

It is the true tenderness in his master’s voice that makes him turn around. It is the strangely forlorn tilt of his master’s shoulders that forces a breath back into his lungs. It is the hint of sincere regret simmering in his master’s auric eyes that prompts him to sit upon the edge of the bed once more.

He fiddles awkwardly with a fold of the sheets, turning the black cloth between his fingers as the dark susurrus of his master’s words flits through him. Slowly though he softens, and suddenly his master’s hand envelops his. With an odd air of hesitancy his master reaches to him, his ashen fingers trailing over his own, ghosting over the tendons that ridge the back of his hand until fully his master holds him.

“Truly, little one, I am sorry. I did not wish to upset you.”

Forgivingly then he sighs, he glances over to his master and for the first time in millennia he sees true apology glimmering in his eyes. He shuffles himself around to face his master more fully, his hand slides within their grip but he does not break it; indeed he savours this moment of gentle intimacy so rarely bestowed upon him.

After a while of silence his master stirs, softly he releases his hand as he pushes himself more upright in the bed. Even with that simple movement he senses the balance of the mood shift, that tender moment passes, and though the aftershock of his master’s words still aches within him he tries to forget it, and more attentively then he focuses on what his master might now require of him.

“Tell me, Mairon,” his master says. *“Has the fortress been running smoothly in my absence? Have you anything of note to report?”*

“No, my lord,” he replies; affecting at once the air of polished professionalism that he has honed over millennia of command. *“Everything has been quite smooth, as you yourself have said it. We have begun the re-armament of the troops that remain to us, though further revision is required to the stores of iron ore that will fuel such repairs. I have several meetings scheduled with the stockmasters and blacksmiths to improve efficacy and yield, and to reduce waste iron, so for now the matter is in hand.”*

New battalions of orcs are being bred as we speak, though our losses were more severe than expected. The breeding programmes we have analysed and augmented as we have thought best, though you might wish to revise them upon your recovery, as you possess far greater knowledge of such matters than I.”

At that his master nods tersely. A twitch of annoyance passes over his features but quickly it is smoothed away, and he is bidden continue his report.

“Of matters aside, we have assessed the condition of the fortress itself. There was some superficial damage to some of the outer battlements, a few towers along the ramparts were left in ruins, but these shall be dealt with swiftly. I have assigned teams to repair them, and these works are projected to be complete within the month. Otherwise Angband’s affairs continue as normal, even if in some faculties we find ourselves temporarily short-staffed.”

“*And what of our newest guests?*” his master enquires; absorbing all of the information that he delivers with near uncanny calmness. “*These Noldor who have fought so hard to make our acquaintance?*”

A sly note twines within his master’s voice but he tries to evade its snare, and evenly he replies, “In your stead, my lord, I have examined the prisoners. There are none of great importance in your designs that I could discern. I have sent them to the mines or to the kitchens as the guards see fit, unless you should command otherwise.”

“*Really, Mairon?*” his master teases. “*Were there none that were of interest? You have been so fond of some in the past...*”

At that he reddens, the insinuation plain and left twisting in his innards. Embarrassment flickers through him and he starts to pull away, he wriggles his hips in order to slide off the side of the bed. He barely moves an inch before he feels his master move in turn; his master’s fingers clamp around his wrist and with one swift tug pull his arm out from under him, sending him tipping backwards upon the bed. His back hits the sheets and with a feral speed his master lunges, he twists out from beneath the covers to lean over him with a bodily strength that takes him utterly by surprise.

His master’s head dips, he feels his tongue slide up the side of his neck, planting a lascivious row of kisses up over his skin until they curve over his jaw, until fully their lips meet. Tenderly his master kisses him, their lips meld together with each hot exhalation of breath. His master sinks down atop him, his weight held upon his right elbow as he pushes him deeper into the covers, as their kiss grows heavier, as his master’s left hand moves to stroke over his cheek, to cup his skull and press him further into his embrace.

Bright ardour unfurls within him, and he feels his master move once more. Their lips press together harder now, their slow kisses quicken, intensifying into short, savage little smashes. His master’s teeth rake across his mouth, droplets of blood glisten upon his lips but that salty tang serves only to goad him on, it sends ripples of bravery flowing through him.

With a sudden push he kicks hard against the mattress, one hand curls simultaneously about his master’s left shoulder and he rides into that coiled momentum. In an elegant movement that the most hardened of battle veterans would be proud of he flips himself and his master over; all those millennia of combat training brought to an altogether different use.

He watches the surprise flare in his master’s brilliant eyes and he *adores* it, and swiftly he straddles his master’s waist, boldly pressing his master backwards into the sheets beneath him. His hair falls in blond streams about his face as he leans forward, as he grasps his master’s biceps and pinions

him to the bed, and for a moment then he pauses. For in that second it is enrapturing: with such vivid clarity he can feel the slight flexions of his master's biceps beneath his fingers, he can see the contractions of the taut muscles over his master's abdomen, he can see how they pluck about the tender scars that curve over his torso. But most of all he can see the naked lust that bursts behind his master's eyes, and that desire and the salacious grin that accompanies it sends his heart soaring.

Passion shrieks within him, and with a growl he pushes himself forward, his lips crash down upon his master's as with such unbridled ferocity he kisses him. Every ounce of the uncertainty and worry that has plagued him in the past weeks seems to transmute into relief, into *delight*, and caught in its torrent he kisses his master, and fervently his master kisses him back.

His hands release his master's arms; they wander down the contours of his chest. Softly he strokes the new laces of scar tissue that lance across his master's skin, the texture unfamiliar under his fingertips, yet where it might have repulsed him it seems only to inflame. His master's grunt punches down his throat as his fingers press a little too strongly, an apology flickers in his kiss in reply, yet still he persists. His fingers trace the scar over his master's stomach; he follows it downwards until it disappears beneath his thighs where he sits astride his master's hips.

In kind his master responds to his touches. Grey fingers run over the leather of his breeches, the fabric rucks up slightly about his hips, prickling over his thighs; and a thrill of dark adrenaline pulses through him as he feels his master's hips rock beneath him. With each ebb and thrust of their kiss his master's hips roll, he can feel his master smile against him as their tongues slide together, as his breath builds to a tattoo of soft, panting gasps; each shuddering inhalation driven by the ardour that stokes to a hot crux in the pit of his stomach.

With one final press of his lips he breaks away, he suddenly curls backwards into empty space, and his hands cease their caresses. He *feels* more than sees his master's query; muscle suddenly tightens below him as his master rises to follow him. He slides further down into his master's lap, his thighs grip around his master's waist for balance as hungrily his master leans up to meet him. His master drives his kisses home, so familiar and feral and wonderful, and he dives into that sensation. One hand wraps about the back of his master's head as he pushes against him, pressing into him as their tongues meld in a dizzying crash of flesh upon flesh.

With his right hand he reaches behind him, he kneels up slightly to free his master's waist, and temptingly then he toys with the lacings upon his master's trousers. He feels his master shift beneath him, a slight groan escapes his master's lips as he pulls back slightly from their kiss; as their lips merely brush together now, tender and yearning. His master's voice rolls between them. The syllables hum across his skin.

"Mairon..."

He tugs at the cord fastenings of his master's trousers, deftly he unpicks the topmost bow that holds them shut. At the soft vibration of loosened threads sliding through the metal eyelets a thrill of anticipation runs up through him.

"Mairon, I... I need to ask something of you."

His fingers skate over the slant of his master's hips, they slip beneath the waistband of his trousers, teasing and playful.

"You have always been so loyal. So willing..."

At his master's words he moans, some visceral sound of pleasure catches deep and low in his

throat. And he feels his master respond to his touch; he feels the heat flush beneath his fingers, he feels that tantalising stiffness as he slides his grip even lower, and –

“I ask you to go to Tol Sirion.”

For an instant it is as if he has not heard, it takes a few seconds for his master’s words to coalesce amid the passion that churns within him. But coalesce they do, and he freezes in horror as the meaning of those words become clear.

As one suddenly turned to stone he stops, after a moment of paralysed disbelief he withdraws, his hands retract from his master’s skin even as he still kneels awkwardly over his master’s hips. His heart hammers within his chest, denial runs cold and puissant within his veins, and some expression of that horror must flit across his face for as he moves away, as he makes to clamber free of his master suddenly ashen fingers slip between his own.

“Mairon,” his master says, in a voice deep and low, *“I do not ask this of you lightly.”*

The words drip like honey from his master’s lips, potent and thick, but to honey swarms flies. They buzz and they breed and they fester; maggots squirm through their viscera, and in that moment it seems though his master’s voice is steeped only in venom. And for a moment he founders, the words of protest, of *refusal* stick in his throat and they will not come. For this is a jest, surely? Even now, even with his master looking so solemnly up at him, this is just some strange joke played at his expense.

His master is only just healed: his place is at his side, not scores of miles away on some island that he cares nothing about. This has to be jest, it has to be, and even as hurt brims in his eyes he looks down at his master, he sees the resoluteness behind those suddenly infuriating irises and with a cold rush of shock he realises that his master is serious.

You were nothing to me.

“M-my lord?” he stammers. Violently he pulls himself free of his master, he curls himself away to perch upon the edge of the bed, his back fully turned to his master behind him. “Have... have I displeased you, my lord?”

“Nay, little one,” his master says, and he feels his master straighten up upon the mattress behind him. *“This is no punishment, I assure you. I ask this only of you in an hour of great need. We must capitalise upon the Noldor’s losses. They must be reminded of the price of their impudence. That isle is of importance: it commands the vale of Sirion, it controls the main passage to our territories here in the North. We must seize this stronghold, we must make it our own, and the time shall never be more ripe.”*

His head bows despondently. He is not so blind as to deny the sense in his master’s words, yet their abhorrence stabs through him. Glad he is that his shoulders shield him from his master’s eyes as furiously he blinks, as he dispels the row of desperate, bitter tears that jump unbidden behind his eyes.

“Surely,” he says at last, the words catching a little in his throat. “Surely there is some other... Some other commander might do this for you, my lord. Let me stay at your side, *please...*”

“Do not gainsay me, little one. It will not avail you. Long thought I have given to this matter, and I have drawn a stern conclusion. There is none other to which I would trust such a task but to you.”

His knuckles whiten as he clutches a handful of the bed sheets, and behind him he hears his master shift.

“Come now,” his master says, but the first hints of sternness sound in his voice. *“This is needless. This is no exile. It will only be for a short time, until some other might be assigned to take your place and you will return.”*

An apologetic little kiss plants itself upon his cheekbone, his master softly sweeps his hair aside as he leans over his shoulder, and hurt cramps all the harder through his innards. Angrily then he stands, he takes one quick, explosive step away from the bed, leaving his master staring after him in surprise.

With his back still turned he halts; his fingers clench into fists at his sides, digging red little crescent-moons into the sides of his hands.

You were nothing to me.

His master’s words reverberate darkly inside of him. Dreams his master might have claimed, but perhaps now they are revealed in their truth. Desperately he tries to still the hurt that aches through him, he tries to quell the betrayal that turns in his stomach, to smooth them out into the haughty apathy he so longs for.

His master’s eyes bore into his back, patiently waiting him out like a wolf stalks its prey. The silence seems to curdle between them, that scant metre or so becomes infinite and cold and strung through with unspoken resentments.

Suddenly he spins about on his heel, wrenched about by some emotion that he cannot even begin to give name to, and he faces his master once more. And it hurts him so much to smile, to look his master in the eye and pretend that he doesn’t care. Though it feels like the world is collapsing around him, the mountains crumble and the stars fall dead at his feet, stricken he stands amid its tumult, and a brittle smile forces across his face. His entire body shakes with the effort of ambivalence; all of the things that he wants to say in that moment, all of the terrible, violent, *truthful* things he wants to do howl within him, and his jaw trembles with the stress of self-restraint.

But after a moment of passion those dreadful emotions fade, they wither to a dull, seeping numbness within him and he lets that anger go. He could not argue his way out of this, he could not bargain, he will just accept his master’s decree like the good little lieutenant that he is, to be sent away when his master is tired of him. Mournfully that thought throbs through him, and though it feels like he is carving out a part of himself, offering it up all raw and bloodied for his master to simply sneer at and then throw aside, at last he murmurs, “Ever I am my lord’s vassal. Ever it brings me pleasure to do his bidding.”

You were nothing to me.

Stiffly he bows, he turns then and strides from his master’s chambers. With every step he wants to turn back around, he wants to throw himself to his knees and beg his master to reconsider, but with cold resolution he knows that he will not. For proud still he is, and he feels that pride suffuse him, grim and unyielding, and he knows that he will not waver now. He will not give in to craven, base desires. He will not. That was not what he swore all those years ago, and though personal desire might twist him, it does not yet have the power to make him renege upon his oaths.

He jerks the doors open before him, but with the torsion of his movement as he closes the doors behind him he catches one final glimpse of his master sitting unmoved upon the bed. The flicker of

the torchlight sets his hair to shimmer like oil over his shoulders, and framed by it lays his eyes. Dark and golden they are as he looks for a final time upon them, beautiful, and a knot of tight, hot emotion twists in his stomach at the glimmer of doubt that he thinks he sees within them.

Leave Him Alive

Like demons spun from clotted webs of malice the hordes of Angband fall upon the island. Engines seethe and rumble from the far embankments, they send iron bolts ten feet in length and fully two in width smashing through the moonlit walls of Minas Tirith. The Elven fortress lies besieged upon its isle; the natural bottleneck of the mountains that it stoppers providing an ideal terrain from which an aggressor might mount an overwhelmingly offensive campaign.

The hasty barricades thrown up before the fortress' walls burn, the single bridge that spans the river at its mouth swarms with orcs. The spray of the river wets down their leather and mail armour, and in the sickly light of the phosphorescent flares that are sent fizzing above the vale to guide their passage, their armour gleams like chitin as in insectile numbers they press across the bridge. Upon the north-eastern banks of the river great mechanisms turn. The dumb-witted trolls that guard them are goaded to furore, and in their blind rage they push forward upon immense wheels, they winch thick ropes through cogs until at last the tension builds, and at the signal of their overseer the ballistae are released. Riveted iron fastenings sink into the muddy banks of the isle a moment later; the ropes that trail from them are pulled taut and gradually three huge slatted bridges are slung across the river's expanse and secured.

The orcs roar in triumph, and spurred on by the orders of their commanders a large contingent of their force rushes forward, they rattle across the rickety bridges and swarm onto the island, and what remnants of the Elven guard that scramble to meet them are swept away under their tide. Through sheer force of numbers they drive the elves back, inch by bloodstained inch they cut to the fortress' main gates, they scale its pearlescent walls and from there they sow ruin. Fallen skulls are crushed underfoot, swords forged in the high days of Aman wheel and snap against the fresh-smithied axes and serrated daggers of the orcs. The elves' proud heritage avails them not, as after several minutes of anxious, flurried battle they give flight from the riverbanks, what small number of them that remain retreating inside the fortress' keep or chancing the river's perils as they desert their cause.

A colossal battering ram swung by a legion of snarling trolls splinters through the wooden beams of Minas Tirith's gates, and at that joyous sight a howl arises from the amassed invaders. Quickly the orcs rally into their battalions once more, and forming a wedge tipped by a bold unit of Valaraukar they slam through the gateway, they swarm throughout the fortress. What hurried, desperate counterattacks the defenders can muster are drowned beneath their onslaught; no mercy has been prescribed to them and none they receive.

From the rise of a steep hillock to the northwest of the isle, he watches as his plan is executed to perfection. His silver eyes gleam with fierce joy from beneath a fearsome war-helm, his hair pours like mellowed honey across the dark pauldrons of his armour, ruinous spells of strength and fury scrawled into every facet of the metal plate that garbs him. He sits astride a grey stallion, the creature champing at its bit as it scents the blood in the air, and its eyes roll with every flare fired anew into the smoke-filled night.

Gladly he watches as his armies gain the isle's shore without incident, he smiles as he glimpses the northern gates crash down with a squeal of rent timber, and a hiss of approval bursts through the two Valaraukar captains who accompany him. Their eyes flare red at the sight; great gouts of flame erupt down their backs as they witness their comrades charge through the toppled gates. Droplets of oil drip from their hulking forms to sizzle in the dirt below them, and with a scream of triumph they crack their fiery whips through the air as an iron bolt rips through a turret of the beleaguered fortress, sending it collapsing down in a heap of rubble.

His horse skitters beneath him as the percussion ripples through the air, and he yanks it hard in the teeth as he wheels it back around to watch. His cunning eyes flick from point to point upon the falling castle, carefully searching for any signs of weakness in his plans that might need urgent redress. But with a contented smirk he finds none, and smugly he satisfies himself to wait for the red-rimmed dawn and his victory to follow.

His patience is well rewarded. As the sun's first rays creep over the easternmost peaks of the valley, a cry arises from the island. Thousands of fell voices twine into one ululating cheer as from the topmost tower of the fortress his flag is unfurled, an eye wreathed in crimson flames flies proud upon a banner of black, glaring out over the vale. A chuckle tears from his throat as he rips the helm from his head, he tosses it aside to one of the Valaraukar as with enamour now he looks down upon the fortress.

He jams his spurs into the horse's flanks and away over the valley they gallop, tracking the slurred paths down to the main bridge, its once smooth cobbles now pitted with the marks of his war. Taking a little more care over the treacherous ground he reins in his horse, guiding it at a steady canter between the smouldering barricades, spurring it over limp bodies as reeking puddles of water, blood and ichor splatter up its legs. To the main gate he rides, and as he approaches it a dark, lithe figure appears atop the cracked archway.

"Hail, conquistador!" the herald calls in a clear, rich voice. "Hail, lieutenant of Angband, Sauron the Great, Gorthaur the Cruel, servant to the Dark Power of the North!"

"Well met, Langon," he cries in reply, before cantering on into the awaiting courtyard.

The cheers of his warriors break in a swell of sound about him; a fell light shines in their beady eyes and each set of jaws gnashes and growls in delight. His horse shies and rears at the noise, blowing hard through its nostrils, and he strokes a gauntleted hand down its neck to calm it, whispering a soothing word or two even through the exulted beam that lights up his face. Gradually the crowd simmers and disperses, his horse calms and at last he dismounts, patting the nervous creature absently upon the neck as he awaits a groom to lead it away.

Curiously he peers up about the courtyard, glancing about the slightly crumbled stonework of this Elven citadel, until through the throng of chattering, retreating orcs he notices a figure elbowing his way towards him.

"Mairon!" A loud voice cries, and a moment later Langon plants himself squarely before him, a bright grin affixed across his lips. The Maia's dark skin shines with sweat, he scrapes a hand through the clutter of his long dreadlocks, but merrily he grins, "We've the victory, then. A relief, I must say. I practised that herald beforehand, you know, and it would've been a shame not to put it to use!"

"It was truly prodigious," he laughs, true contentment and camaraderie flowing through him as the orcs already begin to order themselves about the courtyard, clearing the worst of the rubble aside even as they converse. "You are well, then? You are unharmed?"

"Of course," the Maia snorts, and as his hair shifts with the movement he notices the little silver stars and sigils strung amid his locks, the little icons each of a distinctly Noldorin design. "It takes more than a loud voice and stunningly good looks to act as our lord's herald, you know. A certain proficiency with weapons is a mandatory requirement.

You should have seen him, Mairon, the last one I got. This bastard sneaks up on me; he thinks to take me unawares, right? I saw him still metres off, but I let him think that I didn't notice him until he lifted his sword up to strike me. I like to think he learned something of humility when I stuck

him through the throat with a stiletto. The *noise* he made, Mairon, like a squealing pig. Truly, it was wondrous.”

The Maia’s grin grows sharp, and from within the cords of his hair he indicates a single silver pendant, a diamond-like rayed star stamped across a coin of silver.

“This was his, you know?” Langon says. “Too fine a thing for an arrogant prick like that, thinking he could sneak up on *me*! So I relieved him of its burden. Handsome, don't you think?”

“Exceedingly,” he smiles, and warmly he clasps the Maia by the arm. “You must excuse me, Langon. Where now you may take rest, my duties have only just commenced. Will you stay long?”

“A few days,” the Maia shrugs, rolling the coin contemplatively through his fingers. “‘Til the next bloody lieutenant out for a shot of glory requires my humble services!”

“Until later, then,” he grins, clapping Langon upon the arm before turning from him and striding towards the large set of doors that appear to lead into a central hall.

Sheer, ecstatic happiness flows through him; all of his plans have come to flawless execution and here the fortress is laid out before him, claimed and branded as his own.

But it's not yours.

A chill thought slides through his merriment.

It's his.

He tries to shove it aside, he tries to drown that thought out in the cresting wave of his triumph, but like some loathsome predator submerged just beneath the water’s meniscus it lurks, it pulses inside of his head.

You will always be his, and he doesn't even care.

Slowly the ecstasy slips from him, sterner then grows his mood, and he glances back across the rubble-strewn courtyard. But swiftly he rallies himself, those dour thoughts do not have the power yet to entrap him completely, and he strides forward once more, towards the waiting hall and his courtiers and advisors to bring to order the newest acquisition in his master’s empire.

In time the fortress is repaired, though its new aesthetics are far from the delicate masonry of the Elven stonewrights. Corrugated iron slabs are patched crudely over the great rents in the stonework, the ballistae bolts are with some difficulty extracted from the walls and their substance melted down and used to fortify the puncture wounds that they have left. Piece by piece the orcs make the fortress their own; the lilting Elvish script that embroiders the walls is chipped away and atop it is scrawled the jagged marks of the Black Speech. For such ugly renovations he cares little, let the orcs have their fun, he thinks. Greatly they have deserved it, and to him the pale walls and fluted stairways of the fortress are yet another reminder of just how far he is from home.

To distract himself from such brooding thoughts he flings himself into every little detail of industry that he can. Quickly he consults with his advisors to establish the fastest supply networks of grain and meats to their new territories, spanning the long miles between Angband itself and Sirion’s vale. Messengers he sends flying to his master and to their major outposts in the northwest of the land, and while he awaits the responses he sets about destroying the siege-bridges, salvaging what scrap wood and metal that he can and utilising it to repair the main bridge onto the isle. At its edge he sets a series of barbed fortifications and assigns teams of orcs to patrol them night and day.

The replies trickle back to him; his master is pleased indeed, but reading that message brings him no joy. To set permanent order within the Vale of Sirion his master tasks him, and a hot slab of bitterness slides down his throat as those words dance before his eyes. Months it would take him if not years, and ever it seems just another rejection, another spurn; even this valiant conquest is not enough to earn his place back by his master's side.

So with reckless abandon he tries to forget, he tries to make the fortress a place of his own. The repairs he leaves intact, he has not quite the heart to rebuke the orcs of their joy and labour, so he sets his mind to other things. The vale is rich still in wandering cattle; the Noldor had abandoned their herds as they fled before the orc's onslaught, and from their stock he picks the finest to breed from as an easy supply of meat. The rest he casts to the wolves.

For to him the wolves of the vale flock, they slink into his halls by the shadows of night and there he welcomes them. The mightiest of their bloodlines he crosses with the sons of men captured in his endeavours; through patchwork magics and half-forgotten incantations he creates a race of beings anew. Of corded muscle and sinews he forges them, both lupine and human, and he sends them out, and the forests of Sirion grow full of terror. At the coming of the moon each night a baying drifts from beneath the silent trees, and all goodly things of that land shiver.

Aside from that first message, he receives no word from his master. In dwindling hope he awaits; some news, some new orders or commands or enquiries might come, but he receives naught but silence. Orders trickle to him by roundabout means; ever Thuringwethil bemoans her workload as she snatches what days of rest that she can within his halls, and as much as he can afford he humours her. Truly he finds her company endearing, crass and tempestuous and lovely as she could be, and many a merry day they spend together before he is forced to send her off on some errand once more.

Requests for his troop details come to him carrying the winged sigil of the orcs of Taur-nu-Fuin, not the dark seal of Angband. Reports of the Noldor steal through to him by clandestine means via the south, not the north, and never once do any bear the direct word of his master. He will not bring himself to ask no matter his feelings, no matter how much it stings as a new messenger bows before him and brings him some news that he cares not for. He will not break even as Thuringwethil cajoles him, as lightly she teases him. He will not write to his master himself. If this is some waiting game then let his master play it. His pride will not buckle so easily.

But as the years trickle past it becomes harder, the scant orders become fewer, and the first tendrils of true pain begin to spread in him. The silver flame in his eyes starts to dim, his passions for invention and order seem to shrivel up inside of him; they are washed away by the relentless flow of the river about his isle, they are leached into the torpor of his haunted vale.

Even Tevildo's visit to him brings him only fleeting merriment as he and the cat stroll through his woods, as they chatter over the gossips that the years have brought between them. A week or so later he is then provided with the annoyance of re-staffing his kitchen with able-bodied slaves, and to that he applies himself with uncharacteristic zeal. The great feline's appetites had extended into what he could only call outright gluttony, and with the capriciousness of all of his kind Tevildo had demonstrated an apparent inability for self-restraint.

Yet in the wake of the cat's departure a void of emptiness seems to open within him that will no longer close, a pit in his stomach seems to ache no matter how hard he seeks to ignore it.

He's forgotten you.

Even his dreams darken, in them his master sneers at him, spits at him, *you were nothing to me*, his master purrs, over and over again in his head he hears it. And as the days crawl by still without

hope of word or reprieve truly he begins to despair. He attends to his duties, his pride binds him to the upkeep of his fortress at least, but bitterness now guides his actions, not fervour, as the sour claws of loneliness grip him and begin to squeeze.

The sun is but thin and pale upon the horizon when an urgent knock comes at his door, snatching him from a fitful, uneasy dream. Tiredly he bids the comer deliver their message, and he curls himself up under the covers as he awaits their news.

“My lord,” an orcish voice snarls, its voice a fraction muted by the thick wood of his door. “We have apprehended a small company who have attempted to pass the vale against your orders. We have detained them at the far post of the bridge, for they are dressed in our gear and bear the sigils of our Lord. Yet they will not report their movements, and they have tried to scurry through these territories with haste. We have not harmed them, for we know not what to do with them. Perhaps my lord might wish to take closer inspection of them?”

He squints as the orc’s queer words slice through him, and through the lingering fuzziness of sleep he tries to slot those strange tidings into context. But he finds that he cannot, and wearily he pushes himself up in his bed, looking blearily out of his window and over the dim hillside beyond.

“Very well,” he calls, stifling a yawn as he begins to drag himself from the warmth of his bed and into the frigid air of the morning. “I shall come presently. See that they are kept in bonds and do not allow them past the outer garrison, but ensure that no harm is done to them. Odd tidings you bring, and we do not yet know the truth of these matters.”

“As you command, my lord,” comes the swift reply, and he hears the orc hurry off to relay his orders.

Slowly he clammers from his bed, and he winces as he misjudges the distance of the sheepskin rug from his bed, his toes hitting the cold stones instead of warm, fluffed wool. Still though, that shock serves to waken him, and quickly he dons a pair of warm riding breeches and shirt, and the thickest pair of socks that he can lay hands on. Standing before his mirror he eyes himself distastefully: too pallid he thinks himself of late, and darkness smears below his eyes like bruises. Hurriedly he runs his fingers through his hair, he clips back the foremost strands behind his head and lets the rest hang freely across his shoulders, and more contentedly then he considers himself in the mirror as at least presentable for the day’s mysteries.

He tugs on a pair of boots before buttoning a sealskin jacket on atop his shirt, and above that buckling on his sword-belt, his twin knives left dangling from scabbards at either sides of his waist. Instantly the jacket warms him, and fondly he thinks to those distant days spent in the frigid north. A proclivity for sealskin clothing that trip had instilled in him, as well as a lingering liking for fresh fish.

That meat was lamentably rare in Angband in the years after the siege had ended. Maintaining the supply routes north had proved impractical, and his attempts to engineer a species of fish that might flourish in the few wells or caves of water that Angband had to spare had failed. The volcanism of the Thangorodrim caused constant and violent fluctuations in the acidification or alkaline-bleaching of the waters they possessed, rendering them utterly unsuitable to support life no matter his best efforts, and even his master’s knowledge and assistance had come up short against such a ferocious natural obstacle. Still, he thinks, giving himself one final glance over in the mirror; the steady supply of fresh salmon and trout is one small solace in his exile upon this island.

Rousing himself then he quits his room and makes his way through the fortress’ empty corridors, and down to the bridge where the puzzle of these prisoners awaits him.

With a casual wave he bids the bridge guards stand at ease as he enters their outpost. A line of chained orcs kneel upon the stones before him, and curiously he regards them, his brows furrowing into a frown. To his naked eyes they appear proper, but a strange reek of enchantment hangs about them, coating the back of his mouth in its cloying tang. A silent spell then he weaves, a subtle thing of detection he places upon his fingertips, and sharply he reaches forward, plucking a battered helm from the head of the nearest prisoner.

He hisses as the metal sears upon his fingertips, he thrusts the helm aside and it lands with a ringing clatter upon the ground, and the guards start forward as they see him cradle his singed fingers to his chest. Quickly he commands them keep their distance, he nudges the dropped helmet with his boot and for a split second he sees it shimmer, and the certainty of the prisoner's disguise concretes itself in his mind.

For though he has not experienced much of it himself, that is unmistakably an Elven magic, and one of surprising potency and cunning.

But his magic is potent also, forged of flame and shadow and steel, and deeply he inhales as it unfurls, as he sends forth snaking tendrils of puissance to probe at the mesh of enchantments surrounding the invaders and seek for gaps in their disguise. For many minutes he searches, the orcs about him tighten their grips upon their weapons, but for their worry the scene remains static. His efforts do not avail him, the Elvish concealment is well woven indeed, and frustration stirs in his stomach as still his trials go thwarted. For a moment then he reins back in his power, his eyes narrow at the miserable row of prisoners before him as he collects himself and considers how best to proceed.

Suddenly the chains burst from the prisoners' wrists, the heavy iron fetters spring undone, and while for a moment he reels back in shock one of the supposed orcs rises to its feet. The orc casts its burnished helmet aside with a flourish, and for a moment its patchwork armour seems to shimmer about it before they transmute into flowing robes of green and gold, and a blond spill of hair floats down its back.

Smoothly then the elf, for an elf it most certainly is who stands before him, opens their mouth, and from it pours a melody that rings sweet and pure through the air, the innocent syllables wound together into a song of quite striking power. The elf sings of freedom, of snares eluded and traps broken, of pearls upon distant shores softly gleaming in the starlight, of verdant fields lit by the brilliant sunrise, and for a moment it takes him entirely by surprise. The elf's voice rolls dulcet and lyrical through the outpost; the guards' grips upon their weapons slacken as the elf shifts through the scales of verse with near flawless execution, his truth pushing power and potency through his words.

For a moment the elf's song washes over him, its tendrils seem to wrap around him with soft ribbons of gold and they charm him, they lull him, they make his head swim. He staggers slightly then, made giddy with the strange, entrancing feelings that the elf's song sends rolling through him. The prisoners blur before his eyes, into the elf's song he seems for a moment to fall, until at the utmost end of his willpower something bright explodes into life. A sharp edge of urgency digs at him, anger at the elf's entrancements burns within his stomach, and a moment later his head snaps upwards, his eyes bloodshot and wild as he stares hatefully at the elf and his companions.

And like a frothing, seething wave within him, an enchantment of his own crackles upon his lips. The black words sizzle upon his tongue, every syllable strains and spits from him. A spell of piercing he sings, its rhythm erratic and alien but driving; of betrayal he chants, of deceit and unwinding and stripping. He straightens as his own puissance suffuses him, it rams up against the elf's lilting words with an almost tangible crash and there they strive. He sees the elf's eyes widen

as his spell weaves on, as the words shape it and corrode; biting into the elf's song like bubbling acid poured over skin.

Their spells twist and strive together, each seeks to evade and entrap the other, but as the minutes trickle by instinctively he knows that he has the mastery. The elf's words come slower and thicker from his mouth as he founders under the onslaught, and hard he presses his advantage. A wild grin tears across his face, behind the abrupt enunciation of his words he throws a great swell of power, and it crashes into the elf's withering song with a force that seems to ripple through the air. For a second or two it hovers, it *heaves*, until at last the elf's song buckles, the words clot upon the elf's lips and his own black speech floods in to fill that void of sound. It snaps the half-formed shreds of the elf's speechcraft and sends them spinning dissolately into the chill air.

Before him the elf crumples, his eyes roll back into his head as the remainders of his enchantments are ripped from him and his companions and shredded. Unveiled before him cower a company of men and into their midst the elf swoons, overcome utterly by his puissance which tentatively then he reels back in. A man crawls to the elf's side, he paws at the elf's neck, checking for a pulse most likely, and at that pathetic effort he sneers. Coldly then he turns aside, he bids the awestruck guards seize the prisoners and cast them into the blackest pits of the dungeons, there to dwell until he might trouble himself to discover their purposes.

He begins with the men. Some months later he drags them stumbling forth into the greenish light of his court, but apparently even that proves too much. The darkness of the pits has tamed their spirits, so he remarks to his courtiers, for the men fall witless at his feet. Like to the Eldar he finds them, and yet different; sterner in mood perhaps, yet more brittle, and such differences he notes with a calculated interest. Shrieks of gibberish or inchoate moans are all that he can extract from the first few he brings up, and at their uselessness he grows impatient.

More still the interrogations irk him, or those that he troubles himself to sit in upon. None of the remaining company will break, they guard their secrets irritatingly close, or they would break altogether, spilling themselves in an indecipherable tangle of hopes and dreams and fears and truths across his floor. Fruitlessly he sifts through what pitiful information he can glean from them, and where before he might have proclaimed it inconsequential and simply left the men to rot, the long years of solitude have soured him. Doggedly he proceeds, with cold, cruel disgust he throws the broken survivors back to their pit, a reward for any wolf who might earn his favour, and one by one the men are extinguished in screams and the crunch of bone.

Their numbers dwindle as the months crawl by and still he knows virtually nothing of them. In moments of particular boredom or vindictiveness he might descend to the dungeons, he might drag one up to gloat, observing with an increasingly reticent disinterest whether or not they were willing to talk. Really, he thinks as he spits over the cooling corpse lying before him, as he jerks free the butcher's hook crudely punched through the foolish man's neck, it would be so much easier if they just *told* him what they were doing in his lands.

He would be disinclined to let them go, of course, yet their lot might be far improved. The kitchens are constantly in need of fresh thralls, especially in the wake of Tevildo's infrequent visits. The fields upon the riverside require tilling; even the small stable of horses that are kept for the use of dignitaries and messengers upon the isle needs slaves to bear the burden of their upkeep. Should the roles have been reversed and he made prisoner with nothing but the boredom of the pits and the ominous threat of dismemberment hovering above him, he knows well to what choice he would swing.

Still though, this reluctance to bring forth their information needles him in a way that none have previously achieved, and for that in itself he is impressed. But he has left to him only one miserable

man and an elf. Upon his chair he mulls their fates, and a rill of frustration burns through him. He is the lord of these lands; he is the dread sorcerer of Tol-in-Gaurhoth. *Necromancer* even he has heard whispered, and oh how that rumour has pleased him. But he is his master's lieutenant above all that, and this failure however small digs at him.

A snarl twists over his face, he sends for the dungeon-keeper, and as the orc enters smartly into the courtroom before him, he hisses but one command.

“Bring me the elf.”

The damp air is close to freezing. The dungeon walls conduct the chill of the river, leaching all trace of warmth from the air. Its faint rush sounds from beyond the thick, moss-slimed stones; it melds with the clinking of chains, the tread of iron-shot boots, the soft snick of metal being whetted, and other, less savoury noises.

“Who are you?”

His voice echoes in stark clarity from the walls, it bounces about the bare room with a resonance that is near uncanny. Torches splutter from the four corners of the room, casting a guttering light over the elf chained within the very centre of the chamber and himself standing like a mildly disgruntled shadow behind him.

Stripped to the waist the elf shivers in the icy air; his breath comes in short bursts of clouded white from between his clenched teeth. At the abruptness of the question the elf jerks slightly, he tugs against his wrists chained painfully above his head, leaving his arms pulled taut. His ribs slide stark and wasted beneath the unhealthy pallor of his skin, he breath near wheezes from his lungs as the stress of that position takes its toll, but against him the elf tightens his jaw in defiance.

With an exasperated roll of his eyes he stalks in front of his prisoner, and glares at him hard.

“Do not mistake such questions for pleasantries, elfling,” he says, spitting the words into the elf's face. “I have no love of your kind, and I care not particularly who you are. But such interrogations tend to work best when we start from the basics, you see. So you will answer the questions that I put to you. Who are you, and why are you here?”

The elf holds his silence, green eyes stare sullenly back at him, and with a sudden rush of anger he turns. He spins about to backhand the elf across the face, twisting the full force of his weight behind the blow. The slap rips open the elf's lips, the rings that he wears across his fingers score bloody furrows across the elf's cheek, crowning the livid mark that blossoms across his skin. A thin line of blood bubbles upon the elf's lips and with a wince it is spat out before the elf lifts his head to stare at him once more.

Hatred shines in the elf's eyes, matted blond hair tips clumsily over his shoulders as he shifts; the once flowing tresses knotted into ragged, stinking strands.

Dismally he sighs, his lip curls as the stench of unwashed elf and blood hits his nostrils anew. Clearing his throat he steps forward, and distastefully he fingers the elf's greasy locks.

“You're disgusting,” he sneers, and pulls a knife from the scabbard hung at his waist. With one quick flash of steel he slices through a hunk of matted hair, and with a grimace of loathing he lets it fall to the floor. The elf twitches in his bonds, he can only hang there dejectedly as he hacks through the grotesque clumps of the elf's hair, shearing those lank blond strands to a rough crop just above the elf's jaw-line. Once finished he runs a hand through the elf's much-shortened hair,

he yanks the elf's head from side to side, gripping what of his hair remains like some smirking puppeteer as smugly he admires his handiwork.

The elf quivers in his grip and eventually he releases him, wriggling his fingers with distaste as they are left tinged with a sheen of grease from the elf's hair. Disdainfully then he wipes his hand across his prisoner's chest, one nail flicking hard against the elf's nipple with the motion and eliciting a quick gasp as the elf squirms away from his touch. He twirls the knife through his fingers; with a calculating air he regards the elf once more until with a sickening smile he pronounces, "Well, at least now you're presentable."

Blood drips down the elf's chin from the deep split in his lip, and delicately he traces the crimson passage of those droplets with the point of his knife. Suddenly then he moves, he slaps the flat of the blade hard against the elf's injured cheek, evoking a violent flinch as the elf recoils in pain.

"Who are your companions, and what was your purpose in these lands?"

The elf's wavering expression hardens once more, his bloodied lips clamp shut and grimly he stares down at the floor.

"Fine," he sighs. "Have it your way, then."

In one swift motion he grasps the pointed tip of the elf's right ear between his fingers, pinching hard into his flesh. And just below where he grips he brings his knife up, he slashes it through the elf's ear, severing both skin and cartilage in one savage cut. The elf shrieks, he writhes in his bonds as a hot spurt of blood drips down his mangled ear, its leaf-like tip now brutally amputated.

Disgust flickers across his face as he drops the elf's ear-tip to the stones; he slowly grinds it beneath the toe of his boot as the elf moans in dismay before him. Spite spurs him on; he twists and grabs hold of the elf's other ear, holding the bloodied knife to its inner helix. The question shines bold in his eyes, an eyebrow arcs menacingly as he looks upon the elf and awaits his reply.

The elf whines deep and low in his throat, but in the end he shakes his head, his eyes squeezing tightly shut.

"As you wish," he says simply, before sawing through the flesh trapped beneath his fingers. The cartilage shudders under his knife; momentum is not behind this cut so it is only the insistent pressure and gradual slice of the knife that jerks it through until at last the elf's ear-tip is severed. The elf twists as the knife jolts through him, as the cartilage in his ear cracks; tears fall silently down his cheeks as he visibly bites back a scream.

The elf's ear-tip he holds in his fingers, ponderously he raises it up before him.

"I should make you eat it," he sneers, and at that suggestion the elf pales before him. The temptation swirls within him, if nothing else it might be amusing, but upon capricious whim he turns aside from it.

"No," he says, his face contorting into an ugly leer. "Why waste it on you?"

With a flick of his wrist he sends the scrap of flesh spinning to the corner of the room, and the elf chokes as he watches it go. But still the elf is silent, though blood trickles in twin streams down the sides of his neck not a word comes over his lips, and a flare of irritation rises in him truly.

"Where were you going?" he asks, his voice taut with barely suppressed annoyance. This stubbornness really did grow tiresome after a while, and while his master might have the patience to toy, deeply he wishes that this obstinate trait of the Quendi's might be revoked.

The elf does not answer him, mournful tears drip down his cheeks but he remains resolutely silent. A growl of frustration tears from him, he suppresses the rather insistent urge to throttle the elf where he hangs and just have done with him, but he contents himself rather with pacing over to the wall. He frees the elf's chains from their moorings, he lets the links slip through his fingers and the elf begins to drop smoothly. But as the elf's knees hit the stones he jerks the chain hard, all of that momentum arrested in one sharp tug.

The tension snaps through the chain links, it yanks viciously upon the elf's wrists and arms as he twists uncontrollably into the sudden stop; and with an audible pop one of the elf's shoulders dislocates. The elf's agonised cry echoes shrilly through the chamber a second later, and oh how widely he smiles as the elf shudders before him, his entire right arm hanging clearly outside the bounds of his shoulder joint and yet still pinioned above his head by the tight chains.

His silver eyes glitter as the elf squirms, a malicious edge sharpens in his grin as for a few satisfying seconds he hears the elf grunt and mewl in pain as he tries to re-unite his shoulder joint. Such efforts do not reward him, they leave the elf panting and sweating upon his knees. For a few delicious moments more he watches, before he stalks over to the door and exits the chamber, leaving the elf to kneel in his misery until it should occur to some guard to remove him from his bonds and consign him back to the pits where he belongs.

You will make the elf talk. I do not care how.

You will make him talk, little one, or whatever you do to him shall be heaped tenfold upon you.

You will not fail me.

His fingers brush over the ball of parchment crumpled up tightly in his pocket as he paces in increasing frustration before the elf's motionless form. His master's words seem to sear against his fingers, his jaw tightens in irritation as he tries to think of what he can do to force this information from the belligerent lips of this elf.

But underscoring that anger there is the first true clutch of panic. It was his master's first personal correspondence to him in years, and it was *this*. Of how his master came to know of the elf's imprisonment, and the man who withered with him in the dungeons, he is unsure. Thuringwethil had perhaps divulged that information on her travels to and from Angband, or some rotation of troops had brought the hint of that rumour to his master's ear, but either way now it matters not, and fear flicks in him like burning cinders scattered against the inside of his chest.

The elf moans at his feet, he curls reflexively into a foetal position, the stained fetters about his wrists and ankles clinking with every painful movement. He can almost hear the crack and peel of scabs as the elf shifts, as weeping lacerations break open anew across his spine and drip watery blood down the elf's sides. The elf's ribs show stark and frail through his skin, and as he curls up further he whines, the fetters about his legs catch upon a bump in the cobblestones and drag against a shattered ankle. His movement plucks against the chains that hold his arms, they pull taut against his shoulder long dislocated and never healed, and the elf moans as that fresh pain thuds through him.

So much he has done, *so much*, and yet still the elf will not talk. Merely he glares at him from beneath a wave of oily, shoulder-length hair, his mouth clamped shut into a sullen line. Not that he would not scream when the brands were set to his flesh, not that he would not beg for a reprieve when he was flogged; he would beg for mercy, for death even, and in those moments of wavering the torments would pause. But while the elf might moan and cry and whimper, he still would not tell of his identity and purpose, and then with almost cyclical certainty the tortures might begin

again.

It is not, of course, that he cannot *guess* who the elf is. That stubborn streak and the reasonably adept song that the elf had performed at his gates marked him as a lord of the Noldor if ever he has seen one. And a son of Arafinwë no less, if the dirty blond hair and vague sense of superiority is anything to judge by. For a while then the elf has been an amusement, a thing to drag up and interrogate at his leisurely will while he continues the command of his fortress as a whole, and life goes on more or less uninterrupted.

But for his master's orders, penned in his own flowing hand, that Thuringwethil had warily delivered to him not a week past. The threat hangs over him like a guillotine poised above his neck, and he is not about to see it swing.

His fingertips brush once more against that note of parchment, and sharply he inhales. His eyes shut for the briefest of seconds, and within him all of that frustration suddenly whirls. Motionless he stands, he lets that powerful emotion scourge through him; it drags behind it desperation and yearning and other puissant things, it erases doubts, it devours boundaries; it smashes together every last shred of fury and passion and repression and lingering, cloying desire until they rip through his core like lightning.

His eyes snap back open, cruel resolution settles upon him, and his mood is caustic. With violent speed he kicks the elf in the ribs, he yanks the spluttering slave up by his hair, the elf taken far too much by surprise and pain to offer anything in the way of resistance. The elf's manacles he draws tight against the wall, forcing him to a tight stricture upon his knees, his hands clasped at an awkward angle behind his back despite the injury at his shoulder. The elf's head lolls against his chest, his green eyes blink dumbly as new waves of pain wash through him, and his entire body trembles with the effort of remaining upright even with the chains half supporting his arms.

From a well-supplied bench behind him he picks up a gag, a thin, open ring of flaking metal worn curiously smooth along its inner edge. The elf has shown an unwillingness to respond to pain, he thinks, but there are cruder arts that might yet be employed by means of persuasion, and desperation pushes him towards them. Before the elf he bends, he pries the elf's jaw open, ignoring the faint struggles of protest as he forces the ring behind the elf's teeth and buckles its trailing straps tightly behind his head. The gag's sharp outer rim cuts into the sides of the elf's lips, a thin stream of saliva and pinkish blood drips from his chin as he whines, an incoherent animal sound that for a moment sends a twinge of pity flitting through him. Well he knows what he is doing, he knows what it is to be so restrained at the hand of another; and steely resolve creeps then into his eyes.

For a moment then he pauses, he reaches inside himself and with a vicious tug he wrenches up all of the things that for the past decades he has tried so hard to forget. Every gentle caress of his cheek, every lascivious, promising smile, every flicker of light in those brilliant golden eyes that glimmer every night in his dreams; every kiss, every glancing touch of his stomach, his hips, his legs; the press of his master into him, the sly little rocks of his hips that made him feel so full, so *exquisite*, the sizzle of a riding crop against his skin, the hot, sticky press of their bodies as his master groaned out his lust, as he whispered his name...

With shaking fingers he unlaces his trousers, he takes himself into his hand, already stiffening at the mere memory of his master's touch as those emotions flow torrid and urgent within him.

He sees the elf's eyes widen in horror, he sees him begin to thrash as best he can within the chains to no avail, and that delicious helplessness only fuels the dark desire that ripples within him, that stokes and pulses to a bright, boiling star in the pit of his stomach as he coaxes himself harder.

With one quick movement then he turns, he twists his free hand through the elf's hair and drags his head forward, as with the other he guides his length through the iron ring of the gag.

He gasps as the elf's tongue slides against his underside, the warm slickness of saliva makes his hips wriggle in excitement. His tip hits the back of the elf's throat and with a vicious grin he feels the elf gag, the muscles of his throat spasming and locking even as he pushes himself further into them, the elf's nose almost pressed against the flat muscles of his pelvis. The elf truly begins to shake beneath him, and at last he pulls the elf's head away, leaving him spluttering for air with the gag prying his jaw so lewdly, so *temptingly* open before him.

Quickly he sets his rhythm, he slides the elf's head up and down his length, ignoring the little yelps and whines of indignation that tear from his slave's throat, that only seem to stoke him higher. The force of the motion drags against the elf's chains, it wrenches against the elf's injured shoulder, and with sick, smug delight he can hear it crunching in and out of its socket with every stroke. Tears of pain and humiliation pour down the elf's cheeks as faintly he struggles, with what small strength he has left to him pushing against his quickening thrusts.

But suddenly then the elf falls limp, his eyes roll back into his skull as his entire body weight sags forward, dragging hard against the chains that hold him but this time to no reaction of pain or discomfort.

Above, with an almost wearied air of exasperation, he sighs. He had suspected that the elf might try this, to loose his *fëa* from his body and so perish, a feat accomplished only under the most extreme of duress. It is a trick he had seen played in his master's dungeons long ago, and while at first it was a surprise, his master had soon devised a remedy.

He pulls himself free from the elf, still achingly hard as for a moment he wiggles his trousers back up, securing them loosely before turning to the prisoner. One hand he places at the base of the elf's throat, with the other he presses two fingers over the point of the elf's heart beneath his motionless ribcage, his nails digging into the elf's skin. He closes his eyes, he sends tendrils of himself wafting through the elf's body, chasing down his fleeing *fëa* by foul, arcane techniques that he had mastered in the dungeons of Angband long ago.

The elf's spirit is barely departed the chamber yet, and with tendrils of his own puissance he ensnares it, he drags it bright and struggling back to the elf's *hröa* and there he binds it. Words of the Black Speech crackle upon his tongue, with the darkest of fleshcraft he anchors the elf's *fëa* back into his tissues, jagged and raw and imperfect but whole once more. Serviceable enough for his purposes, he thinks coldly. He doubts that the elf will have much need of sanity anyway.

Beneath him the elf *howls*, a visceral noise of agony and despair rip out of his throat as so unwillingly he is forced back into the waking world, and there bound against his will.

A victorious grin flashes thinly across his lips, he breathes hard with the effort of the spell as he straightens, as he switches his grip. He forces the elf back down upon himself, holding him still until he begins to choke, fresh waves of tears leaking from beneath his closed eyes as he feels the sobs rack through the elf below him. Savagely he thrusts the elf's head up and down his length, rage and sheer satisfaction wheel together within him until with a growl he climaxes, pleasure radiating up through his core as he spurts his sticky seed down the elf's throat. With a luxuriant smile he at last guides himself free of the ring, he laces himself back into his trousers, delighting in the pulses of warmth that radiate still through his core.

The elf squirms before him, gagging as much as his aching jaw would allow. Desperately the elf tries to spit out his seed, the force of his frantic convulsions tearing open his lips anew against the rim of the gag. A pink mixture of spunk and blood drools down the elf's chest in thick, sticky

strands and for a moment he simply admires the sight of it, his eyes gleaming with perverse amusement as it drips humiliatingly to the floor beneath the elf's spread knees.

Swiftly then he remembers himself, he smashes a boot into the elf's ribs, crumpling the elf over as much as the chains would allow as the air punches from his lungs. Retches of slime come over the elf's lips and with distaste then he looks upon him, he drags the elf back up by the hair to stare into his eyes; piercing silver glaring into unfocused green.

"Who are you, and why are you here?"

His eyes bore into the elf's, every word hisses in over-enunciated clarity from him, they bleed into the terse silence that falls. In his grip the elf begins to tremble, his eyes spill over with tears as he struggles to suck in a breath. But then frantically, horrifyingly the elf shakes his head. An awful keening noise emanates from the elf's pried-open jaw, he mewls like a broken, terrified animal but still he shakes his head in refusal, and in his green eyes there swims a tinge of madness.

He drops the elf then, he straightens back up. It is almost impressive, he thinks, looking upon the cowed slump of the elf's shoulders, the elf's unyielding loyalty to his purpose, whatever it might be. It is *almost* impressive. For his master's threat hangs with lethal potential above his head, and a second later a hateful snarl twists over his face.

With a word of power and a swift tug he rips the chains free of the elf's wrists and ankles, stepping back in distaste as the elf collapses to his feet with a gurgled moan. He sets his jaw, without remorse he wrenches the elf up, twisting one arm hard behind the elf's back and propelling him forward across the chamber and into the corridor beyond.

The elf's ankle whether broken or torn, truly he cares not, causes him to limp grievously, but no vestige of mercy plays its hand to aid him. With each stumble he shoves the elf forward, gripping the elf hard about the arms as he steers him through the labyrinthine maze of cellars and dungeons laid beneath the fortress. Eyes milky with rheum stare blindly at them as they pass, creatures that might once have been human shriek snatches of gibberish into the air as they traverse the damp-rotted doorways that link the dark corridors. The orc guards sneer as they pass, *elf-scum* they croon, *slave* they laugh, and the malevolence in their grins sharpens as they guess the destination of such a route. Before them the elf flinches, at each comment he jerks like he has been slapped, but brutally he shoves the elf forward, ignoring the plaintive, wordless protests that emanate from him.

The scent of musk gathers in the air, and finally they reach the wolf-pits. In those dark caverns his werewolves played and fed and whelped, slaves to their carnal desires whenever he should choose to whet them with whatever flesh he has to spare. Before a narrow door they halt, the elf trembles in his grip, and into the blackness he whistles shrilly, before flinging open the door.

The stench hits them with eye-watering strength; a noisome mixture of wet fur and sweat and rotted meat emanates from the darkness beyond, and in his hands the elf writhes, some instinctive fear lending a modicum of strength to his movements as he cries out from behind the gag. But such pitiful efforts are lazily dealt with, and at the sound of the elf's struggles dozens of pale eyes snap open. Their iridescent irises throw back what faint light filters in from the corridor outside, it seems that a host of alien silver eyes glint like little stars amid the darkness, all fixed hungrily upon this new treat that their master delivers them.

The wolves stare at the elf, and an ugly, breathy panting ripples through the crowd as they rouse themselves. Languidly they stretch; naked, furry hips roll, knuckles crack as the largest of their company saunter towards the door with a sinuous, humanoid gait. Tongues loll from crimson maws, saliva drips from pointed yellow teeth as they behold the elf, as they converge towards the

door. Hackles rise, their pants come harder, faster, more eagerly as they scent him, their lustful noises interspersed with half stifled whines and hissing intakes of breath.

