

Chapter 1 The Workshop of the Jewel Smiths



he forge was nearly empty, which was unusual for mid-afternoon. Celebrimbor, the head of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, was absent, and so were several of his Master craftsmen.

He and Celebrimbor were working together to make the Great Rings. They had already finished a series of nine, and were close to completing the seventh ring in the next series.

The Great Rings, which represented the highest level of craftsmanship seen in Arda since the days of Fëanor, were made to be given away. What if they were misused, what if they were lost? He would let them go, but he still wanted to keep an eye on them.

Before the first of the Great Rings was forged, he added a binding mechanism, something barely noticeable, to a utilitarian part of the design. That way, he could maintain control if any of the rings were used irresponsibly, or if they fell into the wrong hands.

Of course, a binding mechanism only worked if there was something to bind it to. He knew how to make a Binding Ring, but wasn't able to. He needed extreme temperatures like those found in dragon's fire, which he didn't have.

Annatar put the tongs in the fire. He pulled out a piece of metal glowing orange, and struck it repeatedly with a hammer. One of his apprentices filled a bucket of water to quench the finished piece.

"Where has everyone gone? Even one of my apprentices is missing," Annatar wondered aloud.

"Celebrimbor has some new project. He's asked the most

gifted craftsmen in the guild to assist him. They don't know if it will work, so they're keeping it quiet for the moment," a journeyman told him.

That's odd. He hasn't mentioned the project to me, thought Annatar.

Celebrimbor had begun to urge his master craftsman to work on separate tasks. He said they should each pick a specialty and focus on it, as the Gwaith-i-Mírdain moved into more difficult, more highly skilled work.

But at some point, Annatar noticed that the best of the apprentices and journeymen in the workshop were working for Celebrimbor. Annatar was annoyed, and spoke to him about it in private.

"I get the impression that you've claimed the best talent for yourself. How about we divide them up a little more evenly?"

"Most of them were already working for me. I only took one or two of yours. Anyway, I need them for the work I'm doing."

"And I don't?"

"Not to the same extent. We're doing something that's never been done before. I need the visionaries, the ones who are the most creative, the most inventive. On the other hand, your work normally involves taking something that already exists, changing it a little, and using it for something new. Any of the apprentices and journeymen in the workshop can support you for that."

Annatar let the matter drop, but he wasn't pleased. But ultimately, Celebrimbor was head of the workshop, and the decision was his to make.

The door of Celebrimbor's private office opened. Celebrimbor and two of his master craftsmen came out together, followed by some of the most gifted apprentices and journeymen in the guild. Annatar looked up and greeted Celebrimbor.

"What's the new project?"

"I'm working on an idea, but I'm not ready to go public with it. I'm just making a few sketches to see where it goes," said Celebrimbor.

"I'd be happy to sit in and give you advice."

"I don't think it would interest you. We're using techniques other than the ones you taught us. They're not fully developed yet. In fact, we're inventing them as we go.

"Even so, I'd like to be included."

Celebrimbor looked embarrassed.

"I really don't think it would suit you. Your skills are very great, but they don't quite put you in the upper tier. That's not a bad reflection on you, it's just that the bar is always being raised, and right now, it's set very, very high."

Annatar started to get angry. He was the greatest craftsman here, yet people junior to him were being chosen before him.

"So you're saying I'm not good enough. You're wrong if you think my skill is less than your own; I studied under Aulë himself."

"Or under one of his students," Celebrimbor said mildly.

"Excuse me?" Annatar stiffened.

"I wasn't going to say anything, but when you first came here, Gil-galad made a few inquiries. Mahtan told him that neither he nor the other Aulëndil¹ had ever heard of you. But I let it go, because you brought so much knowledge and skill, I didn't mind if you'd improved your credentials a bit, or even if you'd never actually met Aulë.

"You underestimate me. I am Mairon Artano, the High Smith, the first and greatest of Aulë's Maiar," Annatar said.

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he realized he said too much, but it didn't matter. Celebrimbor didn't believe him anyway.

"Uh ... Mahtan said Curumo is Aulë's greatest Maiar. He didn't mention anyone called Mairon," said Celebrimbor.

Annatar was taken aback. He'd assumed he was notorious in Valinor. Why did he do it? Will he repent? Will he be brought to justice? But he never expected to fade out of sight as though he'd never existed. It shook him badly.

"And just so you know, I don't like being lied to,"

¹ The Aulëndil, the 'Friends of Aulë', are Noldor Elves who come to Valinor to study under Aulë.

Celebrimbor said. He left the room before Annatar had a chance to reply.

Celebrimbor, his closest friend, had just called him a liar!

Annatar lied easily and often, but on this occasion, he happened to be telling the truth. He wanted to throw the hammer against the wall.



The apprentices left at the end of the day, but Annatar was too unsettled to finish up and go home. He'd always found peace in hard physical labor. He needed that peace very badly just now.

He pulled an orange-hot piece of iron from the coals and struck it over and over with the hammer. The repetitive motion calmed him, and the music of the hammer against the anvil drowned out all other sounds in the forge.

The metal cooled to grey. He quenched it in the water barrel next to the anvil, then set the hammer aside and looked up. Celebrimbor was standing in the doorway. His face was unreadable. Annatar hadn't heard him come in.

Annatar spoke first.

"Forget what I said earlier. I lost my temper and shot off my mouth. But you were right. I'm not an Aulëndil myself, I just studied under one."

"Let's go for a walk," Celebrimbor said.

They went for several blocks through the narrow streets of Ost-in-Edhil without saying anything. Lamps were lit as the twilight deepened. Finally Celebrimbor broke the silence.

"When I started this new project, I picked the best and the most gifted to assist me. But by the best, I meant the most like Fëanor. Daring, creative, entirely original.

"Fëanor was the greatest craftsman who ever lived, greater than Aulë himself. He made the Palantiri and the Silmarils. Aulë was not able to duplicate them. Fëanor invented and made things that had never been done before or since. That's my ambition for the workshop, to bring it up to Fëanor's standard."

“And you were right. I didn’t think you made the cut, even though you have great knowledge of existing techniques, and great skill. But you’re not like Fëanor.

“But after I left you this afternoon, I realized something. I was holding you to the wrong standard. You’re not like Fëanor, but you don’t have to be, because you’re like Aulë.”

Annatar didn’t have anything to say.

“The Ainur walk among us, mostly unnoticed. Is there a rule that you’re not supposed to reveal yourselves?”

Annatar looked straight ahead.

“What’s Valinor like?” asked Celebrimbor.

“The same as here. Mountain ranges, forests, cultivated fields.”

“There’s no difference?”

“Smaller pond. Bigger frogs.”

“Do you ever see other Ainur in Ost-in-Edhil?”

“Sometimes. They’re around.” He didn’t add that, on the rare occasion he saw someone he knew, he dove into an alley to avoid being seen.

They passed a popular tavern.

“Do you want dinner?” Celebrimbor asked him.

The common room was noisy with conversation, and there was live music that evening. They pushed through the crowd and found a small booth in the back, where they could talk without being overhead.

“My new project will do something that hasn’t been done before. It will slow the decay of beautiful things.”

Annatar accepted that change was part of the natural order. He saw birth, growth, death, and decay as aspects of the same thing, the cycle of life. He didn’t want to preserve things, to freeze them in time the way Celebrimbor did, he only cared about keeping things well ordered.

“Look, if you still want to, why don’t you sit in on our discussions and act as an advisor?”

Annatar did sit in on a few meetings, but he wasn’t able to contribute anything. He didn’t understand the methods they were trying to develop. The discussions were abstract, and he preferred things he could see and touch. His mind wandered.

The Workshop of the Jewel Smiths

He was never sure whether they were discussing a new Rings project, or some other magical object, or something intangible like a spell.

