

HIGH FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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ISSUE # 3



AT THE BACK OF
THE NORTH
WIND



A Window into
Middle-earth

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CLARENDON HOUSE
PUBLICATIONS

HIGH FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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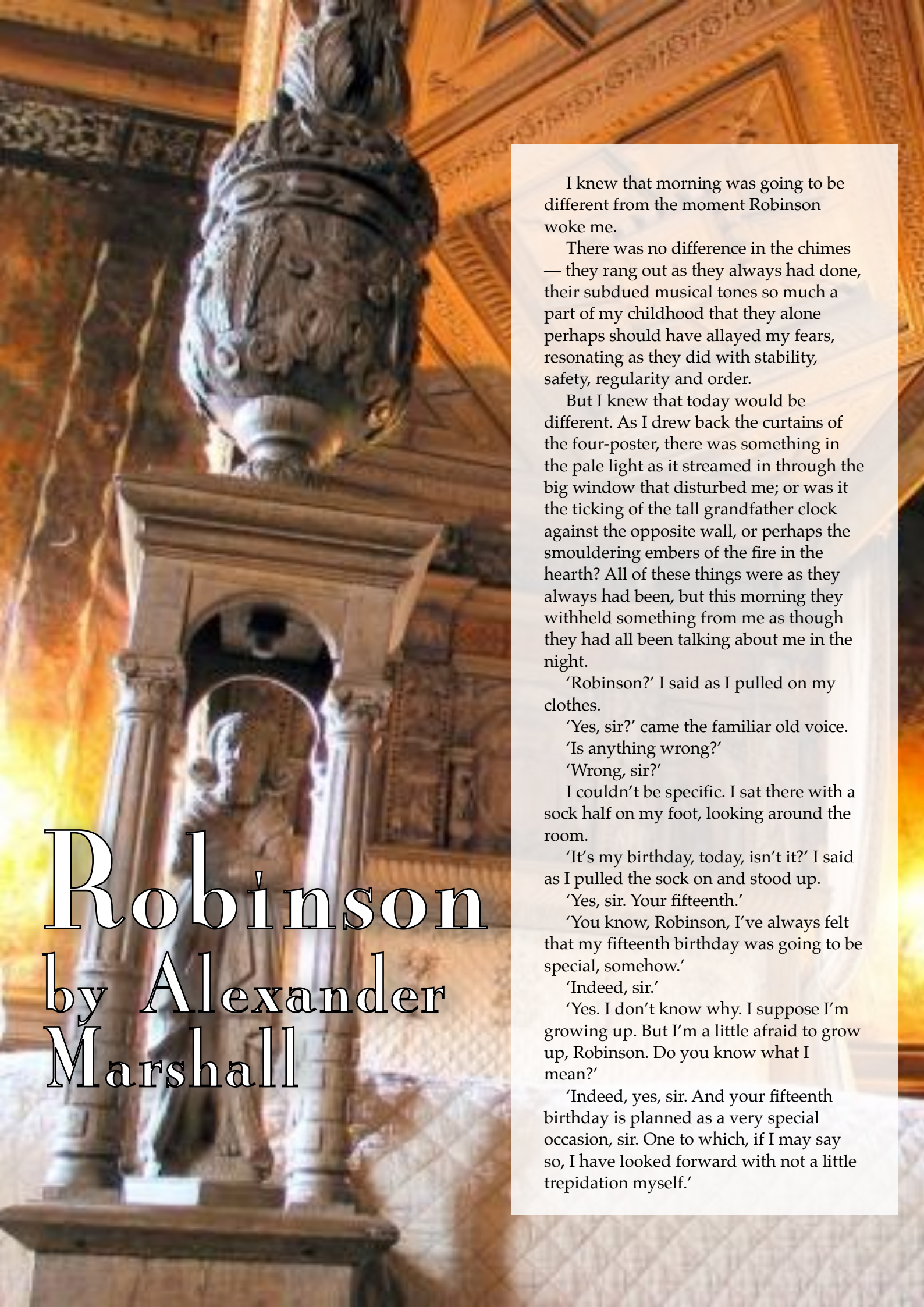
HIGH FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



WELCOME TO THE
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Robinson

by Alexander
Marshall

I knew that morning was going to be different from the moment Robinson woke me.

There was no difference in the chimes — they rang out as they always had done, their subdued musical tones so much a part of my childhood that they alone perhaps should have allayed my fears, resonating as they did with stability, safety, regularity and order.

But I knew that today would be different. As I drew back the curtains of the four-poster, there was something in the pale light as it streamed in through the big window that disturbed me; or was it the ticking of the tall grandfather clock against the opposite wall, or perhaps the smouldering embers of the fire in the hearth? All of these things were as they always had been, but this morning they withheld something from me as though they had all been talking about me in the night.

‘Robinson?’ I said as I pulled on my clothes.

‘Yes, sir?’ came the familiar old voice.

‘Is anything wrong?’

‘Wrong, sir?’

I couldn’t be specific. I sat there with a sock half on my foot, looking around the room.

‘It’s my birthday, today, isn’t it?’ I said as I pulled the sock on and stood up.

‘Yes, sir. Your fifteenth.’

‘You know, Robinson, I’ve always felt that my fifteenth birthday was going to be special, somehow.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘Yes. I don’t know why. I suppose I’m growing up. But I’m a little afraid to grow up, Robinson. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Indeed, yes, sir. And your fifteenth birthday is planned as a very special occasion, sir. One to which, if I may say so, I have looked forward with not a little trepidation myself.’



‘Oh?’ I said — so I’d been right. There was a tone in Robinson’s voice that was different. He wasn’t telling me everything. Sometimes he’d kept secrets from me as part of a game or for my own benefit, but this wasn’t quite the same, I sensed it.

I suddenly felt very anxious. It was as though the sun had gone in, as though the newly dawned day had closed down, and night had come again too soon. I was almost too scared to speak for a while.

‘What is it? What is going to happen?’ There was a pause.

‘If sir will complete his preparations and have breakfast, I will endeavour to explain.’

In a kind of mindless daze I quickly got ready and went downstairs. The air seemed cool in the hall, but the clocks ticked as always and the knights in their suits of armour were where they always had been. I ran across the thick carpet and into the morning room. Breakfast was ready as usual, but I had no appetite. I munched on a piece of toast and looked out of the window. The high clouds had moved aside and bright sunlight painted the lawns and dew-glistening trees golden. Away to the east were the same grey- green hills topped with the same distant single tower. A robin danced on the brown stones under the window. It was as fine a November morning as I could wish for on my birthday — but I didn’t feel part of it. There was something not right about it, something hidden, something dark behind the clouds, concealed rather than revealed by the sunlight. Something right at the core of all this which today I would find out.

Not since my fever about five years ago had I felt so strangely removed from everything, nor so ill at ease. Robinson had been quiet throughout breakfast — I sensed his uneasiness too. But Robinson was never uneasy. That’s what was so disturbing.

I put down the piece of toast half-eaten.

‘Where would you like me to go, Robinson?’ I said in a quiet and almost timid voice.

'Might I suggest the drawing room, sir?' Robinson replied.

Like someone in a trance, I meandered through the house to the drawing room, facing the newly-risen sun. It was filled with an exhilarating but empty light. Billions of dustmotes swirled in their little universes in those golden beams, disappearing into the relative oblivion of the shade. As I slumped into my favourite armchair I felt depressed. I felt that all of this, everything that I had known, was going to be taken away and that I was helpless to stop it. Moreover, as I pondered this in a half-conscious sort of way, I saw that I had always known this would happen, I had always somehow suspected that my whole life was not what it seemed and that one day I would find out the truth.

When Robinson began, it was almost as though I could have pre-empted him.

Another pause. I decided to help him.

'You are strangely quiet this morning, Robinson. It's not your usual quiet, your normal placid reserve. This is a different kind of quietness, is it not? Are you afraid?'

'In all honesty, sir, I am a little trepidatious. But it would be incorrect to imply fear. I am not capable of fear.'

'Are you not? I wish it were true to say that of me. I'm frightened, Robinson.'

'I know, sir. I have been monitoring you. But what I have to tell you is no cause for any kind of absolute concern. Your life is in no immediate danger.'

'That depends what you mean by my life, Robinson. If you mean my physical body, then I daresay you are correct. I feel physically well, there is no threat in the environment that I can perceive, and the gardens are just as they always have been — you are with me, Robinson, and all is well with the world. But you are going to tell me things, are you not? Things that will mean life can never be the same.'

'Indeed, sir. I have been instructed that upon your fifteenth birthday you are to be informed of certain salient factors regarding your situation.'





'Might I hazard a guess as to what some of them might be?' I suggested, standing up and moving to the window seat where I looked out at the bright green lawns in the magical sunlight, letting my foot swing idly against the wood panelling, adding to the scuff mark on the wall where I had done the same many times before.

'If you wish, sir, then by all means,' Robinson replied, and I sensed a certain relief in his voice, as though he saw a way that this whole procedure might be made slightly easier on him.

'You're going to tell me about Jessie, aren't you? And about my parents? All those questions that you could never really answer for me before — you're going to answer them now, aren't you?'

He paused.

'Yes, sir. I am going to endeavour to do so at any rate,' he said finally.

'But let me help you further,' I went on. 'You're going to tell me that Jessie isn't really my brother. That Jane and Esmerelda are not really what they seem. That my parents are not away in India but that they are no longer alive. That...'

I had to pause for a moment. I swallowed hard and continued.

'That I am, in truth, alone in this house. That I have always been alone.'

I expected to feel the mounting wave wash over me with those words, but it held off. The lawns seemed peaceful, the sun shone, and two very black crows roosted in the top of the old oak near the broken-down wall at the eastern end of the grass.

'Not quite alone, sir.'

'No, Robinson, not quite. You're real, aren't you? You've always been there from as early as I can remember. Before Jessie, before the others. Helping me to dress, teaching me to speak and to read, guiding me through so many adventures in the sitting room, with me when I explored the gardens...' I felt a sudden rush of childlike excitement as I thought of the gardens, and my enthusiasm burst out of me before I could restrain it.

'The gardens! You're going to tell me what lies outside the wall, aren't you? Oh, Robinson, you have no idea how that uplifts me. How strange it is that despite all the rest, that idea, the notion of finding out what lies beyond the wall fills me with such wonder!' I laughed, and sensed Robinson's poignant amusement.

Silence fell. I looked up at the ceiling.

'Robinson,' I said after a while.

'Sir?' he replied when I made no noise for several moments.

'Just tell me. Tell me it all. Fact by fact. As you can see, my own mind has not been idle. Let me know first about Jessie.'

Robinson began.

'Jessie does not exist as a separate corporeal entity. He is a projection of your needs for brotherly companionship.'

'Like the images you show me in the sitting room? A ghost? A fantasy?'

'Not quite a ghost, sir. He is a material composite. Based on a real child. To all intents and purposes, he is real — but not actually a brother in the strict sense of the word, nor another living being like yourself, sir.'

'I see.' Again, I expected the wave, but I think that Robinson's words were bringing a deeper sense of relief rather than shocking me — as though I had on some fundamental level already guessed the truth and was now simply having it confirmed.

Jessie appeared in the room, on the other side of the table. He stood smiling at me and then turned around where he stood, holding out his arms as though modelling or showing off his white shirt and leather britches. With a final cherubic grin, he was gone.

I rubbed my face with my hand.

'Can he come back, or is that it now?' I asked, quietly.

'I can reconstruct him whenever you wish, sir.'

'And the others?'

'Similar constructs, sir. Designed impeccably and managed with perfection to enable you to grow up with fitting companionship and a sense of society, sir.'





'Except that I always knew.'

'Sir?'