With a smile he shoves the elf forward, he watches the slave sprawl face down upon the slimy floor before scrabbling desperately up to his hands and knees. An incoherent noise somewhere between a grunt and a squeal bleeds from his throat, his jaws still secured irrevocably open about the gag, before his breathing shallows in panic as the werewolves slink about him, their eyes glittering.

They await their master's explicit permission, they circle about the elf impatiently; hunger and arousal twisted in equal measure within them, inflamed by their prey's such obvious fear. So graciously their master indulges them, smoothly he commands but one simple thing of them.

"Leave him alive."

With that he turns, he slams the door behind him, and with an exultant thrill he hears the howl that rips through the pit, the scuffle of bodies against stone, the sharp tears of fabric before the elf's wordless scream of pain. Many things he has learned of wolves in his long years of command, and chief among them is that their lusts are not of gentle persuasions. The elf's cry cuts off abruptly with a strained whimper and a choke, and a satisfied chuckle rumbles out from a lupine throat a second or two later.

With smug certainty then he strides back through the corridors, confident in his vassals' abilities of coercion. He would fetch what was left of his prisoner in a few hours and wring the information from him then, one way or another, before triumphantly relaying it to his master. Until then, idly he ponders the state of his dungeons. One man from that mysterious company he has left to him, but perhaps that sport would be better left until a later date, some slight alleviation from the boredom that was likely to set in once his master received the information that he wanted.

As he walks back to the upper halls of the fortress, flicking the worryingly large cobwebs from the disused torch brackets that stud his subterranean passages, he hums softly to himself. In his mind's eye he sees them, he sees those great, beautiful golden eyes flickering open, framed by a spill of raven hair and a dazzling smile gleaming at him as finally, *finally* his master welcomes him home.

Consequences

The arid wind of the Anfauglith whips his hair across his face as he canters down the dusty track, following the only easy path amid the barren, rucked earth.

Reluctantly he had wound his way north, barely pausing from his miserable journey but to swap horses in his master's hidden strongholds delved into the caves and gullies of the mountains. At the outposts he had steeled himself, proudly he had set his jaw before walking under their stone entranceways and before the companies of orcs beyond. He was still his master's lieutenant. Whatever else had happened, that title had not been stripped from him yet, and still the orcs accepted his authority. But desperately he tried to ignore the cold stares that followed him, the slight curls of disdain in the orcs' voices as they greeted him and the sly smiles that broke as he departed them.

He walked rigidly to each new mount, meticulously checking over their tack and picking up their lower legs to check for lameness in their tendons or hooves. He threw himself into the minutiae; fiddling uncomfortably with the buckles of the bridle or adjusting his stirrups, all the while poignantly ignoring the glares of the orcs arrayed behind him. Stiffly he accepted each new set of saddlebags and provisions, before mounting quickly and spurring his horse to the nearest exit and then galloping away. But the drum and clatter of hoofbeats upon the track could never quite drown out the dark sniggers of laughter that broke behind him.

So it had continued, over and over again, and each time it got harder, each time the orcs seemed bolder, and amid his shame and his horror sparks of anger began to swell in him. He was still their lord, no matter his circumstances, and he should command their respect. But rumour, it seemed, had outraced him, and everywhere he was met coldly, with mocking bows and those knowing little looks, and each one sent rills of frustration and dread clawing up his spine.

At long last he has left them behind. Warily he traverses the last stretch of road to his master's stronghold; the lonely path amidst the broken war-plains with nothing but the screech of the wind and the thud of hooves to break the silence. For minutes more his horse canters on, and mounted upon it he sways. Exhaustion and stress from his hurried journey suddenly clutch at him, his head lolls forward as he half dozes in the saddle, his hands slackening about the reins. For an indeterminate amount of time he rides on, only vaguely aware of the road winding on before him and trusting in his horse to keep to the clear track among the dusty rocks. The steady rhythm of the horse's hooves lulls him into a daze that is almost peaceful, for a moment he can almost forget the awful circumstances that have forced such a return, that blissful emptiness almost within reach but for the ache that throbs through his left side.

Suddenly his horse skids beneath him, its hooves scrabble for purchase upon a patch of glassy rock that flows like liquid across the track. He pitches forward in the saddle as his horse slides, its forelegs crumpling beneath it for a heart-stopping moment before it manages to right itself, clearing the rock in an awkward jump. The horse blows and skitters, clearly itself frightened at the unexpected mishap, and miraculously he manages to stay in the saddle. Some instinctive horsemanship screams at him to sit up, to ride the momentum of his horse's movement as best as he can, and at last he hauls himself up from his horse's neck.

His left cheek itches from where it has scraped the horse's mane, and he flicks black strands of horsehair away into the breeze as he runs a hand over his abraded cheek. So violently jolted back to watchfulness he looks blearily around, and sensing no imminent danger except for a tired, clumsy horse below him he urges it on once more. This time though he scans the track before him with

more attention, his eyes slitting open against the dust.

He wipes his left hand absently against his breeches, dislodging the last strand of horsehair wound about his fingers and looking down he notices a dark smudge left across his upper thigh. Maroon streaks across the grey fabric and he groans, standing up in the saddle to steady himself against the horse's strides as tentatively he probes at the left side of his neck and shoulder, his reins and a fistful of the horse's mane gripped tightly within his right hand.

His fingers brush over a gnarled scab upon the side of his neck, and delving beneath the dusty collars of his shirt and jacket they touch its twin, a thick film of clotted blood sitting just atop his collarbone. He withdraws his hand, squinting at his fingers in the pallid light, and he winces in dismay as they come away crimson. A thin, yellowish fluid sticks also in the crook of his fingers and angrily he wipes the mess away, ignoring the renewed pulses of pain in the side of his neck as he sinks back into the saddle, as each impact of his horse's stride sends an aching reverberation through him.

For a while he considers stopping and redressing the wound; certainly he has the supplies to do so. But he decides against it, he will hold until he reaches the fortress and of whatever awaits him there, that his master will not let him die of blood poisoning is a surety.

He spurs his horse into a gallop, and dismally he watches as the familiar peaks of the Thangorodrim grow larger upon the horizon, their crowns lost in swirls of murky cloud far above him. How unjust is it, he thinks bitterly; for years he has longed for this noble sight, and now it is gifted to him in the most ignoble of circumstances. Still though, with a mixture of relief and dread he winds closer to his home, and he sees the hulking form of the guard laying before the gates, its spiny back to him and its flanks rising and falling as it dozes.

He pulls together what shreds of lordliness he has left to him; he stubbornly ignores the trickle of blood he can feel inching its way down his ribcage, and some twenty metres from the guard he pulls his sweaty horse to a halt. But where from afar the guard had assumed the expected shape of a wolf, as he halts now it is starkly apparent that black scales shimmer where fur should lie, that bony claws dig into the earth where soft paws once trod. For a moment he stares in utter puzzlement for the dragon, and a dragon it most certainly is, continues its nap, seemingly oblivious to his presence.

A cold slick of worry washes through his stomach, but quickly he pushes it aside, he urges his horse forward a few more steps as it snorts nervously beneath him. Loudly he clears his throat, drawing to him all the haughtiness that he can muster as he tries to rouse the creature without alarming it unduly.

Rouse it he most certainly does. A sinuous neck whips suddenly about, the dragon's entire body twists about to roll onto its stomach and huge, membranous wings unfurl above its back with the audible creak of colossal bones. His horse skitters backwards in fear, a squeal bolts from its throat, but viciously he yanks it around and it comes to a terrified, quivering halt beneath him. He flicks the dishevelled hair from his face and with what air of command he can summon he glares up at the dragon, and coldly he asks it, "Where is Carcharoth?"

The dragon stares back at him with alien eyes. They seem to peel through him, transfix him, but with a glimmer of dark humour that mood suddenly shifts. The dragon's jaws open slightly, showing strands of saliva dripping from teeth longer than his arm. Its lips curl back into a sneer, and with a noisome exhalation of breath it drawls, "**So you do not know, my lord?**"

His eyes widen in anger and he opens his mouth to retort, to admonish this upstart dragon for such blatant *disrespect*. But before even a syllable can come over his lips the dragon stands, staring

down at him wryly.

“**Pity,**” it sighs, a rumble swelling in its throat. Scales crack and bristle as the dragon moves, as it draws itself up like a cat about to pounce. Its claws dig furrows into the dust as with one immense breath it roars, its jaws hyper-extended into grotesque contortions as the percussion of that sound crashes against him with near tangible force. Caught in a strange moment of clarity he glimpses the fire-pits that flicker at the back of the dragon’s throat, he watches those smouldering embers flare into life, but then he sees no more. For beneath him his horse rears, it neighs shrilly as it twists in panic, and even the most skilled of horsemen could not have endured such violent torsion without calamity. He tumbles from the saddle, hitting the dirt below him with an impact that knocks the breath from his lungs.

Strange after-images dance like phosphorescent little ghosts across his vision as he splutters, as desperately he tries to force a breath inwards, his lungs feeling as if they have suddenly atrophied within his chest. After a few merciless seconds at last he sucks in a great, gulping breath of air, he twists around and squints for his horse, the frightened thing now bolting away down the track. He tries to push himself to his feet; his arms tremble with the effort of righting himself as exhaustion and shock ripple through him. But before he can rise the dragon suddenly lunges forward, catching his right leg between its teeth and yanking him across the dust.

He cries out in surprise and pain as the dragon rises to its feet, its teeth clamped firmly around his leg. One incisor jams agonisingly hard into his thigh as the dragon pulls him up; it leaves him dangling like a rag-doll from its mouth as it marches through the gates and through the mercifully empty entrance halls of the fortress. Even so, he feels the blush prickle across his cheeks as he twists himself to glare up at the dragon, and the triumphant little smirk that he finds curling at the corners of its lips sends a fresh rush of humiliation storming through him.

They wind through the fortress, the walls and hallways swimming in distorted recognition before his eyes as he is hauled unwillingly past them. Before the doors of the great hall the dragon at last pauses, crouching low to accommodate its bulk into the corridor outside, and with the tip of its nose it nudges the iron doors open. Panic rushes through him as he sees where he is headed, as the dragon’s head wriggles slowly between the doors before suddenly, violently it twists.

With a nauseating lurch the pressure upon his leg is released, the dragon’s torsion sends him spinning through the air for a few horrifying seconds before he hits the ground achingly hard. The sheer force behind his motion slides him across the marble until he skids facedown to an ungainly stop at last, his right shoulder slamming into the bottom step of the dais.

For a moment he lies still, his eyes shut tightly as shock and pain flare through him. His breath hisses over his teeth as he takes stock of himself, gingerly he investigates his extremities and to his relief he still seems whole, nothing seems broken. He ignores the sticky wetness of his shirt collar; the wounds at his neck drool half-hearted trickles of blood to soak through even the lapel of his jacket atop it.

Dimly he is aware of something nudging his shoulder, softly at first and then more insistently, until abruptly he is flipped onto his back.

“*Not your most dignified entrance, Mairon.*”

At that he flinches, that familiar purr sends shivers of dread dancing across his skin. He doesn’t dare look up, quite in that moment he simply cannot face his master, and instead he rolls aside. Slowly he picks himself up off the floor and using the precious seconds that it buys him, he makes an attempt at composure. Upon his unsteady feet he is at last readied, and slowly then he turns around.

He stifles an involuntary gasp as he looks upon his master, as he drinks in the sight of him; those iridescent, auric eyes, the assured smirk playing across his lips, the sweep of raven hair across his broad shoulders, and those sights for a second lull him. Such yearning throbs within him, but even through that burning emotion dread unfurls in his stomach. For amid his master's splendour something feels wrong, something is missing, and worriedly then he looks, searching desperately for the source of this new unease. His master stands upon the steps of the dais, his arms coolly crossed over his chest, and something dangerous glimmers in his eyes.

His master's fingers tap impatiently upon his bicep, and with an unwise thrill of pleasure he remembers what those wandering fingers can do, what sublime gasps of pleasure they can elicit from him. But something still is not right, and confusedly he looks to his master's face, thinking there to perhaps find the source of his disquiet.

A livid gash rakes down his master's cheek, the skin pulls pink and tight around a healing scab, and with a cold rush of horror his eyes widen.

His master's crown, he realises, and the breath nearly stops in his lungs. That great crown of iron where those gemstones ever were set, where the Three blazed out their light. It is gone. But that is impossible.

So desperately he wants to ask, but sudden terror seizes him; the questions that bubble up in his throat fizzle out as his master shifts his hips, as he glares down at him.

"Perhaps you would like to explain yourself?" his master says icily. *"Perhaps you would like to explain what has happened to my island, the island that I so graciously entrusted to your keeping."*

Nausea blooms in his stomach and he wants to gag, more than anything he wants to run from the pitiless stare with which his master affixes him. But he cannot, and he will not; he made the choices that to him were right, and he would accept the consequences of his actions. He takes a moment to compose himself, he attempts to quell the squabbling, panicky voices that race through his mind. Slowly then he lifts his head, a fresh trickle of blood squirts down his neck but he looks his master in the eye; pale silver meets with fiery, churning gold.

"This is your only chance, Mairon," his master says, and menace thrums in his voice. *"I suggest that you take it."*

So ardently he hopes that his master cannot sense quite how terrified he is, that he cannot see the tremors that run up the backs of his legs or hear the slight shake in his voice as he speaks. Quickly he recounts the island's fall: the coming of the terrible she-elf and his wolves ripped apart by her hound. The words spill over his lips with increasing anxiousness as his master's expression darkens, as he stands motionless but for the flicker of the torchlight against his irises that seem wreathed in flame.

Swiftly he tells of his duel, glossing over the more distasteful facts. His hand unconsciously touches the side of his neck where the beast had bitten him, had *shaken* him, and he feels wetness below his fingertips. Though he winces he continues to speak, more slowly now, and more warily as he eyes his master. He reaches his end, the duel with the hound falters to a wavering stop as he pauses, as he hesitates to admit his failure for his master to hear. The words stick in his throat as he falls silent, and in terror and shame he looks down at the floor.

"Go on," his master prompts him. The words reverberate in sinister clarity through the empty hall, like the ominous ripples of a stone dropped into still water.

“... I s-surrendered.”

He forces the words from his lips; he feels them hang in the air before him, bleeding into the awful silence that falls. He watches the muscles work in his master’s jaw, he sees his lip curl as a spasm of some indeterminate emotion twists across his face. Inwardly he winces, he braces himself for whatever vicious response is sure to come. But he won’t cry out, he will not let himself be provoked, he will simply weather his master’s fury in whatever contrite silence he can and...

“*You did what?*”

His master’s voice is scarcely more than a whisper, but it is more than enough to make him start, and to set the hairs prickling along the back of his neck.

“I... I surrendered,” he stammers. What steely calm he wears drains from him as he looks upon his master’s face; it is replaced with only naked, beating fear as he sees rage flare in his master’s eyes, and his knees feel like they might collapse beneath him as he sees his master move.

SLAP

His master clouts him across the face. The brute force of the impact sends him reeling backwards, and hard he falls to the cold marble below him as his knees at last buckle. Upon his back he pants as the salty tang of blood fills his mouth and reflexively he moves, he begins the aching drag of his arm to clasp to his throbbing cheek.

But his master descends the dais to stand over him, before he can move his left arm more than an inch or two his master’s boot presses down upon it, pinning it to the floor. He tries to relax, he tries to force back down the sheer suffocating terror that pumps through him as he lies back against the marble. He blinks up at his master, his features blurring and refocusing wildly as the concussion of that blow rings about his head.

“*Perhaps you would like to elaborate, Mairon.*”

His master leans further over him, his boot presses down upon his inner wrist, grinding his arm into the marble below. And such is the fury in his master’s voice; such is his utter malevolence that below him his last glimmers of bravery fade. Hurriedly he gabbles out a reply, he quails utterly beneath his master’s blistering stare.

“My lord, p-please, I swear, there was nothing I could do. It - it was her, she was a witch, and her beast... They... they were too strong. Please, my lord, *please* you must believe me. I would never betray you. I would never...”

His speech trails off as suddenly his master turns, lifting his boot from his arm. He winces as the blood rushes back into his fingers, but he can hardly feel it at all as a surge of relief flows through him. Maybe his master has believed him, just maybe he has understood, and with a conscious effort of will he starts to move, to inch himself up off the floor. But with an ugly snarl twisted across his face his master whirls back around, he stamps down upon his wrist.

The sickening crunch of breaking bone echoes around the hall, and is followed an instant later by his shriek. Bolts of agony rip up his arm, his master’s face above him blurs for one awful moment before snapping rigidly back into clarity, and as his master turns away from him he scrabbles clumsily to his feet. He cradles his broken wrist to his chest as he stares up at his master in horror, and savagely he blinks aside the hot, stupid tears that prick at the corners of his eyes.

He moans as splintered bone shifts inside of him, and violently then his master wheels about,

affixing him with such a look of hatred that it nearly tears him clean apart.

“*Get out,*” his master hisses. Utter revulsion shines his golden eyes, and he is all too happy to obey that command as he scrambles back a few paces. He presses his shattered wrist hard into his stomach as shakily he bows, his hair slipping over his face in lank, dishevelled strands.

He wobbles as he pivots upon his heel, he grits his teeth as pain slams through him anew; as shame and hurt claw at him, and as quickly as he can he exits the hall, with each step fighting down the urge to sprint. And as he slips between the doors he hears his master’s voice echo behind him, dark and dripping in venom.

“*Get yourself seen to, Mairon. We shall deal with you properly later.*”

For the second time in his life he is marched in disgrace into the throne room. Every denizen of Angband who can fit crams shoulder to wing-blade inside of the great hall, and each one of them is there for him.

His hair falls unbound about his face, it sticks to the back of his neck with the droplets of nervous sweat that cluster there already. A heavy iron collar grates against the side of his neck; it brushes over the crusted scabs of the hound’s bite-marks left upon him. Greatly he wishes that he could remove it, or at least adjust it into a more comfortable position upon him, but that sentiment goes unanswered. His fingers twitch feebly behind his back, chains knot tightly about his wrists and humiliatingly he is pulled forward through the hall. A chain fastens to the front of his collar, it is held in the fiery grasp of a Valarauka captain who leads him forward like a leashed dog to his awaiting master.

At least it isn’t Gothmog, he thinks, and though tiny and wild the thought, it somehow helps to calm him for a moment. He does not know if he would have been able to bear the mortification of it if it was his very best of friends who delivered him to his master so ignobly.

With his every step the tension mounts in him, cold anticipation knots in his stomach as he sees his master upon the throne, and unconsciously his pace slows. The air becomes suddenly viscous in his lungs, his bare feet drag upon the stones but remorselessly the Balrog pulls him onward. With little other option he stumbles forward, wincing as his motion drags against the chains that secure his hands. Pain bursts up his left arm, it lances through the darkened, swollen veins that pattern his wrist as bones only just beginning to set squeal their protest at such abuse.

His audience watches him hungrily. Vicious smiles curve across unlovely faces as they whisper amongst each other, and what snide comments or cruel barbs they make he does not want to know. But amid the general susurrus he catches a few fragments of phrases repeated over and over again. *Silmarils* hisses again and again from dripping jaws, *doesn’t know doesn’t know*, and each new snatch of speech sets something dark rippling inside of him.

What doesn’t he know?

Desperately he tries to think; the sudden, horrific awareness that he is not grasping something important crashes down upon him, but by then it is far too late.

His feet reach the lowest steps of the dais and he is led up them before being shoved to his knees before his master and the chain at his collar is unclipped. He dares not meet his master’s eyes, so instead he stares resolutely at the folds of his master’s robes before him, the black velvet spilling like oil over the stark iron of the throne.

He tries not to shudder as his master stands, running one sharp nail across his cheekbone before stepping abruptly away from him. Upon his knees he remains painfully still, every muscle in him locks rigid as he stares up at the now empty throne, its pointed spires stabbing up towards the ceiling.

Suddenly he hears his master move behind him, the swish of fabric and the creak of leather boots seem to shriek in his ears and he braces himself for whatever is coming.

“Welcome,” his master intones simply, his arms outstretched to encompass the hall. Each of Angband’s denizens stare back at their master in rapt attention, and an expectant silence falls. *“You are all invited here today to bear witness to your lieutenant’s crimes, and his chastisement. I am sure you have heard rumour of them by now, but for the sake of clarification I relay them to you now. I urge you to think on them, and think then of your lieutenant how you wish.”*

Behind his master he winces, his throat clenches tight in horror. To hear his master speak his failures aloud, to breathe life so callously into them and bring them back to haunt him is almost too much for him to bear.

“Your lieutenant deserted his duty. He acted in direct defiance of my orders to hold the island of Sirion until I might command otherwise, no matter what befell him. Too concerned with his own cowardly life he was, and he has failed most miserably to fulfil his master’s will.

He has failed all of you in his command. The island he has lost, and its territories now have fallen into our enemies’ hands. A crucial fortification in our war he has abandoned simply because he was too scared and too unprepared to defend it.”

He tries to hold his tongue, really he does; his shoulders shake with the effort of it. But he simply cannot bear it, to hear his actions said like *that*, in the most unveiled and objective and derisive of terms. He twists around as best as his bonds will allow, and in a quick, urgent voice he protests, *“No, no, my lord, it wasn’t like that, it wasn’t, I...”*

Swiftly his master turns to him, a snarl of fury etched over his face. His master yanks him up by the hair, dragging him still on his knees to fully face his audience. His knees slip across the marble as he chokes back a gasp of dismay, and a feral light creeps into the legions of eyes that watch him. His master holds him tightly to his side, his left hand twines painfully through his hair even as he turns back to his amassed servants, before continuing with a sigh of irritation, *“Even now, you cannot hold your tongue. At least have the grace to accept your failures with humility, Mairon.”*

His master straightens up further, ignoring the small whimper of pain and humiliation that bleeds from his lips.

“Look at them, Mairon. Look upon my servants and see the beings that you have betrayed. Think on their brothers, their sisters spawned in the glorious blackness of the pits. The wolf-cubs that wrestled through your halls, the wisest and most skilled of my commanders who lived only to help you. Think of how you called them your friends.

Think of how you ensured their deaths.

Comrades-in-arms, children, cubs, veteran warriors of our endeavours: all burned and all destroyed. All because of you.”

The words crash down upon him, and he whines deep in his throat as all of that shame and helplessness comes crawling through him, squirming like little maggots of guilt under his skin.

“But perhaps you do not know the full extent of your failings. The she-elf unmade you; she reclaimed the isle and disgorged the prisoners from the pits, and dragged up with her a man. Some snivelling spawn of Barahir she took as her companion, and do you know what they did together, Mairon? Can you fathom it yet?”

Panic sews his throat shut, the air simply won't flow into his lungs and mutely he shakes his head. Unfocusedly he stares out over his audience, unseeing in his horror as all of the little glimpses and snatches of overheard conversation begin to coalesce to a fatal truth within him. But he must be mistaken, he must be; that is simply *impossible*...

“They stole from me a Silmaril. From my own crown they cut it with some ensorcelled blade and they scuttled from my halls like vermin, taking with them my jewel, one of the Three. A Silmaril there is now in the hands of the Elves, and worse, in the hands of Men.

Do you see now, lieutenant? This is what your failures have wrought.”

For a moment he is stunned, every implication whirls horribly through his mind in one drowning torrent. But somehow he manages to gasp in a breath; he must make some tiny squeak of protest, some involuntary noise slipping from his throat for sharply his master turns to him. His master drags his head backwards, his back arching painfully as he struggles to support his weight thrown so utterly off balance.

“By rights I should have you killed, Mairon!” his master snarls, before dropping him disdainfully to the floor. Upon his knees he sways, and above him bright splinters of disgust burn in his master's eyes.

“But I suppose you do have your uses, when you're in the mood,” his master spits. *“So I am inclined to be merciful.”*

Dissent ripples through the assembly at their master's proclamation. Angry mutters burst through the audience as they sense their prey slipping from their grasp, as their sport is snatched from them. Below his master he breathes a tentative sigh of relief, perhaps he might escape this relatively unscathed yet, but his blood curdles to ice in his veins as his master continues.

“But what just lord would I be if such slights were met unpunished? No, Mairon, you will not escape this so easily. You have caused all of my servants anguish, you have endangered all of their lives, and therefore it is only fitting that they have share in your punishment. It is but poor condolence for their losses, but perhaps it will teach you something of what it truly means to be beholden to your subjects.”

He can scarcely believe what he is hearing; he *doesn't* believe it until he sees the ranks of orcs press forward. His eyes widen in terror as they jostle into a ragged semblance of order before the dais, each set of eyes gleaming malevolently up at him. Even his friends, even those among that host whom he trusts and loves stare up at him, and even if they do not have hatred in their eyes then they do not have compassion either.

In that moment truly he panics, his nerve outwardly fails him and he twists and bucks in his master's grip. But such resistance does not avail him, nor do the plaintive, beseeching protests that tumble from his lips. If anything his master's hand twines even tighter through his hair and holds him firmly in place upon his knees.

With a sudden flourish a vial appears in his master's right hand, and before he can quite process what is happening his jaw is forced open, his master's fingers digging painfully into his cheeks. Under that cruel pressure he opens his mouth, and he retches as his master pours a stinging, sour

liquid down his throat. An awful warmth spreads down through him, at once invigorating and corrosive, and at that foul sensation he whimpers.

Desperately he tries to spit out whatever concoction his master has given him, he tries to scrape its taste from his tongue even as his master sneers atop him, *“In case you should think about fainting, Mairon. Your failures have affected my faithful servants equally. It is only fair then that they should receive an equal measure of your... attention.”*

In shocked, hideous clarity he watches as the first of them ascends the dais, he sees the malice glitter in the orc’s piggish eyes as it steps eagerly forward. Its arm outstretches, and with the dreadful paralysis of inevitability he waits for the blow to crash down upon him. It’s all right, he thinks, desperately he clings to the words as they race through his mind. He can deal with this. He will not scream, he will just bear this punishment in silence, just endure it, just let his master play his game until it is done and then it will be over, then he can just slink away and lick his wounds and forget.

But as time wears it gets harder. The slaps become more vicious, the welts on his skin will no longer fade. A slender knife runs up the inside of his thigh, his knees are kicked apart by some sneering Maia and he flinches as he hears them snigger, as fresh waves of humiliation roll through him.

Fiery hands grasp his cheeks, he hears his master chuckle behind him as flaming lips press against his own, pushing his mouth open. A forked tongue blisters against his own; he doesn’t even know who it is that does it to him, and finally then the tears come, the degradation of it simply too much to bear. As the tears drip silently down his cheeks they laugh, and amid his misery he can only kneel there and listen. Through it all he is so horribly *conscious*, the potion that his master had given him pulses like a glede of pure, sizzling energy in his stomach, and though fatigue and humiliation drag at him it is not enough to block out his surrounds. Every single slap, each pinch or burn or kiss, every one of them hurts.

At some point he hears the telltale fumbling of fabric, the clink of a belt buckle being unclasped before him. A heavy hand presses against the back of his head, it pushes him down and so far is he beyond the realm of resistance that he just opens his mouth, he just cannot quite bring himself to care anymore.

Sharply he is jerked back, the iron collar around his neck slams into his windpipe as his master yanks him backwards, and the over-eager soldier before him is admonished and dismissed. But even as he gasps, even as he splutters at that hideous impact to his throat, the next one steps up to claim their piece of him.

At last it ends, the hall empties of its satisfied occupants but for the guards still on duty, who mill about picking up stray knives and coins that had been lost in the press of the crowd. Upon the dais he slumps forward, aching. He just prays that it is over, that the last of them have had their fun and now he can just go. But distantly he hears the clink of new chains being unfurled behind him, and it sends cold splinters of horror through his heart. For in that moment he knows that it is not over, and amid all of his hurt and his humiliation truly that scares him.

Unashamedly he struggles as his master lays an uncaring hand upon him, he begs and he pleads for his master to stop, that he is sorry, to just let him go and not hurt him anymore. The words pour like blood from his lips, they splatter uselessly to the floor as he feels the shackles about his wrists being switched for wider, heavier manacles, attached to trailing lengths of chain outspread to either side of him.

He moans as his shoulders suddenly unlock, only as he has his arms ripped away from his torso,

outstretched with brutal tension as the guards haul upon two great winches of chain sunken into the sides of the hall. His master steps before him, he rips off his tunic, and he shivers in the chill air of the hall. Bruises mottle over his skin, bluish veins dart engorged and distressed through the corded muscles of his arms as he is pulled taut, his arms held tightly perpendicular to his torso.

“You served them well, Mairon,” his master murmurs, stepping up behind him and running one hand over the top of his spine, tracing the aching muscles over the juncture of his right shoulder blade and neck. *“They should be well satisfied with you.”*

“But this...” his master whispers, and a shining meat-hook suddenly flickers into his vision. *“This is from me.”*

He yelps as the hook punches through the bare skin of his back, as it is shoved through the thick trapezoid muscle of his shoulder and lodged there. He writhes as best as the chains will allow him, and a moment later he shrieks again as a twin hook is placed within his other shoulder. Slowly his master inserts two more hooks into each shoulder, burrowing them deep into him even as he struggles against that insistent pain.

The horror of what his master intends slowly forms in his mind, thinner lengths of chains fall like a cascade of abhorrent little stars down from a concealed rafter in the ceiling, and a terrible wave of nausea curls through him at that confirmation. He sobs as more hooks are slid through his arms, five through each bicep and four through his forearms, as each shining piece of metal is inserted into him he begs for his master to stop. But his pleas fall upon deaf ears, and he watches as his flesh reddens anew about the hooks, erratic streams of blood left trickling down him from each puncture wound. The chains descend fully from the ceiling and carefully his master locks one to the round fastenings upon each of the hooks through him. His master flicks each one as he finishes securing it, watching him jump at each new flash of pain.

At his master’s nod the guards pull the entire apparatus of chain taut. The hooks pull into him, they drag him agonisingly to his feet and leave him there to stand for a moment, a puppet at the end of their sadistic strings. The balls of his feet still just touch the marble, and for a sweet, blissful moment he hears the roar of impending unconsciousness in his ears. His vision darkens despite his master’s drug, and it beckons to him with the promise of mercy.

But even as his eyes flicker shut his master slaps him across the cheek, and the shock jolts him back to such excruciating clarity as that tantalising glimpse of oblivion is snatched away.

“P-please...” he sobs, the words catching in his throat. *“I’m s-sorry I f-failed you... P-please, just let me go. I j-just want to go...”*

“Hush, little one,” his master murmurs, and he brushes the tears from his cheeks with such tenderness that it makes him want to be sick. Something approaching genuine sorrow fills his master’s golden eyes, and somehow it is so much worse than wrath. *“You have brought this upon yourself. You deserve this, little one, and though you may hate me for it now, you will come to see it. You know will know that it is true. You deserve this.”*

His master leans forward then and gently places a kiss upon his lips.

His master steps back fully; almost remorsefully he looks at him but then coldly he nods. The two guards pull smoothly upon the chains, hauling him off his feet, and he stifles a screech as the hooks take his weight. They raise in angry welts beneath his skin, but deeply they are imbedded, and widely they are spread within him so that they do not rip out of his flesh. Inch by unstoppable inch he is pulled upwards by their claws, his eyes squeezed tightly shut against the utter horror of it.

Finally his master is satisfied; they leave him to dangle with his feet a metre or so clear of the spires of the throne. He whines in such piteous despair as the chains jolt to a stop, as the tension upon them is checked and then they are bolted into their winches, immovable but for the keys held by his master, who regards him disdainfully from below.

For two weeks his master keeps him there, splayed like some obscene trophy above the throne. Through it all he is at least vaguely conscious: the trials that would destroy mortal flesh merely stretch into a torturous exercise in endurance for him, and though time slips by in fits and jerks it is not nearly fast enough.

His lungs burn as such an unyielding position stretches him, his head lolls down onto his chest as dimly he is aware of the comings and goings of the court played out unceasingly beneath him; his time fragmenting and blurring into one confused smear of pain. So fervently he wishes that he could die as fresh rivulets of blood run down his back, as his arms twitch in exhaustion and only dig the hooks deeper; he prays that his master would just kill him, just let him stop hurting as the floor below him grows slick with his fluids.

But his master keeps him fed and watered. Every evening his master ascends a slender stool so that they stand eye to eye, and tenderly his master pushes little scraps of bread and meat into his mouth, watching as he struggles to chew them with a curious pity in his eyes. A cup of water is held to his cracked lips, his master cups his chin to help trickle the liquid down his throat. Gently then his master caresses his cheekbones, he might stroke the fall of blond hair from his face, petting him like one would a sick dog.

And every time before he leaves for the night, his master kisses him. It is merely the soft brush of his master's lips against his own, tender and fleeting but somehow passionate, somehow holding meaning and each time it breaks him anew. The knife twists in his guts because he knows that his master he loves him, truly he does, but still he does this to him, still he makes him suffer, makes him hurt, but it is because he *loves* him that he does it and that only shoves the confusing blades deeper. Those nights he cries: alone in the darkness of the hall the tears of pain fall down his cheeks, and stupid, sick longing throbs in his stomach.

Finally, *finally*, his master cuts him down. The guards gradually release the chains, lowering him gently to the floor, and so tired is he at this point that he scarcely realises what is happening until he feels himself begin to collapse. But before he can fall his master darts forward to catch him, and his limp form is enveloped suddenly into his master's chest.

He sprawls in his master's arms as they sit upon the steps of the dais, his entire body shuddering as his master unlocks the chains and shackles from him before working the hooks out of his skin. He sobs as his master gently wiggles the hooks from him, cracking through the crusted scabs that have formed about them. He just cries into his master's arms, curled into his lap as all at once he both craves and abhors his touch; yearning and revulsion smash together within him and between them he is torn. Only when the final hook is pulled from his back does he fall utterly limp, his bloodshot eyes flicker shut as true, merciful unconsciousness claims him.

With surprising care his master picks him up, bearing his weight easily as two orcs scurry into the hall. The herb mistress and one of the chief healers bow hurriedly before their master before moving forward, compresses and bandages brandished within their clawed hands. Upon seeing him so inert, as they approach their master the herb mistress immediately feels for a pulse at the side of his neck, her fingers skirting the knotted, pink scar at the side of his neck where the bite marks had closed. The other healer glances him over, and seemingly satisfied that there was no danger of him haemorrhaging packs the bandages neatly away and awaits the herb-mistress' verdict.

Upon locating the pulse skittering through his veins the herb-mistress steps back, glaring cantankerously up at their master in obvious disapproval of his treatment of their lieutenant.

“You push him too hard, my lord,” she growls in a respectful tone, but still the dismay rings in her voice. “He was in poor condition when he first came back to us, but now...”

“*He will recover.*” There is no trace of a question in their master’s voice.

“Yes,” the herb-mistress says, “in body, he will. But in matters of the heart, I am not so sure. It is a fickle thing.”

Their master sighs then, and delicately he passes his motionless form into their arms, as one would handle a newborn. Once satisfied that between them the orcs could hold his weight their master straightens, with another weary sigh brushing away the droplets of his blood that shine upon his sleeve.

“*Fix him up as best you can,*” he bids the orcs, who nod impatiently, clearly anxious to take their lieutenant into their care. “*I shall come to him later.*”

Silver and Gold

Time seems to blur, his days and nights blend into one incoherent smear. The dull ache in his shoulders and arms becomes his singular constant. It is there every time his eyes flicker open, as his gaze wanders feverishly across the stark ceiling of his room amid the healer's quarters. In and out of consciousness he drifts; splintered memories of the days that had come before swim hazily through his mind, opaque and yet vivid. Time and realities tangle together before him, around him; at times it seems that his master sits at his bedside and at times it seems that his master is there below him, staring up at him with those remorseless golden eyes as he suffers.

A slender Maia drags a needle through the puncture wounds in his arms, she seals his flesh back together with neat little stitches and for a moment he feels like a doll, some child's plaything ripped apart and stitched back together. The candle by his bedside gutters, he rocks forward in his master's arms, his naked chest presses into his master's torso as the smears of blood are wiped from his back, as the herb-mistress slathers his shoulders and arms in a thick paste until it doesn't hurt anymore. She pours something down his throat and it burns, it burns like the venom that his master had given him that night, and he twists and he writhes and he tries to spit it out; cold, fatal panic floods through him but she pins him down, she makes him swallow.

Flaming lips press against his own, someone kicks his legs apart, they hold him open all splayed and lewd and his master is there, his master is *laughing* as he cries, as he screams. Iridescent eyes watch over him, and he curls into his master's chest and he sobs for himself because *how* could he want this, each kiss like a knife blade shoved through his guts. The Maia holds him down as he thrashes in his sleep, as the stitches rip in his arms, rip him open again, and his master is laughing at him, his master is holding him and telling him that it is over, that he is all right, after all that was done somehow everything is all right.

He jerks awake, his heart hammering in his chest, and instinctively he draws himself up into a half sitting position against the pillows. He barely registers the figure sitting at the edge of the bed beside him; it seems just another shadow sent to haunt him.

He presses his face into his knees, his legs curl up tightly to his chest as the tremors of a dream that he cannot quite remember quake through him. The breath shudders through his lungs, and wearily he ignores the little sparks of pain that flare across his arms and his back. His hands knot into fists around the blankets as he tries to quell the shake in them, as the dim echoes of his nightmare escape out into the waking world.

For a few moments he remains still, and he focuses intently upon his breathing, upon forcing each of his gasping inhalations into a more relaxed rhythm.

“*Mairon?*”

At the unexpected voice he jumps, and a second later something dark within him ignites; panic rips up from his guts and it spurs him to move. He scrabbles backwards across the bed, his eyes jolting open and flickering unfocusedly about the room. Into the corner where his bed meets the wall he presses himself, the pillows flung aside with his movement. Unconsciously he whines, like a terrified animal he scrunches himself up to be as small as possible, and he cradles his head to his knees as his hair falls in a ragged blond tangle about him.

He trembles as he waits for what pain is surely coming, the pain that *must* be coming. And he wants to be sick, he wants to scream, but all he can do is wait for whatever new hurt would be inflicted upon him, for whatever new agony he is forced to endure upon his master's whims.

“*Mairon, I...*”

At the sound of his name he whines again; a raw, animal noise of fright squeaks out of his throat as he pulls himself up even tighter. The puckered skin about each scab screams its protest as the muscles in his arms tense, as he presses his face harder into his knees, as his fingers clench about a fold of the blankets as he cringes against the wall.

Just please let me go, he thinks, the words pounding through his head. Whoever you are, just *please*, please don't make me hurt anymore.

He feels something brush his left hand. A slight pressure traces over his knuckles and from it he flinches, he barely stifles a half hysterical sob as he tries to pull away. Such awful waves of anticipation roll in his stomach as he realises that he cannot move any further, that the walls hem him in and he cannot flee, he can only let the person touch him, hurt him, do whatever they want to him. A tiny whimper of terror bleeds out of his throat at the thought, and at it the pressure on his hand stops.

It withdraws and still he braces himself; there has to be more, there is *always* more, it is probably just some awful trick of his master's to make him feel better so that he could break him again, and to laugh at his stupidity as he did it. So he steels himself for what surely must come, and a series of shallow, stabbing breaths hiss over his lips.

The touch upon his hand resumes, but more delicately now. It strokes across his knuckles with motions that are strangely soothing, it wanders over the tendons pulled rigid over the back of his hand, and with tenderness it brushes over the fading bruises upon his wrist. For a while still he remains curled up, but gradually curiosity builds within him.

He wonders who it is that is touching him. He wonders why they have not hurt him yet.

Something bold rises in him, the *absence* of pain more than anything else goads him on, and timidly he raises his head from his knees, peeping out from beneath the straggly fall of his hair at the figure beside him.

His eyes drift unfocusedly over their – no, *his*, his mind chimes oddly, for somehow he knows that they are a 'he'. Over *his* robes then he glances, and the velvet brocade upon the rich black silks that he finds oddly familiar. He follows their curve downwards, and soon enough he discovers what is touching him.

Ashen fingers brush over his knuckles, grey-tinged fingers dance in coaxing little strokes over the dimples in his skin where his fist grips into the blankets. With a tangible click recognition comes, his head jolts upwards even as fear washes through him anew, and his eyes come to rest on his masters; bloodshot silver stares dizzily into cool gold.

He whimpers in dismay, he lets go of the blankets to pull himself away once more, to protect himself before his master can hurt him again, but as his fingers forgo the fabric his master takes hold of his hand.

“No...” he moans, trying desperately to pull his hand away. “Please... please just *leave me alone.*” He twists in his master's grip, ignoring the nauseating sensation of setting bones shifting in his wrist as he moves, but his master holds him securely, preventing his escape.

“*Mairon, wait.*”

The unfamiliar *request* in his master's voice cuts through his fear, and for a second he falls still. A

moment of indecision grips him, but something brave ignites in his chest, and slowly then he looks up, he tries to meet his master's gaze once more. But his master looks away from him; he seems to fiddle with something in his left hand that is concealed by the sweep of his robes.

From beneath the blankets he uncurls a little further, with more confidence he straightens up against the wall to at last sit comfortably. For though still wariness holds him tightly, gone is that flurried, cramping panic of before, and more lucidly he wonders what it is that his master wants of him now.

He regards his master curiously. He watches the play of his lips as he seems to wrestle with whatever words he wants to say, and for a while the silence stretches on between them. Yet slowly worry begins to grow in him anew, of an entirely different ilk to the one of before, subtler but no less potent. For his master still does not turn to him, he stares off into the distance with an uncertainty that is somehow terrifying. For if nothing else, his master is always so *sure*, and truly this ambiguity frightens him.

He licks his lips, he winces as saliva stings against a raw split in his skin, and he tries to coax some life back into his sore throat as he opens his mouth to say something, *anything* to break this solemn silence. But suddenly his master turns, looking at him urgently for a moment before pressing something into his palm. His master's fingers wobble slightly as they close his hand around his gift, lingering there for a second before awkwardly withdrawing.

He looks up in bewilderment, he watches as a strange tension shimmers in his master's golden eyes, of some indecipherable quality that he has never seen before. His master smiles at him falteringly, just a thin, odd quirk of his lips, and his gaze drops warily to the thing in his hand. And in that instant as he registers what it is, for one suffocating second he is certain that he stops breathing.

A flower blooms from the tip of a slender stalk, its petals caught in a soft, velvety revolve almost like that of a rose. From a heart of deepest purple its petals spiral outwards, from rich darkness they lighten to edges dappled in frosty silver. Through each midnight swathe of petal streaks of dusty gold run from core to tip, like veins of molten metal dashed through living ink.

He stares at it incredulously, this moment of his history trapped in his fist, and his heart leaps into his throat because it is impossible. It simply cannot be.

“Where did you get this?”

His whisper scrapes hoarsely from his throat. Hard he stares at the flower, so entranced is he by the perfect swirl of the petals that he barely notices his hand shaking until his motion becomes so violent that he nearly drops it. But he doesn't want to know the answer, there cannot *be* an answer because this is impossible, it is just a dream. It could not be real, because this is *his* flower.

It was silly, perhaps, but at the time it had felt like the most important thing in the world.

So inspired he had been by Irmo's gardens on the sacred isle when he and his friends had once visited upon an errand from his then patron. Lilac blossoms of wolfsbane dripped from cultured hedges, dark nightshade leaves with their bright berries clustered like deadly little stars among the bushes, white foxgloves tolled like pale bells in the clearings. The gardens of nightmare had held little terror for him then. Admiringly he had walked through them, and such beautiful flowers had grown among the shaded woods that he wanted to make one for himself, something beautiful of his own that he could set to grow among them.

And so he had created them, flowers of his own born of difficult and arcane magics that he

laboured over for months. Purest shards of silver and tendrils of raw gold metal he melded with living matter, an interest that he had tinkered with in half-hearted experiments for years until fully his concentration was given to it. After endless trials and errors at last he had succeeded, he forged a true, shimmering hybrid of metal and plant; and his clockwork companion that he had fashioned some weeks earlier squeaked and whirred with excitement as it smelled them.

So proudly, so eagerly he had brought one flower forth; he wished only to share his delight with the council, to entrance Palúrien and Irmo and Vána, and to bring honour upon Aulë's halls. Under the light of Illuin he had brought it forth, and excitedly he had told them of its creation, of what he had done. But quickly their wonder turned to horror, they stared at him with fey eyes and they dashed the pot to the ground. Irmo ground his flower's delicate petals to dust beneath the heel of his boot.

An abomination, they called it; twisted, sick, a *corruption*, and all he had wanted to do was to create something beautiful for them. They burned them, they marched him to his forge and they set alight to his entire crop, and when his little companion had crept to him all ticking and frightened they had ripped it from his hands and tossed it atop the flames. They made him watch as velvet petals shrivelled, as his companion squeaked blindly to him in its fear and its pain, as it *melted*, as stems, roots and seeds were blackened and razed until no trace of his blasphemies could remain.

And yet one of his flowers now blossoms in his hand.

"Where did you get this?" he repeats, his voice cracking with the strain of remaining calm.

His master looks down at him, hesitating for a moment before replying to him sincerely, his voice scarcely more than a murmur.

"I made it."

He wants to ask why; he wants to ask *how*, his mind screams a thousand different things at once. But before even the slightest hint of coherence can form within him, his master continues, *"I made it for you."*

"I know that you like them. I... I saw you, all those millennia ago, standing bathed in Illuin's light. A flower was in your hand and you were so proud, you were so happy..."

He stares up at his master in abject shock. The breath catches in his lungs as some emotion that he cannot even begin to give name to seems to wrap about his throat; as surprise and hurt and love and anger crash together and twist within him. He tries to force himself to say something, to respond somehow but he can't, he just can't, and to silence he is tethered. His gaze slips slowly from his master's face, and he turns aside to watch the dust motes that oscillate slowly above the candle at his bedside.

"I know that you always loved silver the best," his master intones. *"The rivers under the moonlight, the frost crumbled over the leaves, the metal running through your forge. I know that you walk above the mountains sometimes, under the pale light of the stars, and they glimmer in your smile and the silver in your eyes gives them meaning."*

I know that you like to sleep curled up on your side, I know that you always fiddle with your tunic when you are nervous. I know –"

His master breaks off for a moment before gathering himself and continuing, his voice low.

"I know that I love you, little one. And I know that I have hurt you, perhaps more so than I"

intended. And for that I am sorry.”

For a moment everything is still. His master’s words hang in the air between them, sincere and awkward and so strangely subdued, and for a moment he simply doesn’t know what to do. A crush of dissenting emotions wells up inside of him, for a moment there is nothing but their flurry and their chaos, until with a wrench he makes up his mind.

He sets the flower down amongst the blankets, then quickly he darts his hand forward once more. His fingers twine through his master’s and gently squeeze; a timid, hopeful smile breaks over his face as his master looks down at him, a wonderful light filling his eyes like molten gold set suddenly ablaze.

His master reaches carefully forward with his free hand, silently requesting his permission before stroking the tangled strands of his hair back from his face and tucking them neatly behind his ear. He nearly flinches as his master’s fingers brush his cheek, but he hard he forces himself to remain still, to forget all of those other touches that swirl inside his head. The hooks digging under his skin as his master kissed him, a pointed nail sliding across his cheekbone, he tries so hard to push them all away, his mind desperately groping within himself for some other memory, for some other idea.

And to his surprise, he finds one. A wild notion leaps into his head, and he glances urgently around the room, suddenly frustrated by the lack of windows.

“What time is it?” he asks.

“*Late,*” his master replies, looking down at him quizzically.

A soft smile touches the edges of his lips, and he squeezes his master’s hand once more, looking entreatingly up at him.

“Come with me,” he murmurs.

“*What?*”

“Come with me, please...” he repeats, more beseechingly this time. Whether his master would heed him or no for a moment he does not care, and he wriggles his legs out from underneath the blankets. He begins to swing around to his left, carefully manoeuvring past his master even as a hand appears upon his shoulder and halts him.

“*Where would we go at this hour? You need to rest, little one. I would not want...*”

A sudden boldness flares within him, and he shrugs his master’s hand away. Gingerly he moves himself around to sit upon the bedside, he tugs up his thin trousers which had slid down his hips with the movement. Shivers run up his legs as his bare toes touch the floor, but with a grimace then he pushes himself to his feet.

Pain crackles through his arms and back, every muscle in him squeals its protest but stubbornly he endures it. He will not show weakness, not now; for the time being he is quite sick of the feeling of weakness. A brief snatch of pride flashes through him as he stands unaided, he looks back at his master with a triumphant little smile before suddenly he sways. His vision blurs as his legs begin to crumple beneath him, but before he can fall his master arises to help him. His master takes hold of his arm and his waist as gently as possible, helping to hold him upright as that horrific feeling of dizziness drains from him. Awkwardly he pulls away from his master and leans instead against the nearby wall to his left, his entire torso trembling with the effort of holding himself up.

His master watches him cautiously for a moment or two, but once satisfied that he is not about to faint he crosses the small room and begins rummaging through a chest upon its far side. He pulls out a thick overcoat, its fluffy cream wool trimmed with gold embroidery at its seams. Almost apologetically his master holds it out, and when he feels readied he shuffles over, allowing his master to drape it about his shoulders and to steer his arms gently through its sleeves.

He gasps as a stray thread upon the coat snags against a scab, dragging painfully at his skin, but quickly his master's hand is there untangling him, and smoothing the wool carefully against his skin. With a warm flush of happiness he knows that the contrition is there, insofar as his master is capable of feeling contrition, and with a swell of certainty he knows that for him it is enough.

His master gazes remorsefully at the bruises mottled across his broken wrist, the ugly purples and yellows that blossom like obscene roses across his skin. With a melancholy smile he turns aside, he shrugs the coat a little more firmly about himself and then he takes his master by the hand. He is more sure of himself now, even if he does not know quite why. The moment moves him, it is powerful in its tenderness as he pulls his master towards the door, even as his legs tremble with each step he pushes himself forward, determination shining in his eyes.

His master allows him to take the lead, content to let him wander where he will. All the while his hand clasps tightly to his, as if through their touch alone his master could lend him strength, as if just for one moment he could give back what he had stolen. But his master cannot, this is a moment not of his making and by it he is rendered powerless, so he contents himself to be led on. Yet ever his master watches him, poised a fraction of a step behind him to catch him if fatigue or light-headedness should threaten again.

They pass through the near deserted corridors of the fortress, heading slowly upwards through each level. His master trails him bemusedly, quietly following wherever he should lead. They wind up through narrow passages, into halls seldom trod for millennia, their secrets long left undisturbed behind locked doors and films of grey dust.

After a while he begins to tire, even these simple exertions become a trial after weeks of such abuse, but onwards he presses. He refuses to let himself fail. He will not fail again, not while he has an ounce of strength left to him.

Occasionally he stumbles, his aching knees nearly give way beneath him but always his master is there, reaching out to unobtrusively steady him. With an embarrassed smile he collects himself and walks on, gently pulling his master higher through the fortress. Up spiralling staircases that seem to reach into the very vaults of Vaiya they climb, leaving his thighs burning as still he walks on.

Towards a bolted door sunk into a wall some metres distant they traverse a quiet corridor, when suddenly an orc rounds the corner ahead of them. It absently whistles a tune through its misshapen fangs, a scout's helmet tucks informally under one arm as it strides through the corridor and as he sights it he stops dead in his tracks. His master nearly walks into the back of him, so abrupt is his halt as he stares at it in horror, as a sudden torrent of memories floods through him. The sting of each slap haunts him, their groping fingers sliding up his thighs even as he twisted, *oh you like this*, a mailed glove scratching its way down his sternum, across his jaw, their laughter ringing in his ears as he tried to turn away...

The breath tightens in his throat, and desperately he squeezes his master's hand as he tries to shake free of the awful, sick feelings roiling in his stomach.

The orc notices them from a distance and approaches them curiously, unsure of why strangers were patrolling these typically disused parts of the fortress. But its yellow eyes widen as it recognises its master, and they widen a fraction further as it recognises its lieutenant standing pale and sickly

beside him. With some confusion it notes the whiteness of its lieutenant's knuckles as he clutches to his master's hand, and the strange glint of pain that shows in his silvery eyes.

Time seems to slow, the seconds seem to stretch into hours as he stares at the orc, as the memories crash and seethe through him and he awaits the inevitable, humiliating response that is sure to come. He braces himself as he sees the orc open its mouth, he clasps to himself the haughtiest veneer that he can muster: he will remain silent, he is still the orc's superior even if dressed in a woollen coat and clinging desperately to his master's hand.

But his fear proves unfounded as with a creak of leather armour the orc bows before them.

"My lords," it intones by way of polite greeting, before it continues casually on down the corridor, humming indistinctly to itself.

The breath wheezes out of his lungs in a dizzying rush, and if he had been physically capable of it he would have run to the door at the end of the corridor. As it is he strides over to it, dragging his master behind him as he unbolts it and throws it open, passing quickly through before slamming it shut behind them. Against the cold wood he leans for a moment, composing himself before he glances shyly up at his master, and the faint expression of surprise that he sees carved across his master's handsome features brings a slight smile to his lips.

The cool night breeze wafts about them, stirring his master's hair out like a fine spray of obsidian as together they walk. Before them lies a narrow path that winds slightly uphill, its curvature made indistinct by the thick banks of mist that moil and roll over it. To either side of them the mountain cleaves away to a sheer drop, its vertiginous heights hidden beneath the dark swirls of cloud drifting all around them, a soft blanket to mask the peril below.

He pulls his master up the track, enjoying the slightly sticky feel of the mist curling around his ankles. Faint wisps of cloud tumble in lazy revolutions from him as he moves, ephemeral shreds of mist float around him to dissipate into nothingness a scant second later. Despite the poor visibility he walks confidently forward, the path so intuitively familiar to him even after the long years of his absence. The smooth stones beneath his feet seem to urge him on, a sliver of the day's heat remains in each dark surface and they tingle pleasantly against his bare toes as he walks.