Over the next few weeks, Annatar began to confide in Celebrimbor. He told him about his life in Valinor, his apprenticeship with Aulë, and his tense relationship with Curumo, his obnoxious younger brother.

Finally, he spoke of his belief in Aulë's deep affection for his Maiar, in spite of the fact that Aulë was distant and undemonstrative. The discipline he meted out was often the only way they knew he cared about them, or for that matter, was paying attention to them at all. Annatar admitted that, even though he was said to be the favorite, he ached for Aulë's attention and approval.

It was a relief to let down his defenses. He didn't have to watch everything he said as closely. He could be himself with Celebrimbor.

Celebrimbor, in turn, began talking about how had it had been for him, growing up in the shadow of Fëanor. Everyone expected him to be like his famous grandfather, but he was afraid he'd never be as good. He didn't want to be entirely like Fëanor, of course. Celebrimbor was a gentle person, and the violence in his family that had claimed so many lives caused him great sadness.



Annatar was working in the forge when Celebrimbor approached him, a letter in his hand. His face was grim.

"May I speak with you in private?" he said.

It was noon, and the forge was deserted. Everyone else had left for the midday break.

"When you first said you were Mairon Artano, I didn't know whether to believe you, so I wrote to Gil-galad in Lindon. This is his reply, dated ten days ago," He handed the letter to Annatar.

'Mairon Artano was one of the Maiar of Aulë. He was, in fact, the greatest of Aulë's Maiar. But you may know him by his Sindarin

name, Sauron Gorthaur.

'You didn't say why you were asking, but I assume it's in reference to someone we both know.'

When he finished reading, Annatar looked up.

"I can explain."

"I doubt it," said Celebrimbor.

"I've repented. I'm doing anonymous good works here as an act of atonement.

"So it won't bother you to learn that, when Gil-galad received my letter, Círdan sailed for Valinor that same day to let them know you were here," said Celebrimbor.

The room began to spin. Annatar gripped the workbench to steady himself.

"Unless, of course, you'd rather be gone by the time they get here." Celebrimbor turned on his heel and left the workshop, slamming the door behind him.



Annatar stood looking at the door. His ears were still ringing; his heart was pounding, too. In his mind's eye, he saw the Host of the Valar bearing down on Angband, overwhelming, unstoppable. He saw Eönwë, achingly disappointed in him.

"I gave you every chance. All you had to do was find Manwë and tell him you were sorry. Your best chance for pardon was handed to you on a silver platter, and you didn't take it."

The chance wouldn't be offered again, he knew. He had to leave town, and quickly.

He would leave the workshop now, in the middle of the day. He walked to the forge this morning, so his horse was back at the livery stables near his house. He'd have to walk home as quickly as possible. He would pack, and then retrieve his horse. In an hour, he could be out of Ost-in-Edhil, riding toward Tharbad.

But was it safe to go back to his house? That was the first place they'd look for him, if they didn't find him here. He had

The Workshop of the Jewel Smiths

to leave from here, and quickly.

All he really needed was a horse and money. Everything else could be abandoned. He would look in the stables and take a horse belonging to one of the other jewel smiths. As for money, there was always a quantity of silver and a little bit of gold in the workshop, the raw materials of their craft.

It was noon, and no one else was around. He went to the safe and opened it. He put all of the gold and as much silver as would fit into his pouch. He left the jewels, because he couldn't use them for money.

It occurred to him, much later, that none of the sixteen Great Rings had been in the safe. Their early essays in the craft weren't there, either. Celebrimbor usually took custody of their finished work, but Mairon didn't know what he did with them.

He wasn't looking for the rings, anyway. He and Celebrimbor never planned to keep their finished work. As a craftsman, it was normal to make things to give away. After all, you could always make another one for yourself later, if you wanted.

They made Great Rings one after another, with no end in sight. But after he and Celebrimbor quarreled and split up, he realized, it was the end. There would be no more.

He slammed the safe shut, but realized later the door didn't latch. He was already halfway across the room and in too much of a hurry to go back and fix it.

A few of the apprentices started coming back from the midday break. One looked at him curiously. He wondered if he'd been observed emptying the safe. He resisted the temptation to look and see if the door was standing open.

He gathered up as many tools as he could carry. He took them into his office and closed the door behind him. The door didn't lock, but he found a small nail and jammed it into the latching mechanism.

He had the sense that he was running out of time. Leave everything. Just go. But in the end, he couldn't bear to leave his notebooks or his tools behind.

He gathered up the notebooks and dumped them in a

satchel. There was a piece of paper somewhere on his desk with an outline of a plan he didn't want anyone here to find. He had no time to look for it, so he swept everything on his desktop into the satchel alongside the notebooks to sort through later.

Then he tried to fit in as many tools as he could. He had to leave behind a small hammer he liked because he couldn't make room for it.

He slung the satchel over his shoulder. It was heavier than he expected. He swung a leg over the windowsill and dropped five or six feet to the ground into the alley behind the workshop. Directly across the alley, there was the small stable where the Mírdain kept their horses. He ducked inside. He took the first mount he saw, a large chestnut stallion belonging to one of the other masters.

He saw a woolen cloak hanging on a peg. It probably belonged to one of the grooms. He draped it over his shoulders and pulled the hood low over his face.

Wrapped in a strange cloak and riding a horse that belonged to someone else, he was almost unrecognizable. He took the back streets through the city and left by the North Gate.

As soon as he was clear of the city walls, he rode hard to put as much distance between himself and Ost-in-Edhil as possible. When he was sure he wasn't being followed, he left the road and traveled across country. He rejoined the main road south of the city, and headed in the direction of Tharbad.

When he reached Tharbad, he found a jeweler there who was willing to buy his silver. The jeweler offered a bad exchange rate, but he asked no questions.

Now that Annatar had money, he could buy a meal in a tavern, oats for his horse, and provisions for the road. Home was a long way away, but he was grateful he had a home to go to.

Chapter 2 The Journey to Mordor



Airon had been riding for days along the dusty road that skirted north of the Mountains of Shadow. The mountains loomed up on his right, jagged teeth of new rock almost devoid of vegetation. Pieces of rock broke loose, and occasionally he had to ride around a large boulder that had fallen in the road.

He was going home. Mordor was tantalizingly close, just on the other side of the fence of mountains, but he couldn't cross them. No one could, not easily. When he claimed this land, he invested some of his own personal power raising them even more, and narrowing or closing the gaps in between them. There was only one way in, and that was through a narrow gap between the Mountains of Shadow and the Ash Mountains.

Mordor, the Black Land. It bore that name long before he discovered it, almost five hundred years ago. He'd never lived there, though he'd come here a number of times to visit. He thought of it often. It was an arid expanse of black basalt rock, fenced in by mountains on three sides, veiled in fumes from the burning mountain.

The volcano! It was a manifestation of the living earth, and he loved it. The colors! And the light! And its massive size! It was a thing of great beauty.

He was an earth spirit who'd thrown in his lot with fire spirits. He often felt like he didn't belong anywhere, or that he owed allegiance to two warring sides. The volcano symbolized a merger of both of his worlds, and made him feel whole. His

own power actually increased when he was near it.

Ever since the War of Wrath, he'd felt the need for a place of safety, a place to withdraw to when he felt threatened. It was fenced in by mountains on three sides and almost unassailable. The Black Land was ideal.

Having a bolt hole made him bolder. When he went to live among the Noldor Elves in Eregion, he knew he was flirting with danger. Before Eregion, he'd lived among primitive peoples in the East who never heard of Valinor, teaching them simple farming techniques, the construction of mills, and the smelting of iron and bronze.

But in Eregion, he was living among Elves, and they had contact with the Valar. He risked being recognized or worse, caught and turned over to the Valar for trial. But they couldn't get him here. He'd wait out the storm until things settled down, then come out again.