'I always knew, Robinson. I've always known that I'm alone. There's always been an emptiness inside me, always something that told me how deeply unsatisfying my life was. I never told you about that, did I? I wondered if I were just imagining those feelings. It's true then, about my parents?'

'Yes, sir. They are not in India.'

'Where are they?'

'That particular information, sir is not available to me. But it would be highly unlikely that they are still alive.'

'Why?'

'In order to completely and satisfactorily answer that question, sir, might I recommend that we withdraw to the sitting room? I brought you in here because I felt that the beauty of the morning might soften the harshness of certain facts now being revealed to you for the first time, but I am in need of the Lantern to further elucidate.'

Without speaking I walked through to the sitting room, unsure of my own mental or emotional state. It was darker and colder in there — the room faced west and the curtains were still drawn, but enough light filtered through for me to find my way to the Lantern table. This was a flat surface that glimmered with glowing symbols. By touching these, I could summon images in three dimensions from history, literature, science. Using the Lantern, Robinson had taken me on a thousand educational and recreational adventures, teaching me the story of my people, the world, its many cultures and the rich tapestry of its interactions, its imaginative heritage. I think it was while I had been at the Lantern that I had slowly realised that this world he had shown me was dead, and that the reason he was so careful to inform me of so much was that I was its repository, its last living vestige.

He explained it all to me now, in that same patient, careful voice, pausing to ensure, with his infinite care, that I had understood, that my every question was answered, that every nuance of my thinking was addressed. There could be no greater or more compassionate teacher.

My world, he told me, had perished. All its hopes and dreams, the vast and complex web of its many lives, had come almost to nothing in the end. The destructive side of humanity's nature had at last triumphed over its nobility, in so many ways — war, disease, crime, environmental decay, all undercut, he emphasised, with a moral corruption which left no foundation for growth.

Or at least it had almost triumphed. Towards the end, when it became plain to the clearer-minded that all was over, a Sanctuary had been created, and all that was best and greatest about the world had been stored therein. The very height of human technology was lifted higher; the purest of human motivations were further explored and cleansed; the mightiest of human achievements were refined and developed still further, and all was made ready and secure.

And into this Sanctuary had been placed genetic material, carefully selected at first, and then, by common consent, chosen at random. And from this material, under Robinson's thorough custodianship, a child had grown.





‘On your fifteenth birthday,’ Robinson went on, ‘you were to be informed of the nature of all this as seemed fitting. It was left to my judgement. I judged that you were both strong enough and wise enough in your youth to be able to assimilate these truths. I trust that you do not find me in error, sir.’

Unknowingly, I had soaked my shirt with tears. His extrapolation had lasted several hours, accompanied by images so colourful, so varied and moving that at times I felt myself to be transported, moved as I had never been moved before, guided into new dimensions of thought that were both poetic, triumphant and celebratory in the extreme, and infinitely tragic. It was a while before I could speak. Robinson understood and remained silent.

‘No, you have not misjudged the situation, Robinson, my old friend.’ Then I laughed heavily. ‘My only friend.’

‘Solitude was a condition I felt at pains to provide in measured ways, sir. Ultimately, there would be no method of avoiding these harder facts, but until then I thought it best to provide at least the illusion of real company,’ he carefully explained.

‘You did, as always, the right thing. But there is more, now. The Sanctuary, this place that I have called home these fifteen years: you have not yet delved into its nature. You have not told me what lies beyond the wall.’

‘For those answers, sir, we will need to walk outside.’

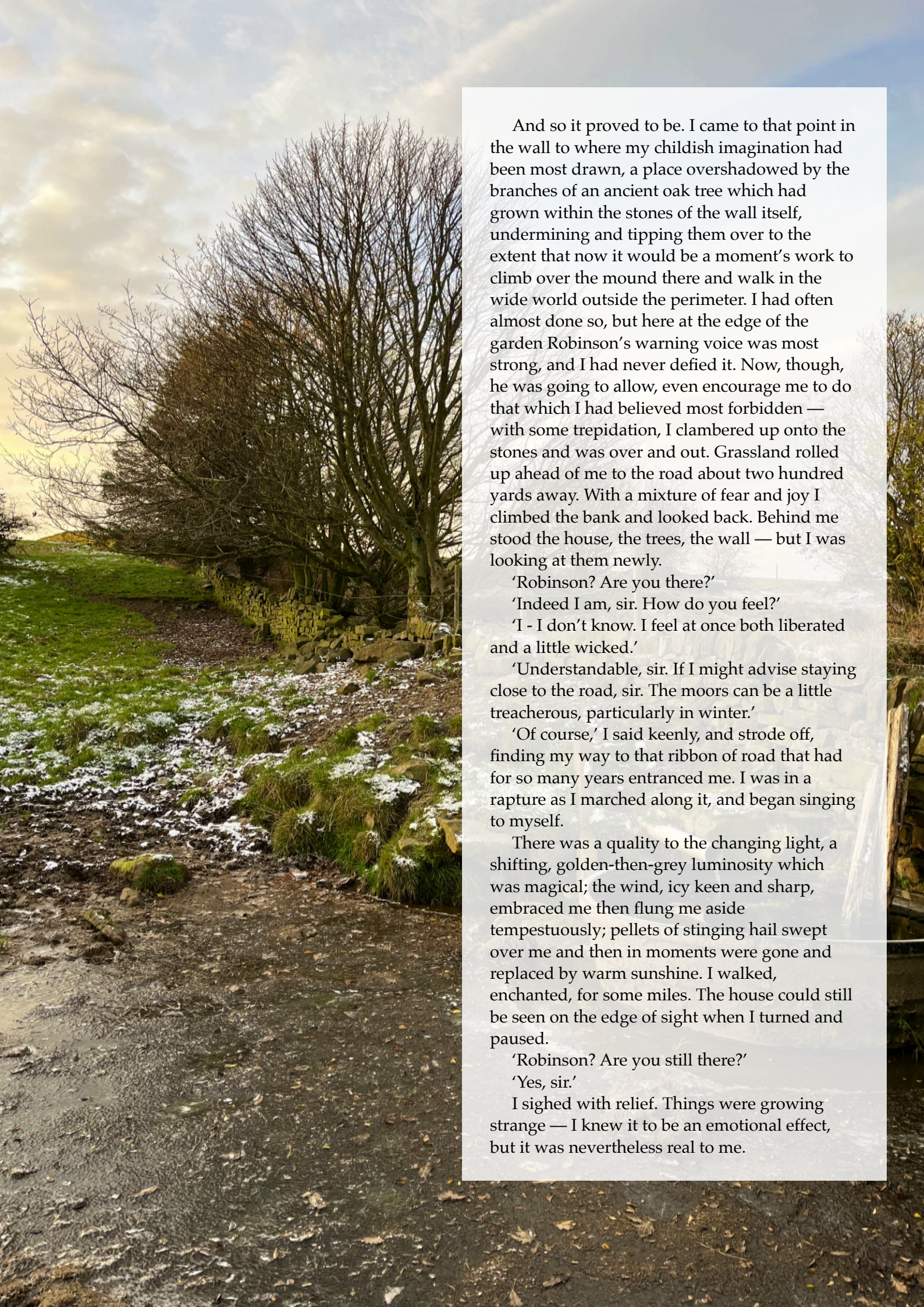
Despite the tremulous condition in which I now found myself, I was excited at this prospect more than by anything I could remember. Hurriedly, I pulled on my walking boots and clothes. The front door swung open and I stepped out into the winter sunlight. It had rained while I had been indoors — everything sparkled with a vivacious mischief that matched my mood. This whole life had been not just an illusion, but a joke — I felt in that instant, though, that it had not been at my expense but for my amusement. Uplifted, I strode out with my walking cane and sloshed through the puddles to the path to the fields.

I progressed under the dripping arms of the oaks up the slippery rise to the top garden, across the wild grass to the brow of the hill, my boots wet, the wind fresh and cold in my hair. From the top of the hill I could look out upon my whole domain, a square mile of mixed woodland, wandering streams, kitchen gardens and open lawns and parkland which had provided me with hours of amusement throughout my childhood. Here I had played with my phantom friends, Jessie and Jane and Esmerelda; here we had taunted the gardeners, climbing the wall into their prized kitchen garden; here we had built a treehouse from pieces Robinson had prepared; there, in winter, we had slithered down the slopes of the snowy hill on a makeshift sledge. All my rapturous but strangely empty childhood, all contained within the overgrown, creeping, half-collapsing wall beyond which I had never ventured. I looked beyond it now. The grey of the moors stretched as far as the eye could see. The thin winding line of the Moor Road, down which I had expectantly gazed for years, disappeared into a rainy haze some miles away. On the edge of sight rose the low hills I had looked upon from the morning room, with their single, endlessly intriguing tower marking the very end of the world. No traveller had ever come down the road; nothing but the grim weather had ever materialised from beyond that horizon. My heart ached to journey there, to the edge of things.

'May I?' I said to the air.

'You may, sir,' came Robinson's voice from somewhere in the ground. He was always with me. When I was a child there had been nameless servants to dress and feed me, and occasionally there had been one whom I had called Robinson, but I had known even then that that had not been the entirety of Robinson. He was everywhere, not be contained or restrained in a single form. I knew now, with what he had shown me that morning, that he was part of the Sanctuary. I suspected that he would follow me even beyond the wall.





And so it proved to be. I came to that point in the wall to where my childish imagination had been most drawn, a place overshadowed by the branches of an ancient oak tree which had grown within the stones of the wall itself, undermining and tipping them over to the extent that now it would be a moment's work to climb over the mound there and walk in the wide world outside the perimeter. I had often almost done so, but here at the edge of the garden Robinson's warning voice was most strong, and I had never defied it. Now, though, he was going to allow, even encourage me to do that which I had believed most forbidden — with some trepidation, I clambered up onto the stones and was over and out. Grassland rolled up ahead of me to the road about two hundred yards away. With a mixture of fear and joy I climbed the bank and looked back. Behind me stood the house, the trees, the wall — but I was looking at them newly.

'Robinson? Are you there?'

'Indeed I am, sir. How do you feel?'

'I - I don't know. I feel at once both liberated and a little wicked.'

'Understandable, sir. If I might advise staying close to the road, sir. The moors can be a little treacherous, particularly in winter.'

'Of course,' I said keenly, and strode off, finding my way to that ribbon of road that had for so many years entranced me. I was in a rapture as I marched along it, and began singing to myself.

There was a quality to the changing light, a shifting, golden-then-grey luminosity which was magical; the wind, icy keen and sharp, embraced me then flung me aside tempestuously; pellets of stinging hail swept over me and then in moments were gone and replaced by warm sunshine. I walked, enchanted, for some miles. The house could still be seen on the edge of sight when I turned and paused.

'Robinson? Are you still there?'

'Yes, sir.'

I sighed with relief. Things were growing strange — I knew it to be an emotional effect, but it was nevertheless real to me.

'I had not considered things like food; I do not know where I am going. Is there anywhere else?' I asked, feeling foolish and exposed.

'It will not be long before you arrive somewhere, sir. Your needs will be addressed.'

I sat heavily on a large stone by the roadside and caught my breath. This whole world was so wonderful, so beautiful, so open and wild. I wondered that such a place had spawned mankind. I knew of cities, of nations, but in this empty wilderness I could feel only the wind. The depth of the human tragedy had many dimensions, I thought. I looked down. On the stone, carved by hand many years before, I read the words 'Sanctuary 2 m'.

'Robinson? What is this?' I asked the air.

'A milestone, sir.'

'Yes — but for whose convenience? I have never seen anyone travel this road!'

'Indeed, sir. But times change.'

