

March 21 The Slopes of Orodruin



he wind let up for a few minutes, and the fumes from the volcano swirled around them, sulfur and soot and acid smoke. His Chief Assistant coughed and rubbed his eyes.

“Oh, that reeks!” the man said.

Mairon drew a deep breath. To an earth spirit like himself, the bitter fumes smelled like the creation of the world, rivers of fire deep underground, gems and minerals, the birth of mountains. He smiled to himself. “Actually, I like it.”

They arrived in late afternoon. The servants had already set up camp. A dozen tents were pitched upwind of the campfire. Tent canvas flapped in the wind, which blew almost continuously at this altitude, three thousand feet above the plane of Gorgoroth.

Orodruin, the burning mountain, was only ten miles from Lugbúrz¹, but it was a difficult trip even on horseback. For every two steps they took up the cinder cone, they slid back one. In places, the road was gone, blocked by new lava flows, or fallen away entirely. Whenever Mairon visited his workshop, he camped on the cinder road in front of the Sammath Naur rather than return home at night.

Mairon kicked his feet free of the stirrups and dropped to the ground. He tossed the reins to a servant, then undid the buckles of his saddlebag and pulled out a bound leather book. The servant offered to take it from him, but Mairon waved him off.

¹ Lugbúrz = Barad-dûr

The Slopes of Orodruin

The notebook contained the final design for the Ring, page after page of notes, calculations, and drawings. He'd been working on it for years, and now it was finished. It wasn't elegant or beautiful like something Celebrimbor's work, but it was reliable and solid, and it did almost everything he wanted it to. He would have to put some of his own power into it, although not so much that it would break him. But no matter, whatever he sunk into it, he'd more than get back.

In a leather purse on his belt, he also carried an ingot cast from an alloy of gold and iron, from which he would forge the Ring. If the ingot were ordinary gold, he'd keep it with the other supplies and tools. But it was hard to mix, and he couldn't replace it easily. The notebook and the ingot were precious, and he would keep them on his person until the forging began.

He tucked the notebook under his arm and walked to the entrance of the Sammath Naur, the Chamber of Fire. Cinders crunched under his boots, and tremors shook the ground beneath his feet. Even before he reached it, he could hear a dull rumble from within.

He entered the chamber with his helpers following close behind. Inside, the roar was even louder. Orange light flickered from the crack in the floor and played on the ceiling high above them. In the still air, the heat was intense. He began sweating the moment they came in. Within minutes, he was dripping wet.

Originally, the Sammath Naur was a natural cave extending into the mountain's core. A fissure cleaved the floor from wall to wall, reaching down to the lake of molten rock beneath the mountain.

A hundred years ago, when he claimed Mordor for his own, he enlarged the cave into a chamber large enough to house his workshop and forge.

An anvil rested on a granite slab at the edge of the crack. There was no fence or protective barrier against missteps.

Racks against the wall within easy reach of the anvil held the tools of a smith: pliers, chisels, awls, and the countless sizes and shapes of hammers and tongs.

Ring

A heavy cabinet against the back wall held delicate instruments. On its highest shelf, a dozen hourglasses were clearly labeled and lined up in order of size, from ten seconds to an hour.

In the center of the chamber, far back from the edge, there was an ordinary forge of the sort found in any village smithy, fueled by wood and charcoal. It was surrounded by the normal tools of a blacksmith: anvil, bellows, racks of tools, and a slake barrel for quenching hot metal.

Near to the forge was a massive workbench. Delicate instruments: scales, bimetallic coils to measure temperature, and glassware full of solvents were arranged on its surface.

Near the main workbench, there were other work stations: an annealing bed, benches for grinding and for cold forging, and a long table where the scribes could sit to write or do calculations. People working there sat on three legged stools; anything else would teeter on the flagstones.

Mairon went to the scribes' table and unrolled a long scroll. He used small bags of lead to weigh down the corners. The scroll illustrated the entire process he would follow to forge the One Ring. Each step was shown in the order it would be performed, with arrows showing how the steps were related.

He planned to forge the Ring in a single day, working from first light until it was done. He thought it would take eight or ten hours to finish.

While his helpers unpacked the tools and supplies brought from Lugbúrz, he edged over to the crack and looked down. He saw boiling rock far below, yellow and orange under the grey dross that formed on its surface.

When he came to Mordor to live, almost a century ago, he announced his presence by lighting the volcano. During the forging, he would raise the molten rock almost to the chamber floor, and in this unimaginable heat, he would forge the Ring.

The chamber was too hot to stay in for any length of time, so as soon as they finished setting up, they went back outside. The breeze felt good. Sweat made his hair stick to his face, and plastered his clothes to his skin, and of all of them, he was the one who could stand the heat the best.

The Slopes of Orodruin

They went to the campsite to get something to drink. The only water up here was what they'd brought with them. The servants untied wooden casks from the saddles of pack animals and lined them up at the edge of the campsite where they doubled as seating. For tomorrow, he'd leave orders that water casks would be placed in the workshop, as well.



Hours later, when he'd done everything he could think of to prepare for the next day, he called a halt to the work. His smiths and helpers laid down their tools, hung their aprons on hooks, and gathered up every last scrap of paper to be locked away until they returned the next morning. Mairon forbade anything pertaining to the Forging of the Ring, whether sketch or plan or calculation, be left unwatched overnight.

Mairon left the Chamber and stepped onto the slope of the mountain. The cool air struck his face. He shivered and wrapped his cloak more tightly around himself.