Several days earlier, he passed a group of soldiers from Khand who looked at him strangely. It occurred to him that, while his Elvish form let him blend in in Eregion, it made him conspicuous. He thought for a while about what a man from the East looked like.

Once he had a clear image in his mind, he shifted into the shorter, stockier form. He gave himself olive skin and black eyes, and made his hair shorter than he had worn it as one of the Noldor Elves.

After he shifted shape, his clothes didn't fit anymore. The sleeves hung over the back of his hands and had to be rolled up. His leggings were too tight around the waist, and the first time he lifted his arms, his shirt ripped. Even his boots didn't fit anymore. His feet swam in them, but they were too tight around his calves.

Finally, he reached the narrow gap between the Mountains of Shadow and the Ash Mountains. Cirith Gorgor, the Haunted Pass.

The pass was blocked by a stone wall running the length of the space between two cliffs.

The road passed through the wall under a tall arch. The wooden gates stood open. The only obstacle he saw was a pole

The Journey to Mordor

across the road, painted red and white, and counterweighted at one end. When he approached it, two men came out of the gatehouse and blocked his path.

“Who goes there?”

“I have business with the Steward.”

Apparently that was good enough for them. They raised the pole and let him pass. He rode under the arch and entered Mordor.

He traveled south through Udûn toward the next pass. Carach Angren, the Jaws of Iron. Unlike Cirith Gorgor, he hadn't narrowed it when he raised the mountains. It was undefended, and he passed through unchallenged.

He rounded the spur of the Ash Mountains and saw the Plain of Gorgoroth spread before him. Orodruin, the Burning Mountain, rose thousands of feet from its center. The volcano was erupting. He focused his attention on it and made flames shoot into the sky. He smiled with satisfaction. I've still got it.

To the left, on a promontory of the Ash Mountains, he could just make out straight lines against a stony background, the silhouette of his fortress. It was under construction, and not yet tall enough to see easily from this distance.

Because its base was so massive, the fortress looked closer than it was. However, he knew from experience, the soonest he could expect to arrive was tomorrow afternoon at the earliest.

He shook the reins and headed for home.

Chapter 3 The Hereditary Steward



Airon finally reached the series of hairpin turns that led up the promontory on which the fortress sat. As he drew closer, he saw that the walls appeared higher and thicker than they did on his last visit, and the towers were taller.

Black pennants fluttered above the walls, Melkor's banner. It occurred to him that, while he would always be Melkor's servant, he was independent now. He should have his own banner. He would keep the black field to honor his Master, but add a heraldic device that was uniquely his own. An anvil, a wolf, a volcano? Whatever he chose, it would be orange-red, the color of coals in the forge.

A tent city had sprung up all around the base of the outer wall. This was home to the stone masons, the manual laborers, and all the people who supported them, the cooks and medics and chandlers.

The outer walls were covered with scaffolding. It was windy, and stone dust from the construction site stung his eyes. He heard the sound of hammer against stone, the shouts of the workmen, the clack-clack of a ratchet as stone blocks were lifted by a crane.

However, he noticed something that bothered him. The weight of the structure was crushing the sometimes fragile volcanic rock beneath it. The uneven settling was causing the western wall to tip outward. He would look for cracks in the foundation once he got inside.

When he reached the main entrance, he dismounted and knocked on a small door set in the massive gate. A spy hole in

The Hereditary Steward

the door opened, and eyes appeared behind the bars.

"The Lord of the Black Land has returned," he announced.

Mairon knew he didn't look like a great lord. He didn't even look respectable. He was traveling without retainers, dressed in the same clothes he was wearing in the workshop. His cloak, made from coarse wool, belonged to a servant. He was grimy from travel, and had two or three days' growth of beard.

The cover over the window slid closed. He waited. About five minutes later, he heard a bar being withdrawn, and the door was opened to admit him.

"My Lord? I am the Steward of Lugalbúrz."

The Steward looked like an Easterling, probably from Khand. He wore the bright colors of the East, and his eyes were lined with kohl.

"Please come in, my Lord, and welcome," said the Steward, still looking a little doubtful. "I'm sorry, but I really don't know who you are. I've never seen you before."

Generations could pass between his infrequent visits. He had to reestablish his credentials each time he came here. The Stewardship of Lugalbúrz was a hereditary position, so he was often met at the gate by the grandson or great-grandson of the Steward he'd met on his last visit.

The only thing to do was act confident and walk in like he owned the place. He led his mount through the door, and tossed the reins to a soldier.

"See to my horse, Sirrah."

He looked around the courtyard and noted the progress that had been made since his last visit. The keep was several stories taller. Secondary towers at the corners of the walls, thick walled and round, had been started. Within the walls, there were many new wooden structures, laid out like houses in a small village.

"How long will you be staying with us?" the Steward asked.

"It's permanent this time. I'm moving my base of operations to Mordor," he answered.

The steward took him on a tour of the fortress. He wanted to see his workshop again, and put away the things he brought

with him. He set off in that direction, with the steward following him.

“You can’t go in there. It’s forbidden. The room is sealed.”

He spoke a charm to break the seal. The latch lifted easily. He stepped in and looked around. It was just as he had left it. The Steward joined him a minute or two later with a lamp, which he set on a counter.

There was a shelf above the workbench which held a row of leather-bound notebooks. Their spines were numbered and they were arranged in order, one through twenty. He took a notebook down from the shelf, set it down on the workbench, and opened it to a random page. It was filled with his slanted script, precise drawings, and equations full of symbols.

He opened his satchel and pulled out another notebook. It was the same size and color as the one already lining the shelf. Its spine was numbered twenty-one. He opened it and put it on the workbench next to the first one. The handwriting was the same, and so were the drawings and equations. From the corner of his eye, he watched the Steward making the connection.

He took all his notebooks from the satchel and shelved them with the others. There were twenty three notebooks in all. Then he unpacked his tools and put them away, calipers with calipers, auls with auls, without ever opening a wrong drawer.

Chapter 4 Homecoming



don't have a room made up for you, so I'll give you mine until we can prepare something suitable. Let me show you where it is," said the Steward.

He led the way to the spiral stair built in the wall of the Keep and climbed three or four flights. The Steward opened an iron-bound door and showed him a comfortable room. There was a small fireplace with a carved stone mantle. The windows looked out on the volcano, scarcely ten miles away. He watched for a minute as orange lava shot up in fountains and ran down the sides of the cinder cone. His power was greatest when he was close to Orodruin.

"About dinner tonight. We're a frontier outpost here, and I'm afraid you may find the fare somewhat primitive."

"Whatever you make for yourselves is fine."

"We have meat only once in a while. We rarely have fruit, and there's almost never any wine or milk. Dinner tonight will probably be bread and cheese, with boiled cabbage if we're lucky."

"That's fine. I'm not picky."

At dinner, he met the officers and officials who oversaw the building of his fortress, the running of his army, and the breeding of orcs. The Steward must have already established his bona fides with them, because they spoke to him with deference.

After the evening meal and some talk around the table, he went up to the well-appointed room to get ready for bed.

This was a rough frontier outpost, but they'd done a good

job creating a few luxuries. The bed was canopied, with embroidered hangings, and big enough for at least two people. The coverlet was silk. The chairs had embroidered cushions. There were chests for clothes, a substantial desk, and woven tapestries to soften the rough stone walls.

The room looked like one in Utumno, the same rough stone walls, the same comfortable furnishings in otherwise primitive conditions. The moment he closed the door behind him, he felt apprehensive. Why was that? He was happy to be here. He had come home.

He started to get undressed for bed, but felt so anxious he had to stop. He couldn't imagine why he was lightheaded, why his skin was clammy. Then he remembered.