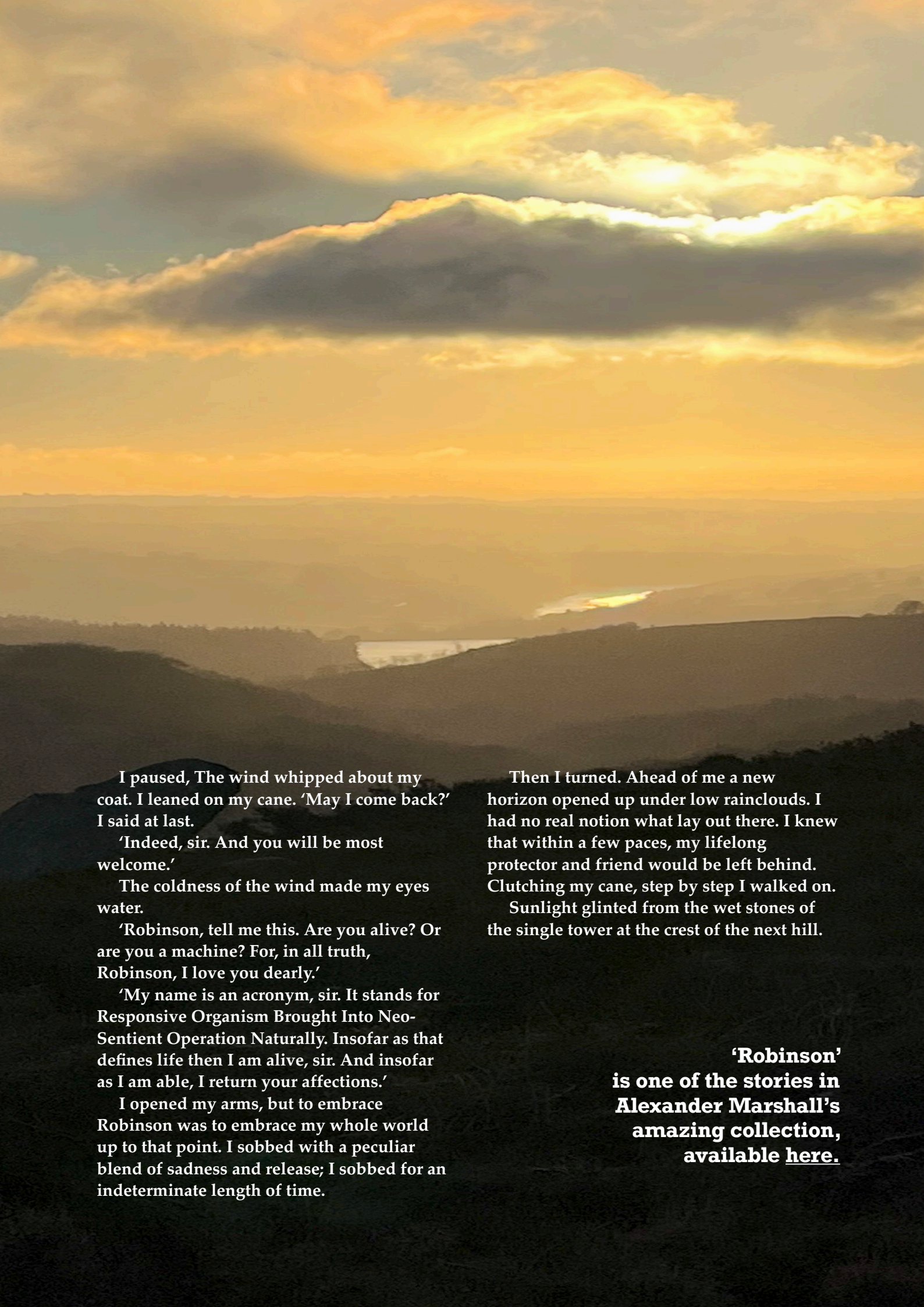
'What do you mean?'

'Sir - you are approaching the perimeter of my concern. Soon you will be in regions I cannot reach. Beyond that lie adventures I cannot control, and then your destiny is your own. Out there, others were saved, others have been nurtured. I cannot tell, for I have only the skimpiest of data, how they fared. But once you cross that threshold, my task is done. I hoped to postpone this moment, but it seems fitting for us to part at this point.'

'Robinson, no! Don't leave me! You are everything to me!' I stepped forward, as though to grasp his hand.

'Sir — it is not I who leave you, but you who walk beyond my borders. Because you must. Out there you may find others living. I know of several who were prepared. From your issue, or due to your words or actions, others may walk this way one day. Thus there are milestones to guide them.'





I paused, The wind whipped about my coat. I leaned on my cane. 'May I come back?' I said at last.

'Indeed, sir. And you will be most welcome.'

The coldness of the wind made my eyes water.

'Robinson, tell me this. Are you alive? Or are you a machine? For, in all truth, Robinson, I love you dearly.'

'My name is an acronym, sir. It stands for Responsive Organism Brought Into Neo-Sentient Operation Naturally. Insofar as that defines life then I am alive, sir. And insofar as I am able, I return your affections.'

I opened my arms, but to embrace Robinson was to embrace my whole world up to that point. I sobbed with a peculiar blend of sadness and release; I sobbed for an indeterminate length of time.

Then I turned. Ahead of me a new horizon opened up under low rainclouds. I had no real notion what lay out there. I knew that within a few paces, my lifelong protector and friend would be left behind. Clutching my cane, step by step I walked on.

Sunlight glinted from the wet stones of the single tower at the crest of the next hill.

'Robinson'
is one of the stories in
Alexander Marshall's
amazing collection,
available [here](#).

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—Grant P. Hudson, Editor



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At The Back Of The North Wind

by George MacDonald

Chapter 2: The Lawn

WHEN Diamond got round the corner of the hay, for a moment he hesitated. The stair by which he would naturally have gone down to the door was at the other side of the loft, and looked very black indeed; for it was full of North Wind's hair, as she descended before him. And just beside him was the ladder going straight down into the stable, up which his father always came to fetch the hay for Diamond's dinner. Through the opening in the floor the faint gleam of the stable lantern was enticing, and Diamond thought he would run down that way.

The stair went close past the loose-box in which Diamond the horse lived. When Diamond the boy was half-way down, he remembered that it was of no use to go this way, for the stable-door was locked. But at the same moment there was horse Diamond's great head poked out of his box on to the ladder, for he knew boy Diamond although he was in his night-gown, and wanted him to pull his ears for him. This Diamond did very gently for a minute or so, and patted and stroked his neck too, and kissed the big horse, and had begun to take the bits of straw and hay out of his mane, when all at once he recollected that the Lady North Wind was waiting for him in the yard.


"Good night, Diamond," he said, and darted up the ladder, across the loft, and down the stair to the door. But when he got out into the yard, there was no lady.

Now it is always a dreadful thing to think there is somebody and find nobody. Children in particular have not made up their minds to it; they generally cry at nobody, especially when they wake up at night. But it was an especial disappointment to Diamond, for his little heart had been beating with joy: the face of the North Wind was so grand! To have a lady like that for a friend--with such long hair, too! Why, it was longer than twenty Diamonds' tails! She was gone. And there he stood, with his bare feet on the stones of the paved yard.



It was a clear night overhead, and the stars were shining. Orion in particular was making the most of his bright belt and golden sword. But the moon was only a poor thin crescent. There was just one great, jagged, black and gray cloud in the sky, with a steep side to it like a precipice; and the moon was against this side, and looked as if she had tumbled off the top of the cloud-hill, and broken herself in rolling down the precipice. She did not seem comfortable, for she was looking down into the deep pit waiting for her. At least that was what Diamond thought as he stood for a moment staring at her. But he was quite wrong, for the moon was not afraid, and there was no pit she was going down into, for there were no sides to it, and a pit without sides to it is not a pit at all. Diamond, however, had not been out so late before in all his life, and things looked so strange about him!--just as if he had got into Fairyland, of which he knew quite as much as anybody; for his mother had no money to buy books to set him wrong on the subject. I have seen this world--only sometimes, just now and then, you know--look as strange as ever I saw Fairyland. But I confess that I have not yet seen Fairyland at its best. I am always going to see it so some time. But if you had been out in the face and not at the back of the North Wind, on a cold rather frosty night, and in your night-gown, you would have felt it all quite as strange as Diamond did. He cried a little, just a little, he was so disappointed to lose the lady: of course, you, little man, wouldn't have done that! But for my part, I don't mind people crying so much as I mind what they cry about, and how they cry--whether they cry quietly like ladies and gentlemen, or go shrieking like vulgar emperors, or ill-natured cooks; for all emperors are not gentlemen, and all cooks are not ladies--nor all queens and princesses for that matter, either.



The background of the entire page is a deep blue night sky densely populated with stars of varying brightness. In the lower half, a dark silhouette of a tree with many branches is visible against the starry sky. A semi-transparent, light-colored rectangular box covers the bottom third of the page, containing text.

But it can't be denied that a little gentle crying does one good. It did Diamond good; for as soon as it was over he was a brave boy again.

"She shan't say it was my fault, anyhow!" said Diamond. "I daresay she is hiding somewhere to see what I will do. I will look for her."

So he went round the end of the stable towards the kitchen-garden. But the moment he was clear of the shelter of the stable, sharp as a knife came the wind against his little chest and his bare legs. Still he would look in the kitchen-garden, and went on. But when he got round the weeping-ash that stood in the corner, the wind blew much stronger, and it grew stronger and stronger till he could hardly fight against it. And it was so cold! All the flashy spikes of the stars seemed to have got somehow into the wind. Then he thought of what the lady had said about people being cold because they were not with the North Wind. How it was that he should have guessed what she meant at that very moment I cannot tell, but I have observed that the most wonderful thing in the world is how people come to understand anything. He turned his back to the wind, and trotted again towards the yard; whereupon, strange to say, it blew so much more gently against his calves than it had blown against his shins that he began to feel almost warm by contrast.

You must not think it was cowardly of Diamond to turn his back to the wind: he did so only because he thought Lady North Wind had said something like telling him to do so. If she had said to him that he must hold his face to it, Diamond would have held his face to it. But the most foolish thing is to fight for no good, and to please nobody.

Well, it was just as if the wind was pushing Diamond along. If he turned round, it grew very sharp on his legs especially, and so he thought the wind might really be Lady North Wind, though he could not see her, and he had better let her blow him wherever she pleased. So she blew and blew, and he went and went, until he found himself standing at a door in a wall, which door led from the yard into a little belt of shrubbery, flanking Mr. Coleman's house. Mr. Coleman was his father's master, and the owner of Diamond. He opened the door, and went through the shrubbery, and out into the middle of the lawn, still hoping to find North Wind. The soft grass was very pleasant to his bare feet, and felt warm after the stones of the yard; but the lady was nowhere to be seen. Then he began to think that after all he must have done wrong, and she was offended with him for not following close after her, but staying to talk to the horse, which certainly was neither wise nor polite.





There he stood in the middle of the lawn, the wind blowing his night-gown till it flapped like a loose sail. The stars were very shiny over his head; but they did not give light enough to show that the grass was green; and Diamond stood alone in the strange night, which looked half solid all about him. He began to wonder whether he was in a dream or not. It was important to determine this; "For," thought Diamond, "if I am in a dream, I am safe in my bed, and I needn't cry. But if I'm not in a dream, I'm out here, and perhaps I had better cry, or, at least, I'm not sure whether I can help it." He came to the conclusion, however, that, whether he was in a dream or not, there could be no harm in not crying for a little while longer: he could begin whenever he liked.

The back of Mr. Coleman's house was to the lawn, and one of the drawing-room windows looked out upon it. The ladies had not gone to bed; for the light was still shining in that window. But they had no idea that a little boy was standing on the lawn in his night-gown, or they would have run out in a moment. And as long as he saw that light, Diamond could not feel quite lonely. He stood staring, not at the great warrior Orion in the sky, nor yet at the disconsolate, neglected moon going down in the west, but at the drawing-room window with the light shining through its green curtains. He had been in that room once or twice that he could remember at Christmas times; for the Colemans were kind people, though they did not care much about children.