To the East, a deeper shadow against the purple sky revealed the outlines of Lugbúrz, its sharp edges blurred by concealing mists. In one of the gatehouse towers, a window glowed with yellow lamplight.

Above the curtain walls, the base of the Tower rose twenty stories or more. Its jagged upper edge, where construction stopped, marked the point where the Tower's own weight had begun to crush the foundations beneath it.

Mairon stood for a moment, lost in thought. Then he turned and began the descent towards camp, his people followed close behind him. The cinders of the narrow path crunched beneath his boots.

He rounded the shoulder of the mountain and saw that even at this hour, the last light of the day was not quite gone. The sky to the West glowed like burnished copper, and the clouds were rippled like a mudflat when the tide is low.

Camp smelled of wood smoke and roasting meat. Mairon thought he was too keyed up to eat, but when a servant put a plate in his hands, blackened meat, turnips, and the bread

Ring

already buttered, he fell on them like wolf-Sauron, at one time his accustomed form.

When he'd finished eating, he stood and addressed the hand-selected group who would assist him the next day. Some of them were goldsmiths who would work with him during the Forging itself. The rest would perform small tasks like fetching tools and reading aloud from notes.

The Forging of the Ring wasn't really about gold-smithing, it was about creating a magical object. Much of the work would involve casting layer upon layer of enchantments over the piece. But there were no sorcerers among his helpers because he'd deliberately excluded them.

It wasn't that he couldn't use their help. It would be nice someone to handle the simpler spells, to take over for a few minutes when he was tired, or to help diagnose a problem if there were any glitches along the way. And it wasn't as if there were no sorcerers at his court. The most ambitious ones from Umbar, Rhûn, and Haradwaith came to Mordor to study under him. Many of them had impressive skills.

The helpers he chose would witness everything he did, but they wouldn't understand what they were seeing. That's how he wanted it, his methods were secret. No, that wasn't it. Someone who understood his work might find fault with it, and he couldn't stand to be judged.

"Tomorrow, we'll walk through the entire process. We'll stand in the same places, use the same tools, and follow the same timeline as we will then. You each know the part you will play.

"I want things to go absolutely smoothly when we do this for real. Anything that might go wrong, we will fix beforehand.

"And one more thing. You're all accustomed to working in the forge. But when we do this, you'll be exposed to more heat than you've ever felt in your lives."

He bade them good evening and retreated to his tent for the night.

March 22 The Rehearsal



Mairon woke in his tent on the slopes of Orodruin shivering. It was chilly on the mountainside, the wind blew unceasingly.

The smell of wood smoke and freshly brewed tea made its way through the rotten egg smell from the volcano. The servants must be up already, and breakfast must be close to ready.

Mairon dressed quickly and pushed aside the tent flap. The others were already standing around the fire pit. He climbed on a rock and clapped his hands. They turned toward him and fell silent.

“Attention!”

The volcano roared like a river flooding its banks. He had to shout to be heard over it.

“Today is a rehearsal, but let’s make it as real as we can. Follow me!”

He led the way to the door of the Sammath Naur. They assembled at the back of the chamber where it was cooler. He put his notebook on the corner of a workbench and assigned two workers to guard it, then turned to address his people. “Let us begin.”

Protective clothing was laid out in rows on a bench: long sleeved leather gloves and thick soled boots, piles of heat resistant clothing, and for those working closest to the crack, leather hoods with goggles of mica to protect their eyes.

He’d never worked in protective gear before. Like any blacksmith, he usually wore a linen shirt and wool leggings,

under a heavy leather apron and sturdy boots, but he didn't wear gloves.

It was time to suit up. He tied back his hair, then put on a padded leather tunic over his shirt and pulled the thick leather leggings over his woolen hose. The boots were taller than he usually wore, and hard to walk in. The gloves were rigid gauntlets that reached to the elbow. He put the hood on last. It limited his vision. He could only see what was directly in front of him, and that was dark and distorted by the mica.

There were complaints from the smiths. The gloves would make them clumsy. They couldn't see through the mica. He was endangering the success of the project. Mairon ignored them.

A helper gave each of them a script describing what he needed to do in the first phase of the procedure. Mairon checked his script against the master timeline on the workbench. The two versions of the procedure agreed.

He walked up to an anvil mounted on a slab of granite at the edge of the crack. In the Sammath Naur, they couldn't attach it to a block of wood, it would burn.

"I'll raise the molten rock to the floor of the chamber and hold it there, to make sure I can do it tomorrow."

Deep in the crack, molten rock glowed yellow-orange beneath a mantle of poisonous fumes. He willed it to fill the chasm, to flood it like the tide coming in. With a great roar, the magma rose almost to his feet.

The heat became almost unbearable, and the others backed away, leaving him alone at the edge of the crack. He rehearsed the motions he would go through tomorrow while his assistants watched from eight or ten feet away.

He completed a sequence and prepared to begin the next one. He motioned for the scribe to bring him the script, but while he was reading it beside the edge, the paper burst into flames. He gave an order for all the scripts to be rewritten on parchment before the Forging.

After he read the next step aloud, he joined the others in the back of the chamber where it was cooler. He set the tongs down on the workbench and started to pull off his hood. The tongs hit

The Rehearsal

the floor with a crash and made him jump. He bent down and put them back on the workbench, avoiding the eyes of the others.

"I meant to do that." he said, avoiding their eyes.