Melkor walked to the door and locked it, then turned around to watch him. He heard Melkor order him to undo the buttons on his shirt. He tried, but he couldn't, because his hands were shaking too hard. 'Do you need help?' The sound of fabric ripping.

Stop it. It never happened. He shook his head to clear it.

There was no way he was getting into that bed. He took a pillow from the bed and lay down on the cold stone floor, wrapped in his cloak. He fell asleep in the clothes he'd traveled in. Tomorrow, he would find a suitable room and furnish it with a hard, narrow cot. Then he could sleep without nightmares.

The next day, he explored the Keep and found a room he liked. It was on the highest level, and it had a view of the volcano.

"Bring me a cot, a simple clothes chest, and a table for writing."

"How about tapestries, rugs, cushions?" asked the Steward.

"No."

"Feather beds, silk bed coverings?"

"No, all I want is a pillow and a wool blanket."

"That's how we'd furnish a servant's room. Your rank demands more than that, Lord Zigûr," said the Steward.

"Even so, that's what I want."

He paused in the doorway and turned back.

Homecoming

“Oh, there’s one more thing. In your role as Steward, let people know they should call me Tar-Mairon. It means ‘Admirable Lord’. I don’t want the word ‘Sauron’ to be spoken or written by anyone in Mordor. Ever.”

“What? That isn’t your name?” said the Steward, surprised.

“It’s an insult the Elves used to shout at me. No, it’s not my name. And I’d rather not hear it spoken again, ever.”

“Might I ask, what is your real name? Or do sorcerers keep that a secret?” asked the steward.

“My real name is Mairon. It means Admirable.”

Chapter 5 The First Assembly



Sauron knew he needed to establish his authority right away.

He ruled by fear. He wanted to be feared, but not so much that they would hate him. The trick was to be consistent. He could rule with an iron fist, but he had to be predictable. If his people knew what offense would provoke what reaction, they could deal with it. But he couldn't rule by fear alone. There had to be something in it for them, too. They would follow him if they saw him as a source of food, and safety.

They had heard of him before. One of the Steward's duties was to remind people that the Dark Lord owned this land, and they were his servants. But Sauron was of a colorful legend to them, not a real person who might appear one day show up and disrupt their routines.

He called an assembly of all his nobles and their sergeants and assistants. He summoned up a tremendous thunderstorm, to blot out the sun and make it possible for the orcs to be outside during the day.

"People of Mordor, I am the Lord of the Black Land. Five hundred years ago, I discovered this land and claimed it as my own. None dwelled here except the Spider in Cirith Ungol."

He looked out over the sea of upturned faces. The fortress's courtyard was packed.

"For those of you who do not know me, I am an Ancient Evil from the Depths of the Earth."

They looked skeptical.

He shape shifted into a Balrog. He wasn't a Balrog, of

The First Assembly

course. Balrogs were Fire spirits. He was an Earth spirit who hung around with Fire spirits.

The crowd gasped. He held the pose for just a few moments, then shifted back. Any longer, and his clothes would catch fire.

Afterwards, he gathered all his nobles to receive their oaths of fealty. One after another, they knelt before him and placed their hands between his, and swore the oath. They were bound to obey him, serve him, and never raise a hand against him. There was one who ignored the summons, either from infirmity or from stubbornness, it wasn't clear which. Mairon sent him a warning that if he, or a family member representing him, didn't appear within a week, his title and lands would be given to someone else.

He also began to set up an infrastructure for administering his realm. First, he needed to set up a network of informants. He needed to know what everyone from the nobles to the most humble of the orc foot-soldiers cared about.

He also needed a personal guard. He found a dozen of the strongest labors and foot soldiers and arranged for them to become as his bodyguards.

Chapter 6 A New Dark Lord



Mairon stood on a box with his arms raised, doing what he was told. He didn't complain even when the man stuck him with pins.

The man in question was an old tailor, bent over with age. He had a measuring ribbon draped around his neck and a mouth full of pins. He arranged the fabric expertly, then stood back to study the effect.

The experience was both intimate and impersonal. The man touched him without asking, but at the same time, he was so focused on his work, he seemed to have forgotten his client was there.

Mairon remembered how he used to fasten Melkor into his armor. He'd kneel at his feet and work the buckles of sabatons and greaves and knee caps. It was like tacking up a horse. When he did the thigh plates, he'd touch the inside of his thigh without asking permission, having forgotten Melkor was even there.

He told himself that even if he'd gone home to pack, he'd need all new clothes anyway. His old clothes wouldn't fit him anyway, now that he was Mannish rather than Elven. Plus, the styles in the East were entirely different from Eregion.

The tailor was making him a sable robe from fine cashmere wool. It would be hooded, with long sleeves and a hem that swept the floor. When Mairon wore it, none would doubt he was a Dark Lord.

Mairon had never called himself a Dark Lord before. It was Melkor's title, not his. He wanted to honor Melkor's memory,

not usurp him. He would be the Second Dark Lord, then.

The tailor folded up the black fabric and gathered up his tools. As he was about to leave, he stepped back and looked him over.

"You know, your eyes look weird. It will attract attention around here."

He'd thought his cat-slit pupils didn't show. Well, it's a racial trait. It's not something I can help.

The man pulled out a tin of kohl and showed him how to paint a black line around each eye.

"Much better. Now you look normal."

He studied his reflection in a silver hand mirror. He looked like he'd been in a drunken brawl the night before. "I don't know if I can get used to this."

"It will improve your vision, especially in bright sunlight. But be sure you wash it off at night. You don't ever want to fall asleep wearing it, because it will sting."

Chapter 7 Planning A Fortress



That night, he sat at a table in his room, drawing on a large sheet of paper. He pulled the table close to the small fireplace to take advantage of the light.

And the heat, too. The day had been warm, but in an arid climate like this, it got chilly after dark. Even with a fire burning in the grate in front of him, he needed a cloak over his shoulders to keep his back warm.

He held a stick of lead in one hand, which he used to sketch the outlines of walls and towers. When he needed to change something, he broke off a pinch of bread he'd brought for the purpose, and rolled it into a ball to use as an eraser.

He crumpled a discarded piece of paper into a ball and tossed it toward the grate, but it hit the side of the fireplace and bounced back into the room. He sighed. He had never been very coordinated.

He was drafting the plans for his fortress, which didn't yet have a name. The design was more ambitious than anything build since Angband. Its footprint would be massive, over a mile in diameter. Its tower would be the tallest ever built. The fortress would be the largest in Arda, and unassailable.

The encircling mountains, and the inhospitality of the land within, formed the greater part of his defenses. But he also wanted a fortress. He started to think about it as soon as he decided Mordor was the place of safety he'd retreat to when he felt threatened.

Planning A Fortress

He surveyed a number of sites. He identified strategic places first. There were two routes into Mordor that invaders might follow.

The main route, passed through Udûn from the north. He took that route when he came here. At least one of the two gaps, Cirith Gorgor or Carach Angren, had to be defended.

A second, more difficult route from the west went through a high mountain pass in the Mountains of Shadow. However, the Spider had her lair there. She guarded the way in. The Spider wasn't exactly his ally, but they knew about each other and accepted each other's presence.

There were no mountains and no defenses of any kind facing east, but he didn't see the need for them. The land east of here was empty.

Both Carach Angren and the Spider's Pass had views of the burning mountain. He finally admitted to himself that being able to see the Burning Mountain was important to him. In fact, it was driving the selection of the site. It wasn't just about the view, either. He'd noticed his personal power increased when he was close to the volcano.

He decided to build on a spur of the Ash Mountains, just ten miles from Orodruin. He would fortify Cirith Gorgor, too. That would be a separate structure, but built at the same time as the Ash Mountain fortress.

The next step was to draw up plans for construction. Back in Ost-in-Edhil, he spent evenings at home sketching walls and gates and towers. He thought about digging wells, and siege defenses, and storerooms and great halls. Every time he visited the site, he brought more drawings with him.