All at once the light went nearly out: he could only see a glimmer of the shape of the window. Then, indeed, he felt that he was left alone. It was so dreadful to be out in the night after everybody was gone to bed! That was more than he could bear. He burst out crying in good earnest, beginning with a wail like that of the wind when it is waking up.

Perhaps you think this was very foolish; for could he not go home to his own bed again when he liked? Yes; but it looked dreadful to him to creep up that stair again and lie down in his bed again, and know that North Wind's window was open beside him, and she gone, and he might never see her again. He would be just as lonely there as here. Nay, it would be much worse if he had to think that the window was nothing but a hole in the wall.



At the very moment when he burst out crying, the old nurse who had grown to be one of the family, for she had not gone away when Miss Coleman did not want any more nursing, came to the back door, which was of glass, to close the shutters. She thought she heard a cry, and, peering out with a hand on each side of her eyes like Diamond's blinkers, she saw something white on the lawn. Too old and too wise to be frightened, she opened the door, and went straight towards the white thing to see what it was. And when Diamond saw her coming he was not frightened either, though Mrs. Crump was a little cross sometimes; for there is a good kind of crossness that is only disagreeable, and there is a bad kind of crossness that is very nasty indeed. So she came up with her neck stretched out, and her head at the end of it, and her eyes foremost of all, like a snail's, peering into the night to see what it could be that went on glimmering white before her. When she did see, she made a great exclamation, and threw up her hands. Then without a word, for she thought Diamond was walking in his sleep, she caught hold of him, and led him towards the house. He made no objection, for he was just in the mood to be grateful for notice of any sort, and Mrs. Crump led him straight into the drawing-room.





Now, from the neglect of the new housemaid, the fire in Miss Coleman's bedroom had gone out, and her mother had told her to brush her hair by the drawing-room fire--a disorderly proceeding which a mother's wish could justify. The young lady was very lovely, though not nearly so beautiful as North Wind; and her hair was extremely long, for it came down to her knees--though that was nothing at all to North Wind's hair. Yet when she looked round, with her hair all about her, as Diamond entered, he thought for one moment that it was North Wind, and, pulling his hand from Mrs. Crump's, he stretched out his arms and ran towards Miss Coleman. She was so pleased that she threw down her brush, and almost knelt on the floor to receive him in her arms. He saw the next moment that she was not Lady North Wind, but she looked so like her he could not help running into her arms and bursting into tears afresh. Mrs. Crump said the poor child had walked out in his sleep, and Diamond thought she ought to know, and did not contradict her for anything he knew, it might be so indeed. He let them talk on about him, and said nothing; and when, after their astonishment was over, and Miss Coleman had given him a sponge-cake, it was decreed that Mrs. Crump should take him to his mother, he was quite satisfied.

His mother had to get out of bed to open the door when Mrs. Crump knocked. She was indeed surprised to see her, boy; and having taken him in her arms and carried him to his bed, returned and had a long confabulation with Mrs. Crump, for they were still talking when Diamond fell fast asleep, and could hear them no longer.

**Don't miss
the next chapter of George Macdonald's
classic masterpiece in the next issue!**





SCORCHED EARTH

BY MEL LEE NEWMIN

Ooljee called it the devil's breath. The ceaseless blast of heat from Strasser Two's planetary desert. Devoid of oceans to generate weather, the atmosphere of the unnamed rocky ball circling the dwarf blue star Strasser-Campollini churned from its short day-night cycle and the stratification of its thick atmosphere. Eddies spun up dust devils that soared kilometers into the neon blue sky like snakes reaching for God. They danced across the torrid, empty landscape often singly but sometimes in pairs in silent, eerie tangos of grit and desolation.

Adjusting the goggles that protected her eyes from the dust and Strasser-Campollini's blazing blue light, Ooljee considered her prospects for completing work before the dust devils drove her back to the lab. The pressure in her chest urged her to continue while the quiet dance of devils whispered, run! run!

I'm so close, she thought. I can almost taste it.

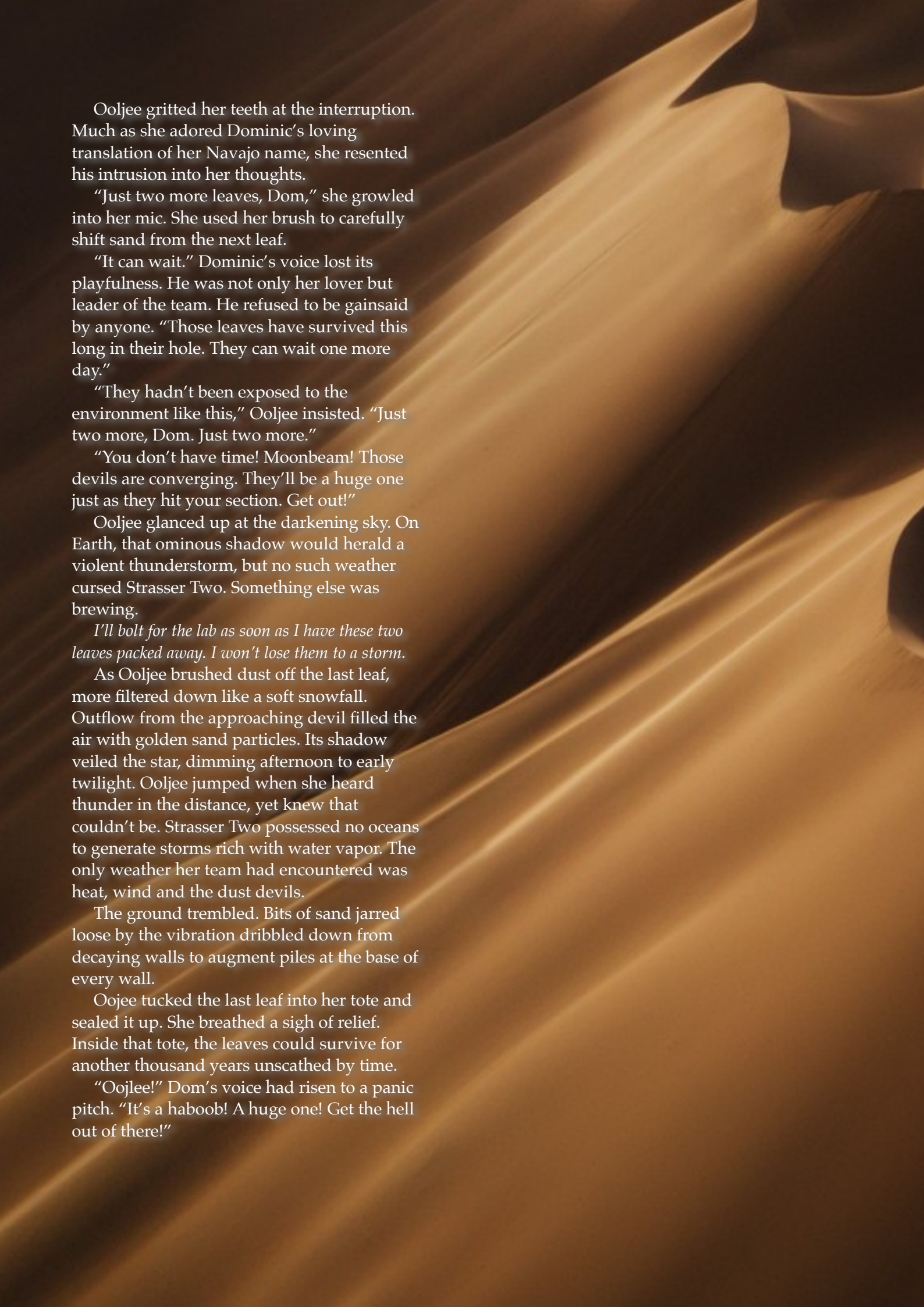
To calm her nerves, she drew a long inhale through her dust mask and forced her mind to focus on the leaves she'd uncovered. Cautiously, lest she disturb the next fragile piece, Ooljee transferred the topmost into her tote and arranged a protective cover over it.

Finding the cache of dessicated, almost petrified leaves had sent a shockwave of exhilaration through the xenoteam working the vast dig site because Ooljee had uncovered something special. Writing. Perhaps now, after months of scouring the sterile ruins of Strasser Two's vanished alien civilization, the team would learn what had reduced its magnificent cities to nubs in an endless desert.

With exquisite care, Ooljee lifted the next leaf from the sand-filled grotto that had been its tomb for thousands of years. The leaves were in such critical condition that handling the first one ended with it evaporating into a cloud of particles. After that debacle, the team debated removing the leaves from their resting place. Ooljee had argued the importance of preserving them in hermetically sealed containers. The leaves carried the only writing they'd found in the vast complex. To leave them in a hole was unconscionable.

"Moonbeam," Dominic's voice crackled in her ear. "Two devils are headed your way. Time to pack up."





Ooljee gritted her teeth at the interruption. Much as she adored Dominic's loving translation of her Navajo name, she resented his intrusion into her thoughts.

"Just two more leaves, Dom," she growled into her mic. She used her brush to carefully shift sand from the next leaf.

"It can wait." Dominic's voice lost its playfulness. He was not only her lover but leader of the team. He refused to be gainsaid by anyone. "Those leaves have survived this long in their hole. They can wait one more day."

"They hadn't been exposed to the environment like this," Ooljee insisted. "Just two more, Dom. Just two more."

"You don't have time! Moonbeam! Those devils are converging. They'll be a huge one just as they hit your section. Get out!"

Ooljee glanced up at the darkening sky. On Earth, that ominous shadow would herald a violent thunderstorm, but no such weather cursed Strasser Two. Something else was brewing.

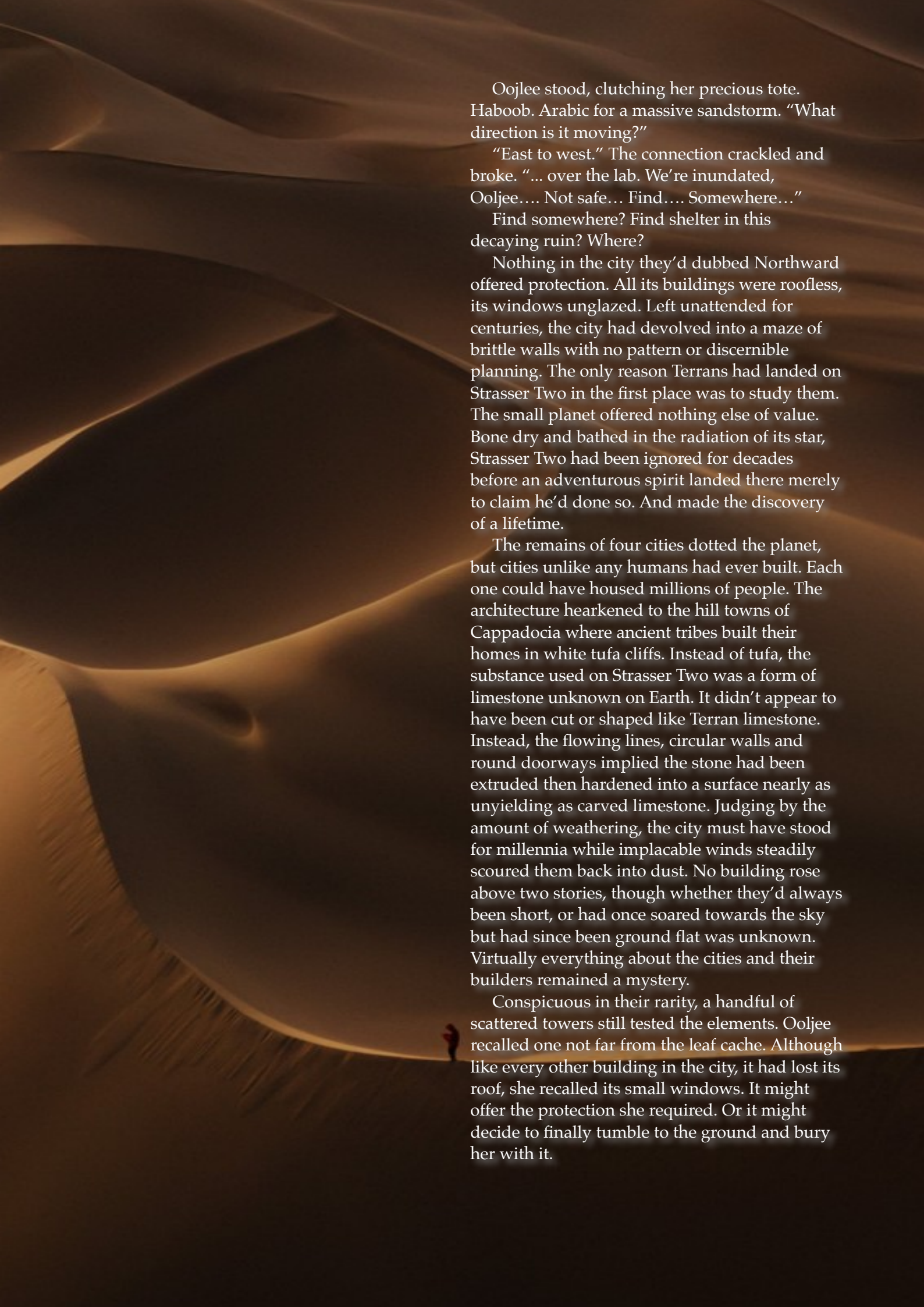
I'll bolt for the lab as soon as I have these two leaves packed away. I won't lose them to a storm.