His people were right. The gauntlets made it hard to hold a pair of tongs. The mask was uncomfortable, and he couldn't see well through the eye slits. He pulled it off and tossed it aside, then returned to the edge. He smelled something pungent, which he assumed was fumes from the pit below.

"Your hair is on fire!" an apprentice yelled.

He dropped his hammer. The apprentice grabbed his hair in a gloved fist to smother the flames. When he let go, Mairon pulled off his own glove and touched his hair. It felt brittle and wiry, and it crumpled in his hand.

They finished up after dark. He gathered the group together and made the announcement.

"The rehearsal was a success. Tomorrow at dawn, we will begin the Forging."

He heard murmurs of excitement. They walked back to camp in a group, where they crowded around the water barrels, then went off to change into less sweaty clothes.



They sat around the campfire that night, perched on barrels and saddles and convenient boulders. Mairon was weary, but deeply satisfied with the progress he'd made so far.

The cook ladled food onto tin plates and passed them around while a servant filled tin cups from a wine skin. They talked about every single thing that happened during the rehearsal, discussing what had worked well and what could be changed.

"Chief, one suggestion. Why don't we put a line of sandbags along the edge of the crack and move the anvil back a foot or two? I'm just thinking, what if something gets dropped? You wouldn't want it to roll into the crack." said his Chief Assistant.

Mairon bristled. "Are you implying I'm clumsy?"

"No, no, not at all. But accidents do happen."

Ring

Mairon set his plate down on a rock and made a sweeping gesture.

“Oh really? When have you ever seen me....”

His hand struck the edge of the plate and sent it flying. It landed face-down in the cinders.

“Umm... You said sandbags? Fine, whatever,” said Mairon.



he tent canvas flapped in the wind, which rose and fell but never ceased entirely. Orange light from the volcano played on the tent canvas during the long hours of the night. When the grey dawn arrived, Mairon didn't so much wake as give up trying to sleep. He lay in his cot, knowing he should get up, but putting it off.

So many things could go wrong. His design might be flawed. He might misinterpret a procedure. He might not even have the skill to make his own design.

Or suppose it failed over something trivial. What if he accidentally skipped a step? What if he dropped something? What if when casting a spell, his memory failed him and he forgot the words? There were so many things he wanted to double check once more before he did this.

Or suppose the task was beyond him. What if he'd overestimated his own abilities?

He got dressed and put the notebook on the corner of his bed. He pushed the tent flap aside. No one else was up, and the fire had gone out during the night. He went over to the servants' tent and called out, "Sirrah, make me a cup of tea."

A boy appeared a moment later. He ran to the campfire pit and blew on the cold embers. When no flames sprang to life, he produced a tin box from his pocket and took out flint, steel, and tinder.

"Let me do it." Mairon waved the boy aside.

Two or three half-burned logs from yesterday lay in the fire pit, ash grey and half unburned.

Ring

He focused his thoughts on yellow flames reaching into the air, on embers carried high in the air by the fire's updraft, on the heat from the fire's heart. The logs in front of him burst into flame, sap popped, and heat warmed his face.

The boy backed away and made the sign of the evil eye.

"After you get the tea started, tell the cook to start breakfast." Mairon called after him.

How superstitious these peasants were; it wasn't necromancy, it was just fire starting. Anyone with a lesson or two in magic could do it.

He realized he wasn't holding his notebook. It wasn't on a rock nearby; his heart skipped a beat. He raced back to his tent; the notebook was on the foot of his cot, right where he'd left it.

When he came back, a servant was pouring tea; the smiths and scribes were huddled around the campfire, drinking from steaming cups. The group hummed with the buzz of excited conversation. His Chief Assistant brought a cup of tea to him. It slipped from his hand, and tea soaked his sleeve and the front of his tunic.

The cook prepared a substantial breakfast for them. Mairon planned to keep working until they finished, probably in late afternoon, without taking a midday break.

He was too nervous to eat; he could barely manage a cup of tea. He paced on the cinder road. Maybe he shouldn't do this. He wasn't ready.

He told his Chief Assistant, "I think we can finish in ten hours. If we start just after six, we'll finish a two in the afternoon." A line formed between the man's brows, and Mairon slapped his forehead. "I mean eight hours."

The sun started to come up. He meant to get started before sunrise, he was making them late. They had a successful rehearsal the day before. There was no reason not to go ahead. He stood to make the announcement.

"Follow me. We have work to do." he said.

The smiths and helpers around the campfire jumped up to their feet, grinning.

He led them to the door of the Sammath Naur. Everything was ready, laid out the evening before. Gloves and masks were

The Failure of Nerve

laid out on the bench in rows. The scroll which showed the process they would follow lay unrolled on the work table, ready to go.

This was the most difficult task he'd ever attempted. It pushed the very limits of his skill. So much could go wrong, and if it did, it could finish him. His heart was pounding, and he couldn't catch his breath. He barely slept the night before, which left him feeling dull witted and clumsy. It wasn't safe to attempt this today.

He turned his back to the chasm. Flickering orange light played across the faces of his people. "Attention, there's been a change in plans. We'll begin the Forging tomorrow."

There were dismayed looks, and murmuring in the ranks.

"But why?" one of them asked.

"Because I said so."

They filed out together. Later, he returned to the workshop and sat down at the table. He spent the rest of the day reviewing his design to make sure it was sound. As far as he could tell, it was.