His master follows him cautiously along the narrow path, but as they walk he hears the crunch of his master's boots begin to falter, their steady rhythm slips as his master slows fractionally. But he drags his master onwards, some urgent emotion bubbles up inside of him; a need to share this, a need to show his master this part of himself, something so long kept private now strangely *right* to reveal.

After a short while they emerge from the mist, spilling out onto a clear precipice cut into the mountainside. With a sigh of relief he flops down onto the cliff's edge, his bare feet dangling over the drop in a strangely childlike gesture as the mountainside falls away beneath him in miles of jagged rock and blasted shale. He feels his master sit stiffly to his right, gripping the crumbly lip of rock beneath them tightly and angling his upper body backwards, away from the imposing drop.

His master watches him curiously as he looks upwards, his hair spilling down his neck as he frowns up at the clouds expectantly, as he wills the last shreds of fog to move and to leave the night sky unsullied. And almost as if they had heard him the banks of cloud dissipate, the last tendrils of fog draw back and he gasps in delight as the sky is unveiled above them.

Deepest indigo stretches out to the very limits of his vision; the stars shimmer like countless effervescent fireflies pinned into the great swathe of darkness, distant and unreachable but constant, and somehow to him they have always brought comfort. They swirl up there above him in

their myriad dappled constellations, and they fill him with a lightness, a sense of awe set prickling in his chest that he cannot even begin to explain. And he turns to his master, almost breathless with elation, only to pause in horror as he sees the look on his master's face.

For his master stares up at the stars rigidly, his eyes unfocused and strange; their golden light dimmed and almost sickly, as if all of the colour had been bleached out of them. A spasm passes over his master's face, a thousand splinters of emotion are caught in that one minute movement; horror and loss and hunger and something perilously close to fear catches in the fine lines around his eyes, in the pained quirk of his lips.

He feels his master's left hand close over his right, he feels the tremble of his fingers as they slip into his palm and he looks over at his master in despair; suddenly, terrifyingly afraid that he has made a grievous mistake in bringing him here. Happiness curdles to icy worry within him as his master speaks, his voice faint, his eyes still locked onto the sky.

"Do you know what it is like?" his master whispers, his voice nearly inaudible over the faint breeze, and yet his hand clamped all the more tightly around his. *"Do you know what it is like to have your death in the sky?"*

For a moment he is confused and subtly he leans over, trying to follow his master's sightline, until with a terrible pulse of realisation it dawns on him. Seven mighty stars blaze to the north, brilliant and terrible amongst the soft speckle of the surrounding constellations. Sadly then he remembers: it was so long ago the night those bright stars appeared in the sky, the Valacirca set there by the vengeful Elentári.

A curse, his companions had said to him all those years ago, when he had asked what those stars were. Little beacons of doom set burning in the sky unto even the end of days. But they have never meant that to him. Innocently he loved them then, and though innocence has been long since stripped from him, he loves them still simply for what they are; great, beautiful stars glimmering there so far above him, endless and perfect. That they might have other connotations had long since ceased to trouble him, yet now his master gives him pause.

"A death-mark hanging there," his master says sorrowfully, *"spelling out my destruction. Cold and untouchable and no matter what I do I cannot make it vanish, I cannot make it go away..."*

His master trails off, and beside him he sits there mortified. A wrenching sort of understanding washes through him, and sadly he knows that there is nothing he can say, there is nothing in this world that he can do, and a paralysing sense of helplessness seems to splinter in his veins. Because he wants to help; so perversely, so *sincerely* he wants to, he cannot bear to see his master sitting there so disarmed and so awfully lonely.

But beneath it all it scares him, it terrifies him to think that one day that doom might be fulfilled. One day his master might be gone, he might be ripped from his hands and one day he might be left alone to face all of the ages of the world by himself, just a lonely little ghost adrift amongst the ruins of an empire.

But he throws those thoughts aside; that future could not happen. *He would not let it happen.*

And beneath that conviction terror blossoms in him anew. Why is he thinking this? How could he possibly want this?

He should be angry, he should be *furios*, for all the things that his master has done to him he should despise the very sight of him, he should try to throw him off the fucking cliff-side for every single hurt, for every stinging humiliation that has ever been inflicted upon him. But though those

emotions flow torrid and puissant within him, he finds that he cannot act upon them. He cannot bring himself to do it.

It is lame, it is pathetic even to himself but it is true; everything in him that shrieks at him to run, to leave, to get as far away from his master as the wide bounds of the earth would allow drowns out in the perverse impulsion to stay. Still that decision grapples and twists within him, but for now it is enough, and after a few moments more of indecision that conflict eases away, it smoothes out like turbulent waters coming to calm after a storm.

He looks over to his master then, who stares blankly into the chasm beneath their feet.

“Do you want to go?” he murmurs.

“No,” comes the reply, spoken as if from terribly far away.

Deep down he knows that his master is doing this for him, enduring all of his own pain for him, the disgrace at his brethren’s hands relived over and over again in the cold twinkle of the stars above him, in the things that he so adores. And for that he sighs, a choking swell of emotion blossoms up in his chest.

“Do you remember, little one,” his master murmurs to him. “The day upon that isle when you swore fealty to me. Do you remember what I said to you?”

“You slapped me in the face.”

“Oh...”

With a rueful smile he curls into his master, he ignores the dull wash of pain from his shoulder and arm as he leans against him.

“It’s all right, my lord,” he says. His master releases his hand then, he snakes his arm across his lower back, so meticulously careful not to touch his sore shoulders, and he shuffles closer into his master’s embrace, he curls up into his chest.

“I understand...” he whispers, and though at once the words both crush him and elate him, he knows that they are true. “I understand.”

His master’s arm tightens protectively about him, possessively about him: which it is he cannot quite tell anymore, and perhaps it does not in that moment matter. It is simply how his master is, and he cannot yet find the strength in him to abhor it.

Softly then his master reaches to him, ashen fingers tilt his chin and his master’s lips press against his own. It is just a fleeting kiss; tender and sensual and no longer than a heartbeat, but he breaks away from it with a smile and the ghost of his master’s warmth lingering upon his lips.

He settles once more in his master’s arms, his head rests against his chest as together they gaze out over the rolling cloud banks, and the stars look down in silent witness as they wait in tremulous silence for the breaking of the new dawn.

Desire

Weeks stretch into long months, scabs heal and skin re-knits with nothing but a row of puckered white scars along his arms and back to mark his ordeal. In all of that time he seldom sees his master except for meetings or military counsels, and he is content with that. In the beginning he is still tender, and though the decision to stay in his master's service still holds firm within him he is ever conscious of quite how deeply his master has hurt him; and that confusing knot of emotions arrests any impetuous feelings of ardour or anger. Simply he remains static, the mood between them remains cool and subtle, and neither for the time being seeks to broach that peace.

In any case, the countless affairs of Angband clutch him once more to their embrace, and that tender night upon the mountaintop is consigned to the most secret depths of his dreams. Once the herb-mistress and her healers declare him hale he resumes his full duties as lieutenant, and eagerly he is welcomed back into command. The hordes of Angband are well appeased with his punishment, and with the social phenomenon that he never ceases to marvel at they put his transgressions behind him, and without obstinacy or dissent they obey and revere him once more.

After the fall of Sirion the arrangement of their troops in the North is somewhat disorganised and for long weeks he labours to set right the disarray. Hours he spends embroiled in meetings of stratagems and plots argued long into the night with his captains. Those councils that his master chooses to preside over seem to stretch on for an eternity, until despite even his best efforts his head starts to nod, and Gothmog across the table from him does not even bother to conceal his yawns. But ever he perseveres; he is partially responsible for their current predicaments and eventually he sees them put right.

Under his unusually reluctant supervision, the ranks of the Urúloki swell. They must have been truly desperate to ask him to take temporary charge of those affairs: a series of sudden demotions that he never quite gets to the root cause of had forced a shift within the ranks of the dragon-keepers, and they find themselves quite without leadership. Unprofessional conduct, he hears whispered about the court as reason for such restructuring, but all of his subtle enquiries into the matter come up short.

Despite his disinclination to take up the position he at last accedes to their requests, and with the application of his knowledge and power the dragons flourish. Their bodies and minds stretch to new proportions, into glorious creatures of sly cunning and gleaming scales, and proudly his master applauds him for that work. Still though, he is not overly fond of the Urúloki: slippery they seem to him, guileful and tempestuous, and he has as little to physically do with them as possible.

He is privileged enough, however, to once witness a birth. Within a darkened cavern he and the keepers watch in rapt attention as a web of cracks slowly splits across the surface of an egg that would stand fully to his chest if measured. Beneath the brittle shell exterior films of sticky membranes shine, they stretch and tear until an inquisitive crimson snout pokes out from its amnion. A little flare of flame appears in the youngling's nostrils, and second later he and the keepers duck in unison as an explosion of shell fragments rains down about them.

In the epicentre of the blast totters one bemused wyrmling. Wide-eyed it looks about the cavern, its slender legs trembling as it picks itself up, and it snorts away the little puffs of smoke that trail from its nostrils. Despite himself he smiles, it is so strangely endearing to watch the small creature taking its first wobbly steps towards the brooding bulk of its mother who lies curled in the farthest corner of the cavern. The hatchling's diminutive wings ruffle in pleasure as its mother leans forward, coiling her neck about it and gathering it into her flank, and a warm, contented hum fills

the air a second later.

But through his wonder at the rarity of what he has just witnessed something wistful curls. That simple act of affection sends an obtuse twinge of jealousy through him.

More and more he finds himself drawn back to his forge. The heat of his furnace wraps comfortingly about him in his master's absence as he smithies new works of wonder. Plated gauntlets he shapes that would turn even the sharpest of swords; falchions of blackened steel he tempers with dark alchemies to cleave through bone as if it were butter, glittering coronets dripping in rubies he strings, he threads them with diamonds like the spangled stars of night, and freely he gifts them to whomsoever might ask for one.

To his forge now he ventures once more, snatching for himself a brief reprieve from the dull economic reports that he has been subjected to all evening. Inwardly he curses his master's stint of breeding orcs with a flair for irritatingly meticulous accounting. Certainly they had their benefits, but being forced to endure a supposedly short briefing by them would inevitably result in his entrapment for hours. Funny, he thinks, what was a short-lived affair in genetic manipulation a few centuries back he would have to rue the repercussions of seemingly forever.

An array of candles clusters above the open mouth of the furnace. Their bases are but a tangle of melted wax; they drip like honeyed stalactites over the flame-blasted bricks and down towards the smouldering red maw below. The glower of the furnace melds with the muted glow of the candles, illuminating his forge in a brooding, reddish light. The room itself is bare but for a large stone workbench lying a metre or so from the furnace, a sturdy anvil set beside it, and the shelves and hooks bolted to the walls. An array of blacksmithing and artificer's tools clutter upon them, tongs, whetstones, hammers and chisels are strewn across the shelves while several thick, stained aprons and pairs of gloves are flung over the hooks. A half-filled bucket of stale water leans against the furnace's lip, sheltered under a neat row of leather-wrapped poker handles, their tips thrust to heat among the burning coals.

He leans casually back against the workbench, facing towards the furnace. A foot-long dagger he holds in his left hand, and with his right he strokes a small whetstone down its lightly curved edge, whittling the blade to razor-sharp perfection. The stone slides against the metal with a shrill scrape, the noise at once jarring and beautiful, sending weird shivers crawling like beetles across his skin. He focuses intently on the blade, feeling the tiny vibrations through the smooth steel with each pass of the whetstone, and he flips it upwards in his hand. Intently he peers at the grain of the metal, he examines the play and moil of the light along its length as one would inspect a gemstone for flaws.

His eyes narrow, the dagger's sharpness does not yet do it justice, and he wipes the blade against his tunic before peering at it again, his lip curling in dissatisfaction. He tucks a few unruly strands of hair back behind his ear from where they have escaped his ponytail, and with a sigh he resumes whetting the blade. Within the whine and burr of the metal he loses himself for a while, and the rhythmic pass of his hand down the blade fills him with a pleasant sense of peace.

He barely registers the door opening behind him, or the flurry of cool air that drifts through the room and sends a swirl of cinders rising from the coals. He scarcely hears the soft tread of boots upon the cobblestones, the quiet click of the door locking behind him as its iron bolt slides home.

"What are you doing?"

His master's melodious voice appears as if from nowhere behind him and he jumps violently, nearly dropping the dagger in surprise. He whirls around to face his master, finding him staring coolly back from beside the door.

“My... my lord,” he splutters as his heart leaps inside his chest, a feeling not solely due to surprise. A moment passes in taut silence; his master watches him expectantly for a few seconds before the realisation hits him, and hastily he bows. As he straightens he exhales slowly, attempting to quell the little tremors of fright that still ripple through him, and as neutrally as he can manage he says, “Forgive me, my lord. I did not hear you come in.”

“*It is no matter,*” his master replies silkily, sauntering across the room towards him with a look of placid curiosity on his face. “*It has been a while since I have seen you. I merely wanted to know what you were doing.*”

“A dagger, my lord,” he answers, glancing down at the blade in his hand and laying the whetstone aside. His master looks at him, his golden eyes shivering in the vermilion light of the forge, and smiles encouragingly. With a rush of pride he holds the knife outstretched, its silver edge gleaming red in the blood-warm air.

“I was just whetting the blade,” he explains enthusiastically, suddenly eager to show his master his new devices. Rarely of late has he seen his master at all, and the fragile tremors of desire leap to him unbidden at the mere grace of his presence. “It has a fuller tang than the others. There is more recoil therefore within the steel. It will not snap, even under the greatest of pressures. And notice the curve, my lord; it is much better for piercing armour, for slipping beneath the joints. The hilt I made myself from an extract of the malachite seam that we excavated not a month ago in the mines, and it is bound with deerskin leather for grip.”

His master appraises the blade for a moment, his face quite devoid of emotion before he leans forward slightly, extending his hand.

“*May I see it?*”

A strange note rings in his master’s voice, and he eyes him warily for a moment before pressing the hilt of the blade into his master’s palm. He watches nervously as his master weighs the balance of the knife in his hand before he flicks it upwards, twirling it artfully through his fingers, eyeing each flash and facet of the metal with an inscrutable expression.

The seconds trickle by like hours as his master toys with it, until eventually he holds it once more in his palm, his fingers wrapped firmly about the leather-bound hilt.

“*How exquisite, Mairon. Truly, you have outdone yourself.*”

He blinks a little in surprise before a proud smile creeps across his face, and he begins, “It is not yet finished, my lord. If I might...”

Unthinkingly he moves forward to take the knife back, and even as he does so he realises his mistake. Something dangerous flashes in his master’s eyes, and quicker than sight his master’s hand moves upwards. An instant later he jerks to a halt, the fine point of the dagger pricking against his collarbone.

He looks up at his master in dismay, every muscle in his body locks rigid in horror as he watches the flames writhe in his master’s golden irises.

“My lord, don’t...”

“*So bold, Mairon,*” his master interjects, his voice a predatory purr. “*I have noticed a trend of late.*”

“My lord, no, that is untrue, I haven’t...”

Sharply he is cut off, the dagger jabs harder into his collarbone, and with a wince he feels the first droplets of blood well up under the blade and soak into the black threads of his tunic. He steps carefully backwards, trying to distance himself from his master as knots of apprehension twist in stomach, and he fights down the urge to run as a sadistic grin spreads across his master's face.

He could have done it, maybe, possibly; he could have stopped everything before it started but strangely he doesn't. Something tingles in the base of his stomach, some long-denied part of him opens its eyes and suddenly the knife blade at his chest doesn't hurt anymore, it doesn't scare him. It transmutes into *exhilaration*.

He steps back another pace, and where he moves his master follows, the knife kept pressed firmly into his shoulder. After a few more steps he realises his master is subtly steering him, in some perverse dance waltzing him across the room until he is backed up against the workbench with the heat of the furnace glowering behind him. The edge of the bench digs painfully into his lower back and for a second he tries to resist it. But the dagger's point burrows agonisingly into his collarbone, forcing his upper body irrefutably backwards. His stomach muscles squeal in protest until he boosts himself onto the table, his master turns the knife upon him and following its suggestion he lies back across the workbench, parallel to the furnace.

The warm stone feels like ice against his back, the glow of the furnace upon his left hand side seems to set him half ablaze, and his heart flutters at the base of his throat as the knife's pressure upon him reduces, now only lightly resting on his chest.

His master strides around him, he circles about the table towards the furnace. Through the movement the dagger remains upon him, rotating upon his chest. His master stares into the coals of the furnace with an unreadable expression upon his face, half obscured as it is by the midnight fall of his hair. With his master distracted and himself apparently unobserved he tries to edge away across the table, wincing a little as the knife's tip drags across his tunic.

He scarcely makes it an inch before his master whirls, the knife flickering in his hand for an instant before the flat of the blade is slapped viciously down across his exposed throat. He gags at the strange impact, the shock thrumming unpleasantly through his neck as a few gasping, shallow breaths force their way down his bruised windpipe. His master stares pitilessly down at him as he splutters, his nose crinkling in distaste, and every muscle in his body locks anew under that paralysing glare; stabs of icy, yearning anticipation lancing through him.

Pinning him in place with the blade crushed firmly against his throat, his master turns towards the furnace, and after a moment of theatrical deliberation plucks a brand from its coals, the twisted metal insignia at its end glowing cherry-red. His eyes widen as his master turns back towards him, a terrifying grin curving across his face as he regards the brand. The acrid smell of superheated metal hits his nostrils and he wriggles a little beneath the blade, but quickly the gesture is stamped out as his master presses harder on the knife across his throat, sending shadows sparkling at the edges of his vision as his breathing constricts.

His master wheels the brand above him, phosphorescent after-images sizzle in his eyes as gradually his master moves it closer to him, enjoying every reflexive flinch of his muscles, every jerky little spasm that shakes through him as instinct bales at him to move. The heat of the brand grazes his skin even beneath his rough-spun tunic; sending little ripples of both fear and excitement flickering up through him.

Slowly, sensuously, his master trails the brand up his body, holding it about an inch from him. Over his ribs, over his neck it wanders until his master pauses, the brand hovering with searing potential over his cheek, its radiance burning bright in his eyes. And he wants to flinch, he wants to

close his eyes and just wait for it to be over, but some little spark of rebellion kindles in him. Proudly he looks up at his master, and his chin tilts upwards in what insolent a gesture he can manage with the blade still compressing his throat.

And though it burns, though the brand's vermilion brightness feels like it is corroding holes through his retinas, he endures it. The muscles in his eyelids twitch with the effort of remaining open; every tendon in his neck stands taut beneath his skin as he fights down the shrieking impulse to move.

Beneath his master's threat he smirks triumphantly: he will not be intimidated this time. Not so easily, not like this.

Poised above him, his master looks down at him imperiously before cocking his head, one eyebrow arching in mock surprise.

"Oh, Mairon," his master purrs, his voice dripping like honey from his lips. *"We are grown bold indeed."*

His master moves the brand away from him, shoving it into the bucket of stale water by the furnace and its heat quenches in a steaming hiss of bubbles. As his master moves the blade retracts from his throat and he gasps in relief. His bravado drains from him as he blinks furiously to clear the itchy sensation from his eyes, the knotted, serpentine insignia flashing in acidic brightness before his eyes with each blink. Shakily he tries to push himself up to a sitting position, but as he starts to rise suddenly his master growls, *"Did I say that you could move?"*

His throat clenches, and slowly he sinks back down, dismay rushing through him as his master once more takes hold of the knife. Its point pokes against his throat before it slides downwards, scoring a stark white line across his skin to mark its passage. As it reaches his sternum his tunic parts, it curling languidly open as the knife trails ever downwards until eventually it halts, poised delicately between the points of his hips.

With an indulgent smile his master spreads his tunic further open, exposing his torso. The tip of his tongue teases the edge of his grin as abruptly he rips apart the few inches of unbroken material that remain. The fabric strips away from his thighs with a squeal of torn thread, leaving only his leather breeches and boots intact, and his torso so horribly exposed.

Naked lust glimmers in his master's eyes and coyly he discards the knife, turning instead to wrest a tall candle from the cluster above the furnace and holding it over him with a wicked grin. For a second he is confused, he is unsure of what his master is doing even as the candle tilts. But an instant later realisation hits, and he braces himself for what pain is sure to come.

A second's delay, and then droplets of liquid wax splatter low over his waist, just above the laces of his breeches, and he gasps as the burning droplets hit his skin. His back arches as he tries to shove his hips backwards into the table, a grunt of protest rips out of his throat as an instant later another few droplets hit him, the pale wax hardening almost instantly upon his skin.

His master ignores his writhing; with a gleeful focus he edges his way up his body, inch by painful inch dropping little speckles of wax upon his skin. A capricious gleam pulses in his master's auric eyes at each hiss and catch of his breath, as legion little flares of pain rise across his skin. Through it all he forces himself to remain still, unwilling he is to tempt his master further, and his knuckles show white as his fingers grip around the sides of the bench with a pressure that is not entirely triggered by pain.

With his right hand his master reaches up, he strokes over his collarbones, smearing the little bead

of blood where the dagger had pricked earlier. A dark stain spreads across his marble skin, his master's fingers are so tantalisingly soft upon him but they intersperse with the sharp sting of new wax drops hitting his skin, and that confusing mix of sensations squirms within him.

His master's fingers wander downwards, they slip over his ribs with a slightly ticklish brush, and his intercostal muscles flex in their hollows as he wriggles at the feeling. He flinches as his master brushes across his nipple; one nail slides across his pectoral muscle, circling inwards in ever-tightening spirals even as bubbling wax drips over the base of his sternum.

He watches in horror as his body somehow responds; his nipple hardens under his master's ministrations, and a shiver of delight quakes up through him. The trail of wax meanders further up his chest, tenderly, lasciviously: with that infuriating, infinite, *deliberate* patience of someone who has all the time in the world to glut themselves. But just short of the base of his throat the stinging procession of droplets pauses: he looks up at his master with such pleading hope only to see the devious smile hovering over him.

The candle tips once more, and droplets of wax splatter straight across his left nipple. He moans as they strike such sensitive skin, flashes of pain spark through his chest as he writhes. But amid the pain there is pleasure also, hot lines of fire bolt through him to swirl at the base of his stomach; a knot of such awful, shameful pleasure gathers there and it tightens, and surreptitiously he shifts his hips; he tries to shake the feeling away even as he feels the first faint waves of true arousal build in him.

His master chuckles as he spies the movement, a smug little noise half forms in his throat and he reaches down to toy with the laces of his breeches. With such vicious delight his master watches as the veins rise between his hips, as a low moan bleeds out from his throat and the fabric across his groin slowly pulls taut.

He sighs as his master moves lower still, stroking him beneath the thin leather of his breeches even as wax pours across his other nipple. Pain and pleasure spark together within him, and with impulsive, reckless abandon he flicks his hips upwards, his heels catch upon the edge of the bench and push him up as he grinds himself against his master's palm; those sensations mingling with a giddy rush inside of him.

Suddenly he lunges upwards, dried wax flakes from his torso with the force of the movement as he wrenches himself upright and to his knees, as one hand grasps about the back of his master's head as he pulls him close. He almost groans with pleasure as he locks their lips together, as his master's breath pours hotly down his throat. The candle skitters to the floor, lips meet and part in savage, biting kisses as his master kneads him harder through the leather of his trousers. With his free hand his master tugs off the remnants of his tunic, flinging it aside and baring his torso utterly, and so caught is he in the moment that he does not care at all.

His master runs his nails up his inner thigh; a cavalcade of wonderful shudders crashes through him despite the layer of his breeches.

"Do it," he breathes, the hot echoes of the panted words reverberating against his skin as he presses his hips forward, his knees splaying wider in his eagerness. He feels his master's lips curve into a smile against him, and with a growl of effort then his master snaps backward, in one fluid manoeuvre flipping him bodily over, and not exactly gently.

His chest crushes suddenly into the smooth stone of the bench, and with a slight wince he levers himself up onto his elbows, his arms bearing the full weight of his torso as he slides himself downwards a fraction until his boots lightly rest upon the floor beneath him, bending him more comfortably over the edge of the bench.

His master's nails run down his spine, they curve in weird zigzags between the faded whip-scars that pattern crazily over his skin, and rills of pleasure waft through him once more. One hand reaches the base of his spine, fingers swirl over the twin indentations of muscle above his hips, while the other reaches around him and swiftly undoes his laces. He gasps as his master tugs him harder, the breath sent hissing through his teeth as his master's fingers slide up and down his length in such exquisite motion. He pants as his master quickens his rhythm, his entire torso shudders as ripples of delight flood through him, but as he arcs his back his master yanks his breeches lower. His nails rip across his buttocks just a little too hard to be pleasant; his master grasps him around the hips a fraction too firmly, his fingers digging into his pelvis with bruising force.

"W-wait, my lord..." he gasps, wriggling a little in discomfort, and he tries to push himself up off the table, but as he does so his master slams him back down. His heart thuds in his chest, his fingers curl awkwardly around the edges of the bench-top as he grips it tightly, his arms half trapped beneath him as desperately he tries to twist around, to see what his master is doing. But little do his efforts avail him: his master pins him roughly in place and leaves him helpless.

He feels his legs kicked apart, exposing him completely, and with a mingled sense of dread and desire he hears the rustle of fabric behind him, the slick shift of velvet robes against skin. He freezes in surprise as something slippery touches his entrance, but he slowly forces himself to relax as it twists past the little rings of muscle, sliding not unpleasantly up inside of him as he moans with the sensation. But though the feeling is familiar it is somehow wrong, some vital thing in it is askew, and as it continues for a few seconds his brow furrows in concern. He jumps as he feels his master lean forward, pressing him further into the table at an angle that is entirely *impossible*. Violently he twists around, his chest just clears the table as with confusion swimming in his eyes as he looks up at his master.

Simmering golden eyes meet his gaze, and with a horrid, insidious leer his master licks up the side of his arm, his tongue wetly prickling over his skin before he grins at him; a challenge, a dare of sick lust smouldering in his eyes. And with a jolt of shock he realises what his master intends, what his master is *doing* to him. Every muscle in his back strains as he tries to writhe away, but his master pins him close, and the colour in his cheeks rises as he looks away in abject humiliation.

Bent over him his master grins wider, his hot breath billows against the tender skin of his neck as he flexes the two fingers inside of him in one languid movement. He squirms at the sensation, his cheeks burning with shame as his breath catches involuntarily in his throat, as hot bolts of terrible, unwanted arousal rip up through him.

"*Like a blushing maiden, little one,*" his master croons, the words dripping from his teeth.

Faintly he struggles, he tries once more to push himself up, to make his master let him go, but even to himself it seems half-hearted. His traitorous body tears him utterly between desire and resistance and upon that narrow precipice it binds him. Every gossamer strand of delight he is given comes knotted with a stain of violation, like a swirl of curdled blood through cream, and he is not sure if it is enough for him not to drink it.

His master withdraws his fingers, lingering just outside of him, and the air rushes out of his lungs in a shudder of relief. Yet his master does not move away entirely, each tiny movement over such sensitive skin he feels so clearly, and twin points of pressure ghost over his skin.

"*Tell me, then,*" his master purrs, as his free hand slips back around to his front, as his master's fingers wander tantalisingly down his aching length. "*Are you wet for me too?*"

His cheeks blush crimson as he feels his master's grin widen, as his fingers slide over the tip of his

length and feel the slipperiness there.

Yet as his master toys with him suddenly he becomes aware of a third point of pressure behind him, and then a fourth. His master's fingers retract from his length, leaving him maddeningly hard, and the air clots in his lungs as he realises what his master intends. Against that horrifying potential he writhes, but his master shoves one hand hard against the base of his spine, pinning him painfully into place over the bench.

"No, please, my lord" he begs, a shrill note of panic echoing in his voice as still he continues to struggle, as his master's fingers wander ever closer to him. "P-please don't... I can't, I can't take... *ohhh!*"

The breath punches out of his lungs in a sickening lurch as his master rams all four fingers home inside of him. Bolts of pain rip up through him and he almost retches with the force of them, the impact slamming him into the bench with the jarring crunch of his pelvis against stone. But with the pain comes a horrifying flash of gratification, raw and burning and wonderful, sending little sparkles flashing across his vision. His back contorts as his master pulls his fingers out and he bites his lip hard to stop a cry escaping him, the sound sticking painfully in his throat. But a second later it smashes over his lips as his master thrusts knuckle-deep inside of him. Gradually his master builds his rhythm, pushing so delightfully into him before tenderly withdrawing, each new penetration building on the ephemeral foundations of the one before in an irresistible, rising tempo.

He feels the heat grow between his legs, the rock of his hips with each thrust only fuels the familiar flutters of impending climax beginning to coalesce inside of him; coiling up into one throbbing core of desire. Slowly, inexorably, he feels his stomach muscles begin to tighten, flexing and unknitting in unconscious mimicry of his master's rhythm, and pushing him even higher.

He can almost feel his master's smile, that victorious, carnal sneer twisting across his face as his breath begins to quicken, coming in short, desperate pants from between his clenched teeth. Suddenly his master leans forward, all four fingers buried to the hilt inside of him, and in a voice like melted butter he whispers, "*You like this, don't you, little one?*"

He tries to respond, truly he does, he frantically gathers what shreds of scattered thought he can and tries to slot their jumbled, screaming fragments into some form of coherence. Because he *doesn't*, he doesn't like this, and he would say it over and over again until his master believed him that he doesn't like it, he doesn't, *how could anybody possibly like this?*

And he knows it is a lie even as the words form on his lips, glistening there like maggots with all their fatal potential. Yet shame and horror still his tongue: he doesn't want to lie but he can't just admit it, spit out those awful truths curled up within him. That so desperately he craves it, more than anything on this earth he just wants his master to touch him, love him, use him. But some futile glimmer of pride wraps itself around his heart, and it will not let him succumb so easily.

But he has to say something; he cannot just acquiesce so mutely, so pathetically, and he opens his mouth to deny it, wrestling the words like slithering, slippery, *lying* eels out from him. But before he can form even a syllable his master's fingers curve slightly inside of him, before seeming to expand slowly, pushing out against his inner walls and sending every nerve ending within him squealing out its rapture.

Deep and low in his throat he whines, a guttural sound of pure, animal lust tears from him as his hips roll. Droplets of sweat bead along his spine as lines of white-hot arousal score through him, the sensation seems almost endless his master holds that pressure, as a grimace caught somewhere between agony and euphoria twists across his face.

Behind him his master laughs darkly, leaning over him once more with a satisfied smirk as his fingers slip a few inches free from him.

“Don’t even try to deny it,” his master murmurs seductively, *“You enjoy being my slave.”*

His master’s fingers move once more, they touch some new place inside of him and he almost screams. His head throws wantonly back as he pants, his hair half-escaped from its bonds and plastered to his neck in sweaty blond strands as his hips curl around his master’s fingers inside of him, as torrents of ecstatic sensation claw up through his body. His master gently twines his left hand through what is left of his ponytail, forcing his head back further, grinding his hips into the bench as his master leans forward.

“You enjoy being my whore.”

But amid the flux and rush of his pleasure that cuts deep; those little shards of pride strung through him dig their heels in, and at that he bridles.

“I... I am n-not your whore.”

“Are you not?”

He struggles so hard for an answer, his master meanwhile resuming the rhythmical thrust and retreat up inside of him. Each new touch has him squirming in delight, desire pulses at the base of his stomach like a burning glede, bright and terrible and irresistible, and the words won’t come, every coherent thought smashes to pieces on the rucked, broken shores of carnality.

“Then why did you stay?”

And in that moment he cannot say; the truth grapples with every lie that would be so much easier to tell. His thoughts scatter like shrapnel across a battlefield, and it is so hard to focus; his master’s fingers press up inside of him, each thrust slides his hips across the bench, rubbing him across the warm stone as he hisses at the sensation. And the words won’t come, they knot and stick at the back of his throat because he can’t, he won’t give them life. He couldn’t possibly make his master understand, and right now, his master probably wouldn’t care.

So instead he says nothing, and he feels those words slip back down his throat. His shoulders slump a little in defeat; his hair falls in a straggly cascade across his face as his head bows, as each thrust impacts so wonderfully through his body.

Behind him, his master laughs again: dark and throaty and full of scorn.

“I thought as much, little one.”

The barb was plain, and though he feels the blood rise in his cheeks, in that moment he just *doesn’t care*. His master’s derision only stokes the burning desire within him, and with a shove he thrusts himself backwards, impaling himself deeper on his master’s fingers. With a ragged gasp he feels the muscles of his pelvis beginning to clench, and he knows it is depraved, he knows it is perverse and disgusting and wrong but it doesn’t matter; the pulsing, aching strength of his need drowns out everything else, and he tosses his head backwards, he bucks his hips, and he is so close, so deliciously close -

Suddenly pain explodes through his nipple, his master twisting it cruelly as he wrenches his fingers out of him. He hovers for a moment in awful suspension; it would only take one more little touch, but maliciously then his master ceases his motions. He moans in dismay as his arousal flickers, and he longs for his master’s caress once more, anywhere, anything tender, just to get rid of the *need*

smashing through his chest, to fill the weird emptiness of where his master's fingers had been.

Desperately he twists around, he looks pleadingly up at his master, and he sees the expectancy roll in those iridescent eyes. In an aching rush of clarity he realises what his master wants, and though he reviles it need spurs him on, as already he can feel the pleasure seeping away, that pulsing coil of desire beginning to unwind within him. And it is so degrading that it nearly snatches the breath from his lungs but he begs, a wild note of desperation ringing in his voice.

“Please, my lord, please just touch me. Please m-make me... *please...*”

For a moment his master regards him. A coy smile curling over his lips; and for a moment he thinks that his master might oblige him, for one terrible moment his heart swells in hope.

“*No.*”

He almost howls in frustration as his master moves away, a vindictive smirk twisted across his face; and he shudders as the glowing sensations dim inside of him, the tremors of unsatisfied lust scour away through his veins.

The word seems like a knife punched through him, and jerkily he hauls himself to his feet, his breath sliding uneasily through his clenched jaw. With shaking hands he pulls up his breeches, fumbling embarrassedly with the lacings as he adjusts himself, before turning around to face his master, anguish burning in his silver eyes.

“Why?” he asks angrily, blinking back the horrifying wave of frustrated tears that prickle suddenly behind his eyes. “Why would you do that?”

His master steps forward with a slinking, feline grace, halting mere inches before him before softly he reaches up, stroking back the sticky strands of hair from his face. One hand gently caresses his throat, a pointed nail presses upon his jugular and he feels his pulse beat under his master's fingertip, throbbing through his neck.

His master tilts his head slightly, his eyes like crucibles of molten gold as he moves even closer, their lips so near to touching, his master's breath sending hosts of shivers pricking across his skin. And every fibre of his being yearns to push himself forward, to seize his master and kiss him; to crumple up all of his passion and hatred and love and frustration and just shove it into him, just for a moment to lose himself so perfectly in the one person that he craves, take all of this stupid sick longing and just finally hammer it home.

The wild fantasy grips him for a moment, and mournfully he wrestles it down. His master withdraws a fraction, the light of the furnace gleams in his eyes and there he reads the answer, crushing and hateful and true.

“Why?” he whispers, and the awful foreknowledge in his voice betrays the reply even before it slides over his master's lips.

“*Because you will let me.*”

The Revel

*In slothful gardens many a flower
like thee the amorous gods are used
honey-sweet to kiss, and cast then bruised
their fragrance loosing, under feet.
But here we seldom find such sweet
amid our labours long and hard
from godlike idleness debarred.*
- The Lay of Leithian, Histories of Middle Earth.

Celebrations ring throughout the fortress of Angband. Cries of mirth bounce in warm cacophony about its corridors as their wide expanses throng with revellers. Sable banners flutter from the ceilings and amid them chirruping bats flit, scraps of meat grasped triumphantly in their tiny claws as they fly to their perches to glut themselves. Far beneath the flap of their membranous wings, braziers of oily flames stud the corridors like scorching rubies amongst the dark confluence of Angband's soldiery.

All are welcome, and all have come; from lowly infantry to decorated captains all carouse through the corridors, boasting their triumphs and gloating in their victories.

After years of planning, of schemes and spying and allegiances sworn with slippery tongues the war was won. The machinations of the Eldar and the Edain were stripped bare from their concealments and razed. Their enemies lay broken, scattered amongst the high fells or wandering leaderless through the wastes of the North. The leaguer of the sons of Fëanáro was usurped, the pathetic remnants of their house bereft of lordship. They would be hunted down like dogs.

At their victory, through fierce combat and the treachery of men, their master was pleased; and in such gracious reward he had ordered the cellars thrown open, the drums to pound; a revel the like of which Angband had not seen in millennia. So amid the corridors tangle strategists and soldiers alike, a mug of drink in each hand, telling over and over again their conquests and showing off their spoils. A splintered arrow fletched in white heron's feathers a young orc clasps in her hand, a notched blade of fluted steel is shoved proudly through a Maia's belt-loop, a bedraggled banner with an eight-rayed star just visible amongst the dark stains that bloom across its fabric flutters from a captain's back like a cape.

The soldiery pour through the corridors laid throughout the fortress like great branching arteries, and some manage to push through the crowd to the throne room and behold Angband's obsidian heart bedecked in all its glory. Its doors are thrown back, across the wide expanse of its floor lie rough-hewn wooden benches occupied by a motley array of captains and commanders. Creaking leather armour crushes against smouldering wing-blades, and beneath their feet the wolves play and snap in mock aggression. Spits of meat turn over open coal-pits, barrels of mead and dark liqueurs are dragged up from the cellars and freely broken open, slabs of malted bread are split and shared from great bronze platters laid across the tables.

But amid the bristling throng of orcs, between the looming bulks of the Valaraukar pale wisps flicker and stumble, their eyes downcast and full of pain. Laden platters of steaming meats are thrust into their chained hands, flagons of ale are ferried in such reluctant steps from the brewmasters and their barrels. Like lonely little ghosts they wander listlessly amongst the crowd,

flinching as clawed hands grope for the mugs they carry, as mailed gloves glance over purpling bruises. And with each new service, with bowed head and despairing eyes their humiliation is reinforced. Slaps fall upon tender flesh, twisting pinches leave bloodied weals across pale arms, burns blister across cheekbones with the sizzle of flesh and choking moans of pain.

Looking down upon them all, clad in ebony finery, sits their master. His tawny eyes glitter as he surveys the hall, an indulgent half-smile curves over his lips as he watches his servants take their pleasures. The dais alone in the room is bare, unadorned but for the blackened spires of his throne.

Each blade-like slab of metal sinks through the body of an elven lord, his broken corpse impaled lengthwise along the throne's crest. Gore-stained spikes erupt down the elf's midline, punched through his throat, his chest, his stomach and his groin as his limbs dangle limply downwards; pinned there like some obscene battle-trophy with their master grinning below. Waves of dark hair tumble from beneath the elf's cloven helm, and as their master settles comfortably into the throne he reaches up and runs his hand through them.

With a luxuriant smile he winds the strands through his fingers, darkly admiring the ragged filigrees of gold ribbon tangled through the elf's mane. His left hand tightens around a flagon of bitter mead and he takes a long draught from it, savouring the bite as the alcohol prickles down his throat. Easily he sits on his throne, contenting himself to drink and toy with his new prize, watching over his servants' revels as his eyes coolly wander the hall, with a mild curiosity searching for his lieutenant among the crush.

And finally they find him. He sits amid a knot of the Valaraukar, his head tipped back as he laughs at a jest, his blond hair flowing loose about his shoulders. He leans back against a wall, his feet propped up on an adjacent bench, and laughs uproariously once more as a nearby captain launches into a bawdy song, leaping atop a nearby table with a clatter of dishes and belting out a tune rude enough to make even the most hardened of orcs blush until his companions good-humouredly drag him off.

He sips at a near-empty tankard of murky aniseed liqueur, its heat and cloying sweetness mingling pleasantly with the glow of the alcohol in his stomach, and he smiles gaily as another captain stands, a huge drinking-horn clenched in his fist as he calls for quiet amongst them. With a lurch of excitement, he realises that it is Gothmog who stands, and eagerly he leans forward, straining his ears above the general clamour of the hall to hear his friend speak. Rumours of his triumph, of the slaying of the Elven-king had sped around the fortress in the previous days, but keenly he had awaited hearing the saga in full and from its source.

A rough circle forms amid the mêlée of benches and Gothmog strides into the center, flexing his smouldering wings in anticipation, little rivulets of flame igniting in irregular crimson lattices along their tapered blades. The Balrog clears this throat dramatically, with an impatient roll of his eyes awaiting the slurred susurrus of 'shhh!'s to die down.

Amid the audience he shifts, leaning against the warm pauldron of the she-Valarauka next to him, a carefree smile on his face and the tankard cradled in his lap.

"Friends," Gothmog booms, his deep baritone like the scraping of boulders among the hills.

"Rumours of my duel with the Elven-king I am sure that you have heard, in all their exaggerations and boasts. But now I shall tell you truly of a duel that will be the stuff of our legends here ever after!"

A rousing cheer rises from the circle of captains, and he raises his mug in toast with the rest of them, lamenting a little its emptiness before he leans once more against his neighbour.

“The Elven-king’s guard lay dead at my feet, hewn asunder by my axe, until only he remained, a fell light in his eyes and a grimace upon his face. A sword he grasped, on his other arm a scorched shield hung, its glittering jewels marred with blackened ash and stains of ichor.

Grim was our meeting, this I do not deny, for it seemed that the Light blazed within him, and he fought as one possessed, fleet as the eel that wriggles from the net. His bright sword stung great rents through my armour, my parries slid with squeals of scraping metals against his...”

At this a chorus of hisses erupts from the audience. Their eyes glow balefully in the gloom, ignited to flares of indignant vermilion at this unexpected twist; that the Elven-king had fought *well*, could indeed hold his own against the mightiest of their ranks.

Gothmog waited for the outrage to fizzle out, taking a huge swig from his drinking horn, before continuing proudly, **“He fought nobly, I am not so ungracious as to deny that. But come now, friends, learn what his nobility bought him in the end. For even as I swung forward my axe another of our Order crept up behind him, and cast round him a thong of fire. And oh how he *screamed* as the flames wrapped around his chest, pinioning his arms with tongues of fire; the very metal of his armour bubbled and sizzled. He stumbled, and he fell, convulsing on the floor before me as metal melted onto skin, and his banner fell crumpled beneath him. He shrieked as his skin burned, as it blistered, and bitterly he strove against that great whip coiled about him.**

Would that I had left him there, to die in misery in the dirt as is befitting of his worthless kind. But for our great master’s command: that the Elf-lords be slain and naught left to chance.

And at that thought I hefted my axe, and with a mighty cry swept it down upon his weeping head, and his helm cleft asunder beneath it with a burst of white flame. In the spray, in the reek of stinking blood he perished, and aloft I held my axe in triumph afore I strode forward, setting my foot upon his throat...”

With that Gothmog pauses dramatically, eyeing his captivated audience with a malicious smile before extending outwards his right foot, its cloven hoof crowned in a circlet of flames that crackle against the marble. He waits an instant longer, milking the moment for all it is worth, his compatriots near leaning forward in breathless anticipation until with a final flourish he twists his hoof in pantomime, bellowing, **“And I ground his corpse into the dust!”**

A mighty cheer bursts from the audience, howls of glee tear from wolfish throats; flinty yells mix with ululations in a mongrel clash of tongues.

“His banner I trod into the filthy mire of his blood! His body I would have cast to the wolves...”

With that his voice drops, and silkily he smiles, his fangs showing like slick, obsidian daggers. Slyly he inclines his head towards the throne, and the broken body impaled atop it.

“... But our victorious master,” he smirks, **“wished otherwise of the Elven-king.”**

A roar of approval greets his words and the Balrog bows deeply, his great wings unfurling behind

him with a flurry of sparks. He saunters back into the circle amid hordes of admirers and quickly the gap closes behind him, the benches haphazardly kicked back out as the captains resume their merriments.

As the Valarauka departs he flops back into his seat, staggering a little as someone presses a new tankard into his hand, his head spinning a little as a spicy scent hits his nostrils: some peppered liqueur of the Edain laid long to mature in his master's cellars. For a while he contents himself just to sit, enjoying the relaxed company of his friends as their voices wash over him. He sips at his drink, his eyes drift merrily shut as he thinks fondly upon their victory, hard-pressed for a moment though it was.

The Noldor certainly were incensed when they had dismembered that prisoner in front of them, he ponders. They were so very enraged that their front lines had nearly breached the fortress itself, and for a horrible moment it looked as if he and his master had greatly underestimated their foes in their wrath. But that worry did not grip them for long: the fickle sons of Men had played their hand well, and all had come to valiant fruition in the end.

Alcohol drags its numbing tendrils through him, its warm fuzziness lulls him down into drowsiness, and idly he wonders whether that elf they had de-limbed had been important.

Suddenly the captain against whom he has been leaning lunges forward, and so rudely bereft of a backrest he jerks back awake. His stomach muscles clench just a fraction of a second too slowly to stop him tipping backwards and with an uncoordinated sort of twist he hauls himself upright, looking bemusedly around to discover what has disturbed him so.

An orc stands before him and the captains, its helmet plumed in black crow's feathers, and as it sees him rise it bows, an ugly smirk carving across its broad face. Vaguely he acknowledges it, and with a series of clinks it unfurls the length of chain concealed in its hand before yanking on it savagely. A second later a bound elf stumbles miserably before him, an iron collar fastened about his neck, his chestnut locks roughly hewn behind his ears.

Straightening himself up on the bench he blinks at the orc, with minor difficulty wrestling his thoughts into coherence as his gaze shifts, and disdainfully he appraises the elf shoved to his knees before him. Thick ropes fasten the elf's hands behind his back, and his orcish master keeps a firm grip on the chain. A ring of greenish bruises adorns the elf's neck where the collar had bitten into his skin; a suiting trinket, he thinks it. His eyes wander briefly downwards, noting with no real importance the crimson droplets dotted down the front of the elf's tunic before he peers back up at the orc, his brow knotting in confusion.

"A present, my lord," the orc intones in a snarling dialect, its stumpy fangs squashed into a gruesome imitation of amicability.

He looks from orc to prisoner once more, only now catching the slightly unhinged glimmer in the elf's eyes, the too-rigid lock of his jaw darkened with oddly spaced bruises, bruises that look suspiciously like finger-marks. His eyebrow arcs, and he takes another mouthful of his drink, grimacing as it burns its way down the back of his throat before replying hoarsely, "Oh? And what is he for, exactly?"

"A vocalist, my lord," the orc answers, a strange light creeping into its eyes. "Let us hear his pretty song."

For a moment he hesitates, unsure that he is fully grasping the situation, but with the ease that inebriation breeds he sighs. "Very well."

He turns to the elf then, squinting disparagingly at him before he commands, "Come then, slave, sing for us. Amuse your new masters. Please us well, and your efforts shall not go unrewarded."

An approving murmur ripples through the ring of onlookers, and as a hush gradually falls he settles himself, looking at the elf expectantly. But the elf simply shakes his head, slowly at first but then more frantically.

The piteous, pleading look in his eyes is abruptly extinguished as an orcish boot smashes into his ribs. Sniggers echo through the group as the elf topples helplessly sideways, his shoulder slamming into the floor with a nauseating crunch and a wordless cry of pain. And as the elf moans understanding suddenly clicks within him, a rush of sadistic delight rips up from his stomach and capriciously he smiles as the elf is dragged back to his knees. A torrent of dark, glistening blood pours from the elf's mouth as he chokes, little crimson bubbles blister over his lips as the air wheezes back into his lungs.

A fell light burns behind his silver eyes as he watches the elf splutter; a sticky mixture of blood and saliva drools down the elf's chin as a ruined whine rips out of his newly tongue-less throat in what wretched mockery of a song he can give. The sniggers swell to merciless laughter at the noise and some savage mirth in him compels him to join. He grins as the elf subsides into sobs; racking, wet gasps of air sliding into him as mutely he whines once more, his eyes squeezed shut in abject degradation as their scorn rains down upon him.

The orc bows to a round of hearty applause, before tugging the elf roughly to his feet. The elf gags as the collar slams into his windpipe, and he sobs then all the harder, thick clots of blood dripping from his lips to splatter upon the marble as he is dragged away into the crowd once more. The pure despair written across the elf's face only fuels the dreadful laughter that bubbles up inside of him, and he revels in that perverse pleasure; seeing his enemies so used, so subjugated and humiliated and helpless before him.

And maybe a tiny, traitorous part of him knows that it is wrong, and for a horrible moment a note dangerously close to sympathy chimes inside of him; too well he knows what it means to be forced, what it is to be abused. But he stamps that feeling down hard, *this was different*, they were his *enemies*, and he takes a few gulps of his drink, trying to smooth away the unpleasant memories that lurk in the dark corners of his mind. In unconscious reflex he curls up a little on the bench, rubbing absently at his arms, his fingertips running over the whorls of scar tissue punctured into his skin, so horribly tangible beneath his shirt as memories of pain curl dimly within him. With a shudder he forces himself to stop, and seeking some form of distraction tasks himself with retrieving a new drink from the barrel-masters.

With admirable success he negotiates the thronging hall and procures for himself a large tumbler of the barrel-masters' finest whiskey, and contentedly he sips at it as he makes his way back to his seat. The confluence of the crowd presses him to the edge of the hall, and protectively he cradles his drink to his chest as the movements of the captains about him grow increasingly vigorous. Artfully he dodges a wing-blade swung accidentally towards him, but a few metres later he is slightly too slow to fully avoid the orc who swings about into him, and to save his drink from utter calamity he dives into a shadowy alcove to his left.

He licks the spilled dregs of whiskey from the side of his hand, and almost he is ready to brave the press of the hall once more when a slight sound from behind him gives him pause.

With much greater attention this time he peers into the shadows, and within them he spies two figures, one leaning closely over the other. For a moment he wavers, unsure if he is rudely interrupting a moment of intimacy, when suddenly the topmost figure turns and a scratchy voice

sounds inside of his head.

<hello Mairon>

At the familiar sensation he shivers, and instantly then he knows to whom it is that he speaks. Eight round, gleaming eyes peer up at him from the gloom; they refract the light behind him into eerie, effervescent pinpricks as the figure shifts slightly, but still does not arise.

<it is long since you have paid me a visit>

A mournful chittering sound accompanies that statement, and as his eyes slowly adjust to the darkness a little more clearly he can see the scene before him. The creature leans over a prone body, and though the creature is humanoid in basic form, that is where human resemblance ends. Four thin, chitinous limbs clasp almost like a cuirass about the creature's torso, wrapping about the filmy strands of gauze that enshroud its entire body and leave only its face bare.

"Indeed," he says evenly, having finally gathered himself enough for a reply. "And I had not thought to see you here, old friend. Do you not find this company too brash for your tastes?"

The chittering sound comes again, accompanied by a faint, more earthly sounding moan, and the creature turns fully to look at him then. Some filter of light catches upon its face, and beneath its arachnid eyes he can see the two great mouthparts that complete its jaw, large curves of reinforced keratin that click and tap with an insectile motion that unsettles even him.

<not so, Mairon> the creature says, its thin voice flickering through his mind. *<there are always crevices where we might hide>*

Long years it had been since the creature had come before him, limping and bleeding as the bemused guards had brought it in. Silently the thing had stood there, its eight eyes had shivered in the light as black ichor had dripped from its side, and within himself he had found some strange pity for it. Noise disturbed it, he quickly discovered, and as it proved itself quick and apt in matters of memory and secrets, he had offered it a position within fortress' library as warden and keeper of the scrolls of lore that the denizens of Angband published or plundered. Only in the years after had he learned its heritage: a fugitive spawn of the Gloomweaver it was that had crawled before his chair, banished from its home in the shadowy vales of the South.

Upon what spare afternoons he once gleaned from his duties he would trek to the far library, he might while away the hours as it talked to him of knowledge and of scrolls; of Elven crafts, and lights and secret things that only spiders knew. The thing did not have a name that it could or would tell, and if it had a sex then it was a subtle enigma, and he did not feel the need to force that issue when it did not bother him in the slightest.

A clear moan echoes now from beneath the creature's bent form, and he peers a little more closely at the figure there. A thrill of revulsion runs through him at what he finds, for upon the floor limply lies an elf, his skin deathly pallid, his eyes wide and the pupils within them perilously dilated. But that is not what disturbs him so, for as he looks closer he notices that about the elf's lips there is the glimmer of silver wire.

A mute servant for a silent master, he thinks slowly, and he considers it fitting.

A neat row of stitches clasps the elf's lips shut, and close to his neck the creature bends. He steps a fraction to the side and his eyes widen in amazement as he notices the spindly, arachnid barb that pierces clean through the elf's oesophagus, the needle-like sting running from some concealed sheath within the creature's gauzy robes.

The creature's eyes shimmer, the elf below it shudders and then falls limp once more, and an utterly inhuman whimper bleeds from behind his sewn shut lips.

"What... what are you doing?" he whispers, leaning forward to look even more closely as morbid curiosity suddenly grips him.

<feeding him>

Indeed, he sees the slight well of fluid where the barb disappears into the elf's skin, faintly he can see the flutter of the muscles in the elf's throat move in an approximation of swallowing. Hastily then he steps back: many foul things he has seen in his long years but this before him now is profoundly unsettling, and swiftly he concurs that a *lack* of alcohol is not aiding his diplomacy. Quickly he downs the remainders of his whiskey, and he feels the blissful prickle of the drink as it burns down his throat and the numb sense of renewed inebriation that sloshes through him a moment later.