As Ooljee brushed dust off the last leaf, more filtered down like a soft snowfall. Outflow from the approaching devil filled the air with golden sand particles. Its shadow veiled the star, dimming afternoon to early twilight. Ooljee jumped when she heard thunder in the distance, yet knew that couldn't be. Strasser Two possessed no oceans to generate storms rich with water vapor. The only weather her team had encountered was heat, wind and the dust devils.

The ground trembled. Bits of sand jarred loose by the vibration dribbled down from decaying walls to augment piles at the base of every wall.

Ooljee tucked the last leaf into her tote and sealed it up. She breathed a sigh of relief. Inside that tote, the leaves could survive for another thousand years unscathed by time.

"Ooljee!" Dom's voice had risen to a panic pitch. "It's a haboob! A huge one! Get the hell out of there!"



Ooljee stood, clutching her precious tote. Haboob. Arabic for a massive sandstorm. "What direction is it moving?"

"East to west." The connection crackled and broke. "... over the lab. We're inundated, Ooljee.... Not safe... Find.... Somewhere..."

Find somewhere? Find shelter in this decaying ruin? Where?

Nothing in the city they'd dubbed Northward offered protection. All its buildings were roofless, its windows unglazed. Left unattended for centuries, the city had devolved into a maze of brittle walls with no pattern or discernible planning. The only reason Terrans had landed on Strasser Two in the first place was to study them. The small planet offered nothing else of value. Bone dry and bathed in the radiation of its star, Strasser Two had been ignored for decades before an adventurous spirit landed there merely to claim he'd done so. And made the discovery of a lifetime.

The remains of four cities dotted the planet, but cities unlike any humans had ever built. Each one could have housed millions of people. The architecture hearkened to the hill towns of Cappadocia where ancient tribes built their homes in white tufa cliffs. Instead of tufa, the substance used on Strasser Two was a form of limestone unknown on Earth. It didn't appear to have been cut or shaped like Terran limestone. Instead, the flowing lines, circular walls and round doorways implied the stone had been extruded then hardened into a surface nearly as unyielding as carved limestone. Judging by the amount of weathering, the city must have stood for millennia while implacable winds steadily scoured them back into dust. No building rose above two stories, though whether they'd always been short, or had once soared towards the sky but had since been ground flat was unknown. Virtually everything about the cities and their builders remained a mystery.

Conspicuous in their rarity, a handful of scattered towers still tested the elements. Ooljee recalled one not far from the leaf cache. Although like every other building in the city, it had lost its roof, she recalled its small windows. It might offer the protection she required. Or it might decide to finally tumble to the ground and bury her with it.

The rumble under her feet was joined by a howl as wind-driven sand raced across the landscape. The face of the storm rose as an ominous, billowing cloud, extending from one horizon to the other. As she fled from it, Ooljee cursed the climatologists who'd failed to warn about the possibility of such storms.

If it's planetary and lasts like a Martian storm, I'm in deep shit.

With her link to Dominic and the lab broken by intense electromagnetic fields generated by the storm, Ooljee couldn't tell them where she was going. She hugged her precious tote and fled downwind.

Her feet puffed up little clouds as she raced through the twisting alleys. She skidded on the fine powder when she rounded sharp turns. In the confusion of the maze, she lost all sense of direction. Only because the tower rose above every other wall was Ooljee able to stay on target.

Wind whipped sand around her, spinning up small devils as a prelude to the main event. Ooljee panted, her dusk mask turning her huffs into a metallic gasp. Left. Right. Around that corner. Left again.

God, I'm running in circles!

The blueish sunlight faded as an eerie red pall fell over the land. The wind howled, chipping at walls and sending bits of decomposing limestone flying. They stung like insect bites each time they struck her.

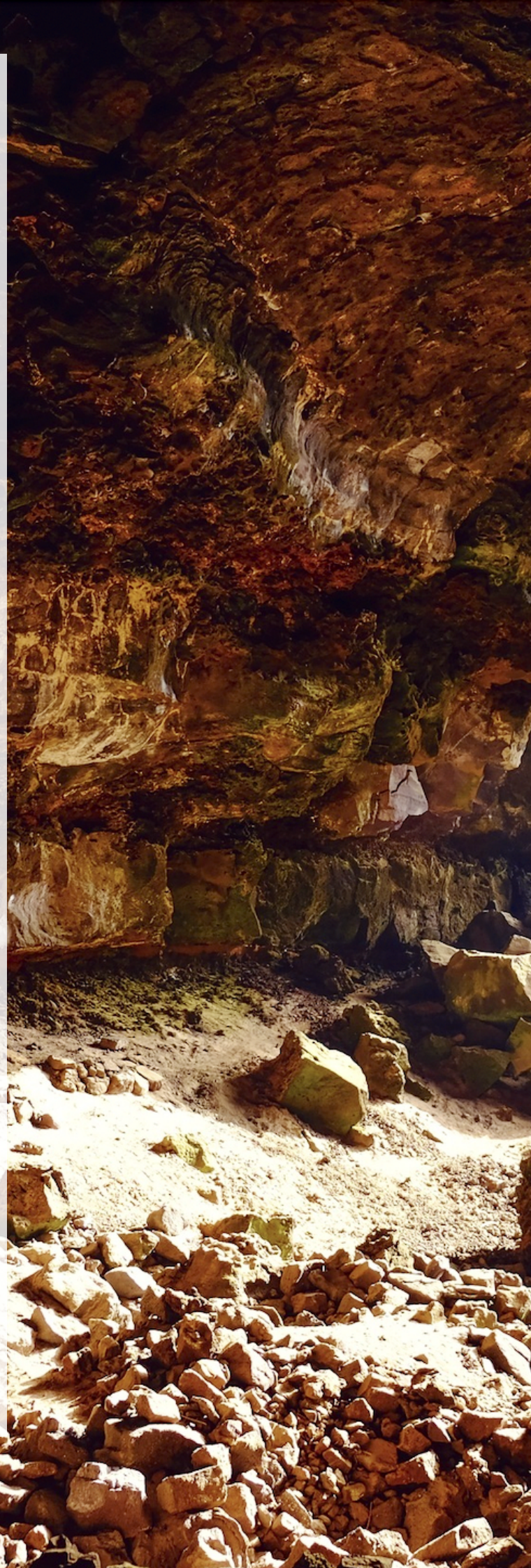
Come on, tower! Where are you?

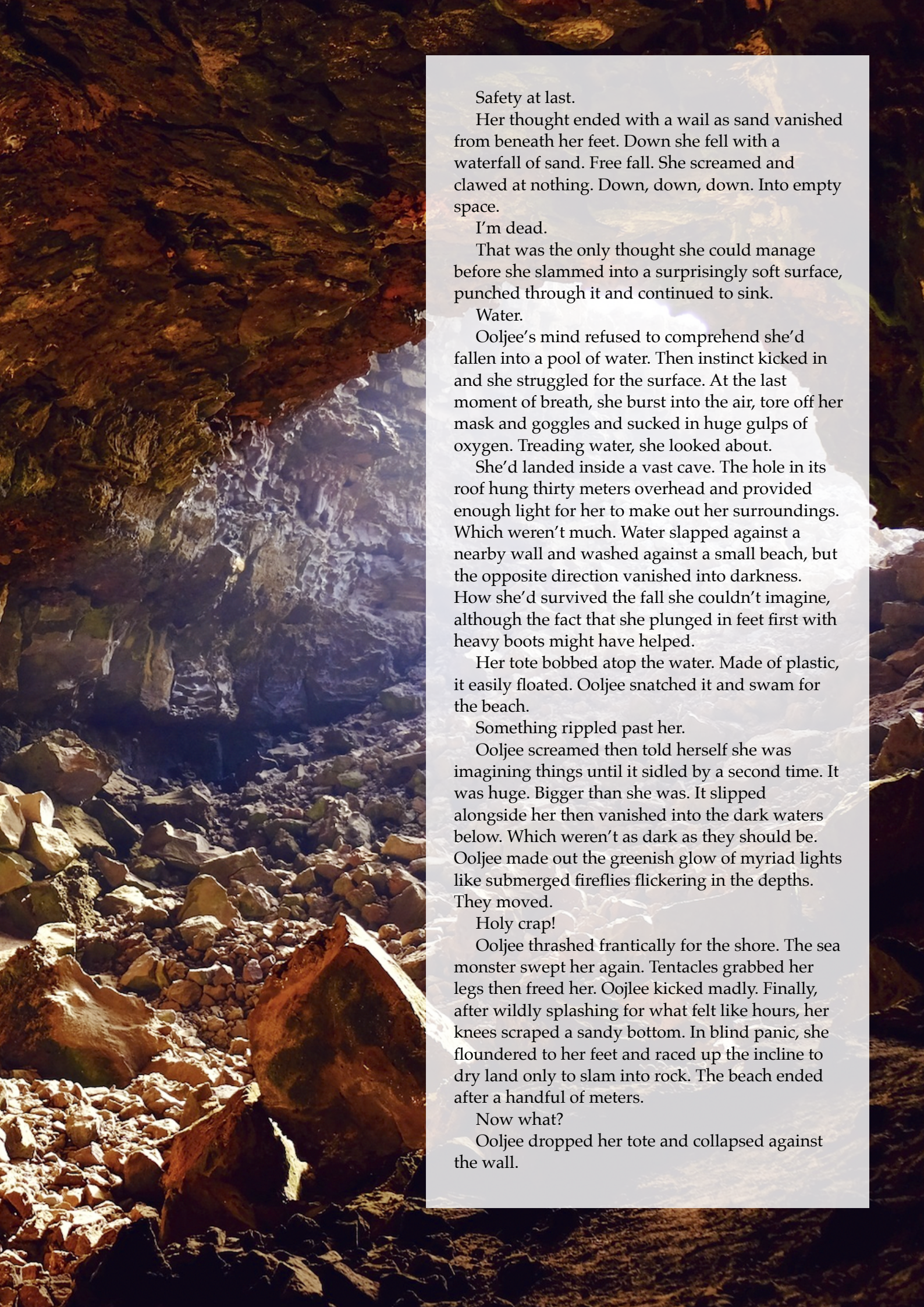
Ooljee tripped over a boulder in the middle of an alley and fell to one knee. Her knuckles whitened as they gripped the tote.