The Ring was devised for a single purpose, to bind the Great Rings that he and Celebrimbor made. Before the first of them was forged, he included a latching mechanism in the design, and put it in a utilitarian part of the structure where it wouldn't be noticed. But he quickly discovered that while he knew how to make a Binding Ring, but at the moment he didn't have the ability. It couldn't be made in an ordinary forge, it required the temperatures found in dragons' fire.

When he was driven from Eregion, he came to Mordor to live. He discovered that the fires of Orodruin were as hot as dragon's fire. He had a design, he had a heat source. He could have forged the Binding Ring at any time.

But once he was away from the Ost-in-Edhil, the Great Rings seems less important. He had more immediate concerns: establishing himself as Dark Lord with his own people, forming alliances with Nurn and Haradwaith, and overseeing

Ring

the construction of his Tower, which consumed most of his attention.

Six hundred years ago, he began building the Tower on a promontory of the Ash Mountains, and when it was finished, he meant to raise an army to conquer all of Arda. The Tower rose until its foundations collapsed beneath it. Progress stalled until they could be strengthened by enchantments.

Then Celebrimbor forged the Three Rings. Mairon was determined to take them away from him.

He had to make the One Ring and bind the others to it. The One Ring had to be more powerful than any of the Rings it would bind. Like the foundations of his Tower, it would need an infusion of his own power.

He could afford to make either the Ring or the Tower, but not both.

He spent almost ten years trying to figure out how to make the Ring magnify his own power to the point that he could use it to strengthen the foundations. He could do it, but his early designs needed a bigger infusion of power than he had to give. Also, he struggled to fit all the parts into a small space. He could have made a sword, or a large pendant to wear around his neck, but since he planned to keep it on his person all the time, he wanted something he could wear all the time, that he wouldn't put down by accident and forget.

He was proud of the design he brought to Orodruin. It was small and didn't take more power than he could afford. It wasn't elegant, but it was sturdy and workmanlike. He read every page of his notebook and reviewed every aspect of his design; it was sound.

Late that afternoon, packhorses arrived with barrels of water. He gave their handler a message for his Steward. Send more provisions and water, they would be up here a few days longer than planned.



He was arranging layers of rock deep within the earth, giving form to the ochre and russet bands of mineral. They couldn't be shaped by force. He had to choose a point to apply

The Failure of Nerve

pressure slowly, steadily over time, and eventually they would yield.

But the browns and rusts, the gold and gemstones, weren't part of the earth at all, they were the silk garments of the nobility, embroidered in gold threads and bedecked with jewelry. He spoke with one of them and then another, and gradually he shaped the group's opinion to his liking.

His eyes snapped open.

Structures and Influence, which he thought were unrelated, were two different aspects of the same thing.

They were the two chief components of the Ring. Structures would allow him to use his abilities as an earth spirit to strengthen the foundations under his Tower, while Influence would enhance his ability to persuade. It would help him to form alliances with neighbors, and to lead an army.

He'd never seen the connection before, but once he did, it was obvious. It meant he could combine the two components and get a more efficient design. It shouldn't be that difficult.

He pulled on clothes over his nightshirt, found his boots, and headed for the Sammath Naur, a beacon of orange light in the side of the mountain. Even if he hadn't been one of the Holy Ones, and able to see in near darkness, he'd have found it easily.

He found pen and paper and began to write. He didn't want to wake up in the morning, knowing he'd had an important insight, but unable to remember what it was. When he was sure he'd captured everything, he went back to his tent and slept until morning.

March 24 The Redesign



There was no reason not to go ahead with the Forging today. He'd spent almost ten years developing the design, which was based upon a hundred years of thinking and planning. He reviewed his design countless times and knew it was sound. He cleaned up the procedures and led the team through a rehearsal. He slept well. At least, he did when at last he put down his pen and went back to bed. Everyone knew their part, and all the glitches had been ironed out. They were ready to go.

Except...he knew he could make the design better.

There was nothing wrong with his original design. It was plain and serviceable, and it got the job done, like a header beam over a door. But as of last night, he knew how to make an arch. Both structures can carry the weight, but an arch is stronger and more graceful.

At breakfast, he told his people he was going to push it back by one day. There was grumbling about the delay, but he ignored it.

He spent the rest of the day filling page after page in his notebook. He drew a schematic of the original design on the left and the new design on the right. Then he highlighted all the components affected by his new knowledge. The new design was like the original, only with fewer parts. This could work. He finished the redesign in late afternoon. When it was done, he reworked the procedures. He unrolled the master scroll on the table and weighted the corners down to hold it open. He found a blank scroll the same size, then dipped a quill in ink

The Redesign

and wrote out the new procedures. The new procedure was like the old one, only with steps omitted.

When he was finished, he found blank sheets of parchment and rewrote all the scripts, turning the pages long-ways so there was no chance of getting the two sets of scripts mixed up.

When he finished, he sent a servant to summon his craftsmen. When they were assembled, he showed them the scroll and pointed out the changes. He told them nothing about how monumentally important those changes were.



He sat around the fire with the others, waiting for the cook to serve the evening meal. He slumped against a saddle with his notebook balanced on his knee. His eyes were closed.

He was thinking about the rehearsal they'd run on the second day. The dry run tested the procedures, but told him nothing about the soundness of the design. He would have to review it himself. The trouble was, he'd been working on it so long, he saw what was in his mind, not what was on the paper in front of him.