"Well," he begins uncertainly, his voice slurring a little as a wave of drunkenness sweeps over him. "I'll... I'll leave you to your night, shall I? It was nice seeing you..."

<it was nice to see you too, Mairon> The voice scratches within his head as he turns about and leaves the creature to its activities.

He staggers back into the light, his head spinning as suddenly the roar of the hall washes over him once more. However, he is quickly distracted from his disorientation as a burly she-orc hails him, elbowing her way through the throng to greet him, and to draw him affably towards her table. Two overflowing goblets of wine she holds in her clawed hands, one of which once offered he politely accepts.

It would not do to refuse one of his master's most esteemed strategists on the very eve of their victory, and he would not have it said that their lieutenant was discourteous in the least.

The hours pass in a pleasant blur of wine and laughter and idle talk, filling him with a lightness he had long thought forgotten as the pure ardour of drink and music flows so splendidly through him. Ever he talks amongst the Valaraukar captains with an increasingly drunken enthusiasm and they listen with fervour to match, downing copious gallons of brandy and spiced rums, little rills of flame bursting along their arms with each gulp. Tevildo he joins for a while, the great cat lapping from a bowl of whiskey-laced cream kept refreshed by a trembling elf-maid, and while he declines cream in the cat's company he helps himself most heartily to the whiskey, and pleasantly they converse as the night rolls onwards.

At some point, propping himself awkwardly up between two large racks of lamb he glances over to his master sitting solitary upon his great throne. With an indulgent little thrill he realises that his master is staring at him, his golden eyes glimmering with faint humour at his current state and a wry smile curving gently across his handsome lips. Something stirs in the base of his stomach, something not entirely due to the flagon of wine he had perhaps unwisely been cajoled into chugging by a squadron of admiring orcs; its effects humming amiably inside of his skull as he feels the first trembles of desire wobble into life.

Intoxication nibbles away at his every inhibition but for a moment still he wavers. He pulls himself with some effort to his feet as the room spins dizzily before his eyes, but even as it shimmers into focus temptation swims with it; his master's lazy smile lingers ever in his mind. It is the softness of his lips, he thinks, or maybe the hot pant of his breath as they kissed, or the roll of his hips, the seductive purr of his voice as he whispered his name, as he commanded him to beg, the thrust of his master's length up inside him as he pinned him down and *fucked* him, every part of him set

roiling, shrieking in pleasure -

Such salubrious thoughts flash through his mind, longing ripples up inside of him, and with a sly certainty then he makes his decision.

Smoothly he sets aside his drink, his eyes lock brightly onto his master, who inclines his head slightly in response. One pointed incisor shows as teasingly his master bites his lip, and a hot flush of excitement courses through him at the sight. With as much delicacy as he can muster he begins to traverse the hall, benches and bodies both upright and fallen scattered haphazardly about like some crazed labyrinth. With pained caution he steps over a snoring orc, wincing a little in consternation as his leg wobbles perilously beneath him with the shift of his weight.

His surroundings blur and refocus as alcohol pounds its merry way through him with each footfall, and desperately he tries to keep himself on course as he picks his way to his master. A satisfying feeling of success rushes through him as cleanly he negotiates a throng of drunken orcs, he extricates himself from Langon's enthusiastic grasp as the herald pats him resoundingly on the back as he staggers his way past him with a jaunty smile.

So nearly he reaches the dais without mishap, he is so agonisingly close when a wolf darts out from beneath a nearby bench and licks amicably at his hand, its silver fur brushing against his legs as it seeks for a treat. But as the wolf winds through his legs his balance finally fails, and he tips unsteadily sideways with an embarrassed groan. In that split second of weightlessness he resigns himself to hitting the floor, praying only that somehow his master is not watching, that no one has just seen him make an utmost fool of himself.

But before he can hit the ground a set of pale hands catch him, with an ungraceful push they right him once more. He jerks in surprise, whirling around to discover his erstwhile saviour, gripping tightly to their wrist to steady himself as the hall dances before his eyes.

He blinks sharply as a young elf gazes back at him. A fearful glimmer shoots through the slave's watery green irises as he tries to scramble backwards; an expression of pure terror breaking over his face as he realises just whom it is that holds him.

But his hand clamps tightly around the elf's wrist, above the rusted manacle that adorns it so prettily already, and he yanks the elf closer, inspecting him as one would livestock. He grins as the elf trembles in his grip. Something sadistic bubbles up within him, some dark facet of desire flares into life and he pulls the elf yet nearer to him, in one fluid movement twining his right hand through the elf's roughly shorn hair. And how he exults in the moan of pain that bleeds from the elf's lips, the little sound rolling over the red bruises blossomed across the pale skin there like crushed cherries across alabaster.

With a fierce rush of triumph he jams his knee into the elf's back, propelling him into staggering movement towards the steps of the dais. The elf writhes in his grip, twisting even as his fingers knot tighter through his hair, half dragging him up the steps before pulling him up short before their master who sits ponderously upon the throne. His master's gaze rests curiously upon them, and he takes one long draught from the mug of liquor in his hand, a fey light simmering in his eyes.

Standing before the throne he inclines his head respectfully, before thrusting the elf pointedly towards his master. But as the elf stumbles forward he pulls him up short once more, eliciting from him a short gasp of pain. He steps up quickly behind him, his right hand reaching around the elf's shoulders to grasp his neck from the front, the elf's pulse thudding beneath his fingertips. A surge of intoxicated confidence runs through him, and from over the elf's trembling shoulder he grins at his master, with a playful curl to his voice enquiring, "Do you like him, my lord?"

His master regards him for a second, his eyes then narrowing as they sweep over the elf before flicking back to him, and looking at him quizzically.

“Little one, I am not sure that I grasp your meaning...”

“Do you *like* him, my lord?” he insists coyly, imploring his master to see, to appreciate his present, to help him play his little game.

“He is pleasing enough, Mairon, though I fail to see...”

As his master speaks a queer crush of emotions wells up in him, and he tightens his grip around the elf’s throat. He steps a little unsteadily around him to look his victim in the face, his silver eyes burning.

“Did you hear that, slave?” he whispers throatily, an evil smile curved across his lips. “My master thinks that you are fair...”

The elf remains silent, but beneath his fingertips his pulse hammers harder. He presses the elf closer to him, the tip of his nose ghosting over the curve of the elf’s ear as duskily he whispers, “Do you think yourself deserving of our... *attentions?*”

The elf’s jaw wavers, but still he does not respond. His eyes simply stare unfocusedly at the base of the throne. Subtly he switches his grip, sliding his hand down the elf’s throat, his fingertips skating over his clavicles. He pushes back the ragged lapels of the elf’s shirt to trail tender spirals across his sternum and finally he feels some reaction. The elf bucks in his grip, silently trying to push him away.

But to no avail, as he slides his grip lower, and looking across at his master lasciviously he breathes, “Do you not like us then, slave? Are we so beneath you? But we weary servants of Angband sometimes tire of shade and bitter toil...”

He pauses, one hissing breath draws seductively through his teeth, and naked lust unfurls within him as the elf whimpers in his grip, “...sometimes we longer for sweeter meats.”

With that he leans mischievously forward, his argent eyes lingering on his master’s face as slowly, sensuously he licks up the side of the elf’s neck. He arcs the elf backwards in his grip like some perverse puppeteer, glorying in the bolts of arousal that claw up from the base of his stomach. The elf cringes, his eyes squeeze tightly shut, his breath comes in ragged little gasps as he desperately tries not to cry. This toying for him is a torture worse than pain; a violation, a debasement of the *fëa*, and all too well his captor knows it.

He leans back a fraction, regarding the elf with merciless eyes. His free hand reaches up to stroke across the elf’s mouth, his thumb dragging hard against the elf’s lower lip as cruelly he smiles once more, revelling in the tiny whine that emanates from his victim. With an explosive flash the sensation of *power* swamps through him, and he tightens his grip upon the elf’s hair. This part of him, this sordid little part of him so long left dormant, so long forgotten under the sway of his master suddenly roars into life, and he remembers just how much he loves it. To be the dominant one, to be the possessor, the victor, his prey held so delicate and helpless in his hands.

But pride wars with duty within him, and for a moment then he falters. He will not so lightly abandon his master’s touch to pursue his own pleasures, and certainly his master would never let him touch him so. But no matter what he gained, no matter whatever fleeting joy he might rip out of his victim it would not be the same, it would not be right. The catalyst for his desire was his master, it is *always* his master, and beneath everything else that stupid, awful, irresistible craving

bleeds true.

Suddenly he snaps back into focus, he glaring with a feral intensity at the elf still gripped in his hands. A terrible light fills his silver eyes as he cocks his head in an unsettlingly bestial motion. With ferocious joy he watches as terror seeps back into those green irises, the elf shakes his head frantically, with every ounce of strength trying to throw himself backwards, away from his touch.

“No?” he whispers, the words hissing in burning puissance over his lips, “Is this a refusal, slave?”

Desperately the elf nods, and he snarls as frustration and anger and a million other pointless emotions seethe in his stomach. They writhe within him, and with a sudden growl he releases the elf, almost flinging him away. Before his prisoner can right himself he shoves hard against his chest, toppling the elf backwards down the steps of the dais to land with a clatter upon a tabletop, amid a score of plates and mugs that clang down to the floor.

Bitterly he chuckles as the air whistles out of the elf’s lungs, his unprotected back slamming into the wooden table; spitefully he laughs as the chorus of jeers arises from the assembly of still-conscious orcs, as a clawed hand drags the elf from the tabletop and drops him hard to the floor with a strangled yelp. He sneers as a steel-capped boot smashes into the elf’s solar plexus, a vindictive delight blazes in him as the elf retches, before he is hoisted up and shoved towards the barrel-masters once more, just another pathetic slave to crawl and toil and bleed for their pleasure.

With an acrid smirk he turns sharply on his heel, whirling back around to face his master. But even as he moves he feels his boot slide on a spilled drink, his heel slipping from beneath him and he teeters perilously atop the pinnacle of the dais. With a painful flash he realises that the eyes of the court still focus on him, and he feels the colour rise in his cheeks as he bites down the urge to scream; anger and pride twisted to embarrassment in one cruel stroke of fate.

But before he can quite fall, his motor skills rallying in fierce battle with inebriation within him, his master darts forward from the throne and snatches him backwards by the wrist. He flinches in surprise a split second before collapsing in an undignified heap atop his master, sprawling across his lap as they sink back into the throne. He blinks confusedly for a moment, the odd angle at which he lies is extremely disorientating; his master’s iridescent eyes hover above him, the edges of his irises blurring drunkenly into the raven sweep of his hair, into the tarnished mail of the elf impaled above them, into the clotted shadows hung about the ceiling like little shreds of night.

And just for a second he breathes it in: their proximity, their closeness melding in jarring harmony with the dregs of frustration still swirling in the pit of his stomach. But with them comes a fresh wave of intoxication buzzing inside his skull, it all meshes together in a confusing tangle of sensations within him until with a piercing jolt of clarity he realises where he is. Coldly he realises what he is doing, as his master stares down at him lying so improperly in his lap. Fumblingly he tries to gather himself, embarrassment shrieks through him as he unhooks his leg from where it curls over the arm of the throne. His hands scrabble against his master’s thighs for purchase so that he can sit up, he can apologise; shame and worry stabbing through him like a sudden knife through his innards.

After what seems like a lifetime he reaches a semi-balanced sitting position, perched gingerly upon his master’s thigh, his cheeks flushed crimson. He makes to move away, his hair falls in a straggly mess about his shoulders, but he scarcely moves an inch before his master winds his arm across his lower back, pinning him in place. He looks up in confusion, forcing himself to meet his master’s eyes despite the dread of what he might find there. He braces himself for whatever awful consequences his impropriety would wreak, but to his surprise he feels his master lean forward, pressing his forehead gently against his own.

His master's eyelashes flutter against his eyelids, sending legions of shivers crawling across his skin, and he dares not move; uncertainty and pleasure catching in equal measure within him.

And every hope he that has ever held within him comes crashing into brilliant fruition as his master lifts his chin, his hands moving to cradle the back of his head as his lips press against his own. His master kisses him firmly, deeply, his fingers twining through the blond streams of his hair as his master parts his lips, their tongues writhing together in slow, brutal passion. Their breath mingles in what tender little gasps he can manage as his master's lips crush dizzily against his own, and after what might have been seconds or centuries or millennia, a whooping cheer explodes from the crowd. Every mug in the hall still capable of being lifted rises in cheerful, drunken toast to their lords, a clamour of encouraging calls and applause bounces from the marble walls.

After a disbelieving moment he blushes. True joy unfurls in his chest, it prickles along the insides of his ribs as he pushes all the harder against his master, reaching up in turn to grasp the side of his neck, kissing him with every ounce of passion he has within him, every shred of his frustration and fear and sorrow and longing brought to bear into one perfect, aching action. So hard he wishes that it could never end, that it would never end, but at last he feels his master withdraw. Their hands soften their grips upon each other, fervid lust transmutes now to fond caresses, to sensuous little strokes that sent thrills of arousal rippling through him.

Gently his master looks at him, something akin to tenderness set glittering in his eyes like crucibles of molten gold. But beneath their façade a dare glimmers, a fantastical, roguish air shines there that nearly stops the breath in his lungs. His master stoops, and an instant later he moans in delight as a constellation of little kisses trail up his neck, his head tosses back in sheer elation.

"*Come, little one,*" his master purrs, and he almost squeaks in excitement as his master's lips touch some tender place along his jaw. He catches himself at the very last instant in an attempt to maintain a modicum of dignity, denying every instinct that screams at him just to collapse into his master's arms.

"*The night is ours. Let us go,*" his master murmurs, guiding him to his feet as he stands also, rearranging the crumpled folds of his robes. He feels his master's fingers knit through his own, and meekly he gives him one little squeeze, with a rush of delight hearing his master's tiny snort of laughter, gentle and teasing.

"*Gentlemen,*" his master announces suddenly, his rich voice addressing what remnants of his court remained conscious enough to hear him. "*Ladies. Exalted, valiant beings. My lieutenant and I take our leave of the festivities. We leave you to your celebrations. Long may they last.*"

A rousing cheer meets his master's words, and he smiles a little, looking out over the sea of drunken faces staring gaily back up at him. His master tugs at his hand and quickly they slide through the debris of the hall, his master steering his rather unsteady footsteps through the tangled mess. At the doors his master pauses, turning back to him suddenly, his eyes gleaming as a devious, stunning smile curves across his face.

And in return he smiles back up at him, squeezing his master's hand once more in encouragement, in permission even. Softly then his master chuckles, and pulls him swiftly forwards as together they retire to his master's chambers and whatever the night's pleasures should bring.

Aaaand [HERE](#) I link some utterly DIVINE fanart by the stunningly talented givenclarity <3

And [HERE](#) I link some more wonderful fanart by the incredible idahlrillion on tumblr, of a very drunk Mairon and a soon-to-be very unfortunate elf X)

Marks of Affection

The insistent crackle of a sheet of parchment being shoved beneath the door drags him so cruelly from a luxurious slumber. Reluctantly he uncurls himself, rolling over onto his back with a sigh. The black silken sheets slide over his bare skin; their soft ripples lull him back down into sleep. But once more the parchment shifts; the heavy paper fidgets against the flagstones with an irritating hiss and inwardly he groans, his eyelids so desperately wishing to remain shut. A grimace twists over his face as the paper slides again and without opening his eyes he reaches to his right, his hand groping over the sheets to nudge his master awake, this message so obviously meant for him.

But where he expects his master's form he finds only cold sheets. His fingers slip listlessly over the bare bedspread, its shaggy wolf-pelt top-cover flung back in a tangle near his feet. Mild confusion prompts his eyes to slit open and with a resigned little moan he slowly sits up in the bed, the sheets left pooling about his waist. With a lazy yawn he stretches, rolling his shoulders, listening to each tiny pop of his vertebrae as they flexed beneath his skin, the crackle of his shoulder blades left oddly sore from the night's exertions.

Groggily he peers about his master's room, and finding nothing untoward except for his master's absence, he delicately extricates his legs from the tangle of sheets. Weird memories of the past night swim through his mind, at once sudden and distant: rolling laughter slicked in alcohol, wide, dilated pupils had stared helplessly at him, an elf had quivered in his grip.

He winces as pain darts across his ribcage as he moves, as the impressions and half-remembered images still flicker through his mind. His master's kiss, his master's caresses and all of the ungraceful little grunts that they provoked, each squealing gasp punched over his lips as his master took him roughly, passionately, as his master's fingers knitted through his own as he thrust into him, as he squirmed in delight beneath him. With an indulgent smile he basks in those stolen memories, the ragged survivors of what the dryness of his mouth tells him was a rather heavy night of drinking. He swings himself around, his legs dangling off the edge of the bed as he considers congratulating himself on the noticeable lack of a hangover. That smug little victory reverberates within him, until an instant later his bare feet touch the floor.

The shock of the cool stone beneath his toes seems to trigger a legion of cramps to bolt up through him. His abdominal muscles clench involuntarily as he tries desperately not to retch while a swell of foul-tasting saliva bubbles up in the back of his throat. A war-hammer seems suddenly intent on smashing its way through his forehead, sending throbbing rivulets of pain radiating out from behind his eyes to his temples, and he reaches up to clutch at his aching head. He balances precariously on the edge of his master's bed for a short while, his head cradled protectively in his hands as carefully he tries to knead the pain away with his fingers. With every fibre of his being he concentrates on controlling his breath, fighting down the nausea that blooms afresh in his stomach with every miniscule movement.

Eventually he feels able to stand, and bracing himself he pushes upright, groaning as even that small movement sends pain thudding through his head. Blearily he casts about the room for his clothes: he was wearing clothes at some point last night, wasn't he?

After a few short moments, and no small twinge of worry he notes their absence, and more urgently he looks around for some better alternative. No matter his rank, he is *not* about to stride naked through Angband's corridors, at least not while reason possesses him. He rummages through the mess of sheets at the foot of the bed before finally pulling forth a crumpled black tunic, one

that he does not recognise as his own. He squints at it suspiciously for a moment, debating whether or not to take it should it be his master's before another pinprick of pain seems to burst like some unholy firework inside his skull.

Instantly any qualms he has are settled, he would apologise later to his master if need be, and he tugs it over his head. The thin material skates down his back; sending weird prickles racing in thin, burning lines across his ribs. He wriggles at the unpleasant sensation before staggering over to the door and collecting the offending sheet of parchment. In the dim light its scribbled words are hard to make out, but gradually they slide into focus as he squints at them.

Trouble with the guests. Assistance required. Clean yourself up, then present yourself to the dungeons.

(Dict. by M-)

He frowns a little in bewilderment, but for lack of any major objections resolves to do as instructed. He leaves his master's chambers, flitting back through the thankfully quiet corridors to his own rooms. Relief floods through him as he reaches his own doors a flight of stairs and a few corridor lengths distant: to be accosted in such a dishevelled state would have been an embarrassment to say the least. The borrowed tunic rides scandalously high up his thighs as he walks. Once safely contained in his chambers he strips off the tunic, eyeing himself distastefully in the floor-length mirror that stands opposite his bed. As he pulls the tunic over his head pain flickers once more over his back, and he twists before the mirror, peering over his shoulder to examine his reflection.

Deep scratches run outwards from the indentation of his spine, crossing his ribs in four parallel lines of scabbed, furrowed skin; a ruddy crimson raked through alabaster. And in a sudden flash of clarity he remembers how they got there: his master's nails raking across his back as he pressed into him with one final, savage thrust, his master's growl as he ground his hips further down, his master's waist gripped so tightly between his thighs as he pushed his master deeper up inside of him, as a glowing orb of gasping, screaming pleasure seemed to burst in the pit of his stomach.

Something flutters in his chest at the memory, some wonderful little part of him wriggles in delight, set purring in its surety. And afterwards the warmth of his master's arm had coiled firmly over his shoulders, his back pressed so snugly against his master's muscled chest as curled in his arms he sank down into a sweet, dreamless oblivion.

His lips quirk at the memory, and slowly he focuses once more on the mirror, his eyes running over his reflection in search of any other marks of his master's such avid affections. Blood-blisters cluster like dull cherries across his clavicle, and with the placid fascination of a sleepwalker he reaches up to touch them. Shivers prickle across his skin as once more he feels his master's teasing tongue, the myriad of little love-bites trailed over his chest, along his neck, his master's teeth nipping gently at his collarbones even as his fingers stroked up his leg, over his groin, sending waves of such giddy arousal crashing up through him...

He smiles crookedly at himself in the mirror before another explosion of pain crackles through his head, and reflexively he cringes, moaning at the sensation. He stumbles over to his wardrobe and dresses as quickly as he dares, tucking a billowy maroon shirt into a pair of dark breeches and pulling on a pair of leather boots. He moves back over to the mirror once more, dragging a comb through his sleep-mussed hair and eventually pulling it back into a high ponytail, which he secures with a thin band of leather that he finds so helpfully tucked into the pocket of his breeches. He peers at himself in the mirror once more, appraising his much more orderly, much more *lordly* attire. Certainly he presents a more palatable sight than when he stumbled through the door, but to him something still seems off, something subtly is wrong.

He fiddles with the collar of his shirt, angling it further shut so that it covers the marks across his clavicle. Whilst he cares little for the approval or otherwise of his subjects, it would not do to be quite so flagrant in revealing his and his master's nocturnal activities. Still something seems abnormal; he stares at himself until his reflection blurs in the mirror, and at last the slippery quality becomes apparent to him.

His eyes.

Some unknown quality shifts amid his silver irises, a darker striae swims amongst glittering argent, and urgently he blinks as if to clear it before regarding himself once more. Yet still the tiny imperfection lingers, and he rubs then at his eyes, but that only succeeds in exacerbating the dull thud within his head.

Through sheer effort of will he forsakes the tempting beckon of his bed and its promise of more sleep, and judging his vision to still be functional he leaves his eyes be. Instead he ventures off in search of his master, the crumpled note shoved inside of his pocket. He strides a fraction unsteadily through the corridors, squinting as the glare of each iron-bracketed torch flares blindingly bright in his eyes, pulsing in excruciating waves of pain inside of his skull. He moans inarticulately as he steps into the more well-lit of the fortress' walkways, even the frail, pallid light filtering through small, ash-speckled windows enough to set his eyes watering.

After a miserable trudge he reaches the lower floors, nearly flopping down a tightly spiralled staircase before rounding a corner into one of the main passages, and site of last night's revels. Instantly the mingled reek of unwashed orcs, blackened meat, staled mead and congealed blood hit him and he almost vomits then and there, his head pounding as the stench claws through his nostrils.

He staggers against a nearby pillar, pinching the bridge of his nose as a horrifying wave of nausea swells up within him, and he wills himself not to gag as sour bile sizzles up the back of his throat. After several slow, heaving breaths it bubbles back down and he hauls himself back upright, and after a second of contemplation lunges into the nearest side-corridor, one small destination of mercy fixed into his mind.

His master could wait, he decides. It would not be at all seemly to present himself in such a sorry state.

He treks through the winding passageways, morosely berating himself for being so reckless the night before, until after what seems like a lifetime he staggers through a narrow archway and into a small room. Shelves stock its narrow walls, brimming with countless pots and jars. Boxes of strange, trailing plants mingle with vials of murky liquids and pouches of verdant powders, but above all the reassuring smell of herbs filters through the air, at once pungent and refreshing. He inhales deeply, already feeling the worst of the nausea recede, but before he enters he peers warily about for the store's keeper.

Finding her absent, he enters and hastily searches amongst the vessels for the leather pouch he had last required some decades before following a particularly unwise boast made before one of his captains. It was probably Gothmog, he thinks peevishly. Somehow, on most of these occasions, it is always Gothmog who is at least partially responsible for his condition the next morning.

Occult knickknacks and singed beakers clink out of the way as he hunts almost elbow-deep within the bowels of a cobwebbed shelf that he thinks vaguely familiar, and he gropes his way through its dusty contents with his fingertips.

“Well, *good morning*, my lord.”

A sardonic voice sounds behind him and he whirls about, a jar of what looks suspiciously like eyeballs clutched in his hand. The herb-mistress stares amusedly at him, and he feels a faint flush of embarrassment creep up over his cheeks, caught like a child in some act of mischief. The herb-mistress regards him, her yellowish eyes flick over him with surgical precision despite her age. At once she notes the dark smudges beneath his eyes, the slight tremble of his arm still awkwardly holding the jar before she snorts with laughter, grinning knowingly at him with needle-like teeth long dulled with age. With unerring aim she reaches amongst the clutter about a metre to his right, pulling out a small pouch as he surreptitiously replaces the jar upon the shelf behind him. She unties its knotted drawstring and with some difficulty shakes out a portion of its contents into his bare palm.

A globule of sticky plant-matter oozes across his hand, and he looks at it disgustedly for a moment before catching her pointed and terrifyingly matriarchal glare. Bracing himself, he juggles it in his palm, and with a watery smile of appreciation tips it down his throat. He nearly gags at the cloying taste; the slippery, fibrous plant-matter seems to expulse an almost numbing sensation as he swallows. The herb-mistress tuts at him loudly as his elbow knocks against a vial of viscous liquid, nearly tipping it over as a sudden cough racks through him, the muscles in his neck flexing in an entirely involuntary motion as the herb slides its strange way down his throat.

With an affable frown she steps forward, shooing him from the room as if he were some miscreant orcling. He steps towards the doorway automatically before some little flare of indignation rises in him and he tries to splutter out a protest, but before he can muster his vocal cords to action he is bundled out of the door and finds himself back in the corridor. For a wild moment he considers going back, re-affirming his authority as lieutenant, as her *superior*, but the fancy passes. As the years of service had worn on the herb-mistress had gathered to herself a reputation for being cantankerous. But her skills far outweighed her temper as already he could feel his headache dying away, the nausea that twisted and rolled in his stomach beginning slowly to settle.

He walks back through the major passageways of the fortress, weaving through the debris of last night's celebrations strewn like rubble amongst the wide halls. The snoring forms of orcs lie spread-eagled about the floor, or slumped over benches amid scattered piles of plates and mugs. Wolves curl about their feet, nearby a Valarauka snores thunderously, propped up against an obsidian statue, his fiery wings flaring and simmering with each steady breath. Carefully he picks his way through the sleepers, nudging cracked platters out of his path and skirting around rather pungent stains left crusted over the obsidian floors.

Soft clinks of chain herald his passing, pale bodies scuttle for cover as he strides past them; the gaunt crew of exhausted slaves tasked with the clean-up efforts are so painfully unwilling to attract his attention, to heap further insult to their humiliation. But he pays them little heed, concerned rather with the message in his pocket, and after some minutes he reaches the staircase leading to the more subterranean parts of the fortress; the brood-sites, the slave-pens, the mines, and the dungeons. He trots down the stairs, marvelling at the effectiveness of that herb. His headache has utterly dissipated, and only the faintest of queasy sensations is left tingling in his stomach.

He presses on throughout the gloomy walkways, the smooth marble flooring of the ground levels of the fortress slowly giving way to cobbled flagstones, and his footsteps are the only sound to shatter the oppressive silence that reigns amid the shadows. Finally he reaches the dungeons proper, edging open the ironclad outer door and slipping inside.

Expecting some further instruction he lingers by the door for a few moments, but finding no one sent to greet him nor message left, he wanders further on, the blackness of the corridor punctuated only by a single guttering torch casting its flickering annulus over the stones. His boots tap softly against the cobbles as he walks and slowly other sounds begin to transmute through the static air;

faint moans, garbled words muffled by stone and steel, the distant, scraping grind of metal on a whetstone, the grating noise sending a shiver flitting up his spine. Still he encounters neither sight nor obvious sound of his master, nor the guards, nor *anybody* really, and for a moment he considers calling out and announcing himself properly.

He clears his throat, but before any words can come a side-door is suddenly flung open, and he jumps as the abrupt percussion slams through the silent corridor.

A harangued-looking orc rushes out; its cheeks flushed a ruddy hue beneath its slanted, ice blue eyes, the seven bird-skulls stitched over the shoulders of its rawhide jerkin marking it as a ranked officer of the dungeon guard. He moves towards it in greeting, but before he can even begin to ask why he has been summoned, a host of bandages, needles and other medical apparatus are thrust into his arms.

He blinks down at them in confusion, a second before the orc propels him by the elbow towards a distant door, rapidly gabbling in its snarled tones, "Apologies, my lord. There is little time. This is beyond our skill to heal, and the herb-mistress has had little effect. Our Lord has commanded that he must live, and we know not what more to do."

His brow crinkles in utter puzzlement and eventually he begins to form some sort of reply, of protest even: many talents he possesses, but he is no healer. But the orc ignores his hesitation, merely showing him into a cell with a worried frown before clicking the door shut behind him.

He lingers by the doorframe for a moment, his mind still struggling to comprehend what exactly is being asked of him, of *why* it is being asked of him, and a terrifying sense of uncertainty stirs in his mind. A strangled whimper jerks him from his speculations, and with an instinct honed by millennia of military experience his surroundings snap into focus.

Bare cobbles scrape over the stark cell, devoid of furnishings but for the rough-hewn stone bench at its centre, illuminated by a greasy oil lamp suspended from the ceiling. Tentatively he moves forward, setting down his array of medical paraphernalia atop the bench. As he does so, he catches sight of his charge, and his heart sinks in his chest.

Shrunkened into the corner of the room curls an elf, his bony knees clasped to his chin in a pitifully foetal position, his naked back and buttocks left raw with bloody weals pressed into the slimy stones beneath him. Shivers run visibly through the elf's skinny arms, his cropped hair lies matted and filthy about the sides of his face, framing eyes scrunched shut into sockets the colour of bruises.

Carefully he steps around the table, apprehension blooming in his stomach as he appraises the elf's obviously poor condition, and yet he holds himself warily, cautious of any unwise reactions to his presence. He approaches slowly, his eyes running over the elf's crumpled form and trying to by sight alone assess the extent of the damage.

Even as he draws nearer he cannot not deny the worry that kindles in him: the elf just lies there mutely, seemingly either unwilling or unable to acknowledge his proximity, and that he finds more than a little disconcerting. At the elf's side he crouches down, and as if attempting to stroke a feral dog he reaches cautiously out. His fingertips brush gingerly over the side of the elf's neck and he searches there for a pulse: despite his lack of expertise in extensive healing practises, this he is sure that he must do.

The muscles tighten in his arm, every instinct poised to jerk himself backwards if the need arises but though the elf flinches at his touch he does not protest, he does not move away. With surprising delicateness he tilts the elf's chin back, sliding his fingers under his jaw to better feel for his

heartbeat, and its faint flutter is barely tangible at all. With shocking weakness the elf's head lolls, and instinctively he moves to steady it, his right hand cupping around the elf's cheek as every muscle in the elf's neck falls slack, seemingly unable to support even his own slight frame.

And with that tiny movement the stench hits him, the sweet, rotted smell of congealed blood, and he recoils, nearly dropping the elf's head from where he held it. Revulsion ripples through him, and for a split second he toys with just snapping the elf's neck, the slender vertebrae scant millimetres from his fingertips, held so helplessly in his hand. It would be so easy, it would be a mercy, even, and he would not be so cruel as to forbid clemency where it was warranted.

Would he not, he wonders, the strange thought chiming unbidden through his mind. Yet he pushes it aside; his master's command hovers over him, and loath he remains to risk his master's displeasure. So resignedly he sets himself to his task. If nothing else he would try, and if he failed here then at least it would be pure, it wouldn't be because he was too *weak*, too sentimental.

He slips his right arm around the elf's back, ignoring the pathetic little spasms of muscle as the captive tries to writhe away from him, and swiftly he guides his left arm to hook beneath the elf's crooked knees. Smoothly he swings the near-unconscious elf into his arms before turning to lay him across the bench, gently stretching out his limbs under the dim light to better assess what is required of him.

Never would he make pretences of divinity, hardly would he proclaim himself an innocent, but upon seeing the elf's body so miserably exposed even he is prey to the treacherous stirrings of pity that well up inside of him. A huge gash rips over the elf's right pectoral muscle; choked with pus and blood all crusting together in some hideous, reeking conglomerate. The jagged edges of the wound shine nearly black in the dull light, the atrophied veins struggle away from such a corrupt epicentre, fading from turgid purple streaks under his skin into the flushed pinkish sheen of infection.

He sighs in dismay, his eyes skate over the rest of the elf's pitiable frame, with a rigid impassivity noting the myriad other lesions pattered into the elf's torso until he spies the elf's left hip. An unnatural hollow cleaves beneath the arc of his pelvis, the entire femur is visibly dislocated from its socket and the skin about it is left sallow with the trauma. With morbid curiosity he wonders how it has happened: what atrocity, what calculated humiliation had been performed. Even with his relative inexperience with anatomical proceedings he knows that it is far easier to shatter the hip than to dislocate it. The latter requires far more... *precision*.

Sensing no other life-threatening wounds upon the elf he takes a moment to compose himself, willing the uneasy shift of his emotions to still and to fade into tranquillity. He looks back to the jumble of equipment that he was so helpfully provided with, toying for a moment with a needle before setting it grimly aside. These wounds would require somewhat more than what mortal instruments could contribute. He checks one final time on the elf, who lies upon the borders of unconsciousness, his eyes roving deliriously beneath his closed eyelids.

He breathes in deeply, settling himself and over the coming minutes gathering what scant knowledge of these matters as he has, luring them to him, teasing them, and infusing them with power. It is not quite a spell of healing, never has he studied more than the basics in such craft, but instead he forges a spell of making and he hopes that it will suffice. Of organic assembly he thinks, into sealing, binding, growth and melding he pours forth his power. The thoughts flicker into words, they crackle over his lips as puissance flows through him, bubbling up from his chest as wilfully he channels it down his arms, feeling it spark at his fingertips like tiny bolts of lightning.

He waits for a moment for the spell to build, and then judging it ready gingerly he presses his

fingers against the elf's chest, just touching the edge of the wound over his pectoral muscle.

Suddenly the elf snaps back into consciousness, his back arcs in one scrabbling spasm as a wordless howl of pain rips out from his throat. Above, he jumps back in surprise, the spell dissipating from him as swiftly he recovers and leans across the elf to pin him in place, his left forearm pressing down over the elf's left shoulder in an attempt to hold him still. The elf's green eyes stare unfocusedly upwards, and hovering above him he solemnly captures the elf's sightline, leaning into him in what awful mimicry of comfort that he could muster.

"Lie still," he says firmly, but not unkindly, his voice echoing in low susurrus around the dank cell.

The elf whines beneath him; a thin, reedy moan emanates from his throat as his eyes roll back into his head, the muscles of his neck flexing in grotesque wrenches beneath his skin. Once again little sparks of pity flare in the base of his stomach, some instinctive, unexplainable part of him hesitates for just that tiny moment, and he grimaces in frustration as he stares down at the elf; viciously he tries to shake that feeling away. Again he collects himself, he twists those uneasy little prickles into a coil of power that pulses up through him, burning at the base of his sternum as the spell flashes again through his mind. And once more he reaches down, the fingertips of his right hand just brushing the inner edge of the wound. But suddenly a pale hand wraps around his wrist, torn fingernails bite into his skin, and he halts as a broken, breathy whisper shivers through the room.

"No, p-please... Don't. Just leave it. Please, please... it hurts..."

He flinches as those horrifying sparks of pity re-assert themselves, but with them this time little splinters of anger burst into life. For a split second he pauses, the emotions mingle in a confusing rush inside of him. He isn't supposed to feel this way, he isn't supposed to feel *anything*: the elf is a prisoner, a slave; *he is nothing*, and yet somehow sympathy worms its perilous tendrils through him. But for the moment at least anger gains the mastery of him, and with a growl of irritation he twists free of the elf's grip. The elf's fingers twitch in their sudden emptiness, falling limply back against his wasted chest.

"Please... d-don't... just *l-leave me alone*..."

For a traitorous moment the fantasy of disobedience grips him. He could just end it, just snap the elf's neck now and have done with it, be rid of him and all of the discomfort that he breeds. But cruelly he remembers what has happened before, he remembers the price of his failure: the scars of insubordination stud into his arms, they knot across his back. His lip curls and he pushes the elf down once more, grinding his shoulder blade into the bench top, the veins rising in his arms with the force of it.

"I cannot," he snarls, but even to himself the words sound pathetic. "This is willed by an authority higher than mine."

He feels the elf quiver beneath him, he feels the sobs jerk through the elf's torso as he blinks up at him beseechingly, such fervent, hopeless tears glimmering in his eyes, spilling down his cheeks. With brittle calm he ignores them, his left hand clamping down over the elf's clavicle as with the other he traces over the wound, all of the power within in his body suddenly summoned and an instant later shoved through his fingertips in one explosive, blistering torrent.

Skin re-knits in seething knots of translucent flesh, and he strains as the elf bucks and screams below him, viciously he pinions the elf to the table to stop him from slipping free. The stench of burning flesh fills the cell, the infection purges beneath his fingertips, it is scorched away into foul puffs of smoke. Surely it is crude, it is flesh-craft more than it is healing but it is effective: the

edges of the wound slowly close, they melt shut into a twisted line of scar tissue.

After some minutes he appraises his work, stemming the flow of power from his fingertips left tingling with the force of his spell. A great scar lances across the elf's chest yet the skin runs clean, and below it the sick flush of infection fades into mere physical trauma. The elf shudders beneath him, a sheen of icy sweat beading over his body, the tremors of such violent sorcery ripping uncontrollably through every muscle, seizing every vein; and yet a surge of uneasy, indecisive pride flows through him. The elf will live, of that he is sure, but somehow he cannot quite exult in that triumph.

Wearily he straightens, releasing the elf's shoulder, but his prisoner scarcely seems to notice as he moves around his prone form, eyeing his hip with aversion. He investigates the elf's leg, prodding gently at his upper thigh and pauses as the elf yelps; a hideous squeal is sent ricocheting about the cell's walls. He moves his touch higher, this time running his hand over the side of the elf's stomach, feeling the slide of emaciated muscle beneath his sweaty skin and once again the elf screeches as his hand brushes near his hipbone.

He sighs, before quickly uttering a few sharp syllables, in a mixed act of mercy and self-gratification forcing the elf down into blank unconsciousness. For a few moments he waits, watching as the elf's muscles slowly unclench and all the while eyeing his hip in consternation. There would be no clever way to do this, no cunning spell that he could weave save that of brute physical force, and he steels himself for the unpleasant task to come.

He grasps the elf's waist tightly with his left hand, his right curls about the back of the elf's knee and he rolls his shoulders in preparation. He builds himself up to it; he almost gives himself an encouraging internal speech as his fingers drum against the elf's inner knee with nervous adrenaline.

And with one final, steadying breath he wrenches the elf's leg upwards as hard as he can in one fluid, brutal motion. Tendons squeal under the pressure, he can feel bones grate through the elf's pelvis until with a shuddering pop he feels the elf's femur re-unite with its socket. An audible crunch echoes about the cell, and a ripple of sheer revulsion swells through him as he *feels* the percussion of the shock under his fingertips.

Gratefully he releases his grip on the elf, flexing his fingers in some unconscious desire to rid himself of that hideous sensation, of the shift of bone so crudely manipulated under flesh. He stalks back around the table, checking over the elf's body for any other life-threatening abrasions that he might have missed and to his relief he finds none that are apparent. He sorts amid the bundle of supplies, pulling out a jar of foul-smelling tincture, and with what impassivity he can manage he smears the greenish jelly over the worst of the elf's remaining cuts, a feeble safeguard at further infection at the least.

Yet as swiftly as he works, he is not quick enough to escape the unease that once more worms its way back into him. Little maggots of disquiet gnaw under his skin; insidious, cancerous, and dragging with them things he would sooner forget. Because so vividly he remembers those days curled up in agony, the healers fussing over him; that pounding misery, the bitter fear that bled its way through him, the loneliness, the helplessness, the *betrayal* as his master just stood there, just stood there beneath him, smiling.

And at that memory, that burning, shameful, awful memory blistered into his mind, anger flares in him once more, and it burns this time the brighter. He knows that it is stupid, he knows that it is futile, this sense of self-righteous justice so long left to simmer now set ablaze over what? A broken toy, a whimpering slave of all the wretched things under the sun to truly shake him, but

shake him the elf has irrevocably done. The elf's feeble cries weave nothing but useless strings of sentimentality, but within them the lethal slivers of himself are irrevocably twined.

So desperately he tries to stamp those feelings back down, to forget them, to just let them go. Let those days of pain be buried under the silts of time and just *move on*, he thinks. Forget what his master has done to him, ignore what deep down he is so terrified that it might mean...

He slams the jar down, his fingers shaking, and for a moment he closes his eyes. The breath slides uneasily through his lungs. Because in that awful, truthful moment he cannot bear it, he cannot bear to see this elf lying there so vulnerably before him; this nameless slave left so hollow, so mangled and limp and bruised at the command of his master but still forced to continue, forced to endure and live and breathe through all of his agony.

Because how is he so different?

Every aching little doubt, every sneaking suspicion that has ever flitted through his dreams now claws their sneering way up through him. They sow in him their frustration; they spit their truths, their lies, their *ambiguities*. And perhaps it is the subtle knife that twists the hardest in his guts, the honest blade and all the fear that grips the hilt.

Because he is more than that, isn't he?

He is more than just a toy to be abused, to be broken and remade and then cleaved open anew. More than just his master's whore to be petted and fucked and thrown aside when his master is bored of him.

He is more than that.

He has to be. He *was*. He *is*.

Isn't he?

It is that voice of tremulous desperation that spurs him on, uncertainty wrenches to such stinging finality within him as quickly he straightens, a scowl twisting over his features as he appraises the elf one last time. Judging him to be fit, he stalks towards the door and flings it open, his boots clicking in taut, staccato rhythm against the uneven flagstone as he prowls down the corridor. Indignation bristles in his every movement and as he passes he whacks on the door to the guardroom with the palm of his hand, signalling his termination with the prisoner and for the orcs to deliver him back to whatever miserable fate is assigned to him.

The impact jars up his arm and he grimaces; it only fuels the bitterness that burns within his chest, the acidic pressure that throbs in his temples. After a few more strides he reaches the final door, every intuition shrieking at him that behind it his master lurks with all his manipulations, with all of his lies; for the first time in centuries perhaps lain before him in truth.

He reaches out for the handle as a piercing squeal reverberates through the metal, a feral scream of such anguish that it set his teeth on edge, and sets tiny curls of caution to resound with sage warning within him. He shoves them down through brutal force of will; he drowns them out in cold, brittle fury. The bruises on the elf's thighs he takes as just another stark reminder of his own humiliations, the half faded lacerations around the elf's neck such a vicious remembrance of his own entrapment, and he clings to that disgust as it unfurls within him.

No, he is more than this.

He is more than just a slave, and he will make his master see it.

He will not prostitute everything that he is to satisfy the capricious whims of his master. Not again. That was not the oath that he swore all those years ago, and loath he is to recognise that perhaps it is not the same anymore, that perhaps the definitions of loyalty have changed with feelings and with the wearing of the long years. But anger blinds him to that possibility, and he steels himself. He would not back down from this, he would have this out with his master now; this crush of pride and lust and anger and fear perhaps millennia slow in its coming but now stoked to a crux.

With one sharp breath he shoves the door open, before striding into the murky darkness within, ready to confront his master and face whatever should come after.

EDIT: Check out this [absolutely gorgeous piece of fanart](#) done by the mighty morphym37 on Tumblr! Warning: a bit NSFW for gore!

The Truth of You

Quickly he strides through the door, and it slams shut behind him with a thud that throbs through the stifled air. The gloom weighs heavy in his eyes, and without really bothering to look at his surrounds he opens his mouth. The air hisses sharply over his teeth as the words surge up in his throat: everything he wanted to say, everything feeling of betrayal and doubt and blame left to simmer for millennia now ignites, now is set ablaze.

But his initial inhalation fails in its poignancy; it transmutes rather to a strangled cough as the stench of blood and urine and curdled fear lances through his nostrils, and an unpleasant sensation of nausea wafts through him. His eyes smart, and blinking hard to clear them he peers around in dismay, all of that anger arresting within him in one sick moment of astonishment.

A pile of bodies lies crumpled in the corner of the chamber, all torn and mutilated. Disembodied limbs wilt like barren branches; they are strewn over torsos that are scarcely recognisable as humanoid anymore, all mangled flesh and broken shards of bone. High above the macabre cairn a figure dangles, hung from the ceiling in manacles of blackened steel and faint surprise ripples through him as he eyes the figure more closely.

A stubbly blond beard shadows over the seemingly unconscious prisoner's jaw, its hue matching the fall of greasy hair that tangles over his broad shoulders. Distastefully he turns away from the man, for a man he surely must be: no elf possesses so deep a chest or such thickset limbs. A rarity indeed then: such guests are typically fleeting within Angband's halls.

But where before he might have marvelled, such novelties hold little sway over him now. His quarry lies elsewhere.

He turns slowly to his left and his eyes finally settle upon his master with a sharp pulse of adrenaline. Yet his master does not acknowledge him, he glowers instead over an elf secured wrist, waist and ankle to a great wooden cross set into the far corner of the room. The elf's head lolls across his naked chest; his dark skin is marked with bruises like smears of coal dust. A thin line of pinkish saliva shines upon his split lip, and the dull droplets throw back the torchlight in muted, ghostly pallor.

At the sight of the elf his lip curls, and he must make some sort of noise for suddenly his master swings around, transfixing him with an alien stare, his golden eyes like great crucibles of flame. A stiletto blade shimmers in his hand, its cold steel tapering to a needle-thin point already dotted with ruby droplets along its edge.

His master stares at him a moment longer, until with a disinterested air he twists back around to face the elf, regarding him with a calculating smirk. And in one quick, brutal motion his master seizes the elf's left hand and stabs the pointed blade beneath the nail of the elf's forefinger, the tip burying two clean inches into the wood of the cross beneath it.

For one tremulous second there is silence; such pure, shivering silence until with what is almost a relief the elf howls, the muscles in his arms knotting as they strain against the thick leather straps that hold them. Desperately the elf tries to twist his finger free of the knife, but to no avail, and his breath gradually subsides into pained little gasps as the initial shock of that impact fades.

"Where is your lord?"

His master's voice slides like oiled steel through the elf's erratic breathing and at once the elf

clamps his mouth shut, his jaw locking tight in defiance. His master sighs once more before reaching up to tap the hilt of the knife. Each new impact into such sensitive skin causes the elf to hiss in parallel rhythm; beads of sweat break upon the elf's forehead with the effort of remaining silent, but somehow still he manages it. With a bored sigh his master grasps the stiletto's hilt fully and with measured ease begins to twist it, each rotation digging deeper and deeper into raw flesh, the elf's fingernail showing white and bloodless with the pressure beneath it.

The elf squirms in his bonds, every muscle in his body tensing as delicately, delightfully his master tilts the blade upwards, slowly levering the elf's fingernail from its bed in a squirt of dark blood, and every vein in the elf's neck stands bold under his skin as he bites back a scream.

His master withdraws the knife, inch by agonising inch sliding it free of the elf's ruined fingertip, before driving it under the nail of his adjacent middle finger, its hilt left quivering in the air as the blade pierces through flesh, nail and wood alike.

"I will ask you but once more, elfling. Where is the Hidden City? Where is your lord?"

Still the elf does not reply, his jaw clenches proudly and a contemptuous look creeps into his dark eyes. His master frowns before wrenching free the stiletto, flinging it aside with a metallic clatter that even at a distance sends shivers running up his spine.

For he has seen this before; this fluid annoyance, his master's wrath subsumed into guile, into something soft and treacherous, and behind every subtle movement his master makes a veiled malice burns. He knows that he should step forward, he knows that he should intervene for his own sake, if he is going to cling to this mood of provoked ire then he should complain here and now but somehow he doesn't, he can't; some morbid fascination compels him to stay by the door as mute observer to his master's actions.

With a beatific smile his master runs a fingernail along the underside of the elf's jaw, his thumb brushing over the elf's cheek, exulting in every tremble of muscle, the tiny whimper of fear that forces its way from the elf's throat. His master cups the prisoner's chin with both hands now, tenderly at first but then harder, his thumbs digging into the elf's cheeks, dragging inwards over his cheekbones in aching lines of bruised flesh. Once more his master smiles in such an awful parody of reassurance, and suddenly he slides his hands upwards, gripping the elf tightly around the skull as his thumbs press into his eyeballs.

For one horrifying moment the image blooms static in his eyes: the vicious grin torn across his master's face, the clench of muscles in his hands, in his arms as he pressed inwards, the wordless cry of the elf in its shuddering inception. Disbelief and revulsion swirl inside of him, and beneath them something else stirs, some stupid, sordid part of him that he tries so hard to ignore, to push back down trembles into life as well. It twists in his stomach and with that tiny reaction everything seems to snap back into motion, and with a sickeningly audible pop the elf's eyeballs rupture.

His master's thumbs sink knuckle-deep into the captive's skull in a spurt of blood and watery spray. Beneath him the elf shrieks, desperately trying all too late to wrench his head free, every muscle in his body strained taut as he writhes against his bonds. At last his master withdraws his fingers, leaving trails of vitreous humour leaking down the elf's face like obscene tears: globulous, white chunks of eye-matter sliding amid the crimson wreckage.

With a satisfied smirk his master reaches up, wiping his hands free of what gore clings to them across the elf's chest. Little smears of viscera glisten in the torchlight as the elf shudders, his harsh, choking sobs echoing chilly through the chamber.

His master steps aside, and plucking a serrated knife from within his robes swiftly severs the

leather bonds that secure the elf to the cross, sending the prisoner tumbling to the floor in an ungainly collapse. The elf's hands scrabble at his ruined eyes, and blindly he shakes his head as if to clear it, as if by some act of movement he could restore his sight, he could undo what had been so senselessly done.

After a few fervid moments the elf subsides into quiet, curling himself up as best he can by the wall. The heels of his palms press against his bruised cheekbones, his hands cradle the enucleated sockets of his eyes even as fresh gobbets of mangled vitrea slide through his fingers, they drip down his forearms in bloodied rivulets. And oh how the elf *keens*, in a noise so inhuman, so broken that even he shifts uncomfortably, his fingers unconsciously fiddling with the edge of his sleeve as those awful cries ricochet around the chamber.

Yet still he remains motionless, paralysed by the roil of emotions that flip and turn through his innards, by the terrible certainty that the performance was not yet over. With some mute, indeterminate emotion he watches as his master steps over to the elf, languidly crouching down before him.

Amid the elf's sobs, amid his indistinguishable noises of anguish slowly words begin to coalesce, and stumbling and halting they are but they come anyway, pushed over lips half numb with shock.

"K-kill me..."

It was scarcely a gurgle, just a mumbled smash of syllables and with a cruel theatricality his master leans further forward, cocking his head as with a nauseating innocence he purrs, "*Come again?*"

"Please..." the elf moans, "please, kill me... please..."

A thin sneer curls over his master's lips and quickly he stands, his left hand yanking the elf up by his hair as his right snakes around his throat, pinning him awkwardly backwards against an arm of the crossbeam. The elf's feet scrabble for grip on the blood-slicked stones beneath him, in useless effort he twists within his master's grip, who holds him with an irritated patience until the fight bleeds out of him and he calms, limply hanging within his master's grasp.

"*Please...*" the elf begs once more, beseeching and forlorn, a last appeal to whatever vestige of mercy he might hope resides still within his master. But his pleas are made in vain, and maybe if it had been him holding the elf there then maybe he would have done differently, but at this moment the elf's fate is beyond his control.

His master just pulls the elf close, his fiery golden eyes staring into bloodied, empty sockets, and with such venomous simplicity that it makes the hair prickle on the back of his neck his master whispers, "*No.*"

His master drops the elf to the floor once again, who cringes back against the wall, curling up in such wretched misery against the slate tiles. And at last the moment seems right, the breath unsticks from his throat and he looks sharply over at his master, those familiar splinters of anger and betrayal flaring back into life once more.

He watches his master move, sauntering over to the elf once more and something knots in his stomach, every instinct screams at him to act. It is going to be now or it would be never, and quicker than conscious thought, before he even knows what it is he is going to do he lunges across the room and plants himself firmly between his master and the elf.

He glares up at his master, who looks back at him in utter surprise as he stands his ground.

“My lord,” he says icily, “what is the meaning of this?”

“*This is torture, Mairon,*” his master retorts snappily, displeasure bristling through his usually smooth voice. “*I should think that after all this time you would recognise it when you see it.*”

“I recognise it well, my lord, but at times I struggle to discern its purpose, or its long-term utility.” His master squints at him uncomprehendingly, and pressing his momentary advantage he continues, “So what was that, then? That other slave, the one that you wished me to save?”

“*Did you do it?*”

“Well, yes...” he begins, taken aback by such an abrupt question. “But... my lord, I...”

The words clot in his throat, all of that anger, all of that awful damning doubt is in that moment just so difficult to articulate. Because it wasn't true, it *isn't* true, and so hard he wants to believe in his own assertions.

But what if it is true?

And in that moment of decision all of those tiny needles of doubt wrench back around to impale him. Because he doesn't want to hear it, he doesn't want to ask just in case he is wrong, in case his master says those fatal words that would turn all of his fantasies, all of his self-spun beguilement to cold, brutal truths. It would gut the comfort of mere suspicion and shove reality down his throat.

So even now he hesitates, and to his horror he feels that ire slipping from him. Maybe the pretence is better, he thinks, the ignorance of it is so much easier, and slowly that self-righteous fury evaporates within him. But it's not better, it's *not*; and desperately, angrily he glares at his master, he gropes within himself for those puissant emotions once more but slowly they ebb away, and in their wake flows nothing but numbness.