Are you worth dying for, leaves?

Ooljee thought they were. Not only did they possess the only writing found anywhere on the planet, they were also the only remains of life the team had uncovered. In all the months of digging, the team had encountered not a single animal bone. Not a petrified piece of wood. Not a fossilized imprint of a fern. Nothing to imply life had ever flourished here. And yet, the ruins emphatically insisted it had. The contradiction had perplexed the team for months.

The gust front that drove the haboob slammed into Ooljee's back just as she staggered into a small square. The tower stood before her.





Safety at last.

Her thought ended with a wail as sand vanished from beneath her feet. Down she fell with a waterfall of sand. Free fall. She screamed and clawed at nothing. Down, down, down. Into empty space.

I'm dead.

That was the only thought she could manage before she slammed into a surprisingly soft surface, punched through it and continued to sink.

Water.

Ooljee's mind refused to comprehend she'd fallen into a pool of water. Then instinct kicked in and she struggled for the surface. At the last moment of breath, she burst into the air, tore off her mask and goggles and sucked in huge gulps of oxygen. Treading water, she looked about.

She'd landed inside a vast cave. The hole in its roof hung thirty meters overhead and provided enough light for her to make out her surroundings. Which weren't much. Water slapped against a nearby wall and washed against a small beach, but the opposite direction vanished into darkness. How she'd survived the fall she couldn't imagine, although the fact that she plunged in feet first with heavy boots might have helped.

Her tote bobbed atop the water. Made of plastic, it easily floated. Ooljee snatched it and swam for the beach.

Something rippled past her.

Ooljee screamed then told herself she was imagining things until it sidled by a second time. It was huge. Bigger than she was. It slipped alongside her then vanished into the dark waters below. Which weren't as dark as they should be. Ooljee made out the greenish glow of myriad lights like submerged fireflies flickering in the depths. They moved.

Holy crap!

Ooljee thrashed frantically for the shore. The sea monster swept her again. Tentacles grabbed her legs then freed her. Ooljee kicked madly. Finally, after wildly splashing for what felt like hours, her knees scraped a sandy bottom. In blind panic, she floundered to her feet and raced up the incline to dry land only to slam into rock. The beach ended after a handful of meters.

Now what?

Ooljee dropped her tote and collapsed against the wall.

Is that thing amphibious? God, I hope not!

For several minutes silence reigned except for the gentle lap of water against stone. Only a drift of sand from the hole disturbed the pool's smooth surface. Eventually, Ooljee crept to the edge to peer into the depths. Far below greenish lights still glowed. What were they?

Ooljee glared at her tote of leaves.

I hope you're worth all this.

Even given her predicament, Ooljee thought they were. Perhaps they'd once been green and supple like earthly vegetation, but now they were black and as brittle as ancient paper. Each was the size of a banana leaf with veins that ran parallel from base to tip in a pattern not seen on Earth. The inhabitants of Northward had used them like lined writing paper. Ooljee hadn't studied them enough yet to understand how the aliens had marked the leaves, but she recognized writing when she saw it. Small scratches reminiscent of cuneiform removed a layer of the leaf's surface to reveal the slightly paler flesh within, creating pale characters on a dark background. She had no doubt the marks had been written by intelligent hands.

Momentarily safe on her tiny beach, Ooljee rid her boots of water and wrung out her suit. When she switched on her radio, only raging static assaulted her ears. Perhaps the storm's interference or the cave blocked transmission or maybe the swim had ruined the equipment. She switched off again.


She propped her elbow on her knee and her chin on her fist. Nothing for it but to ride out the storm and hope it didn't last a month. She carried no food and only a small canteen in case she'd be unable to reach the safety of the lab.

Like in this situation.

Her fingers encountered her flashlight. She thumbed it on and flicked it around her temporary home.

The inside of the cave gave no indication anything intelligent had ever visited it. The walls were as blank as those of every Strasser building. Sand continued to fall from the hole as the storm raged overhead.

To keep from panicking, Ooljee focused on the puzzles the planet presented. Anything to avoid thinking about being trapped underground with a sea monster.



Why didn't Northward have decorations? No one had seen a single carving, a statue, or a design chiseled into a single structure. No evidence of paint or plaster remained. Was this due to incredible age which, along with the sand storms, had obliterated such niceties? Had the desolate, bland buildings once been vibrant with color? Or had the inhabitants kept their city blank in a way no human ever would? Ooljee didn't know.

Where were the bodies? Surely, creatures capable of creating such buildings were large land animals similar to humans. Which meant they required either internal or external skeletons. Ooljee couldn't imagine a creature like a snake or a snail erecting towers to the sky. The size of the doorways spoke against it. Whatever the Strasserites had been, they ranged in height comparable to a human.

So why had no one found a bone? The archeologists had encountered nothing like cemeteries, tombs or catacombs. Where had the millions of creatures who inhabited Northward gone? Even if the last survivors of some awful disaster had fled the planet, surely generations of their ancestors should be interred somewhere. For that matter, Ooljee thought, turning off her flashlight to save power, the team hadn't discovered any advanced technology. No launch pads or industrial machinery. No vehicles rusting under the light of their brutal star. Not a plate or bowl or bit of crockery nor any glass to be found. The Strasserites might have been intelligent enough to build a city, but they'd not attained spaceflight. Of that Ooljee was certain.

So where were they? What had happened to their civilization?

Ooljee's stomach grumbled, telling her she should be heading for the dining hub for dinner. A glance at the sand still falling from the hole told Ooljee she would be late.

I hope they save me a plate.

The hunger sent her active intellect pondering the question of food. Assuming Northward had been inhabited to its capacity, perhaps a million aliens might have called it home. Yet from where had they obtained their food? The desert didn't even whisper of agriculture. Scans from space revealed no squares hidden beneath the sand to delineate fields. Land surveys uncovered no plows or abandoned agricultural equipment. No one located traces of roads or irrigation ditches to move produce and water. Any rivers that had once flowed had done so through craggy arroyos before spilling out onto evaporation pans crusted with salts and these were remarkably rare. Unlike on Earth, the Strasserites hadn't benefited from mighty waterways like the Ganges, the Tigris or the Amazon. So why build their city here? How had they fed its people?

Ooljee knew she'd not learn the answers in the cave. She drew her knees to her chest and rested her head on them. After the exhilaration of excavating the leaves, the run for safety, and her sudden swim, Ooljee's energy was failing. She allowed her eyelids to droop while her mind drifted through the mystery of Northward.

She remembered the heated argument between Dominic and Manuella the previous night at dinner. Manuella, one of several geologists on the team, questioned that Northward existed at all. Regardless of the fact that it did exist, she insisted it could not.


In her mind's eye, Ooljee watched the woman toss down her spoon in agitation.

"I'm telling you it's not physically possible for any of these cities to exist," she insisted. Her dark eyes glared around the table, a Chihuahua primed to bite.

"Limestones only accrete from organic activity in shallow, tropical waters." She waved at the plastoscene window that revealed sunset over a desert landscape.

"I'm not seeing the beach here, people."





Dominic stabbed at her with his fork. "Not now. But this planet might have had small seas at one point. Given its size and the radiation coming off Strasser-Campollini, it's possible they've since evaporated away."

"Might explain the excessive moisture content of the atmosphere," Reggie added. His eyes lifted skyward. "It's strangely thick for such a small planet. Especially one without oceans. Its vapor load seems unusually high given the circumstances. If ancient seas evaporated, maybe they're drifting around over our heads."

Manuella protested. "I'm not arguing the existence of ancient seas. Scott may have located shorelines buried beneath the sand using lidar. I'm questioning the existence of ancient sea life in sufficient abundance to deposit enough limestone to build these cities. Where are the reef beds? The fossils? Sediments composed of seashells? All the bedrock we've sampled so far as been basaltic topped with a thin coat of sedimentary sandstone and clays. We've not found any limestone in the ground."

"Not all limestones are organically generated," Dom insisted. He slipped another piece of soy-turkey onto his plate. "Evaporative properties such as occur in caves can distill limestone from rainwater."

Manuella scoffed. "Only if the rainwater has an acidic content and percolates through organic limestone. It simply carries the mineral load to another place before depositing it. The origin is still sealife. Yet we haven't found any here."

Much as Ooljee had hated inserting herself into the conversation, she piped up anyway. Lifting her finger, she corrected, "We have. My leaves. I think they are of an algal nature, not terrestrial."

Dom turned with a pucker between his brows. "What makes you think that?"

"The veining," Ooljee paused when ten pairs of eyes turned towards her. "It's not much thicker than the leaves' matrix so it wouldn't provide the stiffness terrestrial leaves need against wind and gravity. Think banana leaves with their thick, pulpy central vein. I think my leaves were from a plant similar to kelp. They probably grew in warm, shallow seas. The locals gathered them, dried them in the sun then scratched on them like humans scratch on paper."

Manuella poked the table with her finger. "It doesn't matter. I'm telling you I can find no evidence of reef building here. None. So where did all the limestone come from?"

The argument had spun around the table until Reggie pleaded a headache and fled for his quarters. Dom and Manuella might have continued battling all night; Ooljee wasn't interested in seeing who won. She had her theory. They could believe whatever they wanted. Like Reggie, she sought refuge in solitude.

She had plenty of that now.

Ooljee eyed the sand falling through the hole. Was it her imagination or was it easing? She noted the sky brightening. The worst had passed.

Or so she thought.

Something sent ripples through the pool. They lapped the shoreline near Ooljee's feet. Nervously, she backed up. A great bulge lifted the water in a hump only meters from shore. It sent small waves crashing on the beach as it swept past. Ooljee swallowed a scream as she scrambled backwards. A creature swam just beneath the water's glassy surface.

Grabbing her flashlight, Ooljee flicked it on only to wish she hadn't. The creature waited in the shallows only a meter away from her. Without doubt it was watching her. As Ooljee panned the beam of light along it, her heart thrummed. Her head wanted to explode. Alien life. The first humans had ever encountered.

The creature was the size of a dwarf sperm whale and probably weighed a hundred kilograms. Its skin was smooth and olive colored, splotched with white. Some of those splotches pulsed firefly yellow. Others flicked between black and white. Its motionlessness allowed Ooljee to study it just as she suspected it was studying her. Like most earthly life, it was bilaterally symmetrical, built long and flexible like a fish, but it was no fish. It possessed three sets of paired appendages along its length which looked like seaweed. Only their gentle swishing told Ooljee they were limbs. A long tail covered with loose flaps looked like water lettuce. The creature strongly reminded Ooljee of a sea dragon. A one hundred kilogram sea dragon.





Ooljee could see nothing like a head. A line of dots ran along its spine. These shifted from white to black and back again in an oddly organized fashion. When a series closest to Ooljee turned all black and remained that way, Ooljee realized the spots were sight organs of some sort. Black meant pupils staring at her. White meant the organ was closed. So the dragon could stare at her with twenty eyes. Intimidating.

For several minutes, Ooljee sat watching the dragon. Its bizarre eye array watched her back. Finally, her curiosity got the better of her. Ooljee palmed the water. To her surprise, the dragon floated a limb frond and delicately touched her. Both withdrew hastily.

It's as afraid of me as I am of it!

"I wish I could speak with you," she said.

The dragon didn't respond.

The two waited, staring at each other. Then the dragon extended a limb frond. Ooljee extended a hand. They touched. Backed away. Waited.

The dragon was the braver. It thrust a frond out of the water.