He never mentioned the project to the Elves, no matter how friendly he was with them, and he never worked on any drawings or wrote down any notes about it during the day at the Gwaith-i-Mírdain.

He kept his drawings and notes in a locked box under a loose floorboard in his bedroom, with a heavy chest pushed over it for good measure. Probably some of them are still there. I wasn't able to go home and get them.

Then he remembered something he'd left behind.

That wasn't the only secret project I was working on. There's another set of notes under the floorboards. Either they've been found or they haven't. There's nothing I can do about it now.

He turned his attention back to the plans in front of him. A small castle could be built in one or two years in an emergency, with three stone masons and about a hundred laborers. The thing that determined time to complete was the site, and whether the raw materials were found locally or had to be brought in from somewhere else. The timbers had to be brought from a long way away, but all the basalt and granite needed for construction of the walls and towers could be quarried on site. The material taken out of the hole dug for the foundation provided a great deal of the stone required for building the inner curtain wall and the keep.

When he arrived the other day and saw the latest additions in person, he felt disappointed. It wasn't as large as he'd expected, and it never would be. The basalt cliff was being crushed. It was actually collapsing under the weight of the unfinished structure.

He wondered if he could design a foundation that would support the weight of a gigantic tower and some huge curtain walls around it. The foundation would be made of stone blocks, the same kind of stone as the bedrock the fortress currently rested on. But blocks cemented together are less strong than solid rock. It wasn't a problem he could solve right now. He threw down his drawing lead in frustration.

He'd been here for three or four days now. There wasn't a single person in Mordor he knew well. He knew the Steward's name and that he was married, but that was all. He knew the names of a few other people, but almost nothing about them.

Even having a conversation was difficult here. He could speak the Easterling language, but had to translate word for word. In a way, it was a relief to be around the Orcs, who spoke the same Black Speech spoken in Utumno. Back in Eregion, he had become fluent Sindarin to the extent that the Valarin he spoke in his own head began to include Sindarin words and phrases.

Planning A Fortress

He felt homesick for Eregion. He missed the people of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, the familiar routine, and above all, his friendship with Celebrimbor. Those last few weeks, when he dropped his guard and confessed to being Mairon servant of Aulë, he wished he could recapture that time, and make it last longer.

He shoved his chair back roughly. The need to be with other people was like hunger or thirst. Where could he find other people at this hour? They might still be in the Great Hall playing a game called chess, which all Easterlings seemed to know. He'd never heard of it before and didn't know how to play, but he could stand at the table with the others, watching the game.

Chapter 8 He Does Not Share Power



Mairon assembled his lieutenants for a Council meeting. He studied the faces of the people around the table. He was concerned about one of them, a young man who rolled his eyes when Mairon spoke at council meetings and interrupted him when he was speaking. It was an expression of contempt, and it had to be nipped in the bud.

That night, he was having dinner with his Steward. He waited until a servant entered the room. Then he leaned toward the Steward and spoke in a low voice, as if sharing a confidence.

"The Council meeting today reminded me of one long ago, in another country.

"I was running the meeting, and I had the sense that one of my lieutenants was mocking me. His words were polite but his tone was .. amused. And when I spoke, he studied his nails as if he were bored.

"Then he leaned across the table and reached for a page of my notes. I shot him a warning look, but he put his hand on it and pulled it towards himself. I pulled out a knife and plunged it into the back of his hand. The hilt vibrated from the force. Everyone in the room gasped. He screamed and tried to pull his hand free, but he couldn't. Blood soaked the paper and spread across the table. I just continued the meeting as though nothing had happened." He laughed.

The Steward looked at him, shocked.

"What, you don't think that's funny?" Mairon asked.

The servant, who had given up any pretense of refilling their

wine goblets, stood there hugging the pitcher.

“Don’t worry. Most of the time, I have better control of my temper. As long as people treat me with respect, they needn’t fear me.”

The story was just that, a story, but it served its purpose. From then on, the young nobleman’s attitude towards him was deferential to the point of being subservient.



He was far more concerned about another of his lieutenants, a middle-aged nobleman with a pinched face. The man enjoyed more independence under the Steward than he did under this new Lord. The reports said he chafed under the tight rein Mairon kept him on, and wondered aloud whether he was really had supernatural powers.

He’d thought his shape-shifting demonstration, his show of power, would have silenced all dissent. But people were saying it was just a magician’s trick, like calling up the storm.

Then Mairon heard some really disturbing news. The man was talking to others about challenging him for the Lordship of this land. He had the man arrested.

Under questioning, the man gave up the names of several others. He had them arrested and questioned, too. Some were the ones he’d spoken to about the plot, and some were names given at random, a known hazard of harsh questioning methods. Satisfied he’d identified all those involved, Mairon ordered them hanged.

On the day of execution, the courtyard was filled to capacity. There was ominous murmuring in the crowd, because the man had been popular. Mairon stood surrounded by his personal guard, but even so, it was dangerous to provoke an angry crowd.

The traitor was brought to the scaffold first. The man stood beside the noose with his hands tied behind his back.

In the back of the courtyard, he saw a woman trying to push her way through the crowd, reaching her arms toward the

scaffold. Two or three crying children followed her. He sent a few of his men-at-arms to remove them before they created a scene.

"This man sought to challenge me for the Lordship of the Black Land. That was a mistake," Mairon announced in a loud, clear voice.

He gave the order. The man was lifted until just his toes were touching the scaffold. He fought desperately for life, but after what seemed like a long time, he stopped struggling and was still.

Mairon didn't order the body cut down right away, but left him hanging for several days as an example to anyone else who might defy him.

Next, two more men were brought to the scaffold, their hands bound behind their backs. The remaining nooses were placed around their necks.

"I just hanged a traitor. Now I will hang two men who have done nothing."

There was angry murmuring from the crowd.

"The traitor asked them to join the plot to overthrow and take my place, and they did nothing. They should have come to me without delay, and warned me."

He understood why they'd acted the way they had. The traitor had been their friend, and their new Lord was still a stranger to them. From what others said of them, they were good men. He wanted to scare them, but had no intention of hurting them, beyond what had been done to them already.

Someone in the crowd shouted, "Spare them! For pity sake, spare their lives!" He knew this was going to happen. He'd placed an actor in the crowd to speak the line. Others took up the cry.

"Spare them! Spare them!" The courtyard reverberated with their chanting.

Mairon confronted the first man. "Why should I spare you?"

"I did wrong, I'm sorry, I am so very, very sorry. I will come to you the instant I hear you are threatened in any way. I swear it. I swear it upon the lives of my children." Tears ran down his face.

He Does Not Share Power

He turned to the second man. "And you?"

"Spare me, and I will become your most devoted servant. I live my life as an example of loyalty to yourself and your interests. I swear it upon my honor, with Ilúvatar as my witness."

Mairon considered for a few moments. The crowd kept chanting. "Let them go," he said to the hangman.



He retired early that night. During the day, probably while he was conducting the execution, workmen sank heavy iron staples in the stone wall on either side of his bedroom door, and set a thick wooden bar between them. There was still sawdust and wood shavings in the doorway.

He was about to say something sarcastic about the usefulness of putting a bar on the inside of a door that opened outward. Then he noticed they'd reworked the hinges, too. They were on the inside now.

Chapter 9 A Good Foundation



he bedrock under the fortress was settling unevenly under the weight of the fortress. It was most noticeable at the cliff at the tip of the promontory, he'd seen it on the ride in. But he was more concerned about the foundations beneath what would be the largest tower.

The pit for its foundations had been surveyed and partially excavated. Already it looked like a great yawning pit, its bottom hard to see, but he knew it had barely been started. He was starting to believe that there was no foundation he could build that would support the tower he wanted to build. There was always the option of scaling back his plans and building something smaller, but he didn't want to do that.