“... I...”

“*Then I do not see the issue, Mairon.*”

His master glances at the elf behind him, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

“*Take that snivelling creature away from here. Put him to work in the mines, or the kitchens if you will.*”

With that his master moves aside, and automatically he begins to turn around, the instinct to obey so deeply ingrained in him that he cannot help but to follow his master's command. But as he moves, some last vestige of stubbornness grips him. Facing away from his master he halts, his hands clench tightly into fists at his sides to still the trembling of his fingers.

“No.”

It is as if the sound has bled from the air, with nothing but the dull throb of his heartbeat left to shatter that deafening silence.

“*What?*” His master's voice drops perilously low, and behind him he hears his master turn back around, he feels the weight of his master's eyes boring into his back. Through sheer force of will he remains immobile, he stamps down the urge to just crumple, to swing back around and apologise, to wave away his disobedience as momentary disillusion and just comply.

It would be so much easier, it would be so much kinder, and for a moment that temptation beckons

to him. But angrily he shoves it aside: he has cast his lot and he will stand by it, even as his master hisses, *“What did you say?”*

He can hear the incredulous note swimming through his master’s voice, and tightly he clings to that lifeline, that quavering reassurance that he is doing something that matters, the tiny hope that he can make his master understand. Buoyed by that little spark of confidence he turns around, his eyes locking onto his master and for the first time he is undaunted as bitter rancour suffuses him and roots him to the spot.

“I said, no,” he repeats, each syllable spat in clipped elocution as proudly he draws himself up. “Do it yourself, if you will, but I will have no part in it.”

His master’s eyes narrow, his eyebrows sloping together in a sceptical frown.

“You will not, Mairon? Since when do you care for the fortunes of our guests?”

And in that inexplicable instant his resolve wavers, the words still won’t come. How could he even *begin* to explain it, and in the absence of words a searing wave of frustration washes over him.

Sullenly he shrugs, and even to himself it seems a sorry effort, this inability to express himself; this failure, this weakness. Yet even as he tries to gather himself his master seizes upon his moment of hesitation, pushing him aside to grasp the elf about the upper arm, in one tug hauling the prisoner to his feet. He freezes as his master manhandles the elf, his breath hisses uneasily through his teeth as the metallic reek of blood hits his nostrils anew, as his master pushes the elf’s ruined face into his own. Instinctively he looks away; revulsion is left mingling with some other, deeper emotion in the pit of his stomach.

“This is a slave, Mairon,” his master growls, one hand clamped around the back of the elf’s neck and forcing his beaten face ever more into his own. He steels himself, he will not back down from this, not now, not again, and rigidly he holds himself still. Every muscle in his neck and shoulders strains with the effort of not moving, with the effort of impassivity.

“Look at him,” his master hisses, and amid his words he feels the crackle of power. Against his will he feels his head begin to rise, the muscles in his neck shudder into involuntary motion as his master’s spirit overpowers his own, as it forces him to bear witness to their actions, to his *inactions*.

Through slitted eyes he regards the elf’s bloodied face, those gaping sockets like the accusing marks of his atrocities, guilt stitched into every ragged end of viscera that hangs within those ruined orbits. And he wants to look away, he wants to deny it, but his master’s will holds him firmly, keeping his gaze locked onto the elf.

But beneath his master’s command something else flows, some tiny, uncontrollable part of himself unfurls, to his horror twining with his master’s will and only binding him further.

“This is a slave, Mairon. This is but a piece of meat. He is mine to do with what I choose, as you are mine to command as I see fit.”

Held so tightly in his master’s grip he can do little to protest even as his master’s words grate through him. But somehow he manages to grit his teeth, the muscles in his jaw flex in what feeble display of defiance he can muster as his master’s power clamps like a strangling vice around him.

“Oh, but you do not think so?”

He grunts in response, the rather ineloquent sound forces from between his jaws locked tightly

together. An instant later his master's pressure disappears, and the muscles in his upper body sag in relief as their *rigor* is nullified. He works his jaw, silently unknitting the tension that coils there as his master stares scornfully down at him.

"A little late in the day for objections, is it not?" his master sneers.

His master releases his grip on the elf, who slumps to the floor with a dull moan of pain. He swallows hard, wetting his tongue for what ugly truths he would finally have to vocalise, and yet *still* he hesitates. Mistrust and anger and a million other emotions all coat themselves in doubt, in that awful, squirming fear of what his words might unleash, what they might uncover.

So still he pauses, and he wants to scream at himself for doing so but he just can't do it, it is just better to pretend, it is just better to accept his master for what he is and to just forget it, just bury it...

"Mairon," his master says drily, *"this reticence is beginning to bore me. State your piece, or let it go."*

The silence pervades for a few crawling seconds longer, until with one shuddering breath at last his resolve solidifies, and he looks up at his master. Say it, he urges himself, just say it, just spit it out. He draws himself up to his full height, his silver eyes hold his master calmly within his gaze: just do it, do it now. And with a forced smile; come on, this stalling is pathetic even for *you*, he begins.

"I... my lord, I just..." The words stumble in all of their awkwardness over his lips. *"How am I so different? You... you've done things to me, you've hurt me... you - you've forced me, and I just... These slaves... I..."*

He trails off lamely, his heart hammering at the base of his throat, and every halting word he might have said withers upon his lips as he sees the expression breaking across his master's face.

Naked disgust burns behind his master's eyes. His gaze almost has the power to corrode.

"Really, Mairon?" his master growls. *"You think that I have treated you cruelly? You think that I have treated you like them?"*

With the words still glistening on his lips his master turns, abruptly slamming his boot down onto the elf still laying curled at their feet. And so uncomfortably he stands there, already regretting even opening his mouth as beneath that thudding impact he hears the unmistakable crack of bone. A millisecond later a hideous squeal punches out of the elf's throat; all the air in his lungs reels out of his body with that one kick.

"I have administered punishment where punishment was due..."

His master's boot grinds further into the elf's ribcage, and through the elf's cries of pain he all he can hear is the splinter of bone, slow and unrelenting, until with one final, vicious stamp the elf's ribcage buckles completely.

"... and I have given reward where valiant service was offered, or where I saw fit to indulge you. You would accuse me of being unfair?"

And he knows his master is saying something, he knows that maybe it is important, but in that moment he just can't focus. Like a sleepwalker snared in some dreadful nightmare he just stares down at the elf, both horrified and entranced. For beneath that numbness something else bursts into life within him, some awful throbbing thing croons to him as the elf splutters. It *revels* as blood blisters over the elf's lips, its dark heat wars with the insipid cold that seeps through him.

Those two forces collide sickeningly inside his stomach, at once flurried and languid, jagged yet slick. A legion of shivers like little pricking beetles crawl over his skin, and he can't look away, he can't move, he can't do anything; that whirling knot of emotion paralyses him until its conclusion should be reached.

His master sneers, watching him struggle with derisive attention until with the point of his boot he flips the nearly unconscious elf over onto his back, utterly exposing his atrophied, bruise-mottled chest and the ruined sockets of his eyes. With such devastating impassivity his master sets the flat of his boot over the elf's throat, with such excruciating docility he begins to tread slowly downwards, the elf's dark skin flushing as pitifully he gasps for air.

The seconds drag so painfully by as feebly the elf's arms slip against the cold stones, slender fingers twitch erratically, and somehow looking down he knows that the elf's eyes would be rolling back in his head if they could. He watches the tremors of shock jerk through the elf's body, setting waves of some far worse emotion to roll through him, hateful little ripples of such vile delight charm him.

His master eyes him distastefully, and in a voice that nearly curdles the blood within his veins asks, *"Still trying to play the victim, Mairon?"*

At last his master releases the elf's throat, he steps back with an air of easy imperiousness. The elf shudders at his feet; whooping, choking gasps rattle through his crushed windpipe as so desperately he tries to suck air back into his punctured lungs.

He does not react, he is not sure *how* to react, what self-righteous anger he had felt before now blends with pity, with hatred, with that other, awful thing that he doesn't even want to think about, that he wouldn't even give name to. So he stares bitterly back at his master, who arches an eyebrow at him, and with a cruel smile steps towards the elf once more.

And perhaps that is the catalyst, that insufferable smile curved over his master's face suddenly all too much to bear, and before his master's footfall can land he darts forward. A blinding purpose now fills him and he slams his heel down onto the elf's exposed neck, every ounce of his body weight dropped behind that one clean blow. The crunch of vertebrae reverberates around the chamber, and as the elf falls limp the tiniest sense of relief flows through him.

If nothing else, he has spared him whatever his master would have done, whatever new torture would have been inflicted just for his sake, to so cruelly reinforce those lessons branded into him time and time again. He has spared the elf that indignity, at the least.

He hears his master tut and swiftly he turns around to face him, his shoulders squared, bracing himself for whatever consequences should follow that strident act of insubordination. But where he expects wrath he finds only dissonance, as his master sighs, *"Mairon, this is the basest of sentimentalities. I have not known you to show pity where it was unmerited, and I would not expect it of you now."*

He shifts in discomfort, and his master's words slip over him like a noose slowly tightened around his neck.

"Ever you try to be the hero. You try to appear valiant, the lord untouchable in his purity, incorruptible in his duty. The mighty lieutenant who will countenance disobedience with punishment, as is fair, as is right, as is befitting of his station. But it is pure, it is swift and it is just and the lieutenant takes no pleasure in its administration, he sees it through with cold, clinical impassivity."

He opens his mouth to retort, to say something, anything, but before he can his master lunges forward, slamming him up against the wall. The back of his head hits the slate with a ringing thud that sends sparkles flashing across his vision. His master stands over him, his left hand grasped around his shoulder, pinning him uncomfortably in place.

“But I think we both know that’s not quite true.”

“No!” he protests, squirming in his master’s grip before he is shoved roughly back into the wall. His master’s face pushes into his, those golden eyes like incandescent orbs of writhing, oily flames.

“Was it all so hateful, Mairon?” his master snarls, the bass frequency of his voice seeming to hum through his chest. *“Did you ever cringe, did you ever truly shirk from the task that was set to you?”*

“N-no...”

“Did you ever protest?”

“No.” With an awful inevitability he senses where his master is leading him, twisting his own words around to snare him, and as always he cannot stop it. It is his fault; it is *always* his fault and

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“Did you ever refuse?”

“... No.”

“Then do not make pretences of your innocence to me.”

And like a leak in a dam finally failing to hold back the flood, shame swamps through him, and he turns his head aside. Balefully he glares at the shadows clotted in the corner of the room as his master’s words carve their bitter way through him.

“Blood drips through your fingers, just as it does mine. It shines there like sin. But it runs deeper than that, doesn’t it, Mairon? It cuts right down to the bone. It’s that truth that slides amid your words, that truth that burns in your eyes no matter how much you would deny it.”

You think I do not differentiate you from them? I do not have to. You possess that within yourself; your value, your self-worth is not for me to determine, nor can it ever be. You blame me because you will not face yourself, you won’t admit the truth of you. You won’t admit that you enjoy it.”

“No!” The word tears itself from his lips like some primal instinct, and it feels like someone is ripping out a part of him, in slow brutal agony dragging everything that he would hide out staggering into the light.

“Stop lying, Mairon!” his master snaps, his hand clamping tighter around his shoulder, grinding his back into the wall. *“Stop lying to yourself. You think that this petty self-delusion absolves you? You pick up the knives that I give you, you take them and you twist them and you carve your pretty little soul into other people’s flesh, and you like it. Gross delight seethes under what disgust you pretend to find, under this dispassion that you cling to you revel in seeing them scream, in making them beg.”*

It is the wonder in the making, in the unmaking; in the act of destruction. That is where you thrive, and where you falter is in the aftermath, in its justification beyond that first exquisite impulse.”

It is just too much to hear himself laid bare, stripped and dissected with such terrible accuracy, and his throat won't open, the breath seems to stop in his lungs, that seething torrent of shame and frustration and denial tries to smash its way out of his chest.

Suddenly his master's voice changes, a cunning note creeps in among his words. "*But those desires run dual fold, don't they? To inflict and receive: to hold power and to have it taken away. It is power spliced through mirrors: and in one it is pure, it is controlled and it is vicious and vindictive and elating, and in the other it is warped; it is painful and throbbing and so cruelly inflicted but you relish in it all the same.*"

Such puissant waves of denial roll in his stomach, and for a moment they move him, for one crushing moment he wishes that they could be true. But his master's words have found their mark like cold little knives of truth stabbed into his guts, and even through such wishful thinking that denial rings hollow, those waves froth and billow but their crests are edged in damning, inescapable truth.

Slyly his master trails his right hand over his thigh, delicately tracing the curve of his muscles up his leg, and to his horror pleasurable little goose-bumps rise over his skin. A little squeak caught somewhere between protest and sudden desire worms from his throat, forced from between clenched teeth as his master's fingers tap his inner thigh. And in the grip of some perverse instinct his legs part, his hips shift forward a fraction, his body responding even through his anger, even though every rational part of him screams at himself to stop.

His master smiles, his breath hot against his neck, and he moans as he feels his abdominals tighten in anticipation, that shameful, treacherous warmth flaring into life at the base of his stomach.

"*You see...*" his master purrs, "*even now...*"

His master's voice flows like molten gold: that dark, throaty whisper sends sparks of pleasure rushing unbidden through him. He wants to moan, he wants to *scream*, he wants his master to stop, he wants him to continue and just let it happen, just throw himself away, meld himself into someone else and for a moment at least be free of himself.

"*... even now you would submit...*"

He grunts as he tastes the salty wash of blood inside of his mouth, his lip split under his teeth. He hadn't even realised that he was biting it. His master's fingers still stroke so distractingly, so tantalisingly up the inside of his thigh, up over the flare of his hipbones.

He will tell him to stop, he will make him, he *will*, but with a devious smile his master presses further. His fingers slip underneath his shirt, they ruck the fabric up around his hip as his fingers ghost over his waist. He gasps as his master's fingers trace over the slender indentations of muscle in his pelvis that curve so temptingly downwards; but he won't let him do this, he will make him stop, but then his master's touch is so exquisite, that raw carnality is so utterly alluring as his master toys with the laces of his breeches.

"*... you would submit to me, and you would like it, and perhaps that's not...*"

But whatever his master was going to say is lost, lost as in that second the last shreds of his pride finally assert themselves, as that final truth still proves too raw, too devastating for him to admit. With an awful wrench they tear through the giddy sensations that flit through him, and behind them they drag something real, something solid and urgent and unyielding, something that is so inescapably *him*.

Spurred on by their strength his jaw clenches anew, he whips his head up, jerking roughly in his master's grip.

“Stop it!”

His master scoffs; a tiny snort of laughter emanates from him at such a desperate exclamation before his master leans into him once more, his fingers still lazily wandering across his waistline. But his master's fingers have forgone their temptation, their cunning sensuality is lost, and with every bit of anger and frustration he can muster he knocks his master's arm aside.

A moment later he slams his hands against his master's chest, sending him stumbling backwards a few steps.

“*Don't touch me!*” he snarls, and his voice is blistering, left ringing throughout the chamber in the livid silence that falls. Roughly he rights his shirt, tugging it forcefully back down over his waist, the brooding quiet like a strangling hand around his throat.

A few more seconds stammer past in silent progression, and at last he finds it within himself to look up, to look at the person that he hates and loves and fears most in the world and bear their judgement. But in place of anger his master stands coolly in the grimy torchlight, regarding him with a mischievous curiosity, one eyebrow arched coyly.

“*So you do have it in you...*”

“What?” His voice cracks like a whip through the static air, sharp and yet so terribly brittle. But before he can waver those last dregs of self-autonomy rally, they force him forward to confront his master, and crossly he steps forward into the light, his features for the first time fully illuminated by the torch's dim annulus. “What are you talking about?”

Firmly he stands before his master, his arms crossed over his chest, and he is about to continue when he sees his master's eyes narrow, he sees the tiny flicker of alarm within them.

“*Your eyes...*” his master says strangely, an unfamiliar note creeping into his voice.

Frostily he halts, one hand rising almost unconsciously to touch the arch of his cheekbone as he blinks, worry rising in him. For uncomfortably he remembers that morning, that time spent before the mirror that almost seems like a lifetime ago. That strangeness that he thought that he had seen in his irises, that quirk of colour that he wrote off to a refraction of the light, or merely his imagination.

But no more, it seems, for that stain has spread, a murky patch of indeterminate quality grows like a cancer through the silver striae of his irises.

“*What... Mairon, what have you done?*” Perhaps it is the concern in his master's voice that truly sets panic sparking within him, but as his master steps towards him he recoils. He rubs at his eyes as if by his own power he could fix them, he could bleach away that stupid, meaningless little impurity that bleeds through them.

But both he and his master are most unexpectedly interrupted as a dark, wheezing chuckle announces itself from the back wall. They turn towards it in surprise, the man hanging there so long thought unconscious now glaring at them from beneath a ragged fall of hair, a contemptuous look graven into his stern face.

“Lovers' spat, I presume?” the man sneers at them, still frozen haughtily in the middle of the room. “So sorry to interrupt. Do carry on...”

Sarcasm bites in the man's voice, and standing opposite him he feels some last remnant of rage rise in him again. But this time it is cold, it is measured and focused and lethal, that this man, this slave should dare to impugn him, that he should dare to mock both he and his master in the heart of their stronghold is so utterly irksome.

Coldly he walks over to where the man hangs, irritation bristling in his every movement, his voice slicing through the air as he glares up at the prisoner.

"Be silent," he snaps, before moving sourly aside as his master passes by him, looking up at the man with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

"You are Húrin of Dor-Lomin, are you not?"

"Might be," comes the sardonic reply, sending tendrils of rage hissing through him, what scant syllables this man uttered so grating in their tone that the very sound of them is enough to make his skin prickle.

"Answer the question," he growls, his eyes flashing perilously, but the man yet defies him. He remains insolently silent; his clear blue eyes focus only upon his master.

An electric pause crackles through the room, all three parties glare at one another, until at last his master sighs, turning to face him before smoothly announcing, *"Mairon, I shall take this from here."*

"What?" he asks archly, an ugly scowl breaking over his face as he looks over at his master.

"You are of no use to me right now, not like this," his master says in a surprisingly gentle tone. *"I know that you do not want to hear this, and from me least of all, but go, now. Take some space; think about what was spoken here. I do not care how long it takes; days, months, so be it, but think on what has transpired. Find meaning to this day within yourself, and when you are ready come to me, and for good or ill we shall deal with what you decide."*

For a moment he just stares at his master dumbfounded, some reticent sense of insult drowning in the astonishment that floods through him. This dismissal comes so generously sanctioned, so understanding in its terms that for a few seconds he does not know how to react.

"Go," his master commands once more, turning slowly from him to face the prisoner.

"Fine," he replies, perhaps more venomously than he truly intends. He stalks towards the door; an aching hollowness bleeding its numbing way through him as the course of his anger finally blows itself out. Silently he steps through the door, closing it with a muffled thud behind him.

Wearily he wanders his way back through the dungeons, back to his chambers, back to his peaceful mountain pathways where finally he might be allowed to think; to unite and reconcile and forever still those turmoils that tear at him. Or to abandon them all together, he thinks. To forsake his master and everything that once he loved: to walk away from this world.

That would be his truth. That would be his choice.

And he can only hope that he will choose aright.

What The Cat Dragged In

The days stretch on in lonely tedium. His master has not summoned him, has not even spoken to him following their last encounter. In his absence he tries to throw himself into his work, to bury that numbing sense of discontentment, to stifle the resentments that hover in the wake of that day.

Chief among his duties now is the reviewing Angband's accounts. After such a costly war their coffers are near empty, and the stores of grain, meat and iron running low.

At the empty council table he hunches over his work, a single candle casting its flickering annulus over the inked numbers that swarm across the page before him. His quill moves in jerky scratches over the parchment: a serious revision of the iron ore tallies is required. The figures before him are optimistic at best, and would only just cover the replenishments needed within their armouries.

Wearily he sighs, rubbing at his eyes as he leafs through the stack of papers piled to his right, squinting at his spidery handwriting until he finds the relevant notations. He sighs once more as he reads back the figures he had calculated some days before: their current reserves are clearly inadequate for the immense amount metallurgy that is required to set right the whole of the fortress' affairs. New battalions of orcs must be armed as they are bred, new artillery and siege engines must be re-constructed where the Noldorin forces had destroyed what ones they had, and the more superficial damage to the fortress needs swift repair.

He casts the papers aside, running a hand irately through his hair, his movement setting a pot of ink to wobble perilously close to his documents. Let it spill, he thinks petulantly, before an instant later chiding himself, grabbing the inkpot and relocating it to a safer position. He glares at the pot, a dull sense of apathy thudding through him.

Where before instinct would have made him act, conscious effort is now required to even to bring himself to care and that realisation curdles with rancour within him. He knows that he is being stupid, every rational part of him knows that beneath this moroseness he does care, he has always cared for the running of the fortress, for the upkeep of their armies, for the order even of his filing system.

But of late such cares seem to have faded in their poignancy.

Even his mountain paths lend him no solace; what was once his place of reflection and rest is now merely a barren cliff-side, the wind moaning its indifference at him as he sits huddled upon the ledge. The stars shine cold and wan above him, their silver tarnished, as if even they would scorn him his pleasure. His creations skew awry, metal buckles and twists under his hands, it spits at him from glowing crucibles, and no matter how much he tries he cannot seem to focus, he cannot seem to draw it to his will. Ever it eludes him, it cracks and splinters as he hammers, it collapses as he moulds it until at the last he flings it aside. It is just one more thing sent to torment him, just one more pleasantry denied him.

Such thoughts echo within him, and abandoning his work he wanders through the quiet corridors, cradling his misery to his chest like a babe in arms. Deliberately he skirts the staircases that would lead him to his master's chambers. His breath seems to hitch at the very sight of them; longing and resentment come all snarled up in his throat. Via a circuitous route then he winds his way up through the fortress to his own rooms, and the suffocating air seems clotted in his lungs.

I need to go.

Just for a while, just for one invigorating moment he needs to remove himself from all of this; from all of the phantoms that weave their indecisive webs about him, from every strangling memory that haunts these corridors. The moment seizes him, and filled with energy for what seems like the first time in an age he jogs the remaining distance back to his rooms.

He rummages through his wardrobe, extracting a frayed backpack from its innards and quickly he flings an assortment of clothing into it. Deeming his current outfit to be acceptable for travel he changes into pair of tall riding boots, tucking his trousers into their knee-high leather before bucking a pair of blunted spurs over the top of them. He scrapes back his hair into a short, messy braid, then dons a brocaded sealskin jacket over his shirt and a dark travelling cloak over the entire ensemble.

He pauses for an instant, but before he can change his mind he snatches up a pen and some parchment from his bedside table, and hurriedly scribbles out a rudimentary delegation of responsibilities. His captains are pressed already; the tolls of war drag upon their time and energies and he supposes that some part of him feels guilty about adding to their burdens, but it drowns out in the overwhelming part of himself that in that moment just *doesn't care*.

He finishes, his hand already moving to replace the pen when suddenly he thinks of his master. He should leave some message, shouldn't he? Some excuse of absence at the least, as he doubts that his master would be greatly pleased by an undocumented dereliction of duty, even if it has been implicitly permitted. He fidgets with the pen for a moment, before haltingly beginning:

*My lord,
Gone to Taur-nu-Fuin. Too long neglected.*

He pauses for an instant, unsure of how to continue, unsure of what he even wants to say. A farewell, an apology even? But as he thinks, bitterness rises up within him. Whatever polite memorandum he might have thought to write withers, and quickly he scribbles:

*Don't come looking for me.
M-*

That done, he lays the parchment to dry upon his desk, and slinging the pack over his shoulder strides from the room, the door shutting with a somehow righteous thud behind him. Swiftly he descends to the stables, ignoring all of the curious stares that follow him throughout the fortress, the little murmurs of gossip that undoubtedly spring up in his wake.

Walking at last through the stables he surveys what few horses they have remaining to them. Eventually he settles upon a dappled-grey stallion, a fiery sort that snorts as he approaches it yet quiets quickly as he strokes its muzzle. The stable-hands scurry unquestioningly to their duties, gathering the horse's tack and a few saddlebags worth of provisions along the way, efficiently preparing his mount as he lingers by the stable door, scratching the horse behind its ears as it whickers contentedly.

Soon enough all the paraphernalia has been gathered and the horse readied, and as the orcs make their final adjustments to the bridle he swings himself into the saddle. He fiddles with the stirrups and checks the security of the saddlebags while the horse snorts eagerly beneath him, its eyes rolling white with the anticipation of a journey as the orcs scurry to the doors at the far end of the stables. After a minute or so of adjustments he deems himself ready, and he is just about to set spurs to the horse's flanks when someone taps his knee.

An elderly orc squints up at him, and before he can even ask what it wants, silently it proffers up a well-oiled hunting bow; its tips finished in gilt steel, and strung with horsehair as dark as pitch.

Gratefully he accepts it, manoeuvring it into place over his rucksack and tying the accompanying quiver of raven-fledged arrows to the pommel of the saddle, resting just before the saddle-flaps for ease of access.

“Safe travels, m’lord,” the orc croaks.

“My thanks,” he replies simply, before nodding down at the orc, his jaw set.

The stable-hands open the outer doors, and with a squeal of excitement his horse leaps forward, its hooves clattering upon the cobblestones as it streaks out of the stables, through a short passageway beneath the mountains and into the outdoors beyond. A shock of cool air fills his lungs, the rhythmic surge and pull of horse-muscle flows so refreshingly beneath him, and he smiles, crouching low over the stallion’s neck as it pounds away over the dust-lands.

After a few minutes at a steady gallop they clear the shadows of the Thangorodrim, and gladly he turns his back to them, touching his spurs to the stallion’s side to urge it on faster. Happily it obliges him, bolting away down the track as he gives it its head, trusting in its instincts to avoid tripping amid the fractured earth.

The journey passes mundanely; no troubles befall him in the two days he spends traversing the desolate road. In timely fashion he reaches the borders of the Taur-nu-Fuin, the Forest Under Night where he has spent many a pleasant year as his master’s vassal, and its haunted boughs close over him as he steers his horse along the winding trail beneath its eaves. Spicy scents of pine and fir drift through the air and he inhales them deeply, those familiar evergreen smells curling luxuriously within him. The pine needles seem to prickle as he passes beneath them; chirruping bats flit beneath the darkened branches of great hemlock trees, and his horse snorts as they squeak by overhead.

Gradually they pass into the deeper realms of the forest, and the canopy grows black as night above them. But even as his horse begins to whicker and shy in the gloom, he smiles. He can feel it; the remnants of his power so long ago soaked into the earth here, tiny slivers of himself leached into the trees now stir in recognition; they writhe, they unfurl to welcome him. A howl pierces through the sluggish air and his horse squeals beneath him, its bold nerve finally failing, its ears pressed back onto its head in distress. He urges it forward but it resists him, twisting and shying even as he strokes its neck, whispering what calming words he can to soothe it. Eventually it settles enough to continue, the echoes of the wolf’s cry lingering unnervingly beneath the drooping branches, and it prances fretfully a further mile along the trail until at last the gates of his fortress appear before them.

He trots proudly through the gates that, after a short delay, swing open before him. He arrives in the cobbled courtyard; the squat, brooding slate of the fortress set on three sides before him. He dismounts, holding the tense horse by the reins as a party of orcs approach with astonished curiosity shining in their pale eyes.

“My lord Mairon? Is that you?”

The lilting accent of the orc surprises him. It is at such stark odds to the snarling inflections of Angband, and it takes him a moment to reply to the sallow-skinned captain who had addressed him.

“... Yes, yes, it is me. It has been too long since last I came.”

The captain smiles, showing a mouth full of laminate folds of dagger-like teeth, before ordering his fellows to make safe his horse and to prepare his rooms of old. As the orcs busy themselves he

wanders into the fortress proper, through the squared outer doors inlaid with spells of concealment and subtlety. His hand trails over the cold stone, the flint-like shale so wonderfully familiar as he steps into the modest entrance hall, eyeing its unchanged walls with a wistful smile. Clearly the lady of the house has kept his décor intact.

It is almost sentimental.

He glances around, almost expecting her to come leaping out of the shadows at him. Yet a strange intuition murmurs that she is not here, and had not been for some time. In the days when he had dwelt abroad of Angband she had always been his messenger, his friend, and his... well, perhaps some things were better left in the past. It would not do to complicate matters any further.

She was always so lively, so spiteful and brash, and at the rumours of her demise he had laughed. Such vivacity would take more than the overthrow of a fortress to extinguish, no matter how much the elf-witch had feigned otherwise. And in that moment it strikes him just how much he has missed her; her piercing laughter echoing through the corridors, the scent of her perfume lingering about the dining hall in a haze of frangipane and liquorice. Truly, her like was not seen within Angband's austere cloisters.

In her apparent absence he settles back into his stronghold, raising his banners once more over the high table: his stylised red eye glaring proudly from a cloth of midnight velvet over the room. To his profound delight many of his old warriors still remain, companions from centuries ago left largely untouched by the ruinous wars that had befallen the rest of their kindred and they welcome his return with vigour. He spends many a pleasant hour in their company, discussing their plans old and new; renovations needed to the fortress, reports of Elven trespasses into the forest and their violations beneath its eaves, rumours and information gleaned by the spies amongst their beasts.

The snow leopards had breached the upper walls of the Echoriath; the nests of the Eagles now fall prey to their swift, fleet claws. Like soft shadows they slink through the mists, ever searching for the Hidden City as he had bidden them do so long before, and the elves yet remained blind to their incursions in the region. He smirks at that, one of his earlier projects, a shard of pride set aglow in him like a smug little cherry. Yet amid his general contentedness he speaks not of his true motives for returning to the forest, and the orcs through whatever subtleties of wisdom yet remain to them waive their suspicions and do not trouble to ask. But as the days wear on the business with his master still irks him; some cloying sense of irresoluteness lingers uncomfortably in his veins.

A new report is delivered one afternoon. The elves are growing bolder, it seems, daring the malevolence of the trees and hunting beneath their boughs. He frowns at the news, but a part of him is glad: finally there is something real to do, something tangible, something physical to distract himself from the numbness that day by day seems to sink a little deeper into him.

The next morning he gears for a hunt. Twin knives hang in leather scabbards crossed over his back, overlaid with the strung hunting bow and the quiver of arrows slung about his waist. Like a sable clot of night he slips through the shadows, his footsteps silent among the deadfall of rotting pine needles as he follows the game trails beneath the hushed trees. He walks easily down them; he is yet the master of *this* realm at the least, and as the hours pass by he even begins to enjoy himself. He marvels at the delicateness of the cloven hoof-prints embedded into patches of mud along the trail, at the richness of a tuft of fur left caught in a bole of bark at shoulder height. Its musky odour and coarse grain mark it clearly as that of a bear, and one of no mean size either.

After a time he nears the western borders of the forest, the source of these reports, and here he walks with a little more caution, the bow now gripped firmly in his hand. He finds nothing much amiss in the general area as he explores it, and he almost considers turning back before a breeze

filters through the muggy air.

He freezes as the wind passes over him, and the unmistakable tang of blood catches in his nostrils. He inhales sharply, with predatory precision locating the direction of the smell: south. With an arrow nocked loosely to his bow he treads stealthily in that direction, holding his course for nearly a mile as the metallic reek of fresh-spilled blood only grows stronger.

Eventually the forest slopes abruptly down into a river gully, its small flow choked by a fallen tree just visible upstream. Positioning himself behind a tree-trunk, he peers cautiously around, the smell of blood now beginning to grate at the back of his throat. Set into the steep bank on the far side of the stream is an irregularly shaped hole. A wide mouth leads into an unknown blackness, and despite the gloom he can clearly see the dark slick of blood at its entrance. He waits a short while but nothing more seems untoward, and cautiously he steps forward, his bow half drawn before him. The forest remains undisturbed, and quickly he scrambles down the side of the gully, crossing the stream to the opening of the hole.

Not a hole, he realises as he nears it. A *den*.

The musky scent of wolf clings amid the blood, and as he peers at the ground beneath him he sees the muddled tread of Elven boots and the drag marks from where something heavy was slid away. He sighs in disgust, the evident truth of those reports sending a wave of revulsion through him. That the elves dared to walk unchecked in his realm, that they dared to kill in his forest with impunity galls him. He turns away; there is nothing that he can do here now, but as he does a whine emanates from somewhere nearby.

He pauses, almost certain that he had imagined it, but after a few seconds it comes again, a mewling sound hovering on the upper limits of his hearing. He peers around more urgently, the jumbled stones making the noise hard to pinpoint until it sounds for a third time a little more strongly, and most certainly from within the darkened maw of the den. Resolving himself to investigate he steps warily onto the lip of the den, ducking inside the tight space, his eyes quickly adjusting to the shade.

Yet not quickly enough, as something lunges up at him from the darkness, and an instant later he feels sharp little teeth dig into his half gloved hand. He snatches his hand back and the thing loses its grip, dropping to the floor by his legs before twisting to growl at him. And in that moment all of his suspicions are realised: a diminutive wolfling crouches before him. It snarls at him again, its tiny ears flattened against the back of its head and its nose crinkled in a youngster's display of aggression.

"That wasn't very polite, you know," he says, wiggling his bloodied fingers at the cub, who snaps at him in response.

Quickly his initial surprise recedes, and is replaced by, of all emotions, a strange sense of duty. Solemnly he looks down at the cub: this is one of his creatures, a citizen of his forest whether predator or prey, and with a strange resolve he knows that he will *not* have further hurts unfairly inflicted upon it where his jurisdiction could prevent it.

He reaches forward once more and again the cub snaps at him, its tiny teeth closing just short of his fingertips. But this time he does not flinch, instead gently he croons, "You do not know me, youngling. But I know you. I know all of your kindred, and once you called me lord."

He does not know if the cub can understand his words, that trait was fading as the lineages of his wolves dwindled, but he has to try, and he hopes that somehow his tone will belie his meaning, or that instinct in its pedigree will remember something of him. With a surge of pride he watches as

the cub's hackles slowly fall, and it steps uncertainly forward, sniffing at his fingertips.

"There we go," he murmurs encouragingly, and the wolfling huffs before stepping more positively towards him, rubbing the side of its head against his fingers and gloved palm. He lets it, allowing it a short while to accustom itself to him.

"Come," he says, straightening up as carefully as he can so as not to startle it. "You cannot stay here, youngling."

He backs out of the den, finding his footing once more upon the slippery stones and warily the cub follows him, its tailed tucked between its legs as it scents the blood anew. In one clumsy bolt it darts from the den, shrinking against his calves as it blinks in the dull outdoor light. And with a proper sight of the little creature he frowns, a true note of pity striking through him. Its fur is matted and clumped, the outlines of its pelvis show far too starkly, and as it tries to scramble up the side of the gully, its paws sliding weakly on the shale, that pity transmutes to cold anger within him.

This abuse was committed in *his* forest. It was yet another thing that he had failed at.

He helps push the cub to the top of the gully before climbing up the ledge himself and pausing to check on the surrounds, an arrow once more tightly fitted to his bow. Still the forest is quiet, and the wolfling nudges at his leg insistently, head-butting his calf and nipping at his boot.

In a sudden moment of clarity he realises what it wants; the creature must be starving. He looks it over once more, his brows knotting as he tries to ascertain whether or not it is old enough to even eat meat, or whether the rather more difficult task of procuring milk would be required of him. It licks wistfully at his boot and with that he sets himself: there would be no harm in at least trying.

"Follow me," he murmurs, before moving off into the trees towards the east, the cub padding along behind him. They travel around a half-mile from the den, heading towards the heart of the forest once more until abruptly he halts, his bow half-drawn. The wolfling cocks its head at him curiously, but it seems to sense his intent and it drops its haunches to the ground, watching him keenly.

"I will do this for you but once, youngling," he says, his eyes narrowed, scanning the boughs of the trees for any sign of quarry. "Soon, you must learn how to hunt."

Something flickers in his sightline to the left and he whirls around, the bow drawn and released in one rapid motion. A millisecond later, some twenty metres away, a squirrel drops to the ground, an arrow neatly embedded in its eye socket. He smiles in satisfaction, it had been a long while since he had used such a bow, and to discover that his skill has not deserted him is pleasing indeed.

He replaces the bow carefully across his back before beckoning the cub to follow him, its nose quivering in anticipation. As they approach, the wolfling dives ahead, burying its snout in the innards of the creature, gore streaking across its muzzle as it ferociously devours the squirrel. Patiently he waits nearby, and a short while later the cub pads over to him, a bone grasped in its wet jaws. He smiles down at it before moving off into the forest once more, tracking his way back to the fortress, and the cub haunts his steps like a well-fed little ghost gambolling among the pine-needles.

An hour or two pass and they reach his gates once more. Cheerfully he hails the sentries, and they open the gates before him as he strides back inside with the wolf trotting gaily after him. Just inside the gates he turns, aiming to tell the sentries of his discoveries, but before a single syllable can make it over his lips something shrill sounds above him, and a heartbeat later a load of pine twigs

is dumped rather unceremoniously over his head.

He splutters for a moment in utter shock before a sardonic voice above him drawls, “Well, well. Look at what the cat’s dragged in.”

A mingled sense of dismay and wry pleasure wells up in him at those familiar tones, and he grimaces as he tries to untangle a twig from his hair, glancing upwards to see where she was. But he needn’t have bothered, as a second later a dark figure swoops down from an overhanging tree and lands gracefully before him. Clad in forest green, she looks just as radiant as he remembers; her leathery wings tucked neatly behind her, her dark curls spilling like a waterfall to her breasts and framing a fair face set with eyes as dark as pitch.

She looks him over before with some surprise noticing the cub that peeks out at her from behind his legs, and at that she smiles.

“Or should I say, what the wolf’s dragged in, hmm? Finally found yourself a friend, Mairon?”

He mutters something unintelligible, rather preoccupied with trying to twist a particularly large stick free from his hair. She watches him struggle for a few more seconds before stepping forward, with something all too close to amusement snatching the offending plant matter from his hair.

“*Ouch!*” he intones indignantly, noting with dismay the strands of blond hair wrapped around the stick in her hand. He rubs at his head, shaking loose what he hopes is the last of the pine needles, before sighing, “Well met, Thuringwethil.”

“You’ve been away too long,” she says dismissively, before turning on her heel and striding towards the fortress doors. Irritation and astonishment flashes through him at her impertinence and quickly he starts after her, grabbing her by the arm to turn her back around.

“I command you, remember?” he snarls, perhaps a bit more violently than he intends to. “I am your lord. You could show me a bit of respect.”

She blinks at him incredulously, before chilly replying, “Well, perhaps when my *lord* sees fit to explain his actions then he will *earn* my respect. Perhaps he could explain why he left without a word, why centuries have crawled by without any hint of a message, and why he now sees fit to come gallivanting back into *my* keep without so much as a ‘by your leave’?”

Utterly taken aback, for a moment he flounders, unsure of what to tell her, unsure of what he *could* tell her that would be even remotely appeasing. After a short, brittle pause he releases her arm, and the lies seem to stick in his throat but stiffly he begins, “Well, I... I was just in the area, and I thought to...”

“Just in the area?” The scorn in her voice could have felled birds from the sky. “You have scarcely left Angband since your royal cock-up at Tol Sirion. Do you really expect me to believe that you were *just in the area?*”

And he wants to tell her, so bitterly he wishes that everything could go back to the way it was; those years spent together in such easy, open companionship where secrets had flowed like liquid between them. But too much had happened, too much was lost, and he feels the truth wither and blacken on his tongue.

So in a rather poor answer he grimaces, before shrugging his shoulders noncommittally. She regards him disdainfully, her arms crossed over her chest.

The brooding silence stretches between them, neither party quite willing to vocalise what exactly it

is that they think of the other until at last she steps forward, her expression softening.

“I was beginning to think that you had forgotten me...” she murmurs, coyly glancing up at him, her tongue poised flirtatiously between her teeth.

Beneath his discontent he feels her trying to change the subject, and gratefully he rises to her bait. Suavely he replies, “I could never forget you, my lady.”

“Flatterer!” she cries, a bright smile suddenly curving across her face. Delicately she reaches up, brushing an errant leaf from his hair as her inky eyes wander over him. Suddenly he feels her pause, with her face scant inches from his he feels her withdraw.

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” she asks, squinting at him.

He jerks away from her, his hands instinctively flying to his face as if he could hide those impurities that still colour his irises, that murky stain that slowly advances through them.

“Nothing,” he replies tersely, not meeting her gaze.

“All right,” she says, affront and concern mingling in her voice. “I meant no offense...”

“Just leave it alone,” he snaps.

“Well, what’s gotten into you, then?”

She looks at him piercingly, and reluctantly he meets her stare. She had always had an uncanny talent for getting under his skin, and it seems that time has not dulled it in the slightest.

“Nothing, it’s just...” he sighs, before rigidly continuing, “I’ve just come for a breath of fresh air, and to check up on the forest. That’s all. All right?”

Even to him the words sound hollow; the lie curdles in the air between them like soured milk. She stares at him witheringly, clearly unconvinced. But before she could press him further, he interjects, “And where have *you* been, if I might enquire?”

“Oh” she replies airily, “just running a few errands.” She smiles sweetly at him, her teeth glinting, before she turns and saunters back towards the fortress.

“It’s good to see you again, Mairon. What’s left of you...”

The barb twists within him, her words hit a fraction too close to the mark, and for an instant he considers going after her, challenging her. But the wolf cub nips at his boot once more, no longer content to be ignored in the day’s proceedings. Irritably he sighs, shaking his head at it.

“Oh, come along, then. We’d best find you some lodgings.”

And with that, he strides off towards the servants’ quarters, the cub padding softly along behind him.

The weeks slide on in measured serenity, and for the most part he dedicates his time to patrolling the forest, hunting down the Elven trespassers that dare to defile his lands. He becomes the terror that prowls beneath the trees, the horror that stalks the night, the silent shrike under the moonlight. And oh what savage joy he rips from making them scream, the sheer, organic thrill of the chase rippling through him as he flits amongst the hemlocks, gutting knife in hand.

The wolfling flourishes, in appetites and strength expanding until after a time it accompanies him on his hunts, loping behind him with its ears pricked, its jaws dripping, a fast companion and ally in his works. Sometimes Thuringwethil joins him as well, and her movements are unearthly. She flickers from tree to tree in his wake.

But while they hunt as partners ever he suspects some ulterior motive from her, somehow he always feels like he is being watched: her mysterious errand and sudden reappearance strikes him as a touch *too* convenient. Now and again he looks back over his shoulder, he looks to the treetops where she lurks and he can see the black glimmer of her eyes shining like orbs of liquid coal above him. He can almost sense the gold in her smile.

In the black watches of the night, alone in his bedchamber those suspicions curl unpleasantly within him. They bristle over his skin. Something insidious lurks around him, inside of him; it peers at him with alien eyes. And so hard he tries to convince himself that he is imagining it, that it is her, that it is this place, that it is anything else but himself. But as time wears on that resolve crumbles, bitter thoughts of his master trickle back to him and they drag with them everything he would sooner ignore, no matter how cunningly he tries to evade them they bloom in his mind like sick little wraiths.

And loath he is to admit it but he misses his master, of all the pathetic emotions he could arrive at it is *loneliness* upon which his psyche falls; and what a bitter blow that is to take. But beneath every ounce of denial that he tries to maintain that feeling bleeds true, and his master's absence gnaws at him. Despite everything some treacherous part of him still yearns for his master's touch, for his power, for his lust, his affection, his cruelty; and those confused emotions set to an uneasy simmer within him. Drop by hateful drop that feeling grows, that loathsome desire bites like acid through his veins no matter how much he tries to push it back down.

But maybe he could solve it; maybe he could make it leave him alone even for just a little while, to dispel this frustration knotting through his innards. Some sordid part of him pulses its perverse sensuality, like fires gradually stoking to an indeterminate crux, left to flicker and burn their resentment without hope of resolution.

So one restless night spent half-curved in slippery dreams, his master's whispers echoing in his ears in such wonderful, hideous pleasure, he tries. Naked beneath the covers, he runs a hand down his abdomen, his fingers sliding in what seductiveness he can muster over his chest, flitting over his nipples, ghosting over the sides of his ribs. He tries to remember what he likes, he tries to remember what his master does, all of those caresses that made him gasp, made him buck, and slowly his fingers brush over his hipbones, his breath catching in his throat as a shiver of pleasure runs through him.

Delicately he trails his hands over his hips, following the slope of his muscles inwards, downwards, all the while imagining his master's ashen fingertips, his sly, handsome smirk. Involuntarily his hips rock, a shuddering inhalation forces its way into his lungs as fresh waves of sensation course up through him. His head tilts back as shakily he grins, taking himself fully into his hand, gently teasing his half closed fist up his length and sending prickles of arousal jarring through the base of his stomach.

One time, he remembers, one delicious time he had kneeled before a different throne, a throne of granite lost to the annals of history. A riding crop was in his master's hand; a welt of pain had blossomed across his inner thigh as playfully his master had brought it down upon him. And even then, even as the pain shuddered through him his knees splayed wider, his master striped another smarting crack across the opposite thigh, the leather thong of the crop licking its strange, delicious sting between his legs. And where he should have flinched, he should have recoiled, his back

arched, he rolled his hips upwards, he curled *into* the blow...

Sensuously he recalls that occasion, but even as he lies there, even as pleasure swirls within him something feels wrong, something feels missing. He shifts his hips, he clenches his abdominals, he strokes himself a little more firmly: trying to drown out that weird sensation in pure physicality, trying to blot out what it threatens to imply.

Desperately he tries to recall his master's touch, he tries to mimic every teasing little stroke, every coaxing brush of flesh upon flesh that he *knows* that he likes, but the sensations ring hollow within him, fragmenting, splintering, and he can't respond, despite his best efforts his body *won't* truly respond. With a stifled sob he thrusts his hand away, tears prickling at the corners of his eyes and such crushing disappointment thudding through him with each traitorous beat of his heart as unanswered frustration is left swirling pitilessly in the base of his stomach.

Like maggots drawn to a festering wound true horror wells up inside of him, the extent of his master's damage for an instant reveals itself, and for one stunning moment he wants to be sick, he wants to scream, he wants to curse his master in every tongue from here to the Void and just rip him apart, take every infectious little part of him and burn them into nothingness. Such puissant betrayal pounds through him: that his master could steal something so primal, something even so base as self-arousal and pollute it, corrupt it, leave it nothing but ashes in his hands horrifies him. But beneath all of that anger something else bleeds; some malicious part of him sows its little seeds of blame and doubt and need. It tempers that fury, it cozens that hatred, that seductive lure drags him back to his master no matter how hard he might thrash, no matter how much he might protest; and that hateful truth is a hard one to swallow.

Violently he twists around in the bed, curling himself up on his side, his eyes squeezed tightly shut as his arms wrap around himself, his fingernails digging into the sides of his arms. And so hard he wishes for a release; he wishes that just for once that he could make something of his own volition, some action of his own unstained by his master's hand.

In the chill air he sinks down into uneasy dreams, dreams of lust and war and rage and a lonely little lord standing amid their tempest trying to shield himself from their fury, until at the last he was devoured.

The sun had long since crept over the horizon when he stirs the next morning. A sharp knock sounds at his door, and he rolls over onto his back, his hair crowning his tired face like a dishevelled halo. His eyes flicker half-heartedly open, but the tender embrace of sleep lulls him back down: a haven from the acrid shame of his failures last night stretches so comfortingly out towards him. Whoever it is and whatever they want can wait, of that he is sure...

The knock comes again, more insistently this time, and he groans, wincing as the daylight shines crimson through his closed eyelids.

"Go away," he moans, turning himself back onto his side.

He listens for the receding of their footsteps, but to his abject dismay he hears none. Rather, an irascible and terrifyingly *feminine* sigh emanates from behind his door.

"I said, go away," he repeats more forcefully, hoping against hope that for once his vassal might actually do as she was bidden.

He hears her tut from behind the door, and at that tiny sound some long-forgotten instinct in him shrieks into life. A vestige of their times previously spent together blares out its warning, and it

compels him to move with a sudden jolt of adrenaline.

One: his mind chimes, and before even begins to question it he starts scrambling free of the sheets.

Two: he wrenches his legs free of the tangled covers, before hauling himself in front of the mirror, wriggling into the pair of breeches left flung over his dresser in record-setting time. He fumbles with their laces before chancing a glance up into the mirror, and although he looks unappetising in general, it is his eyes that scare him the most; they are...

Three: the door snaps open, the lock nearly shatters in its socket. He jumps as the percussion slams through the room, twisting himself away from the doorframe with a scowl, his hands fiddling desperately with the lacings of his trousers in an effort to preserve what scant modesty he has left.

Finally done, he turns back around to face Thuringwethil, who stands in mock demureness in the doorway, a steaming mug clasped in her hands.

“Tea?” she asks sweetly, and ignoring his indignant cry of protest sweeps imperiously into the room, the forked coattails of her sleeveless jacket swishing behind her in dramatic effect. She slams the door shut, breezily depositing the mug in his hands as she crosses the room and wrenches open the shuttered windows, sending great ribbons of daylight spilling over the slate floor.

“Just come right in,” he says, sarcasm dripping from his teeth. He glares at her before stalking back over to the bed and sitting upon its edge, the covers rucked up around the back of his waist. A swathe of sunlight illuminates the mug in his hands, and for a second he considers dropping it, splattering it to the floor like a petulant child just to see what she would do. Just to see her get angry with him. But the petty fantasy passes him by and reluctantly he takes a sip, the warm notes of cinnamon and clove prickling down his throat as he swallows.

Her lissom arms shine like marble where she stands at the windowsill, the ends of her curly hair light up in golden radiance as the sunlight dapples upon her face. But her beauty holds no power to move him; the baleful glimmers of last night still turn in his stomach. She pays him no attention, seemingly transfixed by the forest outside, and sulkily he clears his throat and mutters, “You’re not supposed to be in here.”

“It’s past midday, *my lord*,” comes the scathing reply, and sullenly he takes another sip of tea. “I thought it best to wake you if indeed you wished to see the day.”

She turns to face him and he sneers at her, his lip curling in an ugly grimace.

“What are you, my mother?”

“You don’t have a mother, Mairon.”

A terrible silence falls as both parties ponder the implications of that bluntly said statement. She recovers herself the quicker, glaring at him with something approaching contempt. And he can’t quite look up, even though he wants to he just cannot meet her gaze; all of the things that he wants to say stick painfully in his throat. He shifts his shoulders uncomfortably as he glowers into the tea, his lower lip trembling.

“It’s nice...” he croaks after a lengthy pause, lamely indicating the tea, and all of the things that he didn’t say hang dead in the air between them.

She looks at him dubiously for a moment, before scoffing softly, shaking her head at him as if saddened.

“I remember you in the days of your glory, Mairon. Those days upon that moonlit isle lived in such gluttonous peace, in such decadent tranquillity when you sat the throne. You were the fairest of lords, pale and dread and fickle as the dawn. And maybe your subjects loved you, or maybe we feared you, but at least you were you. You were whole, you were distinct: the wolf-lord, the dreamshaper, *zigûr*, necromancer. Do you think that I cared for titles? I followed you, we all followed you unquestioningly because you were something then, because you made something of yourself. And now look at you...”

Naked disgust twists in her voice, and she trails off, her eyes near scorching their way through him. Still he doesn't answer her, he can't answer her. Anger and numbness slide in awful confluence within him, fluid and jarring and gross, and mutely he turns his head aside, the mug shaking in his hands.

“You were so full of grace.”

A pleading note thrums in her voice, and at that plaintive chord something inside him seems to shatter; all of those emotions buckle under their own pressure, and bitterly he laughs, scorn seeming to burn up his throat.

“Grace?” he spits, his chin crinkling awfully as his throat tightens. “There is no greater taint.”

She shakes her head once more, and where he expects anger he finds only pity, a terrible melancholy that seems to seep through her, and somehow it is so much worse than her wrath. Wearily she turns aside from him, gazing unfocusedly out of the window. Time skips on in erratic heartbeats, and gingerly he sets down the half-empty mug, the porcelain nearly slipping from his fingertips as it clunks to an uneasy halt atop his bedside table.

“You are not his plaything...”

Her whisper slides through the air like a knife, the silence peeled asunder by its passage.

“What?” he hisses, his voice reverberating in a taut quaver as he glares at her, his eyes narrowed against the light.

“You are not his sacrifice,” she intones sadly, turning in a measured pivot to face him again before continuing more forcefully, “You are not his slave.”

He inhales sharply, emotion bubbles up like acid inside of his chest, but before he can even begin to retort she cuts across him, stepping towards him with dangerous intent.

“Many things you were, and many things you are, but you were *never* his slave.”

“No, Thu – it's... it's not about that -”

“For once in your wretched life, Mairon, will you shut up and let someone help you?”

And in a move that surprises even himself his jaw locks shut, and he stares up at her defiantly as he struggles to suppress the emotions that flurry within him.

“Do you think that I cannot see it? Do you really think that I do not know? Our lieutenant arrives like a whipped dog upon my doorstep, and do you *really* think that I had not the faintest inkling of why? Credit me with wisdom enough to know a bitter parting when I see one. You seem to have a proclivity for them. Your every step under this roof is taken in anger, and no matter how much you try to hide it, longing walks with you too.”

His lip wobbles perilously as he tries to bite back the denial that surges up in his throat, that instinctive shield thrown up at the first hint of her attack. But she turns his shield aside; she shoves her spear right through it as she glares at him contemptuously, “You want him, and you hate him, and you wear your misery like flimsy armour as if it is going to absolve you. You are not anything more to him than what you think of yourself, Mairon. For all your subtleties, are you so blind as to that?”