Because the gesture looked strangely like the offer of a handshake, Ooljee closed her fingers around the frond. It was cold and slippery, rubbery on the outside but with something bone-like on the inside. At her touch, the fronds curled around her hand in a brief clasp, then released her.

Amazing!

Ten eyes flicked open and shut. Then the dragon offered its frond again which Ooljee took. A gentle current ran across Ooljee's skin, enough to raise the hairs on her wrist. For reasons she couldn't explain, Ooljee understood the sensation. A greeting. She gave the frond a squeeze.

They separated. Touched twice more.

On the third encounter, lengths of seaweed curled around Ooljee's fingers, bundling her hand in wet bandages. Another soft jolt of current. The sea dragon squealed and chirped.

"I don't understand and yet I do," Ooljee said aloud.

The frond tightened its grip much as Ooljee had when squeezing, then released her.

And so the gentle introduction continued, one touch at a time.

A group of lights approached from the depths. Ooljee eyed them nervously as three more dragons appeared. Ignoring her, they floated around the first and Ooljee heard squeaks and clicks. So they possessed some sort of communication similar to that of cetaceans. The conversation continued for several minutes, then the three new arrivals darted away.

The first sea dragon's eye array rearranged itself. A limb frond lifted as if pointing. Both gaze and limb aimed at the forgotten tote of leaves.

Determined to understand these creatures because she sensed intelligence, Ooljee grabbed the tote and opened it. With the gentlest touch, she lifted the topmost leaf.

The dragon swished violently, causing Ooljee to jump back. Then it settled. Its eye array readjusted.

No longer afraid, Ooljee watched in wonder as a new dragon swam to the surface and circled the first. The two clicked and squealed. Then the new arrival swam into the shallows, nearly beaching itself. It belched, then with a heave, flopped back into the depths.

Ooljee gaped. A pile of fresh, red/green leaves glistened on the sand. Kneeling, Ooljee studied it. On each leaf she saw writing. Flipping through the stack, Ooljee felt as if she was paging through a book. Her hands stilled.

I am. This is something they want me to read!

Ooljee carefully stacked the leaves while the sea dragon watched, ten eyes focused on her. Intelligently. Understanding at least fundamentally that she was as intelligent as them.

A frond swished water towards the pile several times. A message.

Ooljee understood. "You want me to read this. To understand you." Ooljee placed the leaves on a flat surface, treating it like a manuscript. "I will, when I can."

Ten eyes flicked shut then open in succession as if answering.

"You built Northward!" The realization swamped Ooljee like cold water. Because, suddenly, it all made sense.





Of course, nothing about the city seemed terrestrial, because nothing about it was. It had been a submerged city. Such a place needed no roofs or windows to protect inhabitants from weather. It required no roads to the outer provinces. If the dragons had practiced agriculture, it would not have been by plowing the ground or digging irrigation ditches. Perhaps they generated the limestone for their homes from their own bodies the way paper wasps made nests from wood and saliva.

The meaning took Ooljee's breath away. An intelligent species still existed on Strasser Two! Not on land as terrestrial creatures assumed in their arrogance. But in what remained of their vanished seas. Undoubtedly, the dragons had once lived on the surface when oceans still covered their world. But catastrophic change had driven them below ground. To live here in dark and silent caves.

She wondered how many still survived. Was this the only cave? Was a vibrant civilization reaching its end?

Another dragon shoved leaves onto the beach. Then a third.

Ooljee arranged the growing pile like a giant manuscript. Her heart raced at the thought of the magic they'd reveal once their code was broken.

The first dragon swished water towards the leaves. Something in that gesture told Ooljee exactly what the dragon wanted. Take them.

She couldn't store them in the tote with the dried leaves, so she carefully rolled them up like a burrito and tied the bundle with a bit of cord she tore from her pack. She brandished it at the dragon to say she understood the message.

The dragon's many eyes blinked in succession.

It offered a frond again. All ten eyes stared fiercely.

Sensing desperation from the creature, Ooljee sat down on the water's edge and offered her hand. This time the dragon's grip was as determined as its gaze. It sent small electric jolts through Ooljee's hand that sent her mind spinning. Too late to withdraw, Ooljee could only close her eyes as the sensation penetrated her brain. Vague images filled her mind. Odd concepts. The freedom of swimming in a planet-sized ocean, no limits in any direction. A blinding, painful burst of blue light she tried to deny. Sadness. Desperation. A shrinking of the world. Then separation. Loneliness. Finally, darkness. A gritty determination to survive.

Just as Ooljee almost pulled free, she caught one last sensation. Wonder and hope. That another entity had arrived. Take our knowledge. Don't let us die forgotten.

The sudden crackling of her headset wrenched Ooljee back to consciousness. The dragon released her.

"Moonbeam!" Her comlink whined and spit. "You out there? Ooljee?"

Still stunned, not able to gather her thoughts, Ooljee sat winded beside the pool. Then relief washed over her. Breathlessly, Ooljee tapped on her set. "Yes, I'm here. I rode out the storm OK. How are you guys?"

Dom's voice whooshed with relief. "We survived. Took some damage though. Are you OK?"

"Better than OK, but very lost." Ooljee stared up at the hole in the cave ceiling. The storm had ended and night was falling.

"We're tracking you. Our detector says we're right on top of you. Where are you?"

"Probably under your feet," she laughed. "I fell into a hole. A really big one."

"You're all right?"

Ooljee didn't know quite how to answer that. The dragon continued to eye her, not moving. She sensed it wanted to know if she'd gotten its message.

"I think so. Just you wait until you get down here. I found something very special."

A veil of dust poured down from the ceiling. Ooljee saw shadows hovering.

"Holy mazes!" That was Reggie. "How'd you survive that?"

Ooljee chuckled. "I'm a good swimmer and there's lots of water down here."

"Shift me!" Reggie swore. He beamed a light into the hole.

Ooljee waved.

"Come on down!" she offered. "The water's fine."

Dom's voice was stern. "We'll need more rope, Moonbeam. Can you hang in there a little longer?"

Ooljee nodded, knowing he couldn't see the gesture. "Yes. Take your time. I've got a new friend I'd like to talk to. There's lots more I need to understand."

She gazed at the dragon, willing it to know she understood its desperation. Trapped in a dwindling environment. How well humans knew about that! Hadn't they, too, nearly turned their world into a desert? At least the dragons could blame their star. Humans could only blame themselves.

The dragon offered a limb frond.

Ooljee took it.



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A Window into
Middle-earth

Gandalf the
Fearful
Part One

As with many of Tolkien's characters and ideas, Gandalf grows backwards and larger as the stories featuring him develop in Tolkien's mind. If we treat him as a living character, though, closely examining his inner motivations reveals a multi-layered personality with more going on than it might first seem. His attributes, positive and negative, mould the story of the Third Age as it comes to us in *The Lord of the Rings*.

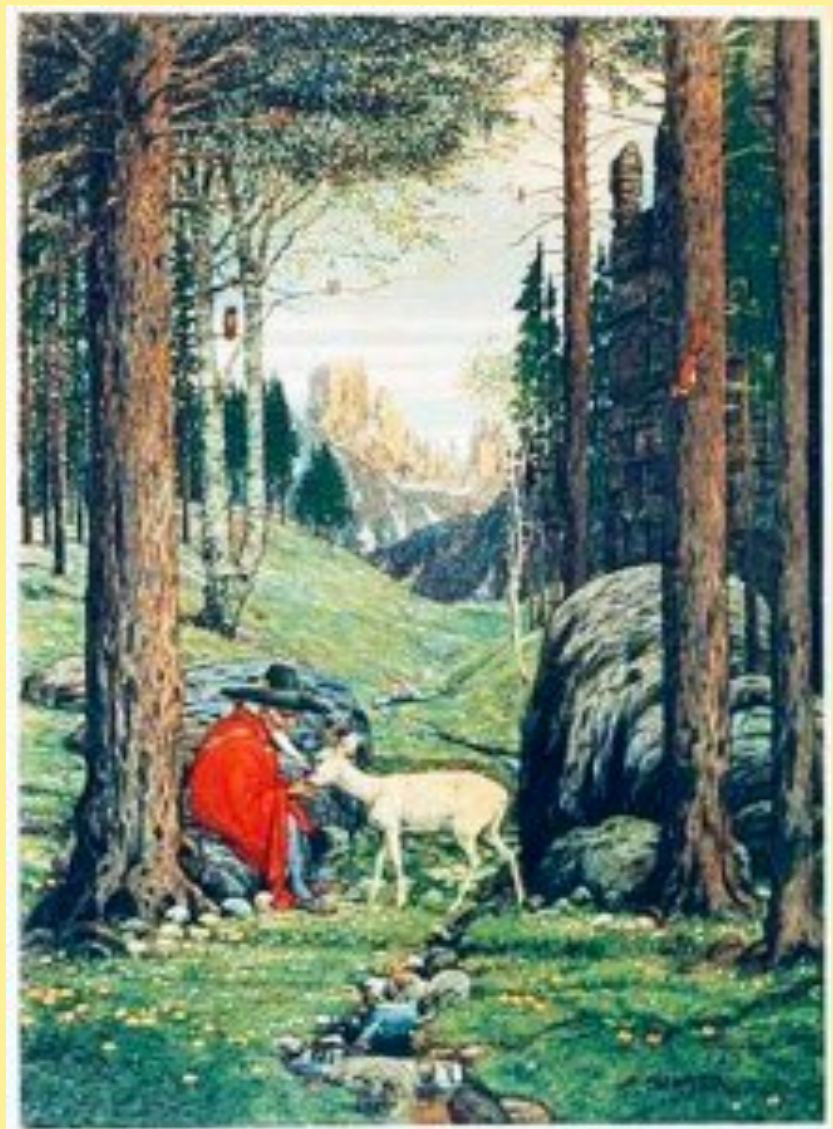
At first, Gandalf was just a picture on a postcard that Tolkien claimed to have encountered while on holiday in Switzerland in 1911 (the postcard, *Der Berggeist* 'the mountain spirit' later proved to be based on a painting by the German artist Josef Madlener and dates to the late 1920s, as pictured), but like much in Tolkien's imagination, this simple old man soon began to link up with older and deeper matters.

Gandalf is certainly a character worthy of exploration. When we first meet him as readers in *The Hobbit*, written in the 1930s, he appears as an old man with a staff. He has a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which a white beard hangs down below his waist, and immense black boots.

In the course of what is his first adventure for us, we see Gandalf do many things. He blows glowing smoke rings that move around a room at his direction, and is remembered for fantastic fireworks displays. He creates blinding flashes and

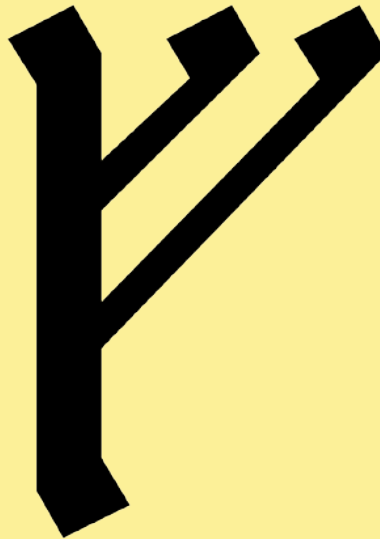
other pyrotechnics to distract the goblins of the Misty Mountains, aiding the dwarves in their escape from that stronghold, and later turns pine-cones into flaming missiles that throw hot sparks and start fires that do not easily go out. He is also able to come and go from the presence of Thorin and Company without being noticed. Later, in *The Lord of the Rings*, we see his proficiency with fireworks again at Bilbo's Farewell Party. When the Fellowship is attacked by Wargs in Hollin, Gandalf speaks words of power to inflame the

trees near where the company had camped and is also able to start fires under blizzard conditions, creating light of varying intensity for the journey through Moria. We get a glimpse of what appears to be another level of power when he speaks a word of 'Command' to secure a door against what turns out to be a Balrog of Morgoth, and he's also able to break the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. When angered or aroused for battle, he seems able to grow in height and assume a terrifying aspect.