He was beginning to think, if he was going to build the tower he envisioned, he'd have to put his own power into its foundations. He'd already sunk so much of his power into the encircling mountains, he could feel it. And now he might need to spend that much again on the foundations of his tower. He could undo the mountains to try to recover what he'd put into them, but it was unlikely that he'd get more than a tiny fraction of it back.

He turned his attention to the construction in progress. The tower they were living in was more complete than the others, but it was still surrounded by cranes and scaffolding, and a layer or two of stones was added to it every day. It was already a storey taller than it had been when he arrived last week.

Chapter 10 Celebrimbor's Betrayal



It was midmorning, and Mairon sat at the table he used as a desk, skimming page after page in a stack of reports from his agents who reported to him on the doings of others outside the borders of Mordor.

Whenever reports came in from his extensive network of spies, he and his Steward sat down together to go through them. Mairon would look them over, and when he found something interesting, he would read it aloud and his Steward would write it down for him.

"Tar-Mairon, I wish you'd let me screen those for you and just give you the highlights," said his Steward.

"That would be a good idea, except that I have trouble delegating," said Mairon.

His Steward, the great-grandson of the steward who greeted him when he first came here to live, was his right hand man and most trusted advisor, one of the few in Lugbúrz who called him by his given name.

Mairon skimmed a report from Eregion and froze. He went back to the beginning and read it carefully, to see if he could be mistaken; he wasn't.

He was on his feet in a moment; his chair struck the floor with a crack.

"How could he? I'm going to kill him," Mairon said.

He overturned the table; paper, ink, and quills went flying. He looked around the room for something else to break.

"What happened?" asked the Steward, edging towards the door.

"My closest friend betrayed me."

Mairon paced back and forth, clenching his fists and breathing hard.

"At least I thought he was my friend. We worked together to make the Great Rings. I taught him everything I knew, and he used it to make things he never could have made by himself. But then he went on to make Rings in secret, without me."

"How do you know?" asked the Steward.

"He was overheard telling someone he sent the Three into hiding last year.

"Three of the sixteen?"

"No, I don't think so. Otherwise why just three of them, and why now? I think he made three more rings after I left, different from any that came before."

"I think you're reading a lot into one report," said the Steward from the safety of the corridor.

"Oh really? Right around the time I left Eregion, Celebrimbor was working on something in secret, but I never really understood what it was. He used me for my knowledge, and after he drained me dry, he discarded me.

"I'm going to punish him for it. I'm going to take back everything he built using my knowledge, and that includes the Three."

Mairon resolved to attack Eregion. He'd been breeding Orcs since he came to Mordor, and had close to enough to field a small army. At that moment, he was prepared to march on Ost-in-Edhil and take the Gwaith-i-Mírdain by force.

He was desperate to recover the Three. He believed wearing them could increase his own power, which the other Great Rings did not. He wanted to know how they were made. And he wanted to keep them out of the hands of the Elves.

"He still has the sixteen Great Rings, which he couldn't have made without my help. I should have taken them with me when I left.

"The Three are different from the others, but Celebrimbor couldn't have made any of them without the skills I taught him. By rights, the Great Rings belong to me. All of them. And I'm going to take them back."

It was going to be difficult. He didn't know where they

were, or who had them. He didn't know anything about them. He thought for a few minutes.

"But I don't need to have actual physical possession of the Three. I don't even need to know where they are. I just need to control them."

But how? Bind them to something even more powerful than themselves. Except that, at the moment, no such thing existed.

He would make the Ring he'd wanted to make for himself, and he would bind the Three to it.

"Help me put the table back the way it was. And bring me some more ink, the rest had soaked into the carpet."

He picked up the chair he knocked over, and gathered up sheets of paper from the floor. The Steward returned with a new inkwell.

"Close the door when you leave. And don't let anyone in to see me," he said.

"Will that be all, then?" asked the Steward.

"Bring me my notebooks from the workshop."

He looked out the window at Orodruin, thinking. He heard the door being closed.

To bind the Three, he had to make the One. He could do this.

When he came to Mordor from Eregion ninety years ago, he brought with him a finished design for the Ring. He could have forged it right then, and he would have, except that he was distracted with everyday matters like establishing himself as Dark Lord, breeding Orcs, and building his fortress.

It was time to forge the One. He would check the finished design for completeness and change it if necessary. He needed to identify the tools needed, and if he didn't have them already, he would need to make them. And he would need to prepare a quantity of the alloy from which the Ring would be made.

He remembered the first time he thought about making a Ring for himself. It was the day they made the first of the Great Rings. When it was quenched and the final enchantment was sung, Celebrimbor tried it on. Mairon could tell from his face that he felt something pretty impressive. Later that night,

Mairon came back to the workshop alone and tried it on; he felt nothing.

Celebrimbor said the more native power you had, the more you felt it. Celebrimbor never believed that Mairon's powers were beyond his own.

It appeared that the Great Rings amplified power up to a certain point, but after that, they stopped working. Consequently, the Great Rings enhanced the natural abilities of Elves, but they didn't work for him.

If he wanted a Ring for himself, he would have to make something stronger than the ones they were making for the Elves.

At his house, he worked late into the evening filling notebook after notebook with ideas. He considered a number of designs to enhance his Maia abilities, like shaping the landforms of the Earth, influencing the Free Peoples, or controlling the creatures of Melkor.

But before he made any of his designs, he had to find a heat source. All his designs required temperatures that could be found only in dragon's fire. Most of the dragons that could product that kind of heat were gone, but even if they weren't, he would have had a hard time winning their cooperation.

Soon after, he made a secret trip to Mordor. When he was there, he climbed the slopes of Orodruin, which he did whenever he was in Mordor. The volcano sprang to life as he approached. He looked down into the caldera. Instead of using dragon's fire, what if he used the volcano for the forging? Would it be hot enough? It was hard to be sure. How would he get to the lava? How would he avoid dropping his work, or falling in? What sort of tools could withstand those temperatures, and how would he make them?

Over the next several trips, he enlarged a chamber around the Cracks of Doom, and set up his workshop, the Sammath Naur, the Chamber of Fire. He did some simple projects to practice using lava as a heat source. After that, he could have made the Ring any time he was in Mordor. He had a workable design, and he had something hot enough to forge it in.

The Steward came back with his notebooks. The stack of

leather bound volumes reached almost to the man's chin. Somewhere in those volumes was the finished design, the one he was going to build.

"Put them anywhere," He waved his hand towards the corner of the table.

He arranged the notebooks in order according to the numbers on their spines. He picked up the first one and skimmed through it. It all came back to him. The earliest entries were about amplifying a specific one of his native abilities, like finding gold deep underground, speaking unfamiliar languages, or controlling the weather.

Each time he found a new design, he wrote its name on the top of a blank sheet of paper. After a few hours, he had half a dozen pages arrayed in front of him: Languages, Minerals, Storms, Shape Shifting, Creatures, Structures. He filled in each sheet with a description of what the design did, with a schematic of how it worked and any drawings, diagrams, or calculations that might be useful.

He frowned; his single-purpose designs weren't as mature as he remembered. They were concept sketches rather than blueprints, and not even close to ready to build. For some reason, he thought he'd gone further with them.

Noon - He read through his notebooks and wrote down everything that might be useful. By midday, he'd filled every sheet of paper he had, and sent for more. A servant returned with new writing materials, as well as food and drink, but he left it untouched. He didn't want to stop writing long enough to eat.

By the time he closed the last notebook, he'd found three finished designs: Influence, Landforms, and War. Influence would enhance his ability to influence and persuade the Free Peoples of Arda. Landforms would magnify his ability to shape mountains and rivers, and War would help him to raise an army and lead it. He could have taken any one of them to Orodruin that day.