He needed another set of eyes. He called his Chief Assistant over.

"Have a look at this. Read it out loud, and describe what you see." he said, opening the book to the start of the pages detailing the new design. His Assistant turned over a few pages, frowning.

"I don't recognize any of these symbols." he said. The symbols were used in the formulas to record spells. They would have been familiar to any sorcerer, although his Ring making spells were more subtle than most. He should have realized that, for someone unschooled in sorcery, his notes were impossible to read.

"Then I'll narrate, and you repeat back to me what you heard." Mairon said.

He took the notebook back and read aloud from it. He described the design in layman's terms while making an effort

Ring

to explain it as completely as possible. When he came to the last page, he looked up.

"I'm sorry, but I have absolutely no idea what you just said." His Chief Assistant shrugged.

Mairon closed the notebook. This wasn't a job for a layman. The review could only be done by a trained sorcerer, or better yet, by two or three sorcerers competing with each other to find flaws. If he sent a messenger to Lugbúrz, the best sorcerers in Mordor could be here in two or three days. But he'd excluded them for a reason. He didn't want anyone other than himself to know how to make the Ring.

Mairon sighed. He would have to do the final review himself.

That night, he lay awake, thinking. The new design was a good one. It was his best effort yet.

Except...He wasn't sure if he should attempt it tomorrow.

The new design was only a day old. He'd written out a clean copy of the procedure, and made scripts for all the participants, but he hadn't double checked them. The difference between the two designs was aesthetic more than anything else, so there wasn't any real reason to choose the new one, except that he liked it better. He would sleep on it and decide in the morning.



He was back in the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, where a statue of Celebrimbor wielding a jeweler's hammer guarded the main entrance. It was dark inside. The forge was roaring.

"Watch the color. It's the best way to gage the temperature of the piece. Careful, don't let it cool too quickly." he heard himself saying.

Celebrimbor was forging one of the Great Rings. Mairon stood at his elbow, giving advice and encouragement. Celebrimbor swung the hammer while he gave instructions and cast the more difficult spells. He was proud of how far Celebrimbor had come under his tutelage.

Then Celebrimbor stepped away from the anvil during an important part of the forging. Mairon, who understood

everything there was to know about making Rings, picked up the tongs and took over. But when he swung the hammer, he struck too hard and damaged the piece. He managed to repair it, but now it looked lopsided, amateurish, the work of a new apprentice, not a master craftsman.



He woke with a start, in his tent on the slopes of Orodruin.

What if Celebrimbor was the real maker of the Rings of Power, and he'd just been watching? He never made a Great Ring by himself, not from start to finish. He wasn't even sure he could.

Mairon never considered the possibility that Celebrimbor might be a better craftsman than he was. Celebrimbor was mortal and Mairon was divine, great among the people of Aulë the Smith. But the Elven smiths could do things the Valar couldn't. Fëanor, the most skilled among them, made the Silmarils ² and the Palantiri ³, which even Aulë couldn't have done.

Celebrimbor was Fëanor's grandson, and he'd inherited his grandfather's talent. Somehow Mairon hadn't noticed at first perhaps because Celebrimbor was a peacemaker, good-natured and compassionate. He was nothing like his fiery ancestor. Mairon never met Fëanor, but Melkor had. After a screaming confrontation with Fëanor over the Silmarils, Melkor had backed away, saying, "That is one bat-crap crazy Elf." ⁴

Mairon had apprenticed under Aulë, but he was not Aulë himself, not even close. The meaning sunk in and his stomach lurched. He came to the Gwaith-i-Mírdain as a teacher, yet he'd learned so much from the Elves. He was just too arrogant to appreciate it.

² The Silmarils are the Great Jewels, one of which survives as "Elendil, our most beloved star." (Venus)

³ The Palantiri (Palantir, plural) are the Seeing Stones

⁴ a quote from the excellent fanfic, "Sauron's Blog"

Ring

He was attempting more than he could handle. He should make another Great Ring first, to prove to himself he could do it, and then he would make the One. It was a good plan that wouldn't cost him any of his own power, just a few years of his time.

Except that the three Elven Rings were out there, and he had to get them back. There wasn't time for caution.

No more excuses. At first light tomorrow, he would enter the Sammath Naur and forge the Ruling Ring.

March 25 **The Forging - Morning**



Mairon was up before first light. Today was the day. There was little conversation around the campfire. He didn't feel like talking, so no one else spoke. He still hadn't decided which design to use, the lower risk of the original or the efficiency of the new one.

He could conduct another dry run today on the new design, and then review it some more. Was he being prudent, or just finding new reasons to put it off? He'd never been a coward, and he wasn't going to start now.

It was time to get ready. He studied his hands. The nails were long and filed to a point; they would get in the way. With a pang of regret, he unfolded the small knife he used to sharpen quills and cut his nails short.

Then he tied his hair back as tightly as he could with a leather thong. The lock that caught fire yesterday came loose and hung in his eyes. It was likely his hair would catch fire again today, and he didn't want any distractions.

Mairon called out, "Sirrah, come here."

The servant came over. Mairon gave him the folding knife, then pulled out the leather cord and shook his hair loose.

"Cut my hair."

He looked straight ahead and sat as still as he could. There was tension and a sawing motion, and a lock of brown hair fell to the ground. When the boy finished, Mairon touched the side of his head. He'd always worn his hair long. The short uneven clumps didn't feel like they were his.

Ring

His Chief Assistant came over to talk to him, looking at a script.