The climax of his strength in the first part of *The Lord of the Rings*, though, is his fight with the Balrog of Moria. He kills it, though it also seems to kill him. Then something very unusual happens - one of the most unusual occurrences in *The Lord of the Rings* and in the whole history of Middle-earth when it is viewed as a single event: Gandalf is 'sent back' to Middle-earth as Gandalf the White, possessed of some kind of greater power and even a limited degree of clairvoyance. In this renewed state, he is able to break Saruman's staff with a spoken command, demonstrating his authority to throw the treacherous wizard out of the order to which they both belonged. This resurrection signals a fundamental change of character and direction, as we shall see.

Throughout these adventures, Gandalf is described as quick to anger, equally quick to laugh, and possessed of a deep wisdom. In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* we are not told of his origins or true nature — Tolkien expects us to accept Gandalf for what he is, and he so closely captures our archetype of the Wizard, the wise old man with a stick, that we do so unquestioningly for the duration of the story. It's only later that we learn that some of his qualities might be derived from experiences he had in Valinor in the West: his care for all creatures of good will, his strong sense of pity for the weak, a veiled power, usually revealed in his eyes,



which appeared deep and wise.

As readers we see only the end chapters of a long history in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. To view those adventures in perspective, and to gain true light about Gandalf as a layered character, we should go back to the beginning and examine the evolution of him as a being in his own right. And when we do, we find some interesting revelations about him and his innermost motivations.

Gandalf, originally called Olórin, was created by Ilúvatar before the Music of the Ainur, which brought Tolkien's created world as we know it into being. He was amongst the Ainur who entered into Eä, the universe, and became one of the Maiar of Manwë, Varda, Irmo and Nienna — it is from Nienna that he supposedly learns pity and patience. In this capacity, he walks unseen amongst the Elves, placing fair visions amongst them to help them be wiser. Initially he is, then, an

angel-like spirit, working to ease sorrows and encourage wisdom. This goes on for much of the First and Second Ages, as far as we know, which already places Gandalf at well over 4,000 years old by the end of his time on Middle-earth, depending on which timeline is consulted. Most of this time, though, he has spent in Valinor, the Blessed Land, far from travail or conflict.

A thousand years of the Third Age passes before the Valar choose five emissaries from among the Maiar to go and help the peoples of Middle-earth. Manwë selects Olórin, who, at first, does not wish to go, fearing Sauron. But Manwë gives this as the reason why he should go.

Take note, then, that at the root of Gandalf's story is fear -fear of Sauron in particular. We are not told exactly why —but Sauron is a fellow Maiar, an angelic being who chose to follow Morgoth at the beginning. We will see that this back-off underlies most of Gandalf's plans and actions throughout his long mission, and by the end we will be able to surmise its essence.

The timing of the arrival of the Istari (Curumo, Aiwendil, Pallando, and Alatar, the other four 'wizards') is also noteworthy from a narrative point of view: one thousand years into the Third Age, the One Ring, the source of much of Sauron's power, is still missing somewhere in Middle-earth. This is also the exact moment that the Necromancer moves into Mirkwood.



Olórin, submitting to the will of Manwë, makes his reluctant journey from Valinor to Mithlond in the west of Middle-earth in that year, then, T.A. 1000. These concurrent happenings are the narrative beginnings of the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, representing as they do the coming together of a newly-formed antagonist, the Maiar Sauron, and his opposite number, the Maiar who fears him, Olórin. On this grand scale, Gandalf is the protagonist, and his central motivation is his terror of his enemy.

Like the other Wizards, Gandalf takes the shape of an old man, robed in grey, and journeys about as a wanderer and counsellor. But he is particularly welcomed to Middle-earth by Glorfindel, an old friend from Valinor, on a similar mission against Sauron,

and Círdan the shipwright, who possesses Narya, one of the Three Elven Rings of power. It is Círdan who, narratively speaking, sees the protagonist in Olórin, despite his appearance as a bent and aged old man, and gives him Narya with a promise that it will support and aid him in his labours. Círdan, in this sense, becomes a mentor figure for Olorin, as Olorin will later be for many others.

As though motivated by his fear from the beginning of his sojourn in Middle-earth, Gandalf does not then go east as might be expected; nor does he take up a single permanent residence, but restricts himself to wandering in the West of Middle-earth, as far away from Mordor and Mirkwood as possible, where the remnants of the Dúnedain and the Eldar continue to oppose Sauron

from a distance. Elves come to know him as Mithrandir, the Grey Pilgrim, while the men of Arnor name him Gandalf, which becomes his most common name.

It becomes clearer about fifty years after Gandalf's arrival in Middle-earth, that some kind of evil entity resides at Dol Guldur in Mirkwood. No one knows for certain what this entity is, but it's interesting to note that Gandalf fears that it might be his own personal nightmare, Sauron himself. The key point, though, is that he doesn't do anything about it. As a matter of fact, Sauron has the upper hand throughout most of the history of the Third Age — Gandalf seems only able to react to what he does, rather than act against him causatively, as things unfold.

Over the next two centuries, for example, the evil, whatever it is, continues to grow: orcs multiply in the Misty Mountains and elsewhere; the Witch-king, the mightiest of the Nazgûl, builds a fortress in Angmar and wages unceasing war against the Kingdom of Arnor; Moria and Minas Ithil fall under a shadow; and wars, plagues, and catastrophes take place across Middle-earth, with Gandalf doing little about it. He eventually confronts his worst fears and goes to Dol Guldur in 2063 but the entity known only as the 'Necromancer' withdraws. Gandalf doesn't pursue him.

After that, the evil fades and there are about four hundred years of relative calm known as the Watchful Peace. From Gandalf's perspective, it

appears that he has had a personal triumph: his enemy, if that's who it was, has fled before him.

It's a false victory, however. The Nazgûl use it to prepare for Sauron's return four hundred years later in 2460. The Wise react to this new threat by forming the White Council three years after that. Galadriel, bearer of one of the Three Elven Rings and mighty among the Eldar, wishes Gandalf to be the chief of the Council, but he refuses, claiming that he does not wish to live in one place or lose his independence. This could be wise, or it might be the decision of someone motivated by fear, who feels the need for a quick getaway. Saruman takes the leadership of the White Council, heralding trouble

down the line. In rejecting the authority and power which might have led him to confront Sauron personally, Gandalf has again failed to follow through, and arguably has created future problems for himself and for many others.

During his wanderings in Eriador, the wizard meets and befriends the Hobbits in their isolated country, The Shire. During the Long Winter of 2758 he comes to their aid and witnesses and admires the pity and courage of that humble people. Perhaps at this point he has the seeds of an idea: if Sauron is to be finally defeated, can it somehow be through the quiet courage of the Hobbits? When seen in this light, Gandalf's interest in the halfling race takes on a new dimension.





For the next century, Gandalf maintains a role on the edges of things, consistently avoiding confrontation with Sauron. At some point after the year 2845, King Thráin II, a dwarf of the royal line of Lonely Mountain, disappears on journey to Erebor, and it is Gandalf who looks for him, entering the abandoned city of Khazad-dûm. In 2850, his quest leads him once more to Dol Guldur, where he finds Thráin in the dungeons. Thrain gives Gandalf his last possessions, a map and the key to Erebor. Most importantly, though, Gandalf finds his darkest dread is real: the Necromancer is no Nazgûl — it is Sauron the Maiar, gathering the remaining Rings of Power and possibly searching for his lost One Ring.

This is the moment, Gandalf must have realised, when Sauron should be confronted and defeated. He

doesn't dare confront Sauron himself, though — the wizard escapes from Dol Guldur and returns to the White Council, urging them to attack Sauron while the One Ring is still lost and Sauron's power incomplete. But it is Saruman, in command due to Gandalf's earlier reticence, who sways the Council against this, saying that the One Ring long ago rolled from Anduin to the Sea.

Elrond Half-elven confides privately in Gandalf that he has a foreboding that the Ring will be found, and that the war to end the Age is coming, dreading that it would end in darkness and despair. The seed of an idea that Gandalf had about a century earlier is then given voice for the first time, when the wizard tries to encourage Elrond, saying that there are many 'strange chances,' and that 'help oft shall come from the hands of the weak'. This remark is

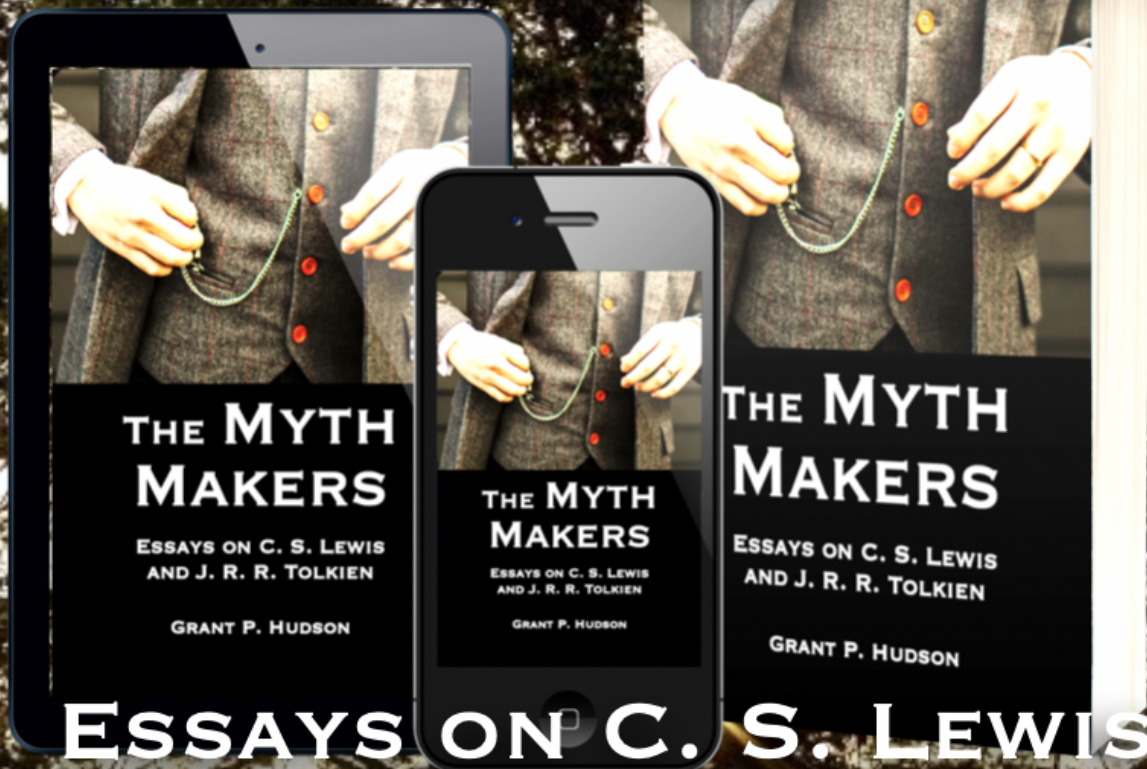
almost a premonition — it certainly seems as though there is more to it, when seen in context.

It's noteworthy too that Gandalf consistently seeks others to act as a via between him and the one he fears. This lack of desire for a direct confrontation has now created a further peril, unbeknownst to the wizard: Saruman wants the One Ring for himself and is secretly searching for it along the banks of river Anduin.

As we shall see in the next instalment, Gandalf's chief character flaw as the protagonist in his own story is the foundation upon which the tale that we know as *The Lord of the Rings* is founded. If Gandalf had had less fear of Sauron, we would have had less story!

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