

# THE LOSS OF TOL SIRION

*Middle of the First Age*



Mairon Artano<sup>1</sup> stood in the highest level of the Tower of Tol Sirion. He looked into the distance, but at this hour, there wasn't much to see. The evening light had almost failed. Far below, the forest was in darkness, so was the River Sirion. The only visible feature was the arched stone bridge connecting the island to the mainland.

Then he heard it, a snatch of song. It might have been the sighing of the river, except that it filled his mind with images of nightingales and of stars overhead in the darkening sky, chief among them the Sickle of Melkor, the symbol of his Master's downfall. Mairon ground his teeth and his nails dug into the palms of his hands. Wolves howled in response to his anger, and the island trembled.

The clouds parted, and moonlight cast shadows of bare branches against the ground. Its silver light revealed a woman standing on the arched bridge, her black hair and dark mantle billowing around her. It was she who was singing the enchanted song. Clouds covered the moon again and the light failed, but in that short time, her features were clearly visible. He frowned. Beyond her astonishing beauty,

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there was something familiar about her, but he couldn't place it.

Except for a large dog at her side, she was alone. None came to this evil place without an armed escort, she was as good as captured. The last to pass close to Tol Sirion, a dozen warriors disguised as Orcs, lay in the dungeon chained to the walls. That is to say, the few who remained. Most had already been eaten.

But that would not be her fate. He would bring her to Angband himself, a gift for his Master's bed.

An image came to him unbidden, of her skin pale against the coverlet, her black hair fanned out over the pillow. Her face was wet with tears. His Master knelt between her legs, his chest bare, the front of his leggings unlaced and pushed halfway down his thighs. She begged him not to do it. He studied her with cold eyes, then leaned forward, his copper-colored belly against her milk white skin, his weight supported on his hands. There was a sharp cry, and a grunting sound like an animal devouring its kill. The headboard banged and banged against the wall, and the bed curtains swung back and forth.

Mairon shook his head to clear it. It was none of his business. All that mattered was that Melkor would appreciate the gift and reward Mairon with greater responsibilities and privileges.

He sent a wolf down to capture the girl. It didn't return. He sent down another, it didn't return, either. The moon broke through a veil of cloud. In its pale light, the woman waited on the bridge. The huge dog was tearing at something motionless at its feet. The dog raised its head. The other shape was the body of a wolf, a dark puddle spreading from its throat.

The moon disappeared again, but he'd seen enough. His wolves were lying dead on the bridge. Mairon had raised them from puppies. He fed them under the table from his own plate, and on nights when he forgot to latch his door,

they slept on his bed. His throat tightened and his breath hissed through clenched teeth.

No one killed his wolves and got away with it. He sent down Draugluin, the Sire of all Werewolves and the most dangerous of his kind. A huge grey beast, his fangs could slash like razors, and they were filled with venom like a serpent's.

Draugluin descended to the bridge and leapt upon the enormous dog. The snarling and snapping went on far longer than it should, and ended when Draugluin broke free and fled back to the Tower.

Mairon ran down the stairs two at a time. He missed the last step and went flying, but was up again and running in an instant. Draugluin staggered toward him, but his legs buckled and he collapsed on the flagstones, his grey fur drenched in blood.

"It is Huan," Draugluin said, and died at Mairon's feet.

Mairon stiffened. Huan was no ordinary dog, he was a Hound of Valinor. The prophecy said he could only be killed by the greatest wolf that ever lived. That should have been Draugluin, yet Draugluin lay here, dead.

Mairon smacked his hand against his forehead. It was obvious. The prophecy referred to himself. Long ago, Mairon walked the earth in the form of a great wolf. It had been many years since he'd assumed that form, but he could still do it.

He would do it. He would assume the shape of the largest, most dangerous wolf that ever lived, bigger and more vicious even than Draugluin.

He went into a guardroom and removed his boots and mantle, then stripped off his tunic, leggings, and undergarments, folding and stacking them on the end of a bench.

He walked to the center of the room, the flagstones as cold underfoot as the night air on his skin. He forced his awareness to be still, clearing away all thought. When his mind was quiet, he formed an image of the greatest of all

werewolves, every detail of the animal's body, its muscles, its sinews, the color of its fur, the length of its teeth.

When he was ready, he closed his eyes and drew a breath. Fur covered his body and his mouth filled up with fangs. His weight doubled and the floor pressed hard against his bare feet. He dropped to his front paws and moved forward, the animal's power rippling through his muscles.

He left the Tower and followed the path to the foot of the bridge. To his heightened senses, smells were everywhere, and the scent of She-Elf made the fur on the back of his neck rise up. She stood on the crest of the bridge with her back to the mainland, facing him. Huan was beside her. He looked bigger up close than he had from the upper window of the Tower.

Mairon tensed like a spring and leapt at the Elf. She screamed and whipped her cloak at him, and for an instant, the hem covered his face. His eyes grew heavy and his front legs buckled beneath him. A sleep spell. He shook it off, but before he regained his feet, Huan seized him by the throat.

Mairon found himself on his back, pinned to the ground and howling in pain. He tried to twist free, but the beast had jaws of iron. Mairon shifted shape into a serpent, a monster, a demon. But whatever form he took, the great hound held on. Then the great hound shook him until the skin on Mairon's neck started to rip. It stung like a whole nest of paper wasps. Blood drenched his fur, soaking the ground beneath him. Mairon's pulse hammered in the wound, a drumbeat of fear.