He cleared the table of everything else and arranged the sheets with the three finished designs in front of him. He

looked at them with satisfaction. Logical, compete, and well thought out; they represented some of his best work.

But something was bothering him. Where was his best design of all, the one he intended to make? A composite of several specialized designs, it would amplify all of his abilities at once. He double-checked the pages on the table of, one for each design, and like he thought, it wasn't there. He paged through his notebooks; it wasn't there either. He frowned. He was sure it was among the finished designs; he had a distinct memory of working on it, but he couldn't find it.

3:00 pm - The view of Orodruin filled the window; fountains of yellow lava sprayed into the air and fell to its cinder-black slopes.

"My Lord?" His Steward's voice brought him back to the present.

His Steward came in with a mug of tea; he set the mug at his elbow and began to withdraw.

"Wait!" Mairon said.

If the missing design was anywhere, it would be in his most recent notebook, the one he was keeping right now.

"Go to my room and get the notebook on my desk. If it's not there, look in the bottom of my clothes chest."

A few minutes later, the steward returned with the notebook in his hand. Mairon leafed through it. It was filled with plans for construction of the fortress, particularly the massive central tower he hadn't yet been able to build. He found lists of all the things the Ring should do, but no finished designs, not even renderings or sketches. He reached the last page. The composite design, the one he planned to make, wasn't there.

With a sinking feeling, he remembered the notebook he left behind under the floorboards in his house in Eregion. That's where it is; and he couldn't go back and get it, obviously. He slammed his fist on the table.

But the notebooks he kept before it should contain the early work leading up to the composite design. He should be able to reconstruct the composite design from that.

He went back and leafed through the older notebooks. There

was no trace of the composite design, not even a short description or a rough sketch. He slammed it shut, and called his Steward over.

"Can you have a look at this for me? I'm not seeing what's right in front of me."

"Your handwriting is legible, but it's written in a language I don't know," the Steward said.

The Steward closed the notebook and handed it back to him. The notebooks were written in Valarin², with a sprinkling of Sindarin words and phrases; he wrote the way he spoke in his head.

He was surprised his Steward couldn't read his notes. Sindarin was the most widely spoken language in Arda, and included words like Mordor (Black Land), Gorgoroth (Horror of Horrors), and Orodruin (Mountain Burning). And Lugbúrz (Prison Dark) and Ash Nazg (One Ring) were technically Valarin phrases, because Black Speech was pigeon Valarin. Melkor had many admirable traits, but originality wasn't one of them.

He leafed through the pages again, but found nothing.

"Somewhere, I have a finished design that combines the best features of all the others. I can't find it, but I know it's there," said Mairon.

"Or not. Something like that happened to my cousin. He went to a fair and looked at dozens of horses, but there wasn't anything he liked. The next morning, he remembered he'd seen the perfect animal: a chestnut color, with sound legs, good bloodlines, and not too expensive.

"He raced to the fairgrounds and talked to every trader there, with no luck. He did find one horse with the same chestnut color, but it was swaybacked. Another had the good compartment he remembered, but a terrible disposition. And the one with impressive bloodlines was ruinously expensive. He searched everywhere, but he never did find his horse."

"Oh," Mairon said, very quietly.

² The language of the Valar, and Mairon's mother tongue.

He closed the notebook and put it down with the others. The notebook under the floorboards contained sketches of fortress designs, and nothing else.

He was disappointed, but the only thing to do was press on. He had a number of specialized designs to choose from, all finished and ready to go. He would pick one and make it, and then he would bind the Three.

He arranged the pages of specialized designs in front of him and reviewed each one, Influence, Landforms, and War. How mature was the design? Was it structurally sound? How hard to make? And finally, much of his own power would he have to put into it? Some designs cost more than others, but all of them were more than he wanted to spend.

Unfortunately, Structures did not make the cut. That was a disappointment. It was one of the designs he attached great importance to. It would have allowed him to strengthen the foundations for his Tower and still bind the Three. However, it was not as mature as he remembered.

He didn't want to choose a specialized design. Whatever he picked, it meant giving up something else. Influence and Structures were his first choices, but all the designs were important to him.

He decided to make Influence. He saw being persuasive as his most important attribute. It helped him wield political influence, lead an army, and talk his way out of a bad spot. He was already manipulative and deceptive, and he lied with great skill. It was the basis of his power, so that was the attribute he chose to enhance.

He made his decision, but he wasn't happy. All day, he'd been making compromises and lowering his expectations.

6:00 pm - The light outside faded. A servant came in to light the lamps. He sent him to get more paper and ink.

There was a knock on the door.

"What?" he said.

His Steward came in, carrying a tray.

"I said 'What?' I didn't say 'Come in.'"

The Steward set the tray down on a chair. There wasn't a free space on the table anywhere.

"I brought you something to eat," said the Steward. He fixed him a plate and set it down at his elbow.

"I'm not hungry," said Mairon.

"Suit yourself," he said. He pulled a chair over to the table and sat down.

"Well, I am hungry, but I don't want to stop right now."

"Take a break. Five minutes won't kill you."

Mairon pushed some papers aside to clear a space.

"So, what's going on?" asked the Steward.

"This morning, I was so sure I could do it. And I can, but I'm not happy about it."

"What's the problem?"

"It does less than expected, and costs more than I planned to spend."

"Well, can you afford it?"

"Technically yes, but it's not that simple. I have the resources, but I'd planned to spend them on something else. Now I have to choose."

"Between what and what?"

"Making the Ring, or strengthening the foundations of the Tower."

"You can't give up the Tower." The Steward looked appalled.

"The stone blocks are all ready, after centuries of work. The fittings, door hinges and window glass and roof slates, are sitting in workshops ready to go. Once the foundations are strengthened, the Tower just needs to be assembled. It will go up quickly. You can't abandon the Tower, not now!"

The Steward was right. Mairon was in charge, but his Steward was his chief advisor, and he should at least listen to what he had to say.

"Let's say I listened to you and stayed with my plan to strengthen the foundations. I'd have to give up plans to make the Ring, and with it, any hope of binding the Three."

"Are they important? You only learned of their existence this morning."

"I'm going to punish Celebrimbor,"

He realized he was clenching his teeth. He stared off in the distance, lost in thought, and shook his head to clear it.

"I'm going to bind the Three. I'm going to take back what's mine."

"You'd give up the Tower to punish Celebrimbor?"

"I'd give up the Tower to make my Ring and bind the Three."

"Can you bind the Three? Are you willing to bet the Tower on it?"

He had no idea. He didn't know anything about them.

"Yes," he said.

"You do realize you're being irrational?" said the Steward.

7:00 pm - After the Steward left, he sat down at the table and thought about what to do next.

Even though they disagreed, the Steward had, in fact, talked him out of making Influence if it meant giving up the Tower. But he also knew he was still going to make his Ring.

He opened his current notebook, the one the steward brought from his room, and began writing. His first thought was to make the Structures design. Then he could use the Ring to strengthen the foundations, and still bind the Three.

But he knew that if he made a Ring, it would have to be a composite design. Influence, Landforms, Structures, War, Languages, and Creatures, they were all important.

He would merge the specialized designs into a single unified whole. But how? They were all so different, for the most part, they weren't mutually compatible. As an experiment, he tried to modify Landforms to include Structures, but in spite of their similarity, the composite was unstable and would have fallen apart. He tried again with Influence and Languages, but he couldn't merge them, either.

10:00 pm - Mairon rarely stayed up past nine or ten o'clock at night, but late in the evening, he was still at his desk, trying to make it work.

I'm looking at this wrong. I'm trying to create a composite by merging specialized designs. What I need is something general purpose, something that will enhance any attribute I

happen to have.