“No... No, you don't understand, Thu. He...”

“*I don't understand?*” she shrieks exasperatedly, standing over him, her slender fingers knotted into fists at her sides. “Can you even hear yourself?”

His lip twists, and he tries to shove himself backwards across the bed, tries to distance himself from her, but as he moves she grabs him by the shoulder. Her nails grip like talons into his skin, and with startling force she wrenches him forward, transfixing him in place on the edge of the bed. He shrugs free of her grip, scowling at the floor as she rains her tirade down upon him, all venom and pride and gutting truth.

“Do not take me for some mindless orc, Mairon. I am of the Maiar, of the rightful Children of Ilúvatar, as are you. I chose that path that I walk, and I will continue to walk it for as long as it should please me to do so. Vala our master is, and mighty indeed is his power, and I *chose* my allegiance to him. And should the day come where I forsake it, if I should choose differently, then I bid you show me the single force on earth that is going to stop me from making that decision.”

He stares at her disbelievingly: never has she revealed this side of herself to him before in all the millennia that he had known her. She had always been tempestuous, always been stubborn, but this is something else; chill puissance snaps in her words. And as best as he can he tries to counter her, he tries to scramble together what fragile shreds remain of his ego into some form of defence. “But you don't understand. You don't know him, you don't know what he's doing...”

Even to him it sounds little more than a whinge, and he winces as a thunderous expression clouds over her face, her eyes set ablaze in ebony fury.

“For crying out loud, Mairon,” she whispers, each word stressed in supernatural clarity. “You are the Lieutenant of Angband. Will you show some *fucking backbone?!?*”

With those last two words she slams her hands against his chest, knocking him backwards onto the bed. She watches him rise, watches his hands scrabble among the sheets and he sees the abhorrence shining in her eyes; he can only think of what a pathetic spectacle he presents to her.

Yet still he can't bring himself to retaliate, an awful torpor seems to drag at his limbs. Just somehow it doesn't seem worth the effort, it would still be too painful to face. Better to let her vent her anger on him and he would just accept it, just count it another wound left to fester among his scars, just another thing that is always his fault.

Dully he watches rage mottle over her features, he watches dispassionately as an ugly flush creeps up her neck, as she opens her mouth.

“I do not care what he has done to you,” she snarls, and the spite in her voice could have shattered glass. “I do not care if he has hurt you. I do not care if he has made tears spill down those pretty cheeks of yours. I do not care if he has fucked you from here to Doriath and the whole of Arda has heard you scream. If you are nothing more than his whore -”

As the hissing words slip from her lips his head snaps up, all of that apathy suddenly brought to a

stunning rush of fury within him; that she would dare, that she would even say such a thing finally shocks him into action.

Roughly he pushes himself up off the bed, and shoving his face into hers, he growls, “You overstep your bounds.”

“And what are you going to do about it?”

The threat in his voice is plain, and yet undaunted she remains, she stands her ground with a ferocity to match his own. He freezes, indecision once more catching in his throat, and he can’t think, he can’t breathe: the seething, broiling anger inside of his chest renders him speechless.

With a sneer of triumph she seizes the moment, his hesitation but a lever to her as she spits up into his face, “If you are nothing more than his whore, then at least be it with a bit of integrity. You have a persecution complex a mile wide, Mairon, so don’t think to shove this false misery down everybody else’s throats.”

And like the dam finally burst under the pressure of the flood he shoves her backwards, in a voice somewhere between a scream and a sob shrieking, “I am *not* his whore!”

“Then *what* are you?” she demands: stepping up to him relentlessly, her eyes boring into him.

And in that second it is as if everything coalesces within him, every shred of rage and frustration and lust and betrayal and a million other nameless things all meld, all crumple and warp and implode, and it feels like his heart is trying to smash its way out of his chest; its terrible tattoo only fuelling the emotions that roil within him. Yet amid that confusion, from that whirling knot of chaos something true emerges, something real and blistering and solid and so unutterably *him*.

With a horrifying wrench it seems to break free of that maelstrom; hardening, solidifying, bringing with it every shining thread of fate and uncertainty and possibility and forging them anew, and everything he was and would ever be perhaps converges in this one stunning moment.

This is what he wants.

This is what he is.

Slowly he looks to at her, every muscle in his neck trembles with the effort of and something dangerously close to madness dances in his eyes. For an instant amid the mottled stain of his irises, a flash of gold outshines the silver.

“I am his lieutenant.”

So simply the words fall from his lips, at once concrete and ephemeral, but with that utterance, that final admission he knows that he has made his choice. For better or worse he has cast his lot, and with that realisation it seems as if the air rushes back into his lungs a little bit more easily.

He straightens himself up, setting his shoulders proudly before chancing a glance over at Thuringwethil. She nods at him encouragingly, a secretive smile curving over her lips. And bolstered by her approval he smiles back at her, saying a little more evenly, “I am his lieutenant. And I am going to make this right.”

With the repetition a wave of certainty flows through him, warm and reassuring; and for the first time in years he feels truly at ease, all of the conflict that had gripped him, that had torn at him now released in a rush of endorphins and relief. It feels just, and it feels right, and no matter what he would hold to his decision, and he would hold on to himself within it, of that he is certain. He

looks over at Thuringwethil, who steps delicately towards him, raising her arms to hold him by the shoulders, her sable eyes gazing up into his and to his surprise he sees admiration shining there.

“Now,” she says silkily, her thumb stroking reassuringly over his shoulder as she smiles up at him, “*there* is the Mairon that I remember.”

He smiles nervously down at her, unsure of what to make of such a rare display of affection and frankly rather embarrassed. She looks him over once more before grinning proudly, and darting forward presses herself to him, planting a tender little kiss upon his cheek. He nearly jumps as her lips brush over his skin, and he stares after her in disbelief as wordlessly she sweeps from his room, shutting his door with a neat click behind her.

The sweet scent of her perfume shimmers in the air, and he sinks back down onto the bed, a tad perplexed as to what to do with himself. But whatever he would decide did not matter as that little glede of purpose settles itself within him anew, hard and unyielding as foundered steel. He is his master’s lieutenant; and for good or ill he would make right his assertions.

Proudly he strides through the deserted great hall of Angband, the usually thronging expanse emptied of its multifarious denizens save one only. With feline grace his master sits the throne, his golden eyes simmering in the firelight as he watches him approach, his fingertips tapping out a staccato rhythm as he waits.

At the base of the dais he pauses, bowing quickly before his master then ascending the short flight of stairs, his footsteps ringing through the silence. Serenely he looks upon his master, and as he reaches the top of the dais he kneels, his head bowed respectfully. Before him he can hear his master shift, fabric hisses over metal, and an instant later his master’s deep, melodious voice sounds, sending shivers crawling over his skin.

“*Have you made up your mind?*”

He feels his heartbeat quicken, he can hear the blood pounding in his ears, and he clenches his fists, the gravity of the situation, of what he is about to do sending perilous jolts of adrenaline racing through him. Deeply he inhales, and without looking up, as neutrally as he can manage he replies, “I have.”

“*And?*”

Such seductiveness melts in his master’s voice, such awful, wonderful carnality flows within that one tremulous word, and it smashes right through him. And before he can even stop to think, pure, screaming instinct overwhelms him, and he lunges forward, every clever word that he had planned, every haughty response turned over and over in his mind since that decisive day deserts him, banished in the light of such visceral desire.

He rises up to his master in one fluid motion, his fingers sliding around his neck, slipping upwards to the base of his skull, and in that moment such unstoppable power flows through him. He digs his fingers in all the harder, relishing what might be his one moment of triumph, such dark craving pulsing through him. It would be *so* easy...

With one vicious tug he jerks his master’s head forward, and after one sadistic moment of anticipation he slams his lips upon his master’s. With every ounce of hatred and pain that he has left in him he kisses him; as if with the violence of it he could somehow give back all of the hurts his master has inflicted, he could erase them, he could be free of them and begin anew. And after a moment he feels his master push back against him, his tongue sliding into his mouth, flicking

across his teeth in such stunning sensation; rills of exquisite pleasure sent coursing through him.

At last he relinquishes his grip upon his master, delicately extricating his lips from his, and withdrawing a fraction he looks at him, sincerity blazing in his eyes. Finally, with the surety born of millennia of suffering and joy and abuse and bliss he looks upon the being who has hurt him most in the world, the being who he loves most in the world and with such crushing certainty he says: "I have chosen you."

Styles of Combat

Life reasserts itself with a startling normality around him. The great arms of Angband open to him once more in all of their stunning, sordid possibilities, and gratefully he sinks back into their embrace.

He resumes his duties once more, or tries to gather up the scattered remnants of them, with the tasks assigned to his captains during his months of absence having been carried out to varying degrees of proficiency. To have further burdened his captains at such a time was unfair of him, and humbly he endures their scribbled mistakes. He will not blame them for a hurried miscount when it was his selfishness that had incurred it. He spends weeks trawling through his old accounts, cross-checking them with the sketchy reports carried out in many a disinterested hand and corroborating them with the data relayed to him of the current revisions of the stores. Laboriously he corrects every little mistake and eventually sets to full order Angband's accounts, although he is little pleased by the figures that reveal themselves.

But perhaps more importantly he spends his weeks apologising to his captains for his dereliction of duty, and for heaping his workload upon their already strained time. Most of them, a flagon or five of ale later come easily around, patting him jovially on the back and expounding how much they mourned his absence whilst he nods sympathetically and tries to look contrite. Some, however, take a little more convincing.

Gothmog for one was not at all impressed, declaring to all and sundry in as petulant a tone as his rumbling baritone could manage that he was a bloody disgrace to Angband's majesty, and deserved to be demoted. Stiffly he smiles, steeling himself to endure the Valarauka's scorn for as long as need be; he had made his choices, and for him to utterly alienate such a friend over them would be an unkindness indeed. However, a well-timed keg of whiskey provides a miraculous remedy to the situation, even if the following morning he cannot quite remember how or why he possesses a neat line of bruises and what look suspiciously like burn marks lancing up his leg.

Nevertheless Gothmog seems appeased, smugly grinning at him as he staggers down the corridor, his eyes barely slitted open against the pallid light of the morning.

"Rough night, my lord?" the Balrog smirks.

He moans inarticulately in reply, flinging himself dramatically down a side-corridor as fast as his trembling legs can bear him. A wave of queasiness rises in him and bent over against a wall desperately he pinches the bridge of his nose, fighting down a new swell of nausea. He won't vomit, he won't, he will not give Gothmog the pleasure of seeing him suffer, and stubbornly he grits his teeth, willing those sensations to fade. Gradually his breathing steadies, and when at last he feels able he slinks off towards the apothecary, thinking to pay the herb-mistress a long overdue visit.

His friends and underlings now rather mercilessly pleased, at his master's behest he sets about ordering the state of Angband's mines. The food stores are thankfully replenished, the Men of the East pay his master a great tribute of grain and livestock which prove a welcome addition to their inbred herds of sheep and cattle that low in the dark bowels of the mountains. He almost pines for a fresh fillet of fish, however; scarce little of that meat is there to be found in the fortress these days.

Long ago the supply routes from the frigid North had been largely discontinued. Successful raids upon the Noldorin and Edain farmlands about their borders had replenished their stocks of meat

well enough, and the impracticalities of large-scale transport across such difficult terrain had mostly withered the supplies from the North. Some things still were ferried to and from the fortress, but mostly it was reserves of whale-fats and oilskin cloaks that were sent south, and wistfully he thinks of the abundant supply of fresh ocean meats that lie separated from him by several hundred miles of snow.

However, their current production of iron ore for now is his primary concern. Simply not enough was being uncovered in the mines to fuel the armaments and repairs that were necessary for the ongoing upkeep of the fortress after such a turbulent time of warfare.

Accompanied by the chief engineers, meticulously he pores over the old schematics of the mines, looking over plans drawn up in spidery annotations on scrolls that are older than the sun. After a long deliberation they ascertain routes of expansion, they drill sample cores in the directions where their best estimates and metallurgic sorceries point, searching for seams of iron ore that run tangent to the ones currently utilised. Long months more of rock analysis and planning pass, and at last the new mines are realised.

Teams of slaves man the tunnelling operations, each dull thud of a pickaxe swung into the earth accompanied by the clink of chains, the crack of a whip, the cries and hisses of pain. For weeks the works proceed unhindered, and often he surveys the new mineshafts, examining the qualities of the ore that they uncover and consulting on how best to circumvent any natural obstacles that present themselves. Chief among such concerns is that of accidentally disturbing a rivulet of magma, one of the myriad volcanic veins that pattern Angband's foundations like a blistering network of capillaries. Most had been mapped out years ago, but millennia of geological turmoil still possess the power to spring surprises, and unpleasantly that truth is reinforced.

A meeting regarding the smelting of steel: of which carbon-iron alloys were of most industrial use is brusquely interrupted, a sweaty messenger rattles off a report of an accident at the easternmost border of the mines. He dismisses his fellows and grimly descends with the orc to the site of the problem. Even as he walks down the sloping mineshaft he can feel a rising heat prickle against his skin, he can smell the weird, earthy scent of superheated rock and with trepidation he walks onwards, somehow reluctant to face what inevitable horror awaits him in this lonely corner of the world. They round a final corner, and with a pulse of dismay he surveys the damage.

The stench of burning flesh lies heavy in the air, the metallic reek of blood and molten iron coats the back of his throat until it almost hurts to swallow. A brooding slick of magma glares at him from the end of the passage and he squints against its redness, spying the jagged fissure in the far wall from which it spews, dripping into a livid pool that slowly spreads throughout the chamber. From that pool charred limbs jut, fingers droop like wilted flowers from arms half-dissolved by the heat, dark steel shackles melted into skin. But where he would expect screams of anguish, or pleas for help from some unfortunate survivor he finds only silence, a void of sound that unnerves even him as incrementally that spill of magma ebbs up the passage towards where he stands.

Dismally he ponders what to do, and what if any of this mess might be salvaged. Some influence over fire in all its derivations he possesses, but over such volcanism he can do little but observe. Such a primal force supersedes even his power, and he doubts if even his master in the youth of his potency could have had much effect here. Sensing little other option, and the stench truly becoming cloying, he stalks back up the tunnel, where he summons the engineers and overseers of the mining works.

Together they review the charts and with little recourse at last he orders the tunnel shut. It would be pointless to continue in that direction with such an obstacle, and with hope they might branch southeast from here, skirting that deadly vein of magma. Consensus is reached and the act done,

the bodies of those unfortunate slaves forever entombed under crushing miles of earth to be devoured by the mountains, unremembered and un-mourned.

Trekking back to the upper floors of the fortress, he considers reporting the incident to his master. But where before such action would have been natural it now rings oddly in his mind. Since the day of his re-affirmation he has scarcely even seen his master. Of what occupies him he has heard but rumours, sinister whispers of experiments, of slaves taken from the pits who would never reappear, but he pays them little mind. If it was of importance that his master would instruct him in it, of that he is sure. Even upon their rare meetings the air is cordial between them: his master enquiring politely after the mines, or the finer points of his metallurgy, or some equally clinical occupation. Dutifully he answers his master's questions, desperately searching for a glimmer of approval amid those golden eyes, but ever they remain impassive.

It is not that desire no longer runs between them: quite the opposite, in fact. It crackles in the clever twist of words, it lingers in every little glance, but somehow it never quite blossoms into fruition. Each of them becomes embroiled within his individual projects, and his master grows all the more inscrutable for it. Yet that attraction never fades, only perhaps it slumbers as the years roll on. Those dark fires quieten to a steady glow of embers within him, ready to ignite with but the slightest splash of oil.

Such thoughts move him, and eventually he decides against bothering his master with a report of the accident. The news would likely reach him anyway, and if it became necessary then he would be summoned and a full report he would give. Airily he resolves to put it behind him, and as the months slip by the incident fades into obscurity.

He involves himself eagerly with other projects; advising the military engineers on thrust capacities for siege ballistae, experimenting with the smelting of steel and copper alloys in the foundries, assisting in the external reparations to the fortress, the works stemming from the last war only now nearing their completion. As he mingles amongst commander and commoner alike, a multitude of rumours reach his ears. For the most part, he holds himself aloof of them, to involve himself in every snatch of gossip that runs through Angband would be exhausting indeed. Yet one piece stirs him to interest: the man Húrin was released from his imprisonment and set loose to wander, and to wreak whatever evil his master's curse might yet unleash.

He chuckles at that one, a smug sense of satisfaction spreading in his chest with each new, more embellished repetition that he hears. Ever their nets tighten around the Hidden Kingdom: his creatures stalk mercilessly through the mountains, dark eyes watch from beneath the boughs of the Taur-na-Fuin, and none might pass the Vale of Sirion unnoticed.

It is now only a matter of time.

Day by day their armies encroach further into the Elven territories, sowing madness and terror in their wake as the scattered remnants of the Eldar retreat into the wilds to escape the remorseless onslaught. Skirmishes flurry along the front-lines far to the south, but the dark heart of Angband pumps on unabated and time flows languidly by with nothing but the change of seasons to mark its passing. But after a time, his purely academic pursuits wear themselves out, and a curious desire for militaristic action rises in him again.

At the invitation of Gothmog he takes to spending his evenings in the training grounds, those caverns formed of ancient calderas like hollow internal blisters within the rock of the Thangorodrim. Rank means little amid the clash of steel upon steel, and his captains welcome him into their companies with relish. And if they seem a little over-eager at the opportunity to bash him about with their blunted practise-swords then politely he humours them, listening attentively to

every little correction of his stance, refining the techniques of *mêlée* combat that had rusted somewhat over the years.

Swiftly he improves, his old assuredness flooding back into him, and within short weeks he holds his own against the best of them. He lunges forward, a sword wielded with blinding speed as he parries Gothmog's axe-blow, his arms left trembling with the effort of staying that swing. And how the Balrog fumes as he twists away from his grasping hands, his liveness put to good use against a larger opponent, and with three lightning-fast knocks of his sword he slams into three major nerve points of Gothmog's arm: wrist, elbow and shoulder paralysed in one quick manoeuvre. Breathing heavily, with grim satisfaction then he watches that dread axe clatter to the floor, the Balrog's right arm hanging limp at his side.

"Four points to me," he grins mischievously, a swell of pride brimming up in him. "Care to make it best out of five?"

Gothmog grumbles, not deigning to articulately reply, with some difficulty attempting to reclaim his axe.

"That will be enough for today, I should think," he says at length, his scraping baritone echoing around the chamber. **"I should prefer to remain intact. It was well fought, Mairon. You have improved greatly since first you came."**

He smiles genuinely at that: a compliment from Gothmog was not a thing lightly given.

"Thank you," he replies simply, brushing a few errant strands of hair from his face. He watches his friend rub at his arm, kneading the patches of lighter skin at his joints, and a slight tingle of concern runs through him. He steps forward, gently asking, "Are you all right? I didn't mean –"

"Ah, it is nothing!" the Balrog laughs, shooing him away. **"It would take more than your little practise sword to do me any real harm."**

Reassured then he steps back, and bidding his farewell for the evening retreats towards the archery range. Buoyed by his success in the sparring ring, he fetches his bow from the store; the self-same hunting bow gifted to him long years ago by the stable-master, along with a quiver of arrows. Stepping onto the near-deserted field he readies himself, lightly nocking an arrow to the string and taking his aim at a man-sized target some fifty metres distant. Softly he inhales, pulling back on the bow until he can hear the horsehair string creak, the tension thrumming through its bent arms. He sights, and then swiftly releases the arrow. A millisecond later, it slams with unerring accuracy into the centre of the target, and a gratifying sense of success unfurls its warm tendrils within his chest.

Confidently he empties his quiver, each shot burying itself in the target within a two-inch radius of its epicentre, to his immense satisfaction.

He sets down his bow, and was just about to wander down the range to collect his arrows when a faltering round of applause sounds from somewhere behind him. He swings around in surprise, and at the far end of the range he spots three young Valaraukar peeking at him from around the pillars of the entranceway, admiration shining in their yellowish eyes.

Cheerfully he hails them, beckoning them over. Like the very epitome of awkward adolescence they slope over to him, bashfully coming to a halt a few metres short of where he waits, tiny ripples of flame bursting in an almost embarrassed way along the flanges of their wings half-folded behind their backs. He eyes them curiously, and at last once steps forward from their cluster, a female incarnate in a semi-humanoid form of nearly an Elven stature apart from her wings and the

two great horns curling backwards from her temples.

She shuffles nervously for a moment before beginning, her words spoken in a jumbled rush. “We... we’re, um, sorry for spying, my lord, really. It’s just... that was, that was very impressive, my lord! I’ve never seen anyone shoot like that, not even the commanders.”

“Thank you, young one,” he replies graciously, and not without a hint of amusement. “You are too kind.”

A short pause follows, the Balrog seemingly turning something over in her mind, working herself up to say whatever she would. He waits patiently, not unfamiliar with the sensation of talking to an intimidating superior, and at last she stammers, “I... um, we, we were just wondering... I mean, we’ve seen you at the training grounds a lot recently, and we thought, maybe, that is if you’re not too busy or if you would even consider it...”

“You would ask me to teach you?”

“Oh! Um... y-yes,” she splutters, her two companions nodding their timid affirmation behind her. “I-if you would even consider it, my lord, it would be the deepest honour. But we know you are very busy, and m-maybe I shouldn’t have asked...”

And where such an audacious request might once have affronted him, hearing it in such plaintive terms somehow charms him. His ego she leaves nicely flattered, and truly he considers her words.

“Who is your commander now?” he enquires, unwilling to be drawn into such a venture if it should involve the offence of any of his more belligerent captains.

“We’ve been training with Captain Gothmog, my lord,” one of the other youths blurts out, rills of greasy, blue-tipped flames flickering up his arms as he speaks.

“Gothmog?” he muses, his lip curling. Belligerent indeed the Balrog could be, but their friendship had been easy of late. There would be little harm in at least asking.

After a moment of consideration, evenly he declares, “If this is your desire, I will speak to Gothmog on your behalf and attempt to negotiate for some custody of your training. However, should he refuse, I will not press him. He is your commander, and his wishes must be respected. Does this seem fair to you?”

The youths stare up at him incredulously, naked awe shining in their eyes. Silently they nod at him, the air almost crackling with unspoken enthusiasm. At last, their leader finds the composure to speak, and shyly she smiles, “T-thank you, my lord! Thank you so much! It is more than fair – it is more than ever we expected! Thank you!”

Informally he dismisses them, watching them sidle off in an attempt at nonchalance. But as they round the corner he hears an explosive whoop of joy echo through the corridor, followed a moment later by an embarrassed round of shushing. He grins to himself before wandering down the range to collect his arrows and afterwards retreats to his chambers for a much-needed bathe.

The following day he speaks to Gothmog, who quite to his surprise assents to the request, upon the sole condition that he is allowed to supervise any such sessions and advise where he sees fit. That agreed, the next evening he summons the youths to the training grounds.

They seem incredibly keen to try their hands at archery, a sentiment that puzzles him. Most of the Valaraukar chose to shun ranged weaponry, preferring instead the surety of a handle in their fist, be it of whip or axe or broadsword. Nevertheless he permits them to try, instructing them firmly to

manifest themselves as much as possible in humanoid form so as not to damage the equipment, as fiery hands were little suited to bows of wood and oiled horsehair. For the most part they are of poor skill: arrows patter well past even the nearest of targets despite his best advice. One of the youths shows some promise, hitting even the bulls-eye upon occasion, although so fleeting are such occurrences that quickly he attributes them to sheer luck rather than skill.

After an hour or so their initial session finishes, and as gently as he can he advises them not to be disheartened, reminding them that proficiency at any skill comes only with many hours of practise. At those words their clouded faces clear a little, and at Gothmog's beckon they move over to the sparring ring, their commander determined that their primary training should not be disturbed by such whimsical ventures into other styles of combat. At Gothmog's behest, he dons a stiff jerkin of leather armour and a pair of notched vambraces over his shirt and ducks into the ring, a dulled falchion grasped in his hand. With sword, whip and axe the youths assail him, and easily he fends them off, pausing their sparring every so often to give comment on how best to dodge, or some nuance of parrying that they had yet to grasp. Gothmog stands nearby, rumbling out additional comments where he deems necessary.

The female slashes at him with a broadsword and lazily he blocks her, his blade angled before him to deflect her blow, sending her sword skidding awry with the ringing scrape of metal upon metal.

“Move your feet!” Gothmog barks.

“He is right, you know,” he adds, “a step here and I could have –“

“I meant you, Mairon,” the Balrog drawls. At that he pouts, pulling a rather childish face at him from over his shoulder, before moving back to engage the youth once more, and silently resolving to pay a little more attention to his own form this time as well.

The weeks slide on with comfortable ease. The youths, while not excelling with ranged weaponry at least markedly improve, and their proficiency in the mêlée ring increases exponentially under the dual-fold tuition of himself and Gothmog. Proudly he watches as their lunges become more expert, their blocks cease to waver, and swiftly they rise in renown and splendour amongst the ranks of the Valaraukar.

It is not until the unexpected interruption of training session that he can claim anything of great import as having happened in Angband's affairs. A messenger arrives bearing direct summons from his master: a declaration that sets dual waves of excitement and apprehension rippling within him. He trails the orc down the spiralling staircases to the more subterranean areas of the fortress, quizzing him for what knowledge he has of what his master wants him for. But the orc either knows or will tell him nothing and at last he gives up, bearing his company in terse silence as they walk ever lower through the fortress. Only as they descend into the dungeons does a chill flicker through his veins, trepidation swirling within him as he remembers his last times in this bleak place, all dour stone and clotted shadows.

They arrive at a cell door that the orc opens for him, ominously lingering at its exterior and bidding him a hasty farewell. For a nervous moment he watches the orc's retreating back, before he gathers himself, warily stepping through the door and into the gloom. A dim stream of light filters into the cell through a grated slot in its upper corner, and quickly his eyes adjust to the murk, his pupils expanding like those of some nocturnal predator into the muddled striae of his irises.

“You are to be congratulated, Mairon.”

His master's silky voice makes him jump, a fizz of nervous adrenaline slams through him and

almost angrily he spins around, facing his master where he lurks amongst the shade. Great eyes watch him like orbits of liquid gold, and as his initial surprise fades his master's words begin to percolate in his brain. Yet he remains unsure of to what his master was referring, and suspiciously he squints at him.

“Your minions have found it. The Hidden City lays bare.”

His eyes widen in shock, he stares at his master incredulously as the implications of his speech slowly slot into place.

“That fool Húrin passed by the Taur-nu-Fuin, as I had so hoped he would whence I released him half mad into the wilderness. Your sharp-eyed captains espied him, followed him even to the borders of the Echoriath, where at last he revealed himself. And by that spectacular piece of imprudence, he revealed with some precision where the Hidden City lies. Your soldiery on your orders investigated, your wolves slipped through the narrow passes and lo, their success was nigh. The Hidden City is hidden no more.

Dimly he feels some sense of accomplishment rise in him, the magnitude of what his master was saying somehow a struggle to fully comprehend.

“And better yet, little one, they have brought us back a present.”

His master's gaze shifts to the side and after a second he follows it, noting rather impassively an unconscious elf hanging in manacles from the ceiling. Bruises mar his cheeks and jaw-line, his tunic lies ripped and tattered over a well-muscled torso, but overall he looks not much the worse for wear, and his gaze flickers back over to his master, looking at him quizzically.

“I had thought that you might like to reap the fruits of your labour. Although, if you would prefer not...”

The question hangs in the air between them, and after a moment he makes some inarticulate noise of neutrality. Should his master insist then he would do it, of course he would do it, but given the choice here he prefers to observe. And whether or not it is some lingering reticence of past actions that push him to that decision he cannot say, but for now he contents himself to view the proceedings with an air of aloof curiosity. An intrigue as to what the elf would tell rises within him, and such things were often best sated whilst not being the one to wield the knife.

He gestures for his master to continue before wandering over to the opposing wall and settling himself there, leaning against the cold stones with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Very well, then,” his master says, before moving over to the elf. He checks the fastenings of the manacles about the elf's wrists, and satisfying himself that they were sufficient he clicks his fingers whilst simultaneously uttering one sharp word of power. An instant later the elf gasps, his head jerks backwards as cruelly he is tugged back into consciousness. Frantically he twists in his bonds, instinctively trying to tear his wrists free of those biting shackles and even from the distance he can see the fear swimming in the elf's dark eyes. That fear slowly ebbs into a look of pure horror as the elf's thrashing quietens whence his efforts prove in vain. He watches the elf shudder, air sliding shallowly into his lungs through such a stressed position; his arms clasped tightly together above his head and the balls of his bare feet an inch or two clear of the floor.

His master sweeps imperiously over to the prisoner, stroking one finger mockingly over his cheek, one pointed fingernail glancing over the inflamed skin there. He hears the elf hiss as his master pivots slightly, his hand sliding down to grasp the elf's bruised chin, raising his head to look him levelly in the eye.

“And who might we have the pleasure of meeting?” his master purrs, condescension dripping from his teeth.

“F-fuck you!” comes the wheezing response, defiance and fear all bound up in that one derisive exclamation. From afar he almost snorts. A wry admiration glints in him at the elf’s boldness, but swiftly the elf would learn the price of such behaviour.

However, instead of a violent rebuke, his master merely laughs; a dark throaty chuckle that sends a shiver of anticipation crawling down his spine.

“Such a spirited soul,” his master croons. *“How... delectable.”*

Coyly his master steps aside, allowing the elf an un-obscured view of him leaning against the wall. His master glances over at him, a sly challenge glittering in his eyes, and he raises his head in acceptance, waiting out his master and whatever insinuation is sure to follow.

“Mairon here just loves the spirited ones, doesn’t he?”

He can see the board set out before him, he can feel the game being played, and some sadistic part of him flares in response, it rises to meet his master. Lazily his gaze slides over the elf, his murky eyes lit in an unearthly radiance by the sliver of pallid sunlight that shivers across the room. His eyes settle upon him, he watches the elf pale and lasciviously he smiles, his incisors bared in a sensual, predatory smirk. An instant later, he drags his tongue across his teeth, running over their pointed tips seductively, languidly, and with such vicious delight he sees fear blossom anew in the elf’s eyes.

Smoothly he shifts himself away from the wall, his eyes never leaving the elf’s horrified face, but as he is about to move his master steps between them, severing the terribly sexual tension that thuds through the air. And he knows that it is juvenile, he knows that his master is simply using him to cheap effect but some vindictive part of him wants him to. It revels in that glory, it thrills in the effect that such simple gestures can produce, as even his master eyes him hungrily from where he stands. Smugly he watches the elf struggle to recompose himself, flicking locks of midnight hair out of his face in some pathetic attempt to disguise the trembling of his jaw.

“Your bravery is admirable, elfling,” his master says at last, tearing away from him and turning back to the elf. *“But it will not avail you, in the end.”*

With a conceited little smirk he positions himself against the wall once more, and as he does so his master whistles. After a short pause, a she-orc enters through the still-open doorway, a trolley pulled behind her. She wheels the trolley to the center of the room then bows quickly to his master before wordlessly departing, the door shutting with a ringing thud behind her.

Never would he profess himself as unfamiliar with the extraction of information, however unwilling, and the various techniques by which one might do so, but even he stands amazed at the array of contraptions that lie in the trolley before them. Snarled twists of metal punctuated with bolts, locks and protrusions lie atop a truly impressive array of knives, spanning from needle-thin stiletto blades to butcher’s cleavers. Mechanisms that he cannot even begin to give name to tangle with straps of stained leather, the sight sending a dark ripple of excitement pulsing through him as he sees the contorted iron traps that lie among them, of what debased application he can only guess.

If he is piqued by the array of devices that lie before him, he can only imagine what the elf thinks of them. His eyes flick back up, and with a rush of satisfaction he sees the aghast expression breaking over the elf’s features, the flare of panic that lights up in his eyes. As his master saunters

over to the trolley the elf's cheeks drain to the colour of soured milk. For an awful, ponderous moment his master rummages through the trolley's contents, until at last he plucks a wicked meat hook from its innards, its serrated inner edge sharpening to a terrible re-curved point.

His master grins over it for a moment with gluttonous pleasure, before moving back towards the elf, menace rolling in his every movement, each slight curl and point of the hook in his hand manoeuvred perfectly to unnerve.

His master did not have long to wait, as upon seeing that hook swung towards him frantically the elf gasps, "Maeglin! My... my name is Maeglin."

"*Maeglin?*" his master repeats, surprise thrumming through his usually balanced tones. His master twists around, facing him where still he leans against the wall. "*Mairon, you did not tell me that we were entertaining such exalted company.*"

At his master's words he frowns, quickly rifling through his memory for anything that he might have missed, some small piece of information regarding this elf that he should know. To his mild confusion he finds none, the elf's name remains unfamiliar to him, and he looks back at his master in consternation.

"My lord, I know nothing of this elf. Forgive me if this is oversight on my part, but of what importance is he? He does not look so noble to me."

"*You did not hear?*" his master asks, and is met with only the confused knot of his eyebrows. "*Ah, it matters not. You shall find out soon enough.*"

With that his master turns back to the elf, leaning in towards him with a conspiratorial air.

"*Well, Mairon might not be familiar with you, but oh the things that I have heard...*"

"You know nothing of me!" the elf spits, jerking himself as far away from his master as he can manage. He watches the play of muscles beneath the elf's ripped tunic, the haughty glare that shines in his eyes despite his ignoble predicament, and with a concealed eagerness he wonders who exactly this elf is that could evoke this sort of reaction from his master.

"*Do you think so?*" his master purrs. "*The eyes of Angband see more than you know, elfling, and more than your petty dreams would dare to fathom. You keep your secrets, and we keep ours, and what pretty songs our secrets have to sing. They say that Men have no talent for music in comparison to the Quendi, but some, we have found, are fair minstrels indeed.*"

"*And such things their songs say of you...*" his master gloats, his voice dropping to a low, insidious murmur, "*... well, they scarcely bear repetition in polite company, now do they?*"

He watches as the elf flushes crimson, an unflattering mottle creeps up his neck, and with a wry sense of foreknowledge he knows that his master has aimed for the mark, and aimed well. So many times he has watched it before, that first blush the fatal chink in the armour into which his master could pry, could lever him open and eviscerate him, leave him bleeding on the floor. Over and over again the pattern repeats; he has done it before, he has had it done to him before, and that tiny admission of guilt is like the first falling of raindrops that signal the flood.

"*The Noldor are such perverse creatures,*" his master continues, running a finger contemplatively along the hook's outer edge. "*Such unnatural appetites...*"

The elf's blush deepens, and subtly he narrows his eyes, pondering what exactly the elf's proclivities might be that were of such note, that could be twisted to such manipulative effect.

Several ideas occur to him, each slightly more preposterous than the next, and he stifles a smirk as the rather scandalous images blossom in his mind. Slyly his eyes roam back over the elf, he could hazard a guess, he supposes, but before he can truly come to a conclusion his master speaks once more. And almost imperceptibly, beneath each smooth syllable he can feel slender filaments of power wind, some delicate spell of compulsion threading through his master's words.

“When she stands in the sunlight, garbed in shimmering white and her hair as soft-spun gold, when she laughs like something divine by your glimmering fountains, you want her. You want to court her, want to simply be near her, to feel that smile light upon your face, to think that she could feel for you but a fragment of what you feel for her. You want to touch her, kiss her, breathe her in; run your hands through her silken tresses as she calls you lord. You want to bed her, you want her writhing underneath you with wetness between her thighs, and when you entered her, oh how she would scream out your name...”

“Stop it!” the elf shrieks, writhing in his bonds, his head shaking from side to side as if somehow that could block out his master's words, that could halt the cancerous tendrils of persuasion that slide through him. Yet relentlessly his master continues and the elf quiets once more, a glazed expression falling over his dark eyes as his master's spell takes hold.

“Such lustful desires: for how long have you repressed them? Tried to hide them from those who would condemn you, from she who spurns you, from your uncle who would disown you if only he knew?”

The elf's breath hitches but stoically he remains silent, his jaw clamped tightly shut. But beneath his sullen exterior, something tantalisingly like irresolution flickers, and almost tangibly he can sense the elf waver.

“I could offer you all that you desire, and yet more,” his master says, his voice dripping like honey: simple in its eloquence and yet so devastatingly alluring. *“I would offer you what opportunities you seek: power over all those who would deny you what pleasures you deserve. A king you would be crowned in golden flowers, elevated in might and majesty beyond even the measures of your forefathers, and the maiden of your dreams would beg to have you. She would throw herself at your feet.”*

The elf licks his lips in a seemingly unconscious movement, staring at his master as if he was drunk: unfocused and yet entranced.

“All of this I offer to you, and yet more, but I cannot do so blindly. I cannot give you a kingdom not yet mine. So you must help me to take it, you must tell me where these ingrates hide, and I will help you supplant them. I will throw down their stagnant rule and raise you like a phoenix from their ashes; a proud king to which even the haughtiest of lords will bow.”

His master's words hover in the static air of the chamber, and keenly he watches indecision moil over the elf's features, ambition warring so plainly with some vestige of loyalty within him. But oiled by his master's spell desire seems to grip him the tighter, and slowly the elf raises his head, with as much pride as he can muster asking, “You promise me the throne?”

“I promise you your dreams, whatever they might be. If it is within my power to be granted then I should gift it to you. You would only have to ask.”

Greed flares in the elf's eyes, and a conceited little smile affixes itself over his thin lips. After a moment's consideration, cagily he asks, “And Idril?”

“Have I not said?” his master replies, and to his profound amusement he hears a flash of irritation

in his voice, the slight tightness about his consonants quickly smoothed over into a flowing, ensorcelled tone: *“This maid that you desire would be yours, for you to do with as you see fit. For how could she refuse one such as you? All that I ask in return for these mighty favours is information. I would see you clad in silks of gold until the utmost end of days, but I cannot do so whilst the city remains enigma, and its fortifications unknown.”*

His master leans forward, his lips nearly brushing the elf’s cheek, and into this last utterance winds a bleeding puissance, one last little push to send the elf toppling to his ruin.

“Give me what I want, and I will ensure that your name will be forever etched into the history of Arda.”

The air seems to thicken; the walls draw closer with anticipation, and with narrowed eyes he awaits the elf’s decision, watching the last glimmers of hesitation flicker over his face. With a coy smile he runs a fingernail against the stones upon which he leans, watching as with each unsettling little noise the elf flinches, a disarming tremor running through his body with each scrape of nail over slate.

Under the pressure the elf at last buckles, and upon the hardening of the elf’s expression he ceases his motion, smirking contentedly as he knows that his calculated little menace drove the elf all the quicker to his betrayal.

Before him, the elf inhales as deeply as he can, his pectoral muscles painfully stretched by the positioning of his arms, and sucking in one shuddering breath he mutters, “I consent to your terms. Upon your word as honour, I will tell you the Hidden City’s secrets.”

The elf confesses quickly, outlining the main approaches to the City and the mountain pathways unknown to all but him, having in his arrogance betrayed the leaguer of his king in pursuit of precious metals and gemstones far beneath the mountains. He scoffs at that, the absurdity of the situation strikes some perversely humorous chord inside of him. Grinning over at his master, flirtatiously he suggests simply enslaving the elf here and now, setting him to labour in his beloved mines in fetters forevermore: that delicious piece of irony all too tempting to resist.

Gently his master rebukes him, revealing instead a glimpse of plans far greater in which the elf would be instrumental. Carefully he listens; and whilst his master’s plans seem feasible he remains sceptical. Too much hinges upon chance quite for his liking, too much responsibility falls to one treacherous elf; and frequently he interjects with as courteous a protest as he can. But his master speaks persuasively and at last he is prevailed upon, albeit not without misgivings.

So it is with a slightly disgruntled air that a week or so later he escorts the elf to the main gates of Angband, a tattered rucksack thrown over one shoulder. They walk in cool silence down the corridors, the elf trailing behind him, glancing fretfully about for signs of any of his kindred. He snaps at the elf to hurry and quickly the elf obliges, scuttling all the closer to him with a cowed expression, his eyes dropped to the floor. In the cool morning air the passages are relatively empty, a small mercy at least, as he doubts that the work-slaves’ reactions to a traitor walking freely in their midst would be pleasant for any involved in the altercation.

After several minutes they reach the front gates, the great doors slotted open a fraction to send a ribbon of pallid light spilling over the sable marble of the entranceway. Just before the doors he steps smartly aside, and the elf halts before the opening, clearly uncertain of what was expected of him. With a disinterested hand gesture he bids the elf continue, and upon a moment of hesitation he clicks at him, his tongue flicking off the back of his teeth as one would encourage a stubborn horse. Flushing, the elf hurries through the gap, and he follows an instant later, shadowing the elf’s

steps between the imposing doors.

They emerge onto the sloping causeway, and the elf halts a few metres beyond the doors. He steps up beside him, scanning the elf suspiciously just in case he should taste freedom and try anything unwise. The arid wind of the Anfauglith whips across them, sending dark and blond hair alike flying across their faces, and mournfully the elf looks out over the dust-plains. Keeping one eye firmly fixed on him, he un-shoulders the pack, and checking that its fastenings remained un-tampered with he hands it over, the elf then slinging it across his back.

A further moment passes in awkward silence, the elf staring dismally out over the bleak landscape. Such apathetic behaviour does little to move him, and with a final glance over at the elf abruptly he turns on his heel, striding back to the fortress as with a forced jauntiness he calls over his shoulder, "Safe travels, then."

"Wait!" The elf's voice snaps through the air, and rolling his eyes he turns back around, affixing the elf with an impatient sneer. "Don't- don't I at least get a horse..."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," he replies, a spiteful curl to his voice. "Who would waste one on a *traitor* like you?"

"But –"

"We have fed you," he says blandly, "we have clothed you, and against my wishes indeed we have granted your freedom. I would not presume much more upon my patience."

The elf steps back a fraction at the threat in his voice, but gathering himself he asks, "But you will keep to your word?"

"Oh yes," he retorts irritably, "your treacherous little name will grace every annal in Arda by the time this is done. Now get out of my sight."

With that he turns, striding back into Angband's interior, and the great doors slam shut behind him. He walks back to his chambers, leaving the elf to whatever evil fate awaits him, whether by his master's hand or no. For despite his reluctance, now their work truly begins, an invasion force must be rallied, trained, armed; and to his eternal frustration such proceedings require from him a truly stunning amount of paperwork.

After months of planning, at last the day arrives. Every aspect of the invasion had been examined, fail-safes and options considered, argued, discarded; until eventually his master's initial plan had been modified to his satisfaction. Indeed, he thinks, staring out over the podium, he is feeling positively enthused.

Legions of orcs stand in their formations before him, and amid them knots of Valaraukar and other Maiar sworn to his master's cause snap to attention, all looking attentively up to where he and his master stand. Clad in sable armour, his hair spills like a river of pale amber over his pauldrons, a few strands shifting across his cheeks as he leans forward slightly, excitedly surveying the forces set in all their midnight glory before him. To his right, his master continues his parting speech, one of the many aspects of ceremony that he cares little for, and eagerly he awaits its conclusion.

He stands as alertly as he can, desperately resisting the urge to fiddle with the straps of his vambraces, or to return Gothmog's cheeky smile that he sees winking up at him. Instead he contents himself with running the foremost manoeuvres of the plan through his mind. They would march south to the Echoriath, making swift rendezvous with his forces stationed in the forest of

Taur-nu-Fuin, and his creatures would lead them according to the elf's instructions, and by secret pathways of their own findings.

He shifts his hips a little, impatiently waiting for his master to finish, and as he moves he feels the reassuring weight of the twinned falchions at his waist, he hears the slight creak of the bow slung across his back, carefully fastened over a quiver of arrows that juts upwards over his right shoulder-blade. It had been an age indeed since he had marched to war, and even to his own surprise he finds himself relishing its coming. That chance for glory dangles in front of him, the chance to take something for himself, for his master, to lead, to feel powerful, assured, victorious; to raise his master's black banners once more above the ruins of an arrogant city. Such fantasies flash before his eyes and he feels that longing, that *certainty* flare within him.

Soon, he promises himself, soon his time will come. His master will look at him with pride as he delivers him a kingdom.

Abruptly he is yanked from his daydreams by an ear-splitting roar from the crowd, bellows and claps and ululations of approval sent rumbling through the halls to signal the end of his master's speech. Looking over to right, a thrill races through him as he spies the dark smile curving over his master's handsome features, the calm surety that shimmers in his golden eyes.

A bugle sounds, a steady drum beat takes up, and with a great clank of steel-shod boots and chainmail the first lines of orcs move off, marching briskly towards the front doors which swing open before them. He watches them begin the descent of the causeway, their numbers pouring like a slick of tar from the fortress' maw, and then he readies himself to depart. And if the resolute coolness of his master worries him then he hides it well. Not a word is spoken between them of farewell or parting, and somehow he cannot humble himself enough to beg for one. Let his master remain haughty then, all the better will his victory be received, and buoyed by that thought he straightens himself up. He flicks his hair back behind his shoulders, and with one last glance at his master he makes to move past him, thinking to collect what remains of his gear and to find his horse in the stables.

But as he steps past his master he feels a hand rest suddenly upon his shoulder, blocking him. Inexplicably a surge of irritation rises in him, and with a mildly peeved expression he turns around, wondering what it is that his master could want with him now.

“*Not you.*”

“What?” he snaps, not grasping the meaning of his master's words, and ill-disposed to try to decipher them.

With an almost bored neutrality his master murmurs, “*I said, not you. You will remain here.*”

This time he hears, he hears all too clearly and for one horrible, viscous moment something sick undulates in his stomach. He stares at his master disbelievingly, dismay and horror and betrayal bursting within him as violently he jerks himself free of his grip, spinning around to face him fully.

“What are you talking about?” he hisses, all of that shock coiling into a knot of fury that seethes in the pit of his stomach.

“*Do not make me repeat myself for a third time, Mairon. You heard me well. You will not be accompanying our forces.*”

He blinks up at his master in despair, impotent rage bubbling up in his throat as every hope, every

dream of glory, of success, of *just for once impressing him* wither to ashes in his chest. And in that moment he wants to scream, all of the plans that he had drawn up, all of the stratagems he had devised now all for naught, all someone else's prize to claim, and that realisation is a hard one to ignore. Anger clenches once more in his stomach, every vile word he wants to say comes punching up his throat, and his jaw trembles as desperately he fights them back down, striving for some sort of composure. And at last forced from his lips simply falls the question: "Why?"

"*You are of far more use to me here,*" his master replies, "*than you are getting yourself killed in some far-flung corner of the mountains.*"

"I would *not* get myself killed," he counters icily, pride flaring in his eyes. Tightly he tries to cling to what shreds of diplomacy remain to him, those more civil faculties slipping from him as blades of disappointment seem to stab anew through his chest. Valiantly he tries, but even he can hear his voice crumble to an unbecoming whine as he continues, "I know what I am doing. I know how to defend myself. Why can't you ever just—"

His master grabs him once more, roughly jerking him forward before snarling down into his face, "*I do not trust that elf as far as I can spit. Yes, he walks under my influence, but he has fallen beyond my sight. The Hidden City has not endured in secret for this long without possessing a power of its own, and one over which I have no sway. I will not have you walk needlessly into a trap when others might take your place.*"

"Your concern for me is flattering," he spits back, his voice blistering. Once more he pulls himself away from his master, drawing himself up. "But I do not need your permission. You cannot stop me from going."

Swiftly he turns to leave, a scowl engraved across his face, but in a voice that near curdles the blood within his veins his master intones, "*I could stop you.*"

And for an instant he wavers, his pride bowing to some tiny sense of concern that wriggles within him, some little voice of self-preservation that whispers that maybe his master is making sense, that maybe he should stop, maybe he should listen. Correlation enough there is between battles *not* fought in and length of survival, and well he knows it, and that truth slides amid his anger. But in response he feels frustration rise anew: this is his choice, not his master's, this is his life to give or to throw away in his master's service as he saw fit, it is *his*...

"*Please, Mairon, do not force me to stop you.*"

Bitterly his master's words resonate within him, but with them are dragged up those scattered sheds of reason, of sensibilities and loyalties and thwarted ambitions all melded in one confused, stinging crush within him. An awful moment of consideration slips by, and amid his hurt he dares a glance over at his master. How his mouth twists as he sees his master staring gravely down at him, his serene air the abhorrent antithesis to the turmoil that founders within himself.

And he cannot explain it; he cannot even begin to give name to the emotion that rises in him; reason and betrayal warring through his guts like frothing acid. But finally his master's lucidity wins out, and he feels that futile self-righteousness fade, dimming within him to a resentful glower, but ultimately stayed. Some overarching sense of reason, a sense that somehow his master is doing this to protect him whispers its hateful truth within him, and no matter how much it hurts, deep down he knows that his master does not mean to wound him by this.

So hard he tries not to care, or maybe he tries to just care differently; an uncertain mingle of inevitability and apathy thud through him. The longer he lingers, the longer it bleeds; his master had weighed the value of his life and found it worth more than petty ambition. And he supposes

that he should be happier for that, he should be grateful for at least that little bit of concern, but it drowns out in the scorch of spurned ambition, the smart of conquests snatched from his grasp.

At long last his lip curls, and without another word he turns upon his heel. He feels his master reach out to grab him, but he is ready for it this time, and as his master moves he shrugs him aside. As his master's hand closes on air, dully he stares back at him.

“There is no need to stop me,” he says hollowly, a numbing void seeming to yawn in the pit of his stomach, because maybe it just isn't worth the effort, it is just better to let his master have his way in this as with all other things. Resignedly he smiles over at him, a tiny wan quirk passing over his lips that betrays not even a fraction of the things he would rather have said, every derisive word, every bitter comment.

“What does it matter, anyway?” he sighs, slowly turning from his master as a bone-deep weariness seems to wash through him. “I only wanted to do this for you.”

With that broken admission he leaves, stepping resolutely away from his master, his head bowed as he crosses the short distance to the doorway. As he steps under the stone archway for an instant he turns back, fixing his master in his gaze as with the last ounce of hurt and disappointment he has in him he murmurs, “I only ever wanted to make you proud.”

Honey and Wounds

Weeks slip by and for lack of any better distraction he throws himself back into his work. He does not see his master; he can barely tolerate the fleeting glance of him along the corridors. That disappointment, that betrayal is still all too poignant. It wraps like a noose around his neck.

He dives into every project that even remotely interests him, seeking any possible discourse from that bitterness, that simmering regret. He consults upon the design of new arrowheads forged to pierce even the thickest of Elven steel; he oversees the delving of new mines yet deeper into the heart of the Thangorodrim. Hours he spends at his forge, smelting gold and silver into works of metallurgic wonder. Necklaces of woven metal flow under his fingertips, or intricate coronets so gorged with jewels that even the gaudiest of the Noldor would be put to shame.

With each passing week new snatches of conversation filter through to him, rumours of the far-distant war and its happenings. Yet among them there is little veracity; opinions collude and conflict in equal measure, and day by day his worry grows. From within those whispers sooner or later either victory or defeat must come, and its consequences must be dealt with.

Finally, that day arrives. He sits in his chambers, meticulously sketching a new design for reinforced trebuchets. Minor modifications to the fulcrum and a re-angling of the drop weight would theoretically produce a greater range; and bordered by piles of arcane textbooks that the spider-creature of the library had so helpfully provided him with, and his own half solved algorithms scattered about he attempts to draw up the schematics for a prototype. Marking quick charcoal outlines over the parchment, with his free hand he reaches forward, extricating from the clutter of his desk a goblet of spiced wine that he sips from.

A second later, he grimaces as that removal causes a landslide of scrolls to slip across his desk, and awkwardly he pushes them aside with the back of his hand. In the privacy of his own rooms he has rather neglected to dress, wearing only a bleach-spotted leather kilt atop a pair of grey breeches, and he wipes his fingers clean of charcoal before fully attempting to rectify his desk, leaving a dark streak smudged across his stomach.

Carefully he re-stacks the scrolls, positioning his goblet amongst them once more. He squints at them suspiciously until he satisfies himself that they will not slip again, and then resumes his sketching, later inking calculations and part specifications at the edge of the schematic.

After a time, and rather to his annoyance, a knock sounds at his door. For a moment he considers ignoring it, most likely it is just a stray servant who had not heard his command to be left undisturbed and would soon depart. But after a fractional pause, the knock comes again, more insistently. Reluctantly he leaves his desk, and wandering over unbolts the door, pulling it open with an irksome look.

But where he expects a gormless orc, immediately his gaze is drawn upwards, and his eyes widen in shock as he realises that it is his master standing before him. He flinches backwards like he has been slapped in some reflexive response that he is not quick enough to stop; resentment and shock thrown up before him like a shield. His master stares at him inscrutably, seemingly unconcerned by his uncouth reaction.

The silence seems to shiver between them; each awaits the other to make the first move, until at last his master says, "*Good afternoon, Mairon.*"

Through his cordial tone a tinge of amusement dances, his master's eyes running over his

dishevelled form: his hair falling un-brushed over his bare shoulders, and his kilt slung scandalously low about his hips. With a start he realises what his master is smiling at, he realises what a state he must present and embarrassedly he replies, "Good afternoon, my lord."

His master shifts forward a fraction and he moves aside from the doorframe, allowing his master to enter. Hurriedly he crosses over to his dresser and pulls on a shirt, shaking his hair loose of the collar as he turns back around to face his master.

"There is no need to be bashful, Mairon," his master smiles, tilting his head coyly. *"It is nothing that I have not seen before."*

A wan flicker passes over his lips, but his master's flirtatious tone does little to move him. Though months ago, his master's rebuke had sown its resentful seeds deep, and still the grudge sours within him. So coldly he looks over, wondering what was important enough to prompt this unsolicited visit after long weeks of silence.