"I've asked everyone to...What happened to you?"

"It's bad, isn't it?"

"It's, well, it's pretty awful." agreed his Assistant.

Mairon got to his feet.

"Assemble in the Sammath Naur. We are about to begin."

He steeled his resolve and made the volcano rumble.

Tremors shook the ground beneath their feet, and off in the distance, a boulder bounced down the side of the mountain.

They entered the chamber. The scroll with the procedures lay unrolled on a work table, its edges held down with weighted leather bags. A scribe stood beside it, ready to call out the steps and strike them off as they were completed.

The tools needed for each step were laid out on trays. Every tool had a backup, stored where it would be easy to find. A helper read from a list to confirm that everything was where it should be.

What he was trying to do would require all the skill as he had. His mouth was dry, he wasn't sure he knew what he was doing.

Before they got started, Mairon wanted a moment alone. He stepped outside. He wanted to pray for help, or protection, or...he wasn't sure what.

Ilúvatar⁵, please let today be successful.

But that was just another way of saying, *You made me one of the greatest among the Maiar, but it isn't enough. I want more. He tried again.*

I ask for your blessing even though I know I don't deserve it.

He blinked hard, then wiped his eyes on his sleeve and went back inside.

The roar of the volcano must have drowned out the crunch of his boots on the gravel because he entered the chamber unnoticed. Someone was saying,

"...time sequence...procedures...Sauron..."

⁵ Ilúvatar (God) is equally protective of all the angels, including fallen ones like Sauron.

Morning

He recoiled, stung. Sauron meant foul or putrid in Sindarin. It was what the Elves had called him in the First Age. He thought he'd left the name behind forever when Melkor's realm was overthrown.

He was about to come down hard on the speaker, but as he listened more closely, he didn't hear any criticism or disrespect in the man's voice. His helper just sounded excited about what was happening today, that was all.

His people were supposed to call him Tar-Mairon⁶, his given name, or Zigûr, which meant Wizard in Black Speech. But since Tar-Mairon was Quenya for Admirable Lord, they may have thought it was a title he'd assigned to himself. Perhaps they thought Sauron⁷ was his real name.

"Places, everyone," he said in a calm voice.

He still didn't know which of the two designs he was going to build. He'd listed the pros and cons of each yesterday, but found they were evenly matched.

He had to decide. He took out a coin. The dragon favored the original design, the Iron Crown, the new design he drew up yesterday.

He tossed the coin in the air and stepped back, iron rang against stone. He knelt down to look. The image of Ancalagon the Black stared back at him.

The coin toss favored the original design. His gut twisted, this felt so wrong. He looked up at the circle of faces.

"I will make the new design," he said.

The scribe rolled up the scroll on the worktable and replaced it with the new one. An aide collected scripts from each of the participants and gave them new ones.

He walked toward the Sammath Naur. The magma was visible far below, through the fissure that cleaved the floor.

"Let us begin."

He ordered the fire to be lit in the charcoal forge. Until the

⁶ Tar-Mairon means Lord Mairon

⁷ "Neither does he use his right name, nor permit it to be spelt or spoken" said Aragorn about the S on the Uruk-Hai helmets. The Two Towers

Ring

ring became a magical object, it would be worked at ordinary temperatures through ordinary means.

He took out a small ingot from a pouch in his belt and set it on the workbench. It was a gold-iron alloy, matte and grey-white. He placed it in a miniature vise and sawed off one end, not quite half of the ingot, and placed it in a crucible.

As an afterthought, he shaved off a few more grey-white curls and added them to the initial chunk. Satisfied, he placed the crucible in the fire, while a helper loosened the ingot and dropped it in a box of leftover parts.

As the alloy melted, he sang an enchantment over the crucible. The words were in Black Speech in honor of Melkor, who devised a modified form of Valarin⁸ for his creatures to speak.

When the alloy was completely liquid, he poured it into a mold. He tapped the sides; air bubbles rose to the surface and pocked the silvery surface. It took over an hour for the metal to harden, When it did, he quenched the mold and broke the two halves apart. The casting inside was bright gold. The first enchantment had taken.

The gold circle, even though it was a magical object at this point, wasn't a ring yet, it was just a rough casting. Its surface had the grainy texture of the inside of the mold, and the channel where the gold had been poured needed to be cut off.

He heated the piece in the charcoal fire. At this point it could still be worked at ordinary temperatures. When the piece glowed red, he pulled it out and used a chisel to remove the spur of metal left over from casting, then quenched it in the slake barrel. Steam rose around the tongs. When he pulled it out, the scar was still visible. He filed it off, then put the piece back in the fire to smooth its surface.

He now had a plain gold ring. Each of the sixteen Great Rings had been made with gemstones and ornamentation, but they had been made for the Elves. He was only a visitor in the material world, his tastes were plain.

He sang the second spell over the ring. From now on, he

⁸ the language of the Valar

Morning

couldn't do the work in a traditional forge, ordinary temperatures were useless. As a test, he put the ring back in the charcoal fire for several minutes. The fire didn't even warm it.

The outside was finished, now he had to shape the inside. The real work was about to begin.

He placed the ring one pan of a jeweler's scale. A helper loaded the other pan with tiny brass weights until it balanced level. It was important to know exactly how much the ring weighed. His own power had weight⁹, not much, but enough to measure. If the transfer was successful, the Ring would weight more afterwards.