He started over from scratch. He thought about fundamental principles, and was careful not to get caught up in details. Soon he had a rough outline for a general design he thought would work. It could be used to strengthen the foundations. It would magnify his influence over others. It would help him to raise an army and achieve victory in battle.

Close to midnight, the pieces started falling into place. It was an excellent design, better than anything he'd done before. But it would take time to finish. Still, he felt confident that he could complete it in under ten years.

He worked through the calculations to find out how much it would cost. Each of the specialized designs took as much as he was willing to spend, and more than he was happy about. He expected the general design to cost him even more.

He added up the numbers, then leaned back in his chair, reeling in shock. It wasn't just more than he was willing to part with, it was more than he had.

Midnight - He was stalled. When the watch changed at midnight, he was still sitting at his desk, drawing pictures of volcanoes and dragons on scraps of paper, and drinking cold tea.

He was still looking for a way to build his design without the ruinous expense, and was getting exactly nowhere. He tried another tack. Perhaps he could reduce the cost by doing less, and keeping it simple.

He worked through page after page of calculations, and learned that one of the capabilities, military success, added more to the total cost than all of the other capabilities combined.

Why would War cost so much? He wrote a list of each capability and its cost, and ordered it from least expensive to most. There was a pattern. Intrinsic Maia abilities, like shape shifting, raising storms, or changing the course of a river, cost the least. Things on the border, like learning languages or building structures, cost more. Things that weren't Maia attributes at all, like leading armies against Elves and Men, cost

the most.

Suppose he dropped War from the general design? What would happen if the Ring didn't bring him victory in battle? Probably nothing. He preferred to achieve those ends through diplomacy, propaganda, and fear. And the design still included Control of Melkor's creatures, so he could raise an army of Orcs and control them easily. He decided that War was too expensive and could be dropped.

Another simplification was the choice of alloy.

He'd always planned to make his Ring from iron, his favorite metal. It made him think of the Iron Crown. But iron was brittle, had a grain to it, and was subject to corrosion. It was too hard to work with for what he was trying to do.

He briefly considered making the Ring from tilkal, an alloy of copper, silver, tin, lead, iron, and gold. It was red or green, depending on the light, and was famed for its hardness. But nothing about tilkal was simple. He probably wouldn't have been able to mix it anyway. Just as well. It would be like wearing a link of Angainor on his hand. He preferred not to be reminded of the chain that bound his Master.

Several of the Great Rings, including the first one they made, were Mithril, which was hard and brittle. It was difficult to work with, and it wasn't a pretty color. Most people loved Mithril, but it looked like tin to him; but then, he wasn't interested in Silmarils either.

Make it from gold. Gold was easy to work with, malleable, and stable. Just make a plain gold band. Leave off the gemstones and ornamentation. Make it simple and strong, like yourself, and it will pack a punch like a sledgehammer.

He worked through the numbers again. Between dropping War and using gold, he was able to reduce the cost from 'totally out of the question' down to 'painfully expensive'.

But he still clung to the hope that if he were clever enough, he could forge the Ring without investing any of his own power in it., or at least, not so much that it was painful.

Was there a way to do it? What would the Elven smiths have done? Something elegant and sleek. They would have made something flexible and stable, that would do a little of

everything. Most of all, it would do exactly what was needed and nothing more. It wouldn't cost any more than it had to, because nothing would be wasted.

If he worked on the design for hundreds of years to the exclusion of everything else, maybe he could pull it off, and maybe not.

Although realistically, if he built a house, it would be all heavy timbers and cross braces, with more nails than necessary. An Elvish design would be light and airy, soaring. But if he could, just this once, do something light and airy and soaring, he might be able to pull this off.

He realized he was never going to come up with an Elvish design. He'd already been working on this project for hundreds of years, and he wasn't even close. He wasn't an Elven smith like Celebrimbor or Fëanor. He was someone solid and workmanlike, like Aulë; his Ring would be the same.

He considered his design. The cost was higher than he wanted to pay, but not higher than he was able to pay. All night, he'd been trying to solve the problem of how to do this without paying the price; now he knew.

The answer had been right in front of him all the time. He would have to do what he had been trying to avoid; put in his own power, however much he wished to avoid it.

2.00 am - Mairon was at home in the Mansions of Aulë, which for some reason was also the Gwaith-i-Mírdain. Tharbad was nearby, but so was the Circle of Doom. He sat at his place at the long table with the other Maiar and the Aulëndil. For some reason, the Jewel Smiths were there too.

He spent his days working with Celebrimbor in the workshops at the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, and at night, he climbed the stairs to the apprentices' dormitory, and slept in the same bed he did when he was young.

Then, Celebrimbor said something that made Aulë turn against him. He'd committed an evil deed? He wasn't a good craftsman? He never did learn what it was.

When he went up to the dormitory, he saw that his bed had been stripped and his clothes chest was empty. Downstairs, his

workbench had been swept bare; his tools and his work were gone. When he realized he was in trouble, he knew he has to leave, immediately. There were no people around; he never had a chance to say goodbye, not even to Aulë.

He stepped out into the street. The heavy door swung of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain closed behind him and clicked shut. He spun around, startled. He pounded on the door and tried to open the latch, but the door was barred against him.

Mairon woke with a start. He was sitting at the long table in his study, which was entirely covered in paper. His fingers were blue with ink, and crumpled balls of paper littered the floor around the hearth, which had burned down to coals. He shook his head to clear it.

The Ring only had to do two things, bind the other nineteen, and make the foundation for his tower. He picked up a quill and got back to work.

4:00 am - He turned to the next problem, binding the Three. He'd never seen them. He didn't know how they were made. He might not even have the ability to understand them, not even if he watched them being made.

It seemed like an insolvable problem.

He knew how to bind the others. When he first came to Eregion and joined the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, he had no particular plan other than to live among civilized people for a while, and win a place among them by teaching them what he knew.

He became an important person in Eregion. In the courtyard at the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, mural of himself teaching the jewel smiths dominated the courtyard. It was painted above a small stage, like an altar piece. He looked larger than life, like a god. He wondered if it was still there.

He was the one who first proposed making the Rings of Power. He supported Celebrimbor's ambition to make his workshop as great as Fëanor's. Then Annatar would become an influential figure among the Elves. They would admire him for his strength and skill, and rely on him for protection.

At some point, before the first of the Great Rings was forged, he began to feel anxious about losing control of them. What if the Elves weren't grateful to him for all he'd done? What if they

didn't listen to his advice?

How could he maintain control of the Great Rings after he'd lost physical possession of them? He wanted the rings to convey strength and wisdom to the Noldor Lords who wore them, but he also wanted to retain his influence over the Rings.

He modified the design so that, after they were forged, the rings could be bound at a later time. Because he found it pleasing if a feature served several purposes, he made the binding feature double as a minor structural element, too important to be left off, but not important enough to attract any attention.

He kept meaning to mention it to Celebrimbor, but whenever he started to say something, someone interrupted them, or some crisis came up in the workshop. In all the time they were actively forging Rings, he never managed to have that conversation.

5:00 am - It started to get light. The things he was writing stopped making sense. He stood up stiffly and headed for bed. When he lay down, he felt like the room was spinning. He was exhausted but too wired to sleep. He still didn't know how to bind the Three. He didn't know how they were made. He didn't know where they are, or who had them now.

And then it came to him. What he didn't know didn't matter. He knew Celebrimbor, and Celebrimbor, like every other craftsman, built new things on existing foundations. It was true that new techniques were used to make the Three, but for the most part, they were probably made like the others. The hidden binding feature in the sixteen will also be in the Three.

He didn't have to do anything different. The Three will bind exactly the same as the others.³

³ In the language of Object Oriented Programming, the Elven Rings inherited from the sixteen Great Rings. The binding function, which Annatar bundled with other housekeeping utilities, was too useful to delete and too mundane to examine closely.