His master appraises him for a moment, before wandering over to his desk, with an air of casual intrigue glancing over his diagrams, flicking through the sheaves of parchment that clutter there. His jaw works as he watches his master fiddle, the rustle of paper the only sound that scrapes painfully through the air. At last he can bear the infuriating quiet no longer, and as evenly as he can manage he asks, "Is there something that I can help you with, my lord?"

Unhurriedly his master relinquishes his documents, stepping back from the desk to look at him once more.

"There may be many things that you can help me with, little one," his master murmurs, *"but for now I simply play the messenger. I thought that you should be the first to know, and perhaps from me the blow would be lessened."*

Those words curl with dreadful implication within him and for a moment he is silent, tightness seeming to pluck at the muscles of his throat. His master seems about to continue, but before he can a strange scrabbling sound comes from the corridor outside. He peers around his master in confusion, and something large streaks through the doorway, bolting towards him with a loping patter of paws and an oddly familiar blur of grey.

In complete shock he stands, recognition blooming within him, and a second later the creature bowls him over, jumping all over him in wolfish enthusiasm.

From his ungainly position on the floor he blinks upwards; the wolf, *his* wolf, the cub whom he had rescued from that bloodstained den years before now stands above him fully grown and enthusiastically licking at his face, its rough tongue rasping over his cheeks. A contented sort of hum emanates from its chest, and after a second of paralysing disbelief he smiles in return. He prises himself up into a sitting position, seizing the wolf and scratching it vigorously behind the ears, and to his delight its eyes close in pleasure, its great tongue lolls from between its happily panting jaws.

He ruffles its fur and as he does so he glances up at his master, light suffusing for the first time in what seems like an age through him.

"It seems," his master smiles back, *"that your friend was unable to contain himself for his proper introduction."*

He laughs at that, and then looks back to the wolf once more. It has grown since last he saw it, and even then it was of no mean size. Its head is nearly the size of his torso, its fur a magnificent silver-

grey, and it almost knocks him sprawling once more as it head-butts him in the chest, merrily rubbing itself over him. Gently he pushes it back and to his relief it steps off him, its front paw easily the width of his thigh that had been rather crushed in its enthusiasm.

Surreptitiously he wiggles his toes, trying to regain some blood-flow into them, and the wolf flops down between his outstretched legs, gazing up at him adoringly.

“Hello,” he coos, and at the positively gooey tone of his voice he can hear his master’s soft snort of laughter. Ignoring him, although reining in his tone to one of slightly more dignity, he continues, “It has been far too long, youngling. Although, I do not know if I can call you that anymore.”

The wolf turns its head at him quizzically, and grasping the slight reprieve in such an overwhelming reunion, he retracts his legs from either side of its bulk and clambers back up to his feet. The wolf rises with him, eagerly mimicking his movements, but once contenting itself that he was not about to depart it circles his legs then settles itself before him.

“Apparently this one would not bear himself to be left behind as our troops vacated the Taur-nu-Fuin,” his master says. *“It seems that there was someone that he missed.”*

He smiles once more at that, a genuine warmth spreading through his chest. But slowly the implications of his master’s words trickle through his mind, and more sharply he looks over.

“Our forces vacated the Taur-nu-Fuin? What news then do you bring, my lord?”

“We have the victory,” his master replies simply. *“Our forces have prevailed. The Hidden City is but a smoking ruin amid the mountains, and the elves that dwelt there burned with their kingdom. Our traitor played his hand well, and was rewarded as befitting his miserable lot. The last stronghold of the Noldor lies now barren.”*

“Good,” he says, the word falling from his lips before truly he means it, a disconnected sense of achievement echoing dimly within him. But where he expects his master to elaborate there is merely silence, a void of words that sends unease crawling over his skin. The quiet drags on and his master looks away, something unreadable glimmering in his eyes, something so converse to the joy that he looks for.

“What else happened?” he asks at length, the silence becoming unbearable.

“This victory,” his master murmurs, *“was not without its casualties.”*

Dread blooms in the pit of his stomach, and for one crushing moment he doesn’t want his master to keep talking, he doesn’t want to hear the answer to the question that hangs dead in the air between them. But responsibility grips him, he has to know, this goes beyond desire and into grim duty, and bracing himself he asks, “My lord, what do you mean?”

A sombre pall casts over his master’s face, something all too close to hesitation flickers in his eyes, and that more than anything else sends fear sparking through him.

“My lord, please,” he says tightly, gently, desperately. “Please, what do you mean?”

“Little one,” his master sighs, each word formed with tremulous precision. *“I know that yourself and Gothmog were close...”*

“No - “

“I know that he was your friend...”

“No! No, please –“

His breath cuts off in a strangled choke and he staggers backwards a step, his hand gripping the edge of his desk for balance. And for a moment it feels like the world has stopped turning, the sun freezes in the sky and crumbles in its impotence; his master’s words punch through his stomach and he wants to be sick, he wants to scream, he wants to deny it; just throw those hateful words back into his master’s face.

“No, no, it can’t be true,” he begs, hoping against all hope that his master is lying, that this is just some cruel joke played at his expense. But that scant hope withers as his eyes settle upon his master’s sober expression.

“He fell, little one.”

His master reaches hesitantly out towards him but violently he jerks backwards, and his master’s fingers curl on air. His master sighs, retracting his hand, and with the closest that his voice has ever come to true remorse intones: *“I’m sorry.”*

His heartbeat thuds through his chest, each beat seeming to smash its way through his ribcage. Painfully his throat tightens, and he feels the hot wave of tears begin to prickle behind his eyes.

“He passed bravely, so I have heard and –“

“Stop!” he gasps, his breath hitching in his lungs, and pleadingly he looks up at his master. “Please, *please*, my lord, please can you go?”

Even to himself the wobble in his voice is pitiful, and he can only hope that just this once his master might show him leniency, he can only hope that his master would even *understand*.

“Please! I – I think I need to be alone for a moment.”

Tears gloss over his eyes and as his vision blurs he ducks his head, frantically blinking in some attempt to hold them at bay. After a slight pause, softly his master responds, *“As you wish, little one.”*

He nods, not looking up, and he hears his master retreat across the marble. And from beyond the doorway, in his master’s rich voice once more simply sounds. *“I am sorry.”*

As the door clicks shut he crumbles, what composure he had so waveringly held together before his master he utterly abandons, and his legs give way beneath him. He sinks into a heap at the foot of his desk and as he falls the wolf scrambles to its feet, peering at him concernedly. He draws his legs up to his chest, his head cradled in his hands as the evil news rocks through him afresh. The wolf whines, sensing his distress, pattering before him agitatedly before setting itself at his feet once more, curling around his legs. And with that tiny display of companionship his poise fails completely; sobs rack through his chest, as bitterly, angrily and with such unutterable sorrow tears trickle down his cheeks.

A week later the main forces return, their numbers dwindled but still largely intact. At his master’s side he welcomes them back, a terribly forced smile plastered over his face. Wave after wave of orcs pass before him, but amid their jubilant faces all he can see are the gaps, the vacancies between shields and spiked pauldrons where another soldier might have stood. He chides himself for such pathetic thoughts: he knows that death is a principal of warfare, that it must be accepted, but for the first time in millennia he has suffered a personal loss, and bitterly that shock hits home. Numbly he smiles down, the suddenly abhorrent ring of their weaponry clattering over him, the

shouts and whoops of disbanded battalions dispersing to their revelries sending a wave of self-righteous distaste through him.

A few days pass, and his master issues notice: a memorial is to be held for the slain, and to commemorate the fall of the great captain. Dully he accepts the invitation: a memorial was a rare occurrence indeed in Angband's history and reserved for only the most grievous of losses upon the field of battle.

The day arrives and grimly he prepares himself, the only slight alleviation to his moroseness being the fact that his master would personally lead the processions. Tribute would be held to all those who had died in the City's overthrow, and set above them all in renown is the great Valarauka.

The corridors line with silent ranks of the garrison and dressed in funereal white the captains and ranked officers march through them. Their attire strikes a pale juxtaposition to the fortress' brooding décor, and all the more sober then is their mood. Gravely he treads behind his master, his hair falling over the shoulders of his cropped ivory jacket, its collar and neckline starched and embossed in trails of mourning clematis picked out in silver filigree. Clapsed in his gloved hands a tall candle springs, its delicate flame guttering in the chill breeze that sweeps through the fortress. He looks solemnly ahead, yet in his peripheral vision he glimpses the lines of orcs as they walk; the white feathers tucked into the plumes of their helmets, an alabaster sash belted around many a waist or arm. A mournful light glows in their eyes, and as they pass weapons snap to attention in a ceremonial display of respect.

Gradually they descend into the lower parts of the fortress and he shields his candle from the chill that falls, from the uncaring wind that threatens to snuff it out altogether. Rounding a sharp corner he chances to look behind him, and amid the sombre crowd someone catches his eye. In such a context he struggles to place her, until at last her face swims into focus: the young female Balrog who asked after his expertise in archery.

Gothmog thought so highly of her, he recalls wistfully. Pallid flames dance over her wings folded demurely behind her, a net of glittering diamonds poises over her curled horns. Garbed in a robe of shimmering white, she has never looked so beautiful to him, and yet that purity of colour only throws back the redness that rims her eyes, the swollen blood-vessels that creep over her irises, and sorrowfully he looks away.

It was not supposed to be like this.

Horns play a low dirge as they march, a lone drum ripples its throbbing bass through the fortress to herald their passage, and in their wake spring thousands of lit candles, each held in a clawed hand, a myriad little stars amid the darkness of the earth to commemorate a fallen commander. At length they pass into the catacombs, a place rarely trodden in Angband's depths. The ghosts of greater times haunt these silent passages, the memories of comrades lost to pitiless wars down here grasp a little too strongly, and even amid such a company he feels a weird loneliness turn in his stomach.

Along the winding passages they walk, tombs dug into small alcoves to either side of them, each neatly maintained from decay in an act of reverence that surprises even him. Orcs, on the whole, tended not towards such inclinations, so he supposes that perhaps one of the Maiar kept the sombre rows of tombs in respectful order.

Eventually they reach a new alcove; a semi-circular hollow cleanly delved into the grey slate, set with two flaming torches at its mouth. Almost hypnotically he stares into its interior, spying only a wide shelf carved out of the rock at waist height, and above it gracefully etched into the stone:

Gothmog. Captain of Angband. Chief of the Valaraukar.

No proper tomb there could be: Gothmog's body was lost amid the wreckage of the mountains, drowned somewhere in a collapsed fountain in the ruins of a city. At such thoughts bitterness stirs in him once more, and with difficulty he forces it back down. This place of memorial is laid for him at least, this one small place for him to be remembered.

His master steps first into the alcove, halting before the shelf. He inclines his head respectfully, before drawing a tapered, black candle from a pocket, with a tiny pulse of power sending the wick flaring into life. He sets it at the centre of the table before stepping back a fraction, regarding the lone candle burning there like a resplendent little ruby.

"He was fair," his master intones simply. *"He was strong, and noble, and in my service he died bravely. Hail the victorious fallen."*

With that his master moves aside, and a little unsteadily he steps up. With trembling fingers he sets his own candle beside his master's, his flame stretching up grandly beneath the engraving. Falteringly he smiles at its effort, bowing his head as suddenly every word that he had wanted to say deserts him, every kind thing is stripped away by the fresh wave of grief that claws through him. Viciously he blinks back tears, he swallows hard in some futile attempt to unlock his lungs that seem to seize within his chest, and at last words rise in him anew. Thickly they pour over his lips, inelegant and halting but at least they are something, at least they are sincere.

"Since the very beginning, you were my friend. You were my best friend. We sparred together, we laughed together, and... and now you're gone. Just like that, you're gone and I - I never truly said goodbye..."

His throat clenches, his speech cuts off in a choking hiss as tears sparkle across his eyes. With one rasping breath he tries to pull himself together, stilling the shake of his knees, trying to quell the tremor that won't seem to let his fingers alone.

He leaves, and the orc that steps forward to take his place smiles sympathetically as he passes. Sorrow sticks its barbs through his windpipe afresh, and he knows that he is supposed to stand alongside his master, waiting in formal observance upon all who wished to commemorate the Balrog's life, but in that moment he just can't face it. Quietly he slips away, darting into a side-passage, with every ounce of self-control he has resisting the urge to sprint, to tear himself away from this dour place and escape back to his own rooms, his own little realm where just for a moment he could stop pretending, he could fall apart and grieve in whatever ignoble way he liked.

Briskly he strides away, yet not quickly enough to outpace the memories that cast their snares around him. About the fortress mirages of his friend lurk: the statuette that he leaned against as they argued the merits of salt-beef versus pork, the corner that Gothmog found him snoring in as one of his master's war-councils ran overlong and the Balrog had sworn blind that he was drooling in his sleep. Such inconsequential things at the time, yet now they lunge at him. But amid the frivolities darker things dwell, black memories run with the pure. That time, that unspeakable time when his master let them all punish him, let them all use him, and Gothmog stood amongst them, towering over him as he swayed on his knees. And in truth that blow was the lightest, the most reluctant of glances across the jaw, but still his fingers burned the brightest, that hurt stung the most.

With a lurch his stomach turns, and images bloom anew before his eyes: the crushing weight of water, the sizzle and moil of the fountain's surface as it closed over Gothmog's fiery bulk, as his bellows drowned in the dank waters, they crept into his lungs and dragged him down to his ruin. That thought pounds sickeningly within him, until at last he reaches his chambers, flinging the door open.

Curled upon his bed, the wolf awakens with a start, its luminous eyes staring at him in alarm as he slams the door shut behind him. Quickly he strips, flinging his attire away as if the very fabric burned him, donning instead a simple pair of loose-fitting trousers. And with that action, that awful, cloying whiteness thrust away from his skin, his mood lightens a fraction. More gently than he crosses over to the bed and sits heavily upon its edge. Slowly his thoughts ebb in their violence, replacing themselves with a more sage melancholy as wearily he lies down, curling himself up atop the covers.

Sighing, he closes his eyes, and as the Balrog's lazy grin drifts through his mind, wistfully he smiles in return. A moment later he feels something nudge at his arm, a cold nose snuffles over his bicep, and before he can respond the wolf lays itself down beside him, wriggling its great head between his arms. Its forehead rests beneath his chin, and gratefully he hugs it close; its warm body pressed to his stomach and chest as his fingers curl through its fur. Forlornly it licks at his fingertips, nudging at him in some animal response to his anguish, to check that he is all right. He sighs once more at that, clutching it all the tighter, pressing his face into the silky fur of its neck.

And in that moment he is just grateful to have something to hold, someone who wouldn't judge him or question him or rebuke him, just a companion with whom he could simply *be*; one uncomplicated relief against the miseries of the world. Sensing his mood, the wolf settles itself, its ears pricked against the gloom as he drifts down into an uneasy sleep, as the candles burn themselves out and the room slips into shadow.

Come the pallid light of morning he resumes his work once more. With reckless abandon he disappears into his engineering, or his metallurgy: drowning out his grief in the peaceful minutiae of thrust-engine capacities, or smithying techniques whereby one could imbue metals with hues of deepest cobalt, or ruddy vermilion. Ever his wolf pads like a silent shadow behind him, accompanying him in all that he might do. Unobtrusively it positions itself beneath his desk as he sketches, or lies before the glowering embers of his forge. For the most part he is glad of its company, of that stoic, silent support. In stark contrast it lies to his master's enigmatic distance as he also is consumed back into his own clandestine projects.

As the days roll on, his melancholy fades, that puissant grief passes and he comes back to himself again. Once more he takes pleasure in the things that he used to, and sensing the recovery of his demeanour his wolf begins to take more leave from him. He does not mind, and one cool evening he wanders back to the archery fields; firing arrow after arrow into the furthest body-target. Challenging himself, he aims not just for the chest but for more specialised regions, sending an arrow thudding through the smudge of ink that would indicate an eye socket, or the joint of the knee, or the throat. With a vindictive satisfaction each arrow hits its mark, they stick quivering in the dummy with the force of his draw.

Wiping a trickle of sweat from his forehead, he goes to retrieve his arrows, plucking them forcefully from the sandbag figure. He moves back up the range to his mark, and as he returns he notices an orc slip into the chamber, waiting for him by his pile of gear.

Upon his approach the orc bows and relays a message: his master requests his presence in his chambers come sundown. Neutrally he nods, dismissing the orc, but within him that message sends dual waves of apprehension and excitement to roll. Long it has been since he and his master have talked with any intimacy, and longer still since any other type of intimacies have passed. He is not fool enough to believe that these summons come free of unspoken motives, but despite his suspicions and the resentment that lingers, something hums in the base of his stomach, a little ember of desire slots open an eye, and he cannot quite find it within himself to refuse the invitation.

With a strange nervousness he readies himself; bathing quickly before dressing in smart yet informal attire: a pair of black doeskin breeches overlain with a sleeveless shirt of forest green. Arranging himself before the mirror, he scrapes his still-wet hair back, leaving it to flow unbound over his shoulders. He pulls his collar up neatly, fastening the silver clasps of his shirt save the topmost two as some roguish impulse compels him to leave that glimpse of skin bare. The points of his clavicles and the corded muscles of his arms are highlighted in rather excellent effect, he thinks, and smirking to himself he departs.

If this should be his master's agenda then at least he should make himself worth the while, and that bit of vanity helps to quell the unease that swirls in his stomach.

To his surprise, the evening proceeds cordially. His master, dressed handsomely in an ebony ensemble of robes, invites him to dine, and gracefully he accepts. Throughout the meal, a piquant stew washed down with rather heroic amounts of red wine, gradually he relaxes. With increasing ease they talk, his master enquiring after his forging, after his sparring, even after the well-being of his wolf, and helped along by the wine he eagerly tells of his past months.

With a genuine interest his master listens, a warm light kindles in his golden eyes, but to his own questions regarding his mysterious activities he remains elusive. Seemingly the conversation twists back onto him, or his master would smile so disarmingly that his concentration breaks utterly and he lapses into contemplative silence.

After long hours of talk his master stands, gliding over to the door of his bedroom and beckoning him to follow. Here the moment lies: and though his rational mind wants to refuse, it fades in the wake of the alcohol buzzing merrily inside his head and in the much more primal urge that throbs insistently at the base of his stomach. Uncertainly he stands, and his master smiles at him indulgently, his tongue poised between his teeth. The overwhelming need to have his master look at him like that again surges to life within him, any inhibitions he might have considered professing flee, and taking his master's outstretched hand he allows himself to be pulled into the bedroom.

Just short of the bed he spins on his heel, flicking his hair back from his face as he turns back to his master, a salacious grin curving over his face. And with a look to match, his master lunges forward, slamming his back roughly up against a bedpost.

"It has been too long, Mairon," his master purrs, his head dropping quickly to the opening of his shirt.

He gasps as his master kisses his chest, his lips lightly brushing over his sternum, trailing a little constellation of kisses over his collarbone, up the side of his neck. But at that push, the impact left throbbing through his spine, reluctance rears itself: as much as his body screams for this to happen, warning flashes through his mind.

Caught by that hesitation, evasively he shifts, twisting away from his master to vault upon the bed, balancing like a dancer upon its edge. His master looks up at him curiously, and with his balance left a touch unsteady by the wine he grabs onto the bedpost for support, desire and reason warring within him.

Something feral awakens in his master's eyes, something perilously alluring glitters within that gold; and almost quicker than his vision can follow his master dives forward once more. Fingers snake around the backs of his knees, and with one swift tug his master upends him, sending him collapsing down into an ungraceful sprawl atop the bedcovers. He blinks in momentary disorientation before scrambling up into a kneeling position, staggering slightly as a wave of drunkenness washes through him. He shakes his head to clear it, in that instant he realises where he is and he moves to push himself away, to stand up. But smoothly his master blocks him, in one

fluid motion running his hand up the back of his neck and kissing him deeply upon the lips.

He feels his master's mouth part his own, and so greatly he wants to melt into that embrace, to let his master have him; take him, touch him, abuse him, just do whatever he wants, but even as that temptation beckons some last, stubborn vestige of self-autonomy rights itself.

With as much force as he can muster he jerks his head backwards, slamming his hands into his master's chest and shoving him away. Their lips part forcefully, his master lets him fall, and as he sinks back onto his heels he glares up angrily.

"That was not very funny," he says icily, wiping his master's taste off of his lips with the back of his hand.

He turns, one leg beginning to rise up beneath him so that he could stand, so that he could leave; unwise desire curdling to dismay in his veins. But he barely gets an inch before his muscles lock, and not of his own volition.

"It was not supposed to be funny," his master growls, a fell light in his eyes.

His master's power crackles over him and furiously he strives against it; his own power struggling to meet the challenge, glowing within him like an incandescent little orb. Yet with crushing force his master engulfs him, bands of pressure squeeze tighter and tighter around him until he feels his own puissance waver, and to his horror finally buckle. He sways, terror lancing through him as his master sneers, as his awful will spreads like a cancer through his veins, through his muscles.

Slowly his master forces his head to bow, the muscles of his neck bending involuntarily as his master asserts himself, his grip solidifying and becoming absolute.

"You asked me before what I have been doing with my time," his master purrs, a gluttonous tone rolling through his voice. *"Perhaps a demonstration will be the most effective manner of explaining."*

Against his volition his spine straightens, the muscles of his back hauling him upright no matter how much he tries to fight against it and they leave him kneeling in the centre of the bed. His master seems satisfied, and with a painful clench his muscles lock once more; a *rigor mortis* artificially enforces in him, holding him in place with only his heartbeat left hammering through him and the tiniest flexion of his ribs to allow him to breathe.

His master reaches towards him and somehow a little squeak of fright worms its way from his throat. But no matter how hard he wills himself to move his body betrays him, his master's grip upon him is complete and he remains firmly anchored in place. Feeling his struggle his master grins, kneeling before him and slowly unfastening his shirt before tugging it free from his torso and discarding it to the floor. Hungrily his master stares at him, watching the slight tremble of his abdominals before disappearing behind him with a smirk.

"Anatomy is such a curious thing," his master drawls. *"It is so full of its quirks."*

He flinches as he feels his master grasp his ankle, swiftly unlacing his boot and pulling it off, before doing the same to the other. The sensation sends his skin crawling; the sheer humiliation of being forcibly undressed burns within him and yet helpless he remains. His feet now bare, his master saunters back in front of him, grinning at the horrified glimmer in his eyes.

"Come now, little one," his master says, his voice like honey dripped over a wound. *"Are you paying attention?"*

With no other option he stares forward, silently begging his master to just get this sordid lesson over with, and then maybe he could leave, maybe he could just run away and pretend like it never happened, maybe –

“You see, whilst your inclinations run towards the mechanical, or the geological in function, I confess a proclivity for more succulent meats. The anatomical subtleties that each individual possesses are so poorly explored, and so fascinating in their applications, now wouldn’t you agree?”

A short, static pause follows his master’s question, and dread unfurls within him.

“Now, this has been practised on many a... volunteer, and whilst some seemed to exhibit symptoms of mild distress, it has been concluded that the results of this experiment are non-lethal.”

“Well,” his master laughs, “mostly.”

“For you see, were I to extend my influence and pinch the optic nerve here...”

Immediately his vision greys, the colour bleaches out of the room, and he whines as shadows speckle across his vision, as blindness encroaches over his quivering pupils. But suddenly it stops, his vision returns to normal, and through his fright the hideous implications of his master’s experiments begin to form in his mind.

“Or,” his master continues lazily, *“were I to pull on this tendon here, flex the rotator cuff like so...”*

His arms draw irresistibly together behind his back, each trembling muscle that still fights against the urge that forces them to move is not availed, and slowly his wrists meet at the small of his back. His master grins once more, from his pocket withdrawing a short length of rope. Internally he screams for his master to stop; a frantic, keening whine from his throat is the only pitiful protest that he can mount, and to his horror his master yanks his wrists closer together before binding them tightly.

Gliding back in front of him, relentlessly his master persists. *“Were I to inflame the vagus nerve...”*

Pain explodes at the nape of his neck, bursting like some obscene firework within him, and he howls, every scrap of air in his lungs sent screaming over his paralysed vocal cords.

“And were I to tweak this little ring of cartilage...”

Suddenly his scream cuts off, something in his throat seems to crumple as pain lances through his torso, fiery bolts rip under his skin and so desperately he wants to writhe, to shriek, to beg for his master to stop. But he can’t move, he can barely suck in the air to breathe: he just kneels there in silence as agony racks through him.

A moment later his master releases him completely, autonomous control floods back into him and he collapses forward in relief, toppling chest-down onto the bed as his bound hands are unable to catch him. A few gasps shudder through him, and recovering swiftly he tries to squirm away. But with a feline grace his master springs atop him, straddling his hips from behind. And with his master’s weight not even half dropped upon him he moans, he writhes against his bonds as every movement stirs some vengeful ghost of that pain to prod at him anew.

“All of the things that the body can do,” his master remarks casually, trailing a finger over the straining muscles of his back, over the scars that knot there. *“And yet it can do so much more.”*

He senses the dare in his master's voice, he senses the intent; and once more he struggles as his master's fingers slip beneath the waistband of his breeches.

"No! P-please don't," he begs, but his master ignores him, beginning to tug his trousers downwards. "Please!"

"Quiet now, little one," his master growls, *"You have taken worse. Relax. You might even begin to enjoy yourself."*

With that his master grabs him in earnest, and in such abject humiliation he squeezes his eyes shut. His master's weight shifts, and a second later he hears the horrifying squeal of tearing fabric, his hips jerk as seams split apart and air slides against all of his most sensitive places left so suddenly exposed.

"Quite a remarkable specimen," his master drools, slipping off of his hips and positioning himself between his splayed legs, his hand trailing mortifyingly over his bare buttocks as he does so.

He presses his face into the covers, a startling blush mottling his cheeks. He couldn't let his master see him like this; he couldn't let him know the devastating effect that his voice has, seduction sliding even through pain, even through the shame that flurries within him. And he wishes it could be that simple, that pleasure and pain would exist and run forever parallel, they would never unite. But it couldn't be that easy, such perfect fantasies cannot exist, and at his master's words, his sadistic touch some sordid part of him inhales: it flexes, it unfurls.

He moans as a fingernail traces his inner thigh, his master chuckles as his hamstrings tense, as a shiver of anticipation races up his spine. His master's touch tightens, and for a moment instinct overrides him, and from such an alien pressure he tries to roll away, succeeding only in an awkward convulsion in such an unforgiving position. Such behaviour earns him a stinging slap across the back of the thigh, and half-muffled into the bed he yelps, above his reddening skin he can feel his master's displeasure bristle. A deliberating moment passes until his master leans forward, one hand bearing down upon his lower back and crushing his hips into the bed. Despite himself he whimpers; he twists his face free of the covers.

"P-please, my lord, please, wait..."

"I thought that I told you to be quiet."

"S-sorry!" he splutters, futilely trying to flip himself around. "I just..."

Suddenly his master's hand twines through his hair, and he is wrenched upwards, his speech severed with a pained squeak. The muscles in his back and stomach scream their protest as his master hauls him up, until at last he overreaches the vertical and slumps back against his master's right shoulder. Half leaning, half kneeling between his master's thighs his head lolls backwards as his muscles slacken in relief, and he senses his master's lips at his ear.

"If you are so incapable of remaining quiet, little one, then we shall have quiet imposed."

"No! No, please!" He jerks wildly, his body clenching into life once more. "I'm sorry, I—"

"You are not helping your cause."

He feels his master draw something out of his pocket, and an instant later a horrific-looking gag dangles before his eyes. A thin, hollow ring of metal occupies its centre, framed between two straps of leather upon opposing sides, and at cross angles four crooked spindles of steel branch out from the central ring, ending in blunted tips. He squirms as his master lifts it to his face, tossing his

head, his jaw clamped shut in utter refusal. But swiftly his master coils his right arm around his neck, his hand comes up beneath his jaw and effectively pins him into place. His master's fingers dig into the corners of his mouth as one would introduce a bit to a stubborn horse, but despite that pain he balks, his lower body shuddering uselessly within his master's grip.

But at last pain overwhelms him, his master's fingertips show white beneath the pressure that he exerts, and shaking with the degradation of it he opens his mouth in defeat. With his left hand, his master guides the ring past his teeth, prying his mouth open all the further and preventing his shutting it. In numb acceptance he waits for his master to tighten the buckles, it is just so much easier not to fight.

His master pulls the straps taught behind his head, and the spindles of the gag dig into his cheeks. Wordlessly he grunts, shaking his head in futile attempt to dislodge that insistent pressure.

"There now," his master purrs, stroking a few errant strands of hair back from his face. *"Isn't that better?"*

A pregnant pause follows his master's question, and at last he realises what his master wants. Stiffly he nods, his eyes squeezed shut against the humiliation of it, and he whimpers as he feels a thin line of saliva drip uncontrollably from his lip, drooling down onto his bare chest.

"Oh, I do think that I will enjoy this..."

His master pushes him back down, and with a terrible sense of anticipation he allows it. For though part of him reviles it, even as he hates it, some traitorous part of him wants this, craves this; and as his master nudges his legs open further he buries his face once more into the covers, his cheeks burning.

A few quavering breaths pass, and even though he tries to brace himself for it, he cannot help but gasp as he feels something slick brush his entrance, and an instant later he feels his master push two fingers up inside of him. His back tightens at the sensation, his master is none too gentle, and an unintelligible moan caught somewhere between encouragement and horror worms its way from his throat.

He feels his master withdraw, and the breath catches in his lungs as an instant later he pushes back in, his fingers held a fraction wider apart, opening him up like he is some prize piece of meat, like he is just a toy to be moulded; and that ignominy is simply too much to bear.

He feels his master withdraw once more, and he knows that it will be futile, he knows that it is pointless but the last ragged shreds of pride compel him to try, and desperately he wriggles his hips, trying uselessly to dislodge his master's grip. Inevitably his efforts founder, his legs slip pathetically against the covers and at last he falls still, shame and helplessness blistering through him as he pants, as he awaits his master's reaction.

"So stubborn, little one?" his master drawls, such stunning condescension rolling through his voice. At length, he continues, *"Perhaps then you would prefer another option?"*

Surprise bursts through him, and frantically he nods. Whatever it might be has to be better than this, surely.

"Very well, then. But you had best make it worth my leniency."

A moment later his master's hands slide beneath his shoulders, helping him to rise, and he coils his legs beneath him into a dropped kneel. He looks at his master in confusion, and to his slight

dismay his master then nudges him off the bed. Awkwardly he regains his footing upon the floor, turning back to face his master who sits upon the bed's edge, his eyes running greedily over him standing there so exposed.

Slowly his master shrugs free of his robes, and then bends, removing his boots and sliding his own breeches off. At last his master finishes, leaning back with a salacious smile, the contours of his form unveiled in all of their glory before him.

"Well then," his master purrs. *"Convince me."*

For a split second he hesitates, unsure exactly of what his master wants. Then his master shifts a fraction, the suggestion glimmering in his eyes and the signs of his arousal evidently plain.

And with a force that nearly knocks the breath from his lungs desire rips up from his stomach. That lingering sense of indignity only fuels its dark pulse, and purpose solidifies before him. Coyly he steps forward before sinking to his knees between his master's legs, his muddled eyes blinking up with a teasing innocence as his master grins above him.

Instinct screams at him to move, some base calling seems to punch its way through his guts as he shuffles a fraction closer, working himself up to it; shame and yearning twining into one puissant drive within him. At last he is ready, the tumult within him momentarily settles, and shutting his eyes he bends his head forward.

"Good boy," his master murmurs, and with that fresh flare of indignation storming through him his master guides himself through the ring gag, and grasping him gently by the hair begins to steer him up and down his length. For his part he tries to do what he can; a jagged thrill of arousal darts through him as he licks up the base of his master's shaft, following the rhythm that his master sets. The muscles in his jaw strain as his master moves him, the points of the gag dig into his cheeks with each new pressure, and as if he has tumbled into some debased vortex his world introverts.

A desperate need to please unfurls within him; and he tries to ignore the humiliating strands of saliva that drip from the corners of his mouth, the tiny grunt that he emits as his master strokes deeper, pushing himself to the back of his throat in one easy thrust. So nearly he gags, his master holds him in place just a little longer than is comfortable, but as his shoulders begin to twitch his master releases him and he slides his head back several inches, sucking a grateful breath of air into his lungs.

Regaining his composure, he presses himself back down, his master's grip on him still loose. And to his delight he can feel the flicker of surprise at his initiation, and a thrill of smug pleasure shoots through him. He senses the smile that radiates from his master, and spurred on by that silent encouragement he continues; whatever inhibitions he held now abandoned. Eagerly he takes his master down deeper, feeling him stiffen further as his tongue swirls over his tip, as he teases his way down his master's length in agile little flicks.

On the crux of an ambitious down-stroke, his nose nearly touching his master's pelvis suddenly he feels his master's hand close on him once more, cradling the back of his head to hold him neatly in place. He wills himself not to gag, his throat flexes around his master's length, each ring of muscle quivering in an effort to remain open.

Breathily his master murmurs above him, *"I could leave you down there all night, little one. It would be easy. A simple matter of restraint..."*

A thin strip of leather waves lazily over his face.

“Would you like that?”

Gradually he feels his lungs begin to burn, and in increasing discomfort he squirms. An incoherent noise rips out of his throat, but definitely it contains an inflection towards the negative.

“Are you sure?” his master chuckles, freeing his head once more. He shoves himself backwards, his heart hammering as he gasps in a lungful of air, before more easily his master steers him downwards once more.

Desperately he tries to fight it down, to quench the embers of arousal that burst into life at the thought of it: the sheer thought of that abasement fuelling some sick carnality within him. And he hopes that his master won't look down, he hopes that he won't notice; but it feels like a sledgemoor smashes into his stomach as a moment later his master grins, in a voice like smoothest cream uttering, *“Oh, I think that you might.”*

His master resumes guiding his head, and beneath his fingers his cheeks flush crimson, the dripping insinuation in his master's voice only causing himself to harden all the faster. Gently his master unhands him, and he continues unbidden, gasping around his master's length as fingers brush over his nipples, swirling so deliciously around such sensitive skin.

Mercilessly his master teases him, and despite himself his hips begin to sway, until at last his master's hands move upwards once more, fiddling with the buckle behind his head. To his astonishment his master releases the straps, sliding himself free of the ring and then slipping it out from behind his teeth. In silent gratitude he simmers, working the stiff muscles of his jaw, wincing as the four points of pain where the gag had dug into his cheeks slowly dissipate. Submissively he remains on his knees, readily awaiting his master's next move, and before he even knows he is saying it, a fleeting word of thanks falls from his lips.

His master looks at him curiously, before pulling him to his feet. Turning him, with a word of power the bonds at his wrists are severed, and he hisses as the blood flows back into his hands. He rolls out his aching shoulders, but before he can truly regain himself his master pulls him backwards, in a move more suited to the battlefield than bed-play tumbling him over until he lands face upwards on the bed.

His master pounces over his outstretched leg, hovering above him for the slightest instant. And in that blistering moment he nods, in acceptance, in permission; blinding arousal screeching its need within him. With such capricious glee his master smiles back at him, before grasping the back of his left knee, shifting his leg forwards, upwards, and leaving him so deliciously spread.

“Please, my lord,” he whispers, his master's fingernail up tracing his inner thigh. *“Please be gentle, p-plea- oh!”*

His master's finger trails upwards, over the swollen veins that pattern the underside of his own rigidity, and he nearly chokes as that stunning sensation rocks through him, his hands so newly freed clawing great furrows across the velvet bedcovers.

Pleasure slams through him as his master moves, sliding his hand up his length, brushing over his tip, and under that teasing pressure he grinds his hips upwards; what pretences of tenderness that he had begged for knocked aside in an instant.

He moans as his master moves once more, but quickly that un-lordly sound is swallowed as his master's lips close over his own, as his master's tongue slides with his. His master grasps his hips, levering him into position even as they continue to kiss, and fervidly he helps his master shift his weight, craving throbbing through him, dark desire pulsing like a flame between his legs. And how

his master found the lubrication he dares not wonder; whether some secret stash or the slick remnants of his own saliva, but the noise he makes as his master enters him could have made the mountains themselves blush.

He flushes as his master withdraws, as his grip shifts, as their kiss breaks. In such flagrant delight he grunts as his master slides back into him, pushing deeper as his body relaxes, waves of excruciating gratification sent rolling through him. Quickly his master finds his rhythm, each sensuous thrust evoking from his lips a breathy pant, some filthy moan of pleasure or pain or some intermingling of the two as his master's fingers crush around his biceps, shoving him further into the bed with each new impact.

Fiercely he retaliates, with what measure of manoeuvrability he has he rolls his head, nudging his master's upwards, and swiftly he lunges forwards, affixing his lips upon his master's once more. A cry of such aching delight punches down his master's throat as that movement causes some new place inside him to shriek, a raw bundle of nerves scraping out their rapture.

Somewhere in the slide of his sweaty torso against his master's he loses himself, just for a little while time blurs and warps and crumples in the press of body against body, in the heat of passion both tender and ferocious. His head thuds back in such gasping, ecstatic pleasure as his master bends downwards, licking over his nipple in every teasing way that he loves; his calf hooks around the back of his master's thigh as he buries himself to the hilt within him, and he bucks his hips as those sensations explode.

And after some indeterminate time he hears his master's breath turn to growls, and his own follows to match; those fires building to their throbbing crescendo at the pit of his stomach. Every muscle in his abdomen clenches as he feels his master's hand slip between them, sliding up his length in time with each powerful thrust inside of him; and his vision sparkles with the force of the euphoria that crackles within him.

In one convulsive move he throws his arms around his master's back, his fingernails digging bloody lines into his skin as he hisses in pleasure, clasping his master closer to him; by the sheer urgency of his touch begging him to do it faster, harder; every delicate emotion smashed aside in the crude grasp for release. Viciously his master obliges him, scraping his hand up and down his length all the quicker as he plunges yet harder into him, agony and bliss ripping in jagged bolts through him; twined together until they become inseparable, but inescapable in their compulsion.

And with a final, giddy thrust he climaxes, every muscle in his body clenching in one savage spasm, and as his back arcs his master climaxes with him. His master's fingers grip with bruising force about his shoulders as he growls out his ecstasy, his length still buried deep inside of him. That fullness crashes to devastating effect, sending him spiralling even higher, and he grinds his hips upwards against his master, his breath shuddering through his lungs at that new, exquisite contact. His fingers slip from his master's back to scrabble against the bedcovers, a crumpled load of velvet he grips within his fists as those sensations rock through him. His hair sticks in lanky strands over his cheeks as he closes his eyes, revelling in every salty touch of his master's skin against his, each tiny brush of closeness crashing so delightfully through him.

Slowly his climax fades, that seething, rapturous gratification washing out into a blissful calm, the warm afterglow still pricking faintly between his hipbones. At some point his master withdraws from him, stretching himself luxuriantly at his side; and together they lie as slowly their breathing returns to normal. In placid silence, and somewhat doubting his actual ability to move, he contents himself to remain still, but at last his master stirs beside him, escaping the growing chill in the room and slipping beneath the bedcovers.

Hesitantly he follows, his entire body aching as he rolls aside to quickly wipe himself clean, then timidly he joins his master in bed. And if, as his face passes before the candlelight, his murky irises have a definite tinge of gold to them then his master says nothing, simply watching him clamber beneath the sheets with a serene expression.

His master reaches out to him, but as he moves his eyebrows suddenly knot, a bemused frown crosses his face. Experimentally his master's shoulders shift once more, and in a slightly incredulous tone he asks, "*Did... did you scratch me, little one?*"

Panic starts through him, dismay rings in his voice as his eyes widen in realisation.

"I'm sorry, my lord! I didn't mean it... I just..."

His master laughs before pulling him close, his back pressing lightly against his master's chest. Softly his master nuzzles against the back of his neck and he savours that closeness, such a rare moment of affection that his master bestows upon him.

"*So you enjoyed yourself after all, then,*" his master murmurs, and he can feel the low hum of his vocal cords through the press of their skin. "*I am glad to see you pleased, little one. The pallor of mourning ill-becomes you.*"

A sudden discomfort trills within him, and uneasily he shifts against his master, ducking his head away.

"*Hey,*" his master whispers, stroking the dishevelled strands of hair that stick to the side of his neck. "*Come now, little one, why do you cling to this? Gothmog would not want your misery, of that I am sure.*"

"It's not that..." he ventures at length, before turning himself more firmly away, his arms crossing over his chest. It is stupid; even to him it is childish and conceited; and that burns with rancour within him. Behind him he feels his master move, propping himself up to lean upon one elbow, looking down upon his turned shoulders.

"*Please, little one, tell me,*" his master says gravely. "*If I have done something to cause offence, then let us clear this now.*"

A finger trails softly over his bicep, and he twitches: some indecisive motion between a shrug and an invitation.

"*I would rather have your hatred than your sorrow.*"

Resignedly he sighs, and asserting what dregs of disappointment still swirl within him he turns, twisting himself to lie facing his master, looking forlornly up into his eyes and saying, "I just... if I had been there, maybe I could have stopped it. Maybe I could have saved him. He... He was my friend, you know, and... and maybe things would have been different if I had just..."

Falteringly he trails off, his head bows; he doesn't want to ruin what intimacy he holds but from some dark part of him the words come anew, flowing mournfully over his lips.

"I wanted to do it for you," he whispers, the crown of his head pressing lightly against his master's sternum. "I just wanted... I just wanted for you to look at me and to be proud. Just for once. Just to prove that I could do something right, something to make you..."

Above him he hears his master sigh, and with such awful anticipation he awaits the inevitable rebuke, his heart fluttering within his throat at the thought of whatever pain had to come, their

closeness spoiled through no one's fault but his own. But to his shock his master's arm gently closes over him, pulling him closer, and his master's legs twine through his own.

"You have many subtleties, little one, and many talents; many more than I could ever name. But fathoming my feelings for you has never been one among them."

Confused, he lies still. For a moment he vaguely considers responding, but a sudden weariness yawns within him; and content he is to just let his master hold him, to just let whatever must happen play out.

"After all of this time, after everything that you have done for me, do you really think that my opinion of you hinges upon the conquest of one battle? After everything that I have made you do, after everything that I have done to you: you have stayed at my side. You have served me with loyalty, with steadfastness even when you did not wish to, with truth and integrity and bravery. With kindness, even."

His master's voice drops even further, barely the slightest of whispers grazes through the air.

"Truly, little one, do you think that my pride is now a thing so easily lost?"

The sincerity in his master's voice bleeds straight through him and suddenly he raises his head, imploring his master and his words to be real, his throat sticking painfully tight.

Tenderly his master looks back at him; gold gazes into muddled silver for one wavering instant before his master leans forward, brushing the messy strands of hair back from his face. And with a strange sadness, with a grace that stops the breath in his lungs his master leans forward and kisses him softly upon the forehead.

"I have always been proud of you."

The murmur slides through him; a glowing warmth sets alight in his chest as his master withdraws, wordlessly curling around him, cradling him within the curvature of his body. One arm wraps securely over him, still their legs tangle together, and slowly he hears his master's breathing steady, slipping down into the embrace of sleep. Closing his eyes, he follows; a security so rarely felt humming through his chest, stilling all fell thoughts, smoothing them away into that easy peace so long overdue.

The Punchline

A cold star rises in the West.

The first he hears of it is via a messenger scurrying into his forge. At its frantic tidings he frowns, quenching the glowing scimitar upon his anvil in a hiss of bubbling water and steam. Abandoning his work, he follows the orc up to the highest lookouts of the fortress, the shiver of red dragon-scales sewn across the orc's pauldrons marking it as a low-ranking sentry, one of the sharp-eyed Watch set to keep guard upon Angband's surrounds.

Not that, in recent times, they have had much to watch for. The Noldor and their followers are as scattered leaves amid a storm and beleaguered upon all sides. By slim luck some remnants of the noble houses have managed to cling on amid the wild places, but they rally only in laughable defiance of their inevitable destruction. The Naugrim hide in their far-distant mountains, their greedy eyes set to mine the jewels that cluster there, either inattentive or uncaring of the plight that befalls the lands about them; and to whichever motive they fall he cares little. The Sindar cower no longer beneath their trees: the fell sons of Fëanor set ablaze to the forest in their wrath. The impassable Girdle was broken and by treachery their people were slain, and Menegroth crumbles now in silent, smoking ruins.

With such mirth had that news rung through Angband's corridors: for days a gloating sneer had lingered upon every face.

Nothing moves in the North unseen or unchallenged, and for long years an easy peace has lingered. The soldiery are efficient in their guard and at the unheralded arrival of this new astrological figure he is indeed dismayed. Upon the highest tower he walks, following the confused gaze of the Watch members set there, and amid the great swathe of night above him there it shines.

Above the Valacirca, the death-mark wrought in seven silver pinpricks eons ago it shimmers. Like to the other stars it is, and yet it is not. Its white flame burns the brighter, a light radiates from it that seems to scorch its way through his pupils, leaving phosphorescent after-images dancing across his vision as he looks away.

A grimace twists over his face: all too familiar that sensation is, and with a dreadful suspicion he squints once more up at the star. In cold confirmation it stares back down, searing in its brilliance, and concern and utter disbelief twist within him. For centuries beyond count he had gazed upon such a light, or rather shielded himself from it: long it had lain atop his master's brow, locked within the great Three.

And now, *somehow*, the one that was stolen is set in the sky above him like a glimmering portent of doom.

Barely a day passes, but rumour of this new star races through Angband, and soon after his master summons the war-council. Grimly he attends it, taking his seat at his master's right-hand side. If he is apprehensive then he disguises it well, he smoothes his worries over into a dutiful seriousness as the meeting commences.

His master speaks with a calm that borders upon eerie, and from his golden eyes he can glean nothing of his inner mood. With reason and with composure his master proposes a plan of action, and readily it is received. The finer details are debated long into the night, and though the torpid process of resolution he thinks should calm him it seems to only serve the opposite, and worry flares anew in the pit of his stomach. For the councillors speak waveringly, even he can only

counter their questions with guesses and estimates, and his master is unusually subdued.

Truly, he realises to his dismay, none of them know what this apparition might mean, and what might come to pass because of it.

Finally their plan is devised and its details settled. No reports have been brought forth of troop movements amongst what remnants of the Noldor might be impudent enough to mount an attack upon them. Their spies amongst the others of their remaining enemies have reported no anomalies, and along their southern borders there is naught that would indicate a prelude to war.

Despite this relative passivity, however, the council elects to err on the side of caution.

At their command, the armouries are set to work at double-rates, teams of slaves are driven night and day to pump the bellows of the great furnaces, to delve yet more coke and iron ore from the mines to fuel the armaments that are demanded. The breeding programmes for the orcs are accelerated; emergency protocols are put into place that would ensure a five-fold increase of output within mere months, spawning thousands of new bodies in the shortest possible time period. Word is sent to their distant outposts at all points of the compass, warning of evil portents and advising the highest possible guard.

As suits best his skills, he assists primarily within the forges and engineering works, overseeing the smelting of countless armour parts and weapons to arm Angband's hordes. He patrols the outer parapets of the fortress, adjusting the mounts of the ballistae that stud the great walkway, checking and re-checking the ammunition supplies for the trebuchets. Orcs scurry to their posts around him, a constant stream of messengers flit to and fro bearing his orders and the replies of the councillors, and with patience he deals with all of them. Occasionally he pauses to assist in the oiling of a cog, or the coating of a catapult's wooden beams in fire-retardant tar, the kinaesthetic pleasure of having something to *physically* do fast becoming a keen source of comfort to him amid their uncertain preparations.

Glancing down over the battlements, he watches the teams of slaves digging a fearsome array of barricades around the fortress. A series of wide, concentric semicircles delve deep into the ground, shielding the entirety of Angband's exterior with the causeway and front gate at their epicentre and the most heavily protected. Sharpened wooden stakes and slicing filaments of metal fill some of those trenches, and in others hidden cachets of oil lie rigged, ready to be released and set ablaze should intruders try to run their gauntlet.

At their outermost rim some two hundred metres distant from the fortress proper a tall platform stands. Its sheer exterior is heavily plated in fire-proofed rags and metal, and upon it lines of archers would be placed. Before this platform the dust-plains of the Anfauglith sweep away to the horizon, and it would be before this bulwark that battle would commence. He hopes that the need will not come, that these preparations are unnecessary, but should they be put to it then reinforcements of orcs would issue from hidden tunnels amid the surrounding mountains and bear down upon the enemy from the sides.

Weeks pass in moody trepidation, slaves toil under the whips of their handlers and in timely fashion the barricades are completed, supply lines are set, additional ramparts and fallbacks for archers and troops to utilise are constructed at regular intervals amid the blockades. Under the brooding shade of the Thangorodrim Angband glowers, hunkering itself down in preparation for war. Atop the peaks of the mountains an ever-present smoke looms, his master conjures up a fume that shrouds out the sun, and the light that filters through the choking clouds is pallid and weary.

Towards the interior of the fortress there is fervid activity still, and despite the bustle of the forges he manages to find some peace, the familiar routine of engineering works and smithying becoming

soothing amid this time of uncertain foreboding. As much as he can, he throws himself into whatever tasks his master assigns him to, using their continuity to assuage the doubts that nip at him if ever he should remain still too long.

Yet despite his most fervent hopes otherwise, battle at last comes.

The ranks of the Eldar march over the dust-plains towards them, arraying themselves in what splendour they could muster under the gloomy shade of the mountains. From a high window in a spire of the fortress he glares down at them, rancour curdling within him as their banners unfurl. For who are they to march so arrogantly against him, these Elf-lords who should presume to think that after all the evil they have wrought that their ridiculous oath holds true, that it is still redeemable?

His lip curls at the thought, but as he looks more closely over their approaching ranks consternation blooms also. Unfamiliar banners open, archaic emblems of brightest blues and yellows stream out, bearing designs that he has only seen in the plundered books that he has looked over with the spider-creature amid more leisurely days in the library long ago. In shock he stares, this could not be possible: the Vanyar out of Aman have come, and their troops align before the fortress in bodies young and fair, their mail glittering like ice amid the dust-plains. With a snarl he realises that among them stride Maiar, creatures of his own ilk clad in myriad form and terrible in their brightness, and that more than anything forebodes ill.

All Aman has emptied it would seem; they pour out over the plains before him with the ragged houses of the Noldor and the Edain in allegiance, and he would be lying indeed if he claimed that he was unconcerned by that unity. Shaking that grim foreboding away he retires to his rooms and readies himself for battle. As he walks to his chambers, from its mysterious hiding places about the fortress his wolf appears, trotting eagerly alongside him with its ears pricked and its tongue lolling from its panting jaws.

Let their enemies come, he thinks savagely, before his mirror tugging a chainmail shirt over his head. Angband holds yet its own might, and such untested forces would not yet cow its pride.

At last he is readied. Plate armour of sable steel overlies his chainmail shirt, twinned knives strap over his back, and a keen falchion hangs from his belt, its sheathed length crawling with spells of ruin and malice. Tightening for a final time the straps of his cuisses about his thighs, he departs his chambers, flinging a war-helm atop his head as he goes.

To the throne room he marches for a final rendezvous with a fraction of the commanders and his master before battle proper is engaged. His wolf pads behind him, its jaws slavering as it scents the tension in the air, and in its eagerness it snaps at the orcs scurrying past in their message relays. He clicks at it, focusing its attention back onto him, and without mishap they break into the lower halls. Already the halls throng with soldiery moving to their posts, or readying supplies for delivery in a swirl of organised chaos.

As he sets foot upon the marble floor a bugle call sounds from outside, its high pure note quavering through the fortress, a call that signals the enemy's advance. A moment later, an answering horn brays, its deep note responding in malice, and distantly he hears the great roar from the troops already in position before the barricades as battle commences. Anger awakens in him at that cry, a sudden fury that they should dare to intrude upon his territories blisters through him.

Quickly he scans the corridor for his master, but finding no sight of him he begins to cross the hallway, making for the throne room proper.

“Mairon!”

His master's voice sounds from somewhere behind him and he turns on his heel. Swiftly he spots his master atop a staircase towards the rear of the corridor, and at his countenance the breath hitches in his throat.

Clad in ebony mail his master stands, his dark hair bound back from his face by a length of silver thread, and beneath his crown his eyes glitter and moil like orbits of bubbling gold. Upon the handle of his dread war-hammer he leans and behind him two Valaraukar stand at attention, incarnate in fully monstrous form with little rills of flame dripping from their wingtips to sizzle upon the staircase.

At his master's call he moves over, edging his way through the press of the crowd with the wolf shadowing his steps. At the base of the staircase he halts, bowing shallowly before looking urgently up at his master and awaiting any command that he might give.

"You are prepared then?" his master asks curtly.

"Yes, my lord," he replies. Despite the apprehension that drags at him, now is not the time for minced words and with militaristic crispness he continues, "I will meet with my force, and we shall hold the gate as we have agreed."

"The gate will hold for the time being," his master says, descending the stairs with the two Balrogs stepping quickly up behind him. *"Let the fools break themselves against our troops and our barricades. A time indeed it will take them to reach the gates, if they do so at all."*

I have devised an alternate plan; one of far more daring, if you would have the courage to do my will."

A mild annoyance flares within him at the flagrant abandonment of strategy, but his curiosity piques, and he enquires, "What is this new plan, my lord?"

"You will remove yourself to the dragon-pits, and when they are readied you will release them to the battlefield. There they may wreak what chaos they can, and disarray the enemy. But you shall hold back one, Ancalagon the Black, the greatest of all the wingéd wyrms. Take him, wield him as a weapon in your hands and with his fire bring ruin upon our enemies."

His master's proposal rings through him and quickly he tries to assimilate it: probing it for flaws and their countermeasures, advantages and pitfalls.