He prepared himself to go into the heat. He drank as much water as he could hold, and then pulled on the hood and gloves. He walked up to the anvil at the edge of the crack and raised the magma almost to the floor of the chamber. The others withdrew, driven back by the high temperatures.

He placed the Ring on a tool shaped like a hook and submerged it in the molten rock. When he judged the metal to be soft, he pulled it out and laid it on the anvil. He cast layer after layer of enchantments over it to create the internal structures of the Ring.

Each structure magnified one of his native Maia abilities. He attached the most importance to Influence and Construction, but he'd also found room in his design for Languages, Shape Shifting, Storms, and Landforms. There might be a way to magnify all his native abilities at once, but if so, he'd never discovered it.

He left out one component he would have liked to keep. The module called War would have been possible to build, but at great cost, and it never would have worked very well. The Ring magnified Maia abilities. Waging war against the Elves was not a native Maia ability.

Constructing the modules inside the softened metal was difficult. He couldn't see what he was doing; he had to go by

⁹ with apologies to Albert Einstein for using his idea about light having weight (theory of general relativity, where the weight of light is computed from $e = mc^2$)

Ring

what he saw in his mind's eye. And when they were finished, arranging them inside the Ring turned out to be harder than he expected. When he first considered how to bind the Great Rings to an object, he thought the object would be something large, like a dagger. He had no idea how to fit the parts into something smaller; however, he had to make an object he could carry all times that he wouldn't put down by accident.

He managed to make all the components inside the Ring. He teased the last one into the correct orientation, but made the previous one slip out of alignment. He'd to go back and fix that one. When everything was where it was supposed to be, he locked them in place. He gave it a gentle tap with the hammer to be sure that nothing inside was going to move.

He couldn't feel his tools very well through the heavy gloves, so he couldn't tell how hard he was hitting. The blow went wide and struck the tongs by mistake. He thought he saw something fly toward the edge. There was a small yellow hole in the grey scum that covered the surface of the magma, an arm's reach away.

He looked on the anvil to see if the ring was still there, but the hood had slipped and he couldn't see through the eye slits. He felt around for a place to put down the hammer and used both hands to straighten the hood. The small circle of gold wasn't there.

He needed to calm down. None of his own power was in it yet, and there was enough left of the alloy to make another. All he lost was a few hours of hard work. He considered what to do. Start over, and repeat everything he did this morning. Try to get as far as he got on the first try, then break in late afternoon. Start again in the morning.

Then he saw a gleam of gold on the floor. The ring was leaning against one of the sandbags. He bent down and picked it up.

March 25 **The Forging - Midday**



It was midday when Mairon finished making the internal components and fitting them in place. Now it was time to sink a portion of his own power into the Ring. It wouldn't be a huge amount, but after he committed himself, he couldn't get it back.

He prepared himself to do it. He cleared his mind of everything except the small piece of gold in front of him. Sweat ran down his sides. He began to sing the syllables of Black Speech which would invoke the spell. Then he hesitated.

He felt inhibited, closed off. He was distracted by the protective clothing. He couldn't see through the eye slits in the hood. The leather gauntlets made him clumsy. He was afraid of dropping his work into the crack. He wasn't ready to do this. He didn't even think the transfer of power could happen right now. He let the magma sink down to its normal level and put down his tools.

Sweat ran in his eyes, stinging them. He walked to the back of the chamber, where he pulled off the hood and gauntlets and dropped them onto the workbench. He dragged his arm across his face; he was drenched in sweat.

This part of the chamber felt cool compared to the temperature near the crack. Someone brought him a glass of water. He drained it and asked for another.

He knew he was putting it off. Stop it.

But there was something else. With the hood on, he was looking at the Ring through sheets of mica rather than with his

Ring

own eyes. He didn't feel connected to his work. That was wrong. It was supposed to be a part of him.

"Are we going to quit for the day?" his Chief Assistant asked.

"No, I'm going back," he said.

The transfer of power was an intimate act. It wasn't easy to get into the right mindset when wrapped in multiple layers of protective clothing. He didn't feel exposed or vulnerable, and he suspected that vulnerable was the way he needed to feel, for this to work.

He peeled off the leather shirt, slimy with sweat, and the linen shirt beneath it. His arms were so damp they stuck to his sides. He stepped out of his boots and stripped off the leather leggings and the woolen hose beneath them. He definitely felt vulnerable now.

"Toss me that rag." He pointing to a piece of chamois on the workbench. He caught it and wrapped it around his waist like a towel.

As he walked toward the edge, he willed the magma to rise to meet him. The heat near the crack was so intense his skin prickled from sweat. He'd never been barefoot in here before. The rock floor of the chamber was hot beneath his feet.

He walked up to the stone slab that held the anvil. He felt like a sacrificial victim approaching the altar, about to give up a part of himself. His mind was still, relaxed, yielding, permitting it to happen.

Without the protective mask, he could see the gold circle clearly. And when he held the Ring in the tongs, he could feel it, indirectly, through the tips of his fingers. Much better.

A scribe called out the steps. He put the Ring in the liquid rock, and when he pulled it out a moment later, it glowed a dull red. He laid it on the anvil and picked up a hammer.

This was it.

He raised the hammer above his head, sang the words of enchantment, and brought it down with all his strength. A shower of sparks flew in all directions. He cursed when they singed his bare skin, but didn't stop what he was doing. He

Midday

was a smith and used to getting burned. Unless it was really bad, he paid no attention.