The hound relaxed its hold, then lunged forward and clamped down on Mairon's windpipe. He thrashed and kicked, but failed to free himself from the dog's vice-like grip. He couldn't breathe. Flashes of light swam before him as his vision failed. Unable to hold a shape any longer, he fell back into his own accustomed form.

"Yield the island and everything on it, and I'll spare you," said the She-Elf. Her voice sounded muffled, as if she were speaking from a great distance away.

His vision failed entirely, and he needed to breathe more than he needed the Tower. Fainting, he made a gesture of surrender, and the hound released him. He lay on the ground coughing and gasping for air.

The wind stirred, and the night air was cold on his skin. That was the problem with shape shifting, fur didn't turn into clothes. His clothes were back in the guardroom, neatly folded on the bench.

"So, have we forgotten something?" The She-Elf was laughing. Not just laughing, bent over and slapping her thigh.

"I need to go into the Tower to get dressed, and then I'll leave," Mairon said with as much dignity as he could manage.

"You yielded the island and everything on it. That means everything." She pointed across the bridge to the bank of the River Sirion. "Start walking."

He wasn't much given to swearing, but on this occasion he made an exception. He turned and stomped off, his hands curled into fists, with his teeth clenched and his breath snorting through his nose. Lúthien's silvery laughter followed him from the crest of the bridge.

He didn't look back. When he reached the far side of the bridge, where running water gave way to solid ground, he paused and raised his arms. A leathery membrane formed under them, spreading until it stretched from his thumb to the prominent bone in his ankle.

He brought his arms down hard, feeling the loose folds of skin fill with wind. He flapped again and lifted the greater part of his weight from the ground. The earth fell away below him. Bridge, river, and island, he left them behind.

Melkor would hear of this, and he would not be pleased. Tol Sirion was an important fortress, and Mairon lost it because he'd picked a fight with a slip of a girl who turned around and beat him to a pulp. At the very least, Melkor would have him horsewhipped for poor judgment, and if he were really angry, would strip him of rank.

Mairon realized he was shaking. If he disappeared into the forest and stayed away from Angband for, say, a year, it would give Melkor enough time to calm down. On the other hand, if Melkor heard the story from Marion first, the consequences might be less bad. He'd never been a coward. He turned north and skimmed over the treetops, blood dripping from his throat.



In the cold of the far north, the great forests of Beleriand were reduced to stunted shrubs growing between cracks of rock that were white with frost.

The three peaks of Thangorodrim rose from the cliff face ahead. Smoke rose from them and was carried away by the wind that was never still in this barren land. Between the peaks, a walkway of enormous length led to the gates of Angband, the Hells of Iron. Mairon had built Angband and been its first commander before Utumno fell and Melkor moved the Court here. He still considered it his home.

He swooped low and brought his hands to his shoulders, dropping lightly to the ground. He was careful to keep his hands well away from his face, the scythe-like claws were razor-sharp.

The Orc guards turned to stare at him. Although they didn't raise their weapons, they made no move to open the gate. In his shifted shape, it was possible they didn't know who he was.

Talons became fingernails, the soft grey fur thinned to nothing, and the loose membranes beneath his arms tightened and disappeared. The air moved, and goosebumps sprang up on his arms and legs. Someone snorted, but turned it into a cough.

Mairon walked toward them, a figure of authority. "Open the gate." His voice was deep and commanding.

"Lord Mairon, I didn't recognize you at first. We haven't seen so much of you lately, said the Orc Captain."

Someone laughed and tried to turn it into a cough. A spear clattered to the flagstones. Its owner bent to retrieve it and stayed down longer than necessary, his hand jammed over his mouth, his ribs heaving.

"I mean, we haven't seen so much of you, what with you being away so much." The Orc Captain seemed unsure where to look.

"Open the gate," said Mairon.

The Orc Captain made a gesture in the direction of the gatehouse, and the rust-streaked door swung open with a scream of hinges.

Mairon walked through it into the stone antechamber, deserted at the moment, that led into the halls of Angband. His rooms were nearby, and if he could reach the servants' stair unseen, he could make it there without running into anyone he knew. He ducked into the narrow doorway and had just started to mount the uneven steps when a voice stopped him in his tracks. He wheeled around. A servant stood there, twisting his hands together. He lowered his eyes as servants were taught to, but quickly returned them to Mairon's face.

"Sir? Lord Melkor said you're to report as soon as you arrived."

Mairon cursed silently, guessing that Melkor had already heard about the loss of Tol Sirion. This conversation was not going to be pleasant. He needed just one minute to wash off the gore and pull on the first garment that came to hand, and then he would report to his master.

"Tell Lord Melkor I'm on my way. You are dismissed."

"I'm terribly sorry, but he said now."

Mairon ground his teeth as he followed the servant to the chamber where Melkor kept his throne. The flagstones were cold beneath his feet. They reached the audience chamber. Twin doors of iron swung open, and the guards on either side stood aside to let them pass.

The Great Chamber was full. Only the path from the doors to Melkor's throne had been left clear. A hundred eyes swung

in his direction. From the middle of the assembly, Thuringwethil, his herald, met his eye. Her gaze dropped from his face downward, and stayed there.

Mairon kept his eyes straight ahead and held his chin high. He was a proud creature, but it's hard to look dignified when you're butt naked.

Melkor sat on his throne, the Iron Crown on his head. In shadow beneath the gleam of the three Silmarils, his Master's eyes were unreadable.

"I heard you'd lost Tol Sirion and escaped with nothing but the clothes on your back. It seems I heard wrong."