"I would trust this only to you. But if you would not do it then well I understand, and we shall proceed as previously agreed upon."

Some perverse sense of boldness awakens within him, and his resolve settles. The urge to draw blade, the stunning need to be *useful* crackles within him, and like restless little insects those desires run under his skin. Finding little actual fault in the plan that he can detect he declares then, "Very well, my lord. I shall do as you bid."

A horn-call issues from a tower far above them, and with a near-tangible heave he can sense a fresh wave of orcs swarm upon the battlefield, the tramp of their boots rattling down the hidden tunnels to break upon the enemy from the sides. A shiver of nervousness runs through him, he has been here before; battle has come to Angband and its challenge has been smashed aside, yet still he is powerless to stop the tightening of his stomach, the clenching of his throat.

"Go now, little one," his master commands of him. *"I will find you later."*

Tightly he nods, not even daring to think about how exactly his master would achieve this.

Viciously he stamps out the doubts that flicker through his mind: his master *will* find him; other possibilities simply do not and cannot exist. He swallows hard, and like a salve over his stinging nerves his master's calmness solidifies him, it pulls him back to steely purpose.

He bows once more, preparing himself to leave when his wolf whines behind him, ramming its head into the back of his thigh. In the proposal it was momentarily forgotten, and quickly he turns back to his master, asking, "My lord, what of yourself? What will you do?"

Darkly his master looks towards the gate, to the first muffled cries of battle beginning to seep through the thick walls.

"I will defend my keep."

"Then take him, at the least, my lord."

He whistles to the wolf, whose head snaps up attentively to look at him.

"Stay at my lord's side," he bids it, scratching it behind the ears as it peers up at him. "Follow him where he might go, and aid him."

The wolf huffs its assent, rubbing itself once more against his hand before trotting over to his master's side and standing at guard there. He smiles at it, a sudden tightness clutching at his throat as his master hefts up his war-hammer.

"You look after him in my stead, all right?" he calls to the wolf, who looks steadfastly back at him. "You keep him safe."

With a taut smile his master bids him farewell, then strides off towards the front gates with terrifying purpose. For a moment he watches him and his retinue go, the images seeming to burn themselves into his retinas. His wolf lopez alongside his master, its grey fur set in pale afterimage of his master's midnight splendour, and at the hatred that burns in his master's eyes even the orcs recoil. The two Valaraukar plunge after him as they press through the crowd, and after a few seconds they round a corner and are lost to him.

The dragon-pit falls away beneath the railed balcony where he stands, and in the flare of the torch-lights studded into the sheer walls the great serpents lie. Scales crackle, immense wing-blades shift and twitch as the dragons stir, puffs of smoke and flame flicker as the scent of blood wafts through the air.

Into the gloom he peers intently, leaning perilously far over the railing. Finally he finds the one whom he seeks, the colossal fire-drake curled up in the shadows at the far end of the cavern. It seems to him that Ancalagon still sleeps, but from within the sinuous coils of the dragon's bulk a maroon eye snaps open, a pupil larger than his entire torso contracts in the guttering flare of the torches. In a curiously feline gesture the tip of the dragon's tail twitches, sweeping over the bone-strewn floor in languid motion as before him the lesser wyrms rouse themselves.

Upon the balcony the dragon-keepers bustle past him, clad in thick flameproof aprons that bear many a scorch-mark across their frayed fronts. They dodge the gobbets of flame that spit with increasing frequency up from the pit, as roars and hisses and gurgles emanate more strongly from that darkness. Even to these deep chambers the clash of battle faintly comes, and at that sound many a dragon rolls to its feet, luminous eyes stare up from the gloom. A keeper sloshes a vat of reeking blood over the edge of the pit, and roars follow with a renewed urgency as the dragons scent it, flame flickers from many a set of jaws as their excitement brews.

Over the rising din he shouts Ancalagon's name, imbuing his words with a trickle of power that he hopes will at least tempt the dragon to his command. He instructs it to stay, watching anxiously as the keepers grasp hold of the rope-winch that bind the doors shut and begin to haul upon them. With a squeal the doors creak open, and the sliver of light that filters through them heralds a clamouring cry: the smell of prey wafts all the more strongly through the pit. As one the dragons lunge forward, in a tumult and trample of bodies they press through the door, up into the tunnels beyond that will lead them to the battlefield, there to wreak what havoc they might.

Fervently he hopes that Ancalagon has resisted that impulsive rush, and as the last of the smaller wyrms shriek out of the doors he vaults the railing, dropping down into the pit. Through the gloom he peers, and with a burst of relief spies the black dragon still coiled up in the corner and looking at him with an air of mild interest. Cautiously he approaches and the dragon allows him near, rolling onto its armoured belly and blinking its hypnotic eyes in greeting, a low hum vibrating through the air from its sheer size.

Behind him he hears the patter of footsteps, and from some hidden armoury several orcs appear. One thrusts into his hand his hunting bow, whilst the rest carefully approach the dragon. Over the expanse of Ancalagon's neck they sling something, and shouldering his bow he steps nearer, watching them with interest.

A spidery web of inter-knotted straps spreads over a small fraction of the dragon's neck, anchored about the base of one of the immense dorsal spines that protrude from the cluster of his scales. Into pouches amongst these straps the orcs slide a huge store of arrows, and suddenly the confusing contraption orients itself in his mind. Between two spines a rudimentary saddle nestles, situated a metre or so behind the dragon's crested skull and within easy reach of where he must sit lies a store of ammunition.

A spike of adrenaline skewers through him, and with its potency brimming in his veins more confidently he steps forward as the orcs secure the final buckles of the saddle in place. Along the dragon's scales he runs his gloved hand, even through the thick material feeling the ridges of each one, and the warmth that emanates from between their interlocked lames.

Sensing his intent, the dragon lowers its head further, and nervousness rises in him as truly he appreciates the sizes that would hereby be involved, as he is utterly dwarfed by even a modest segment of the dragon's outstretched neck. Before hesitation can grip him entirely an orc moves to his side, interlocking its hands in order to boost him upwards. He grasps onto the lowest strap he can reach, the orc pushes him up, and he scrambles up into the saddle.

He takes a moment to compose himself, fear and exhilaration swirling in a heady mix within him as he sits atop such a mighty steed, the spine set before him easily as wide as his hips. Straddling the dragon's neck he checks the ease with which he can reach his arrows, and finding it satisfactory he proceeds to fasten a series of ties about his legs. His hands fumble slightly with the buckles as timorously he imagines what sort of aerial manoeuvres might demand their necessity.

As he finishes securing himself Ancalagon rises to his feet, lifting his weight as if he is but a feather, and he holds tightly to the spine in front of him, steadying himself against that alien movement. The solidness under his hand helps to calm him, and viciously he stamps down the anxiety that looms within him. As little as he could he has had to do with the dragons over their millennia of breeding save in the utmost of emergencies. Ever they had made him nervous, their unfathomable, animal guile disquieted him; and if his master had thought that he would be innately comfortable with *riding* one then he was most sorely mistaken.

Quickly he accustoms to the dragon's small movements beneath him, the crackle of scales around

the saddle as muscles flex, as veins as thick as his arms rise up beneath him. As a final gesture he removes his helmet, tossing it down to the orcs some metres below him. Too greatly it hems his peripheral vision, and in an operation such as this the lack of protection would be a necessary risk.

The noise of battle rings more clearly through the pit now, and with a palpable force the dragon's ire piques, he feels bloodlust uncoil beneath him as the dragon raises his head, its jaws opened into a drooling snarl. Muscles tense and roil beneath him, claws dig impatient furrows into the earth, and with a start he realises that the dragon awaits his command.

Tightly he grabs onto the spine before him, his thighs clench into the saddle, and with one final, bracing breath he commands: "Go!"

An ear-splitting roar follows his order, the percussion rings through his head as in a lurching gallop the dragon darts forward, sliding his colossal bulk effortlessly through the doors.

As Ancalagon presses himself up a tunnel instinctively he ducks, pressing himself as low to the dragon's neck as he can as he shields his head from the close-packed rocks. But after a few tense moments of shuddering movement with a thunderous cry Ancalagon bursts from the tunnel, launching into the sky that suddenly reels open before them. Like the unfurling of immense sails the dragon's wings snap open, and for a moment the sheer air-pressure folding over those veined, membranous expanses sends sparkles flashing across his vision.

Like a snarling dog freed finally from its chain Ancalagon wheels over the battlefield, and for the time being he lets the dragon fly where he might, his attentions focused solely on acclimatising himself to the dragon's movements. From beneath his thighs he feels a heat begin to prickle, where the scales beneath the saddle were once warm they now become scorching, and with a blast that scrapes the hair back from his face a torrent of flame looses from the dragon's mouth, carving a path through the armies that blur beneath him with the speed of their flight.

Gradually he accustoms to the wyrm's motions; the undulations of colossal muscles beneath him, the buffet of air with each ponderous stroke of Ancalagon's wings, and he finds it within himself to let go of the spine before him. His balance takes over, and as their flight levels out he tries to convince himself that it is not so different to riding a warhorse, albeit with rather more distance to the ground. Somehow that helps him, and as his balance asserts itself then with a daring surge of confidence he takes up his bow, grabbing an arrow and loosing it towards a random target picked out from far below him. A millisecond later a figure goes down flailing, an arrow-shaft protruding from the side of his neck.

That success blooms within him, and with it assuredness flourishes also. More readily he sets arrow to his bow, firing indiscriminately down into the masses below as they try to scramble out of the dragon's path. In such close-knit quarters it is easier to hit than to miss, and he thrills in the screams that litter their pathway. The stench of charred flesh and bubbling metal begins to rise; cringing faces fall slack with an arrow through their eye sockets or through the unwary crook of a chin. For a time that grim pleasure flows through him and he allows Ancalagon to fly undirected, cutting through the Elven ranks like a scythe amongst wheat whilst he picks off whatever stragglers might still be in range.

Over the far end of the field they swoop, and supply wagons and their guardians burst into flame under the dragon's withering heat. He grimaces as the explosions scrape over his skin; barrels of oil erupt in gouts of evaporating liquid and quickly Ancalagon swerves, avoiding the updraft of super-heated air. Horses scream and buck beneath him, their manes caught alight in unquenchable flames, and amid their panic figures dart, their outlines blurred against the brightness of the inferno. He shoots at what he can, blackened silhouettes fall as the dragon sweeps low over the

wreckage, and the very air seems to burn in the furnace of his malice.

Grimly he clings on, shielding his eyes from the heat that scorches past him as the ends of his hair begin to prickle and curl. At last he can stand it no longer, each breath becomes searing in his lungs, and he is about to intervene when suddenly the dragon leaps skywards with such a violent motion that his stomach lurches. A great scream of hatred erupts from the dragon's maw and confusedly he looks around, wondering what could possibly warrant such a terrible cry.

Over the crest of Ancalagon's skull he spies it, and for a moment he blinks in utter puzzlement. What for all the world looks like a *boat* splits through the wrack of clouds above the Thangorodrim, banishing their gloom with its brilliance, its sails and decks limned in silvery light. The dragon's head whips around, following the boat's inexplicable passage through the sky, and with tangible force a rage bubbles beneath him, the dragon's lips peel back into a snarl.

The boat flashes, a bright pulse of light ripples like a shockwave over the battlefield and in acceptance of the challenge Ancalagon roars once more: a cry so frightful that he clamps his hands over his ears as the sound alone vibrates through his innards.

With one almighty surge of muscle the dragon twists, diving across the battlefield with deadly purpose. All too well he senses it, and in this fight he wants no part. The forces exerted in an aerial clash could kill him with ease, and a fall from such a height would be remorseless. As they skim over the battlefield, with as much force as he can muster he leans forward, slamming his hands against the dragon's neck.

"Down!" he yells, hoping that his voice is even audible over the rush of the wind. "Take me down!"

For a moment there is no reaction, and horror slams through him: he would be dragged into this conflict whether willing or not. But after a second more, and just short of the barricades the dragon wrenches around, its momentum arrested to loosely circle above the front lines. With a rush of relief he recognises the intent and hurriedly he unbuckles the straps around his legs. Peering over the dragon's side, he notices a legion of Valaraukar towards the western side of the fray, and he bangs once more against Ancalagon's scales, shouting: "There! Down there!"

The wind rips the words from his mouth as the dragon dives, and tightly he clutches to the spine in front of him, fast becoming his favourite part of wrym anatomy. Ten metres above the ground the dragon levels out, sending the nearest lines of enemies reeling back in dismay. As much as is possible whilst still remaining airborne the dragon slows, but the tight-packed field prevents him from landing, and with a wrench of horror he realises what he is going to have to do.

Mustering every fibre of courage he has, he rises to stand atop the saddle, his hair streaming over his face with the not inconsiderable speed of their movement. He looks downward, the air filtering out of his lungs in a pained groan. For a moment the idea of a flying dismount is so utterly repellent that he considers turning back and facing the enigma of that shining boat, height-related death be damned.

Ancalagon bellows as the elves rally beneath them and a volley of steel-tipped arrows clatter harmlessly off the armoured underside of his belly. A lucky few pierce the membranes of the dragon's wings like stinging gnat bites, and a rush of turbulence shakes him as for his sake the dragon tries to hold steady despite the irritation.

With that he scrapes his nerves together, and with a half-formed plea sent shrieking into the sky, he jumps.

A moment of nauseating suspension grips him, and as best as he can he braces for the impact. The ground rises up to meet him and with bone-jarring force he crashes into it, rolling into a protective ball as he is flung across the dust. Tightly he cradles his head as he waits for the momentum to dispel, the gravel scraping across his armour with a juddering whine. He skids at last to an ungainly stop and swiftly uncurls, in that terrifying moment pleading with whatever luck he might still have left to him that nothing is broken, that he can still move.

Luck, it seems, is with him, and he staggers up into a crouch, his body sore but largely unharmed. Huge smudges of dirt claw across his pauldrons and breastplate, but for the mastery of their forging they remain intact. Flicking his dusty hair out of his eyes, urgently then he surveys his surroundings.

Above him Ancalagon rises, with a tremendous buffet of air soaring upwards to engage that boat still hovering improbably above the mountains. Mercifully the ground upon which he has landed remains momentarily clear, the attackers scattered by the dragon's passing. To his left he spots the legion of Valaraukar holding firm before the outermost platform with archers supporting them from above, and it is towards them that he aims. With renewed purpose he discards his bow, its length snapped under the impact of his landing. He pulls free the twin knives from their scabbards, their weight reassuring in his hands, and quickly he plots his route through the horde of assailants that separate him from his quarry.

Without further ado he sets off at a sprint, arrows peppering the ground not five metres to his side. Relying primarily on surprise, with a furious snarl he knocks into the side of the nearest elf before him, decapitating him with a swing of his knives before the elf had even registered his presence. Blood splatters over his face, and as those warm droplets hit him pure, screaming instinct takes over; every rational thought is banished in the wake of the primal impulses that rip up inside of him.

He surrenders himself to them, exulting in the torsion and strength of his muscles as millennia of martial training are put to devastating use. With an uncanny fluidity he seems to glide within the throng, his blades wielded before him: a thrust here, sidestep here, duck there, and in his wake bodies slide lifeless to the dirt. A vicious smile cleaves over his face, savage joy blazes in his eyes as his blades snap upwards and an instant later an elf crashes to his knees, clutching at his throat as blood spurts through his fingers.

With ruthless efficiency he presses forward, carving his bloody way towards the Valaraukar. Their hulking bodies provide a flaming beacon in his vision, each parry and lunge of their axes sends flurries of cinders sparking skywards, and from the construct above them archers fire at will into the press. He spins, shoving both blades beneath the chinstrap of an opponent, and as the blood soaks through his gloves the elf gurgles, crimson bubbling over his lips as he snatches his knives free.

Onwards he moves, pressing ever towards his comrades. Effortlessly his knife slides free from the bowels of a man and he rides that wet centripetal force onwards, thrusting himself ever forward as entrails slop to the ground behind him.

At last one of the Balrogs sights him, roaring out what might have been a greeting or a warning or some intermingling of the two. With a doughty twist its whip cracks forward, cutting a burning swathe of space free in his direction as men and elves alike are sent diving for cover as those searing flails scythe through the air. He ducks the whip-strike, and then sprints forwards for cover as the attackers regroup behind him.

He coughs as the stench of burning flesh coats the back of his throat, those few too slow to escape

left to boil in their armour as white-hot metal melts onto skin, as leather dissolves onto bone while they writhe in the dirt beneath his feet. Towards that rapidly closing gap he runs, turning aside a foolish sword thrust that swipes towards his side before smashing the hilt of his knife into the face of his assailant. With vicious satisfaction he feels cartilage and bone crunch beneath the impact, and the man reels backwards before collapsing to the ground.

Yet in those precious seconds the lines of enemies reform about him, cutting him off from his allies barely metres away. He looks to them for aid, but suddenly their attention is drawn elsewhere: a wave of Vanyarin troops led by three ghostly Maiar circle upon them from the west and he is left without help. He growls as that tantalising gap disappears, at least ten elves converging into it with their swords turned upon him. Above their heads he sees his previous saviour flounder, a silver-tipped spear embedded deep into its chest.

With three slashes he clears a slight space amid the crush, several litres of fresh-spilled blood wetting the dust beneath him. More warily now the elves circle him, fanning out in his pathway but hesitating to strike. Proudly he stands his ground, his knives held with cold precision before him, and at their pitiful faces, at their wide-eyed stares a stunning burst of anger rises in him.

They dare to stand before him; they dare to threaten his realm and his home and his friends in their perverted pretences of justice. In shining arrogance they are arrayed, in their impudence they are bathed, they cling to their supposed purity that drips with nothing but cruor. And more than anything that hypocrisy galls him: the blood of their own kindred lies heavy upon their breath, more often it had slicked their swords than his own.

Many foul things he might be, but kinslayer is not among them.

Self-righteous fury flashes in his eyes, it scorches up within him, but this time he tempers it, refining it into a pulsing star of energy at the pit of his stomach. And into a seething, hissing comet that star explodes, puissance rises within him, and with a vindictive sneer he sends it arching out before him. Beyond his outstretched knives the elves freeze, and an unearthly grin curves over his face. In the years that had passed he had not been idle, and he had perfected the tricks that his master had so agonisingly demonstrated to him.

Caught in his grip the elves' muscles lock, and with such delight he feels their panic, he feels them try to squirm, to scream even as he had done. But with crushing force he tightens his hold, watching as their eyes quiver in horror. A part of him knows this is dangerous, in the middle of mêlée combat such gratifications might undo him, but he doesn't care, the sheer injustice of their cause spurring him to bitter wrath.

He slams up against their consciousnesses, subtly knocked aside with the force of his anger and even as they begin to asphyxiate, even as he feels the fragile threads of their sanity begin to snap he pours himself into them. Like a rampaging cancer he weaves through muscle, he corrodes through veins, darting his ruinous way towards their hearts. Scant moments later he holds his prizes, and with such gleeful triumph he ruptures them. At the slightest tilt of his knives atrium walls atrophy, ventricles burst in floods of filthy blood, arteries clot and twist and split in one fatal haemorrhage.

The elves crumple before him, and over their still twitching corpses he leaps, sprinting forward to finally join the ranks of the beleaguered Valaraukar who welcome him among them with a rousing cheer. In fell elation he cheers with them, the glory of bloodlust inflating him, power prickling deliciously through his veins. He twists back to the attackers, Vanyar and Noldor and Maiar alike who stare at him in dismay. Boldness seizes him, and before they have the slightest chance to mount a counteroffensive he charges them, a feral smile twisted over his face. With a roar like an avalanche unleashed in the mountains the Valaraukar rally behind him, crashing down upon the

opposing ranks with blades of fire and death.

For what seems like hours he holds the lines firm, flitting amongst the glooming bulk of the Balrogs to stem the incursions where most he is needed, a silent little shriek amongst pillars of incandescent rage. But as time slips by, almost imperceptibly he begins to tire: his knives weigh a little heavier in his hands, his parries come just a fraction of a second slower. Furiously though he rouses himself, weariness is not something he can yet afford, and the outer bulwark cannot be allowed to fall.

Yet despite his resolve fatigue drags at him, adrenaline fades as the monotony of battle wears on and his energies begin to wane. Grimly he surveys the lines and judging them dwindled but still more than adequate for defence he ducks behind the archer's platform, slipping through one of the concealed doorways that puncture that fortified length.

In the relative safety of the platform's inner side he leans against a wooden strut, his calves trembling. For scant minutes he manages to rest, his breathing steadies, but all too soon an ululating wail takes up: an alarm call blares its distress. He heaves himself up, feeling the beneficial effects of even that small break as much more alertly he scans the length of the platform for the breach. And there, far to the east he sees it, the archers set there slaughtered and a handful of invaders slipping through a pile of collapsed timbers, then cautiously proceeding through the first lines of spiked ditches.

Wiping the bloodstains from his knife-hilts against his thighs, he takes them up once more. Fleetly he runs along the inner boundary of the platform, his sable armour camouflaging him well into the shadows that clot there, and the clear field eases his passage. Fervently he hopes that the artillery upon the fortress' walls will not loose: the commanders there were under strict instruction not to begin bombardment unless the platform were to be overthrown completely, but in the excitement of battle such orders were often set astray.

All remains thankfully quiet, and oblivious to his presence the intruders proceed unwarily. Finally he breaks upon them, thrusting both knives beneath two cuirasses before they even realise that he is there. Twin fountains of blood spray as he pulls his knives free, a man and an elf slump motionless to the ground. The others are alert to him now but swiftly he dispatches them, anger once more digging at him, pressing him to move.

With difficulty he wrenches his knife free of the last, the blade catching on some shard of bone. Examining its dulled edge he discards it, and its twin too, instead drawing his falchion from his waist, its two-foot length glimmering keenly in the pallid light. Checking that the ditches were clear of enemies, he clambers out of them and crosses over to the breach in the platform. Through the broken timbers he slips, then hauls the mangled wood and metal shut behind him, sealing the gap with a magic that although makeshift would still render it impassable.

Sensing no imminent danger upon this section of the blockade, he climbs atop the platform, his boots slipping on the pools of black blood that slick over the timbers, soaked through from the slain archers. Sighting the legion most in need of aid, a knot of Valaraukar hard-pressed at the centre, he sets off at a sprint down the rickety platform. A few arrows whine past him as he runs, most way off target, but the last misses skewering his hip by a fraction of an inch before he dives back into the nearest ranks of remaining archers: swarthy men of the East who fire venom-tipped arrows from great recurved bows of horn and steel.

Behind the still-intact barriers he walks with relative ease, and upon reaching the besieged Valaraukar he leaps down among them. He marvels at their tirelessness, the Balrogs repelling the intruders from the platform without pause and after all this time still they attack with vigour.

Amid their fray he slides, but where fury guided him before now cold precision leads, each death is served with clinical dispassion. No longer does he smile as the bodies fall before him, and one by one the Balrogs begin to topple as Maiar clad in shining mail engage them, singing like demented children amid the carnage. Sweat drips down his forehead, his mouth sets in a taut line as deftly he decapitates a man fool enough to swing at him. Tired as he is, he is still quite capable of defending himself, he thinks.

His hair plasters in lank strands over his cheeks and neck, his falchion slips in his hand as he darts towards the next wave of attackers and furiously he rallies himself, trying to focus amid the crush. But willpower alone cannot override the physical limitations of his body, and suddenly the charging blow of a broadsword catches him slightly off-balance.

He stumbles backwards to dodge the sweep, hoping to buy himself a second to recompose. But the elf that attacks him shows him no such leniency, he follows him doggedly as he moves and swings at his head an instant later. This time though, he is ready, and his sword snaps upwards, staying the elf's strike with the ringing clash of metal upon metal. The impact jolts painfully up his arm, the elf's blade sticks quivering upon the edge of his own, and his biceps tremble with the effort of holding him at bay. But a disgusting fatigue seeps through him and at the last his parry founders, the elf's sword grinds against his own and slips uncontrollably down towards his cross-guard.

In a weird moment of clarity he looks up, truly registering the elf that assails him. Dark hair binds in flowing tresses behind his un-helmeted head, an eight-rayed star gleams in richest *mithril* upon his shield, and at that hateful emblem he jerks violently back into motion. Awkwardly he twists his arm, snatching his falchion away and hoping that with the motion that the elf will overbalance. But it does not avail him, and a second later a boot smashes into his solar plexus.

Sick disbelief jolts through him as the air punches out of his lungs, which seem to collapse into the void of breath left inside of him. He staggers backwards, his blade pathetically thrust out before him, his left hand instinctively cradling his stomach as desperately he tries to suck a breath back into his lungs. Anything, any little sliver of air would do, but the elf has winded him well, and he splutters to little effect.

The elf's sword flickers towards his feet and frantically he dodges backwards, but his heel slips amid the churned earth. To his utmost despair his balance fails him, and half-curved to his side he sprawls back amid the dirt, heedless of the elf looming above him as every instinct just screams at him to breathe, his lungs still painfully paralysed within his chest.

He hears the elf chuckle, a surprisingly malevolent laughter bubbles up from his throat, and an instant later a boot hooks around his shoulder, slamming his back fully into the ground. His cheeks mottle crimson, the veins in his neck stand bold with the effort of drawing breath, and with dreadful anticipation he knows what is coming: the elf leers over him, broadsword in hand. Bitterly he rails against it, and at long last the slightest quiver of air trickles into his lungs, but it comes too late; the elf's boot crushes down onto his chest and he knows that he is bested. But he won't beg, pride enough he has to face his end without grovelling, and hatefully he glares upwards, if only the elf would stop so irritatingly laughing at him and just *get on with it*.

But to his abject surprise the elf reaches down, grabbing him by his collar and hoisting him upwards, and weakly his hands scrabble against the elf's vambraces. He splutters incoherently, his mind still not quite processing what is happening beyond the shrieking need to breathe. The elf leans forward, peering at him intently, and in his azure eyes a startling ferocity burns.

And with a voice that seems to roll with some terrible, puissant lyricism the elf spits down into his face: "This is for my brother, you twisted rapist fuckhead!"

With those crude words still hovering in the air the elf drops him and he slams pitifully back to the ground. Then an instant later, with one tremendous swing the elf clouts his shield across his face.

The steel catches him fully across the left cheek, ripping open the skin there in a blaze of pain as his head reels around with the blow. Every tendon, every muscle in his neck howls its protest, and amid that agony he feels something snap, some integral thing severs inside of him.

His fingers fall numb, the falchion slips wholly from his grasp as he goes limp, his head hitting the dirt with a dull thud. The last thing he sees is the elf sneering over him, and in shock he stares upwards at that fell visage until his vision blackens, and then there is nothingness.

The lilting rhythm of chanting drags him back from the darkness that envelops him. Blearily he tries to open his eyes, but his eyelids scarcely flutter, and he glimpses nothing but an opaque haziness of colours and confused patterns. Sounds slide weirdly through his head, stretched and warped into a strange viscosity, but as a burbling undercurrent that chanting continues and he feels oddly comforted by its presence. Through the mellifluous surrealism of his senses staccato noises burst, muffled shouts and clangs seem to pierce through that vagueness and to their sharpness he clings; he hauls himself closer to clarity. A trumpet blares jarringly loud near to him, and at that noise he blinks more definitely as slowly his vision slides into focus.

A ceiling looms far above him, and as that awareness sinks in suddenly pain lances through the side of his neck. With a colossal effort of will he shifts his gaze to his left, and surprise ripples through him as his eyes slide over his master. Urgently his master peers at him, and like pieces of a puzzle slowly slotting together he realises that it is his master who is chanting. Flowing syllables of archaic Quenya pour over his lips, their spell seems to shimmer in the air, and with that understanding the pain in his neck intensifies.

Summoning what tiny threads of energy he can he tries to roll over, to shift himself in order to dispel the discomfort that throbs through him. But to his dismay he finds that he cannot: his legs will not obey him, his torso lies motionless, and only his fingers twitch feebly. Fright cracks through him, and where movement fails he tries to form words, he tries to let his master know that he is all right. Dimly he can feel his vocal cords hum, and he hopes that what he tries to say is at least coherent, but in reality only a ragged whining noise flickers out from his throat.

It has its effect though, and suddenly his master breaks off from his chanting, leaning forward to look searchingly at him.

“Mairon?”

At the sound of his name he blinks, and desperately he tries to respond, he tries to force some semblance of words over his lips. To his horror the words fail, and a suffocating sense of panic begins to tighten around his chest. He whines again, a near-hysterical sob bubbling up in his throat as his breathing shallows, raw terror and pain rippling through him. An instant later he feels something touch his left hand, faintly he feels something slip in between his limp fingers and squeeze.

“Mairon? Mairon, hey, shhh...”

His head lolls a millimetre to the side and agony explodes through him anew; jagged bolts of fire tear through his neck and torso. He shuts his eyes; that gesture if nothing else he can manage as breath hisses into his lungs, each tiny shift of his ribs stabs new blades of pain through him. He whimpers, those distressed little noises building to a choking crux in him as shock and injury and fear take their toll, and he can't move, he can barely breathe and everything just hurts so much and

everything -

“Shhh, shh, Mairon, you’re all right. Little one, it’s me. It’s me...”

His master’s soothing tone slips through his head, and amid his panic he clutches to it tightly, opening his eyes once more.

“I am going to fix this, little one. Do you hear me? Do you hear? I will fix this. I’m going to make it stop hurting, all right?”

So much he wants to respond, to move, to do something, anything to let his master know that he is okay, anything to stop the agony that racks through him, but still his body denies him, and he remains immobile. His master says something else, but his voice slowly begins to fade. More and more the pain in his neck dulls, it drains away into forgiving numbness and in its absence he feels himself drifting, tipping backwards, and somehow staying awake just doesn’t seem like it is quite worth the effort anymore, it would be so much easier just to sleep...

Sharply his master grabs his hand, and for a moment more it drags him back into reality. He tries to squeeze back, with every ounce of his concentration he focuses, but his fingers scarcely shudder, lying limp within his master’s own.

“I am going to fix this, but I need your help, Mairon. I need you to stay with me. I need you to stay awake. Can you do that, little one? Please can you do this for me?”

Blackness seems to hover behind him, and he struggles against its alluring pull, fighting to remain conscious even as he feels his eyes beginning to roll back into his head, as his neck deadens.

“I need you to stay with me. Please, Mairon, please can you do this for me? Mairon? Mairon, look at me! Look at me, please...”

The terrifying note of pleading in his master’s voice compels him to try. With a tremendous effort of will he tears himself away from that blackness, groping back towards the lights that seem to blur and moil so far above him. Like a lonely little ghost in a world made of smoke a purpose at last congeals before him, and rallying what strength he can he tries to open his eyes again, to show even the slightest affirmation of his master’s words.

But as his eyes rove unfocusedly over the ceiling pain sears through his neck, vertebrae grate and an unutterable agony racks through him once more. With one final, excruciating pulse his neck seems to scream before falling utterly dead, any feeling that he had below the base of his skull now severed. Back into that blackness he tips, into the void of night that yawns open behind him, and his eyes fall shut for one last time.

As if trapped in some horrific nightmare, by some strange trick of perception he hears his master curse, he watches as he lunges forward, the spell renewed and crackling over his lips as his hands cup his neck.

Then all falls away into blankness, and amid that infinite abyss he is left alone.

His eyes slit open once more.

Darkness hems him close; a stone ceiling scrapes vaguely overhead. With a weird chime of knowledge he can tell that he is in the dungeons of the fortress, in one of the very deepest cells. But what that certainty threatens to imply his fragile consciousness dares not yet consider.

Tenderly he extends his weary awareness over his body and to his profound relief he realises that he can feel the stone bench beneath his fingertips, and at his bidding his toes wiggle in his boots. Even that small effort is exhausting, and a hazy numbness still hovers over the left side of his face and neck. For a while he contents himself to lie still, glorying in the simple fact that as far as he can tell he seems to be alive.

Closing his eyes once more, with increasing intent he listens to his surrounds, trying to ascertain what is going on as life leaches slowly back into his limbs.

Scuffed footsteps thud past him, and faintly he feels the shift of cool air as a door beyond his head is opened and quietly shut. A hunting horn blares and its whine is abruptly cut off as another door slams shut, this time from somewhere towards his feet. Boots crunch upon the stones, and a breathless voice gasps, "They are coming, my lord! They have broken through the upper levels."

"... *I know.*"

His master's voice slides coolly through the air, its unusually withdrawn tone sending a sharp stab of panic through him, and all the quicker he wills himself to life. He needs to know what is happening, he needs to be able to help -

"We must make haste, my lord," the first voice continues, its gravelly scrape tinged with a note of despair. "We must leave, and quickly. I will rally those who still are able, and we must flee. There are the old ways, my lord, beneath the mountains and beyond to the frozen lands, or by trackless deserts into the east. We have done it before, and we will do it again. We will endure this onslaught."

A ponderous silence hangs in the air, and at last his master responds, "*As you say.*"

"But," the other urges, "we must go *now.*"

A tremor shakes through the room, dust shivers loose from the rafters and stones above. In slow spirals the motes fall, glimmering through the air like dying little stars. Again a horn-call sounds, its noise reverberating even through the reinforced wood of the doors, and great crashes and thuds emanate from above the ceiling.

"We cannot hold here," the voice declares, and through it a pleading note runs. "My lord, the towers are broken, the Black One was hurled from the sky in ruin and half the mountains collapsed beneath him. Already their forces overrun us. We must retreat, my lord. We cannot make a stand here much longer."

"*As you say,*" his master intones once more, a more definitive quality to his voice. "*Captain, sound the retreat. Send word: all who can must escape. We abandon the fortress. This cause is lost.*"

For a moment his consciousness wavers, blackness blooms afresh within him in the wake of such evil tidings and he slips down into an uncomprehending void once more. But a few minutes later he comes back to himself, and he lies still as his master says, "*Captain, gather all under your command and bid them make for the north-eastern tunnel. As many as you can save, you do it, and when they are through you barricade the entrance behind you. Take Mairon and go.*"

"My lord, I cannot take him. That tunnel is too far for me to bear him as a burden."

"*Summon his wolf then,*" his master snaps, and something dangerously close to panic wavers in his voice. "*Surely the beast will bear its master to safety.*"

"My lord, you saw it slain, as did I. I cannot carry him, my lord, and the lieutenant is barely

breathing as it is –“

“I do not care!” his master bellows, his voice slamming through the static air of the room. *“You will carry him if you must. You will get him out. This will not be his ending.”*

Some surge of pride, of sorrow, and of an overwhelming need to simply not be a burden sparks into life within him at his master’s cry, and with a mighty effort he opens his eyes. His lips stick together, the foul taste of blood and bile lies thickly upon his tongue but somehow he pushes it into use, and faintly he gurgles, “No...”

For a moment he is unsure if anyone even heard him. His master’s silhouette dances before his eyes in a thousand tiny refractions, but concentrating hard he stirs, rolling his aching head over to his right to face them.

“N-no,” he croaks once more, a little more clearly. “I c-can...”

This time they hear him, and almost faster than he can blink his master is by his side, in a voice tinged with relief commanding, *“Mairon, lie still. I do not know the extent of the damage.”*

“W-what?” he slurs, focusing intently on his master’s glittering eyes as the rest of the world tilts around him.

“Your spine, little one,” his master whispers. *“I tried... I tried as best as I could...”*

Carefully his master touches his neck, and he hisses as pain flares beneath even that slight pressure. His master withdraws, dismay shining in his eyes, but swiftly that pain recedes in him, bubbling away to a dull ache radiating through his upper body.

“Leave it,” he says at last, strengthening his resolve. “I’m f-fine...”

With that some of his tenacity asserts itself, and summoning what dregs of energy he can he gingerly pries himself up off of the bench. His arms tremble with the effort of supporting his weight, his abdominals unwilling or unable to hold him up, and an instant later his master grasps his shoulders, inch by worrisome inch helping him up into a sitting position.

The room swims dizzily before his eyes for one hideous second before snapping back into clarity, and still holding him his master hovers before him, relief and consternation caught in equal measure over his grime-stained features. Truly noticing his master’s tousled hair and the streaks of gore daubed randomly over his face and hands, faintly he smiles, if only to dispel the nausea that brims in his stomach.

“You’re looking a bit worse for the wear, my lord,” he says hoarsely.

A tiny, disbelieving snort of laughter emanates from his master, and wryly comes the retort: *“Well, you have looked better yourself, little one.”*

He smiles more broadly at that, and the skin of his cheek seems to crackle with the movement. He cries out in sudden discomfort, the scabbed skin from that shield-blow tearing open anew: red, raw flesh shines over purpling bruises. Yet somehow at that pain he finds it within himself to move, and using its soreness as a fulcrum he pushes himself more confidently upright. Suddenly he notices the lack of his armour, as he is left only in his sweat-stained shirt and breeches. But such concerns are thrown aside as sensation floods back into his lower half, and with such relief he flexes his calves, he prods at his thighs, smiling up at his master in genuine joy.

Falteringly his master smiles back at him, that grin that was usually so assured now riven by some

other emotion, some entirely unfamiliar thing that glimmers in his eyes.

“*Mairon,*” his master begins, “*listen to me. We do not have much time.*”

Pointedly *not* listening, he turns himself upon the slab. Delicately his boots lower to the floor, and he swallows hard as pain spasms up his back with the movement. His master sighs, guessing his intent, and an instant later offers his arm in support, something for him to hold to in order to pull himself to his feet.

Wilfully he ignores it, he would do this himself, and rather jerkily he pushes his abused body upright. The floor lurches unsteadily beneath him, his neck throbs, but somehow he remains standing unaided. With a childish pride he looks over to his master, almost in annoyance noticing how protectively he stands nearby.

His master reaches over to him, but violently he shrugs him away, hissing, “I’m fine! I can stand...”

But even as the words tumble over his lips that gesture proves too much. Shadows prickle at the edge of his vision, his neck screams its protest and his knees buckle beneath him, and he begins to topple. Before he can fall his master grabs him, pulling him into his chest and holding him there, supporting his weight against him.

A wave of horrifying weakness rolls through him, dizziness sends his senses reeling, and with his master holding him there it is for a moment all too much. Miserably he presses the uninjured side of his face into his master’s breastplate, savouring the warmth that he finds there as faintly his arms slip around his master’s waist. Stripped of his armour, he seems so terribly small against his master’s broad livery, and as his master holds him all the tighter he wishes that they could just stay here forever, in such quiet intimacy never be parted.

Slowly he recovers, his legs gradually come to bear his weight again, and he straightens up within his master’s embrace. He doesn’t want to look up, he doesn’t want to acknowledge his surroundings and what awful things they imply but a sense of duty snaps at him. He is the lieutenant of this fortress, he is a commander charged with its defence, and no matter how feeble his condition he will do what he must. That purpose solidifies within him, hard and unyielding as tempered steel, and more certainly he recovers his stance, a re-forged vigour seeming to run through his limbs.

He will not let Angband fall, not while he has strength left to him.

But just for one more self-indulgent moment he presses himself to his master, clinging tightly to him, drinking him in, and softly he whispers, “What happened? To me, before? What... what did you do?”

“*You do not remember?*” his master replies solemnly, his breath stirring a few stray strands of his hair to dance in the flickering torchlight. “*Perhaps that is for the best.*”

“Please...”

“*They brought you in,*” his master murmurs, “*they brought you in all bloodied and bruised and you were not breathing. They gave you to me, and as I touched you I knew. I had seen this before. I had done this before. Your spine was broken: a cervical vertebra shattered, or more than one even, and desperately I tried to repair what of the damage that I could. My skills... lie not in healing. But still you would not waken, and once you did but you were near catatonic, and for a moment I thought... I thought that you were lost...*”

Slowly he pulls back from his master, looking up at him in mingled horror and awe as his grip loosens. At last he stands unaided, his neck throbbing but bearable, and for a moment neither of them speak.

A bugle shatters such tender moments. The air is cleft by its noise, a call all too close for comfort.

Sternly his master looks at him, and a terrible intensity forms in his eyes.

“Mairon, will you do something for me?”

He steps backwards a fraction, a shiver of abhorrent anticipation running through him.

“Please, we do not have much time...”

As if to provide cruel irony to his words the ceiling trembles once more, and the door rattles on its frame. Within the cloud of dirt that chokes the air anew it seems an axe coalesces, spun of fate and words and ephemeral dust, and it hovers above his head with such lethal potential.

“I have one last thing that I must ask of you.”

He can sense it coming, and in pre-emptive refusal the pained smile twists over his face. He knows what his master is going to say and it terrifies him, it crushes him even before the words crack through the air.

“You have to go. You must leave, and you must leave now. Quickly, gather whomsoever you can find along your way and go.”

It would almost have been funny if not said with such gravity. And despite himself he hesitates, some sadistic part of him waits for the punchline of the joke to twist his master’s words back around, to wave them away with stilted laughter and a groan.

A heartbeat passes.

The punchline doesn’t come.

His master stares imploringly at him, and with such dreadful certainty that axe crashes down.

“No,” he says, a terribly jaunty tone skipping through his voice. He crosses his arms over his chest, rocking himself backwards as he repeats, “No, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mairon, please...”

“No!” he barks, and he hopes that his master cannot see how tightly his fingers press into his arms, his fingertips showing white beneath the pressure. A brittle calm descends upon him, and in chill elocution he spits, “I am staying here with you.”

“This is not a negotiation,” his master growls. *“You are going. Captain!”*

The orcish captain strides over from his guard at the front door, but before he can lay hands upon him viciously he pushes him aside. Through sheer force of will he ignores the unsteadiness that rushes through him, his muscles blaring their protest at such violent use, and alone he stands in the space between his master and the captain.

The ground feels like it might cave in beneath him, his throat clenches awfully as the gravity of the situation sinks in. And so much he wants to crumble into hysterics, to grab his master and slap him and just bleed it into him that he’s not going, he’s not leaving this place unless it is with him by his

side. But as tempting as it is, mania will not serve him here, and tightly he reins in such emotions, as steadily as he can manage declaring, “I am not leaving. I can fight. I can –“

The door buckles from a mighty blow to its outside, its lock rattling, and he jumps as that percussion thuds through the room. A screech takes up from outside, an unearthly cry of triumph sounds that sends his skin crawling before the door is assaulted once more, its reinforced timbers quivering under each impact.

Severely his master looks at him, and in aggressive obstinacy he glares back, an unheralded fury rising in him.

“*Mairon...*” his master begins, and his tone brokers no argument.

“You should have left me,” he mutters, his words half lost in the awful scratching sound from beyond the door.

“*What?*”

“You should have fucking left me!” he screams, his muddled eyes flashing vehemently. “On that battlefield, you should have left me. You should have left me for dead and ran.”

“*How could you ask that of me?*” his master growls, his voice a low quaver.

“You are asking it of me now.”

“*No,*” his master says, his words like bitter steel. “*I am commanding it of you. Go. Now.*”

“No.”

“*Mairon...*”

He can sense the first glimmers of despair in his master’s voice, and as if to fill that void of conviction his own voice raises once more.

“No! No, I don’t care! I don’t care what you would have me do! This is what I want. I left you before, I left you and they took you and I couldn’t *do* anything. I didn’t know what had happened, I didn’t know if you were *still alive* and I couldn’t – I couldn’t help you and it almost destroyed me then and...”

Painfully his throat closes, his chin crinkles, and furiously he blinks the stinging tears from his eyes as he looks desperately over at his master.

The door creaks ominously; a wailing cry takes up from its outside and the battering takes up more fervently.

“*Mairon, please...*” his master whispers, his eyes like boiling crucibles of gold.

“No!” he shrieks, panic blossoming in him anew, his heart seeming to pummel its way through his ribcage. “No! Not again! *I can’t.* Don’t you understand? I can’t!”

His voice cracks, and bright-eyed he steels himself against it, half pleading and half screaming: “I would rather die here! If this is to be my end then let it come. Let me perish defending that which I treasure. Let me end with dignity. Let me – “

Suddenly his master lunges across the room, and his words cut off in a surprised squeak as his master’s lips close over his own. Desperately his master holds him, with such trembling passion he

parts his lips, kissing him for all that he is worth. Pain flares over his cheek at their contact, his bruised lips crush into that embrace but he doesn't care, it doesn't matter, and urgently he presses himself into his master. In such savage ardour their lips meet, and part, and meet again in biting little kisses, his heart hammering within his chest as so hard he strives to ignore the chasm of utter desolation that hovers behind him.

And at some point he feels it, amid their kiss a crackling presence forms upon his master's lips, and with every ounce of his willpower he tries to refuse. But his master's lips part his own; with such brutal tenderness his tongue pushes it into his mouth, down his throat even as he tries to deny it, to give it back.

A concentrated glede of spitting, seething power fizzes down his throat, near scorching his insides with the brightness of its radiance. It settles in his stomach like a boiling star, a power both familiar and foreign set pulsing through him and so fervidly he abhors it, he loathes what it signifies: all of his deepest fears at last dragged up and cast staggering into the light. And as if he could stop it, as if he could make them all go away he clings to his master, kissing him back with such brittle despair.

At last his master breaks off, his breath worryingly laboured. Delicately his master's hands cup his bruised jaw, they raise his head to look him in the eye. He watches the little rill of shock dart over his master's features and the resigned acceptance that follows, and confusedly he looks his master properly in the eye. And with a chill that nearly stops the blood in his veins, he sees the dullness of his master's irises, their vivacity bleached clean away.

The gold in them no longer glitters.

With a sickening lurch it hits him. For so long his eyes had run impure, some indeterminate blemish stained them apparently without ill-effect and though he had his suspicions he had long kept them quiet, he had never thought that they might matter. But within the blank reflection of his master's eyes he catches his own glimmering: no longer indefinite or silver but now a rich, bleeding gold: horror-struck mirrors of what his master's used to be.

Bitter denial breaks over him, and as he moves to pull away his master gently grasps him, pressing his forehead softly against his own.

"I'm sorry," his master murmurs, and the thickness in his voice stops the breath in his lungs. *"I'm so sorry, little one. I didn't... I didn't know what else to do."*

Silently he presses himself closer, and almost longingly his master traces a finger down his throat, following the path along which that little sphere of power had burned. And at that aching touch, any thoughts of dissent or anger he might have held smash aside as sorrow swells in him.

"Take it, please. This part of me... Use it. Let it keep you safe."

"No," he pleads. "No, you can't... You can't give me this. I can't take this from you..."

"It is too late," his master murmurs. *"I'm so sorry, Mairon. You deserved so much better than this."*

Swiftly his master breaks their contact, and as strangling shock grips him his master beckons to the captain. Before he can gather himself, strong hands lock around his upper arms, and panic rips up anew from his stomach as he feels himself being pulled away.

"No! No, stop!" he yells, shaking his shoulders as much as he can stand within the captain's grip.

“Stop! Let me go!”

But resolutely the captain drags him towards the rear door, kicking it open as it presses to his back. Like a wildcat he fights, any instinct of self-preservation utterly abandoned as he sees his master turn aside. Serenely his master picks up his war-hammer, and with an air of utmost calm he turns to the splintering front door, Grond grasped firmly in his hand.

Through the doorway the captain drags him, and as his master’s intentions become clear desperately he screams, “No! No, you can’t do this! Please, my lord, come with us! Come with us, now! Please!”

His voice cracks under the strain, and hoarsely he croaks, “Melkor, *please!*”

“*Mairon, I am begging you,*” his master says, a terrible distance in his voice. “*If this is the last thing that I am ever to do for you, then let them say that it was good. Let them say that, at the least.*”

“No!” he shrieks, kicking and struggling within the captain’s grip, utterly heedless of the pain that throbs through him with every motion. “No! No, I won’t leave you! Let me go! *Let me go!*”

“*I’m so sorry, little one. I—*”

The door rips open before his master, bursting from its hinges in a spray of wood-shards and wordlessly he howls, the captain hauling him around the corner and slamming their own door shut behind them. A terrible cacophony takes up, like the cries from some demented charnel house and amid their din he sobs, desperately clawing at the captain, trying to rip himself free of that iron grasp, to tear himself back to his master’s side.

But his body fails him once again, and as a sobbing wreck he allows himself at last to be led through the labyrinthine passages that run beneath the fortress, the captain’s strong fingers clamped immovably around his wrist. Shock and pain and a thousand other nameless emotions thud through him, and almost beyond caring he is dragged into a far-distant tunnel. As he and the captain pass through, a great deadfall of rubble crashes down behind them, sealing the entrance from pursuers.

And what truly he experiences in those last, crushing moments, who can ever say? Words cannot suffice for the loss that devours him.

“I never told him,” he mumbles into the darkened tunnel, tears falling in stinging, bitter tracks down his cheeks. “I never told him...”

The captain tugs him urgently along by the wrist, pulling him forward as he begins to straggle, as the numbness of trauma sinks into him in earnest.

At last they emerge into the wastes and the frigid wind of the ice fields rips at them, howling out its uncaring fury. For kilometres from the tunnel’s mouth he is led through the snow -drifts and blindly he follows the captain, trusting him to find the safest paths through the wastes.

He simply cannot bring himself to care any longer.

Behind the captain he stumbles, his fingers fall numb as hypothermia begins to bite, and his legs feel leaden but through the freezing snowdrifts still they walk until finally they break into the concealed mouth of a cavern beneath a frozen overhang of rock.

Mechanically he ducks the icicles that stab down from the cave’s ceiling, his teeth chattering with

the cold, and the captain barks out three quick words. At that call lanterns flare within the cave's inky depths and urgently he is pulled forward. A few staggering steps he manages until faintness overcomes him, and he collapses forward into the arms of a Balrog who lunges to catch him.

Cradled like an infant to its vast chest, the creature's fiery body helps to warm him, but little it can do to heal the void that aches within him. He turns in its arms, staring dully into the cavern's depths, and to his faint surprise numerous pairs of eyes stare hopefully back at him. The weight of their expectation crushes him, at the sight of their timorous anticipation what resolve he has crumbles, and grief claws through him anew.

"I – I n-never..." he begins, before his voice falters, and he clutches all the tighter to the Valarauka that holds him in a rather useless display of leadership, pain racking through his body and his mind utterly incapable of focusing.

"Our lieutenant has suffered grave injury," a gravelly voice intones, and surprise jolts through him as he realises that it is the captain who speaks, standing loyally beside him where he lies. "And, I fear, a grave loss. As have we all."

A shivering beat passes through the ensemble, and mournfully each head bows.

"But we shall not give into despair," the captain continues forcefully. "This situation we have faced before, and through the direst of circumstances we have prevailed. Supplies enough we have stored here to last many weeks, and whence this peril passes we shall scout for others of our numbers. Surely many others have survived this cataclysm; and have hid themselves as we have done.

Day does not conquer night! Shadows do not fall before the sun, but hide, and regroup. Our time is yet young on this earth, so take heart. From the ashes we will rise again: stronger and yet more subtle."

Murmured assent follows the captain's speech, and swiftly he continues: "I shall take temporary command here whilst our lieutenant recovers. From then on we act under his directive once more, and we will reclaim what was stolen from us."

Unquestioningly the ensemble nods, and many an eye looks sadly over to where he lies in the Valarauka's arms.

"All of you, now, to your posts. And remain on guard. I want sentries posted at the cavern's entrance, and those among you with keen sight to accompany them. More of our numbers might yet have escaped the fortress and come this way seeking refuge, or our pursuers here may follow. We must remain vigilant, and any anomalies or suspicious sightings I want reported to myself immediately."

A clank of boots and chainmail takes up as the shattered remnants of Angband's majesty shuffle off to their chores.

"T-thank you," he murmurs, looking blearily up at the captain's silhouette, which warps and blurs before his eyes as pain jolts through his neck once more.

"It is quite all right, my lord. You have suffered grievous harm, and no small loss besides. Rest now, and recover. This noble Valarauka here shall guard you, and we will be here once you are ready to assume command."

"I never told him..." he whispers, his eyes slipping from the orc and wandering unfocusedly over

the cavern's ceiling.

“What?” the captain asks, crouching down beside him and laying a sympathetic hand upon his shoulder. “What did you not tell him?”

Such horror grips him, and he knows they are pathetic, he knows that they are hardly the stuff of lords, but his lips tremble as the words pour fragile and fleeting over them. “I n-never... He was... I was the only person who ever saw him for who he was. I saw him, and I loved him, and I never told him that. I never said it... *I never told him...*”

His voice cuts off in a choking sob and he curls into the Balrog, his bruised face hidden behind the fall of his hair as his eyes flicker shut, as hurt and sorrow claim him.

A long pause lingers about him; a knowing look passes over his head between the Valarauka and the captain. Distantly he feels the orc's hand tighten over his shoulder, shaking him the tiniest bit in a gesture of amicability.

“My lord,” the captain says at length, his voice echoing dimly through his head as merciful oblivion washes over him, as shock and fatigue drag him down into their numbing clutches and at the very last he hears the captain say: “My lord, I don't think you ever had to.”

And with that, ladies and gentlemen, I must bring to a conclusion this story. I do hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it. And I do so hope that you've enjoyed my little re-edit of it, and that perhaps dragging yourself through 120K words of Angbang smut was worth it all after all :3

EDIT: And [here](#) is a little sequel fic by the exceedingly talented maironsass on Tumblr, in stark refusal to accept the rather grim ending I've left us hanging on <3

I want to give the hugest thank-you to anyone who's reading this, and to everyone who's ever left support or advice. It truly meant a lot, and without you guys this fic wouldn't exist, so thank-you and a massive hug to each and every one of you.

I hang out on Tumblr way more than is healthy, so if you ever want to come and chat I'd be more than happy to oblige: markedasinfernal.tumblr.com is the place to be.

Farewell for now, friends, and all the best.

theeventualwinner

xx

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!