He felt a part of his power leaving him. His body felt lighter, although what he'd given up shouldn't have been enough to notice.

He released the magma. In moments, it sank a hundred feet. He put the Ring in a bed of ash between two banks of coals. He gaged its temperature by color, and told a helper to start a fifteen minute hourglass. The sand ran through its neck while the gold cooled at a controlled rate.

This far away from the crack, the chamber felt chilly. Someone draped a blanket over his shoulders. Someone else brought him a three-legged stool, he sank onto it gratefully and wrapped the scratchy wool around himself. He felt sleepy and relaxed. Now all he had to do was wait. In a few minutes, he'd know whether it took.

The last grains of sand ran through the hourglass. He picked up the tongs and pulled the gold from the annealing bed and quenched it, then hefted it in the palm of his hand. Odd, but it didn't feel any heavier.

He brought it to the scale, and stood there, frozen. It was an effort to extend his arm, tip his hand, and let the Ring slide into the empty pan. The scale dipped for a moment, then came back up and came to rest, level. The weight was unchanged. He slammed his fist on the workbench.

It didn't take.

He considered his options. If he gave up now, he would lose everything he'd put in so far and have nothing to show for it. Or he could try again. If it worked, he'd get all his investment back, and more.

He hadn't foreseen this. Maybe nothing had transferred. It was hard to tell, he didn't feel any different. He decided to try again, and this time, he would transfer more. He wasn't sure what to do.

He picked up the Ring and walked to the edge of the crack. He raised the level of the magma. With tongs, he plunged the Ring into it for a few seconds and pulled it out again. The gold glowed a dull red.

Ring

He laid the Ring on the anvil and picked up the hammer, sinking himself into the trancelike state to prepare for what was to come.

Nearby, the orange yellow surface of the magma boiled harder. A large bubble burst just a few feet away, splattering the floor around him. A scream rang in his ears and the hammer clattered to the floor. He dropped to his knees, clutching his hand and rocking back and forth in pain.

Gloved hands pulled him to his feet, and his people, their faces hidden behind protective gear, ushered him to the back of the chamber, where they forced his into the slake barrel and held it there.

Mairon yanked to get free, but before he broke loose from the man's grasp, two others rushed over and held him down. The Ring was still on the anvil. He hated to leave it there, but at least he could see it, a glint in the yellow light from the chasm. He slumped against the barrel, his arm in the cold water. He sat very still, breathing carefully. He feared he was about to see his breakfast again.

With his right hand injured, it would be hard to continue working. If he used his left hand, he couldn't use the hammer and tongs at the same time.

His Chief Assistant could hold the tools while he stood at his elbow and talked him through it, as he used to do with Celebrimbor, but it would be too hard. He wouldn't be possible to explain what he wanted his Assistant to do. He didn't want to admit defeat, but it looked as if they were done for the day. Maybe this injury was a sign that he should stop.

A voice startled him from his thoughts. "Let's see the hand."

Mairon looked up. A scribe was standing over him, a canvas pouch in his hand. Oh, right, one of the scribes was trained as a healer.

"I'm fine, I don't need any help."

"Why are you being difficult?" said the healer.

Mairon knew the type, and knew the easiest way to get rid of them was to do what they wanted. He sighed and offered up his injured hand. The healer turned it palm upward. There were blisters where droplets of lava had landed including one

between his fingers. No wonder it hurt so much.

“Can you work with your left hand? You shouldn’t use this one until it heals,” asked the healer.

“Not good enough,” said Mairon.

“Can you use a healing spell?”

“I can’t use a healing spell on myself any more than I could take a blade to my own flesh. The healing spell would hurt as much as the original injury.”¹⁰

“Can you have another sorcerer assist you?”

“Send for...oh.” His shoulders sagged. Anyone he would have sent for was back at Luginbúrz, a day’s ride away.

“I’ll do what I can for you, then,” said the healer.

Very gently, he painted a clear liquid onto the burned places. It evaporated quickly, without leaving a residue. In a strange way, for someone who had to be in control all the time, it was pleasant to be taken care of.

“This won’t mend you, but it will help with the pain,” the healer said.

Mairon’s hand stopped throbbing. He rose and walked back to the anvil. The Ring was resting on its surface.

He raised the magma and dipped the Ring below its surface. He lifted the hammer and spoke the words of enchantment and sunk in twice as much of himself as before. This time, he could feel the loss. It was something tangible, with substance and mass. This time, he was sure he weighed less than he had before.

It was working. He dropped the Ring in the annealing bed and waited to see if the second infusion had been enough. The sand ran through the hourglass. He watched, feeling himself relax.

A thought hit him. He jumped to his feet, upturning the stool. He transferred such a large portion in the second time because he thought the initial portion hadn’t taken. But what if it had? Then he’d accidentally put in nearly twice as much as he

¹⁰ This bone-setting technique comes from the excellent fanfic ‘Dark Judgment’ by Glorfindel.

Ring

originally planned, more than he could afford. He swayed, feeling faint.

When the last grains fell, he pulled the small piece of gold from the annealing bed with the tongs and dropped it on the scale. The pan dipped and then leveled.

It didn't take. He'd crippled himself, and for nothing.

Things were spinning out of control, and he needed to be in control all the time. He felt like grabbing one of the workbenches and overturning it. He forced himself to calm down.

He had to decide whether to keep going. He needed this to work, but right now, he was too flustered to calculate how much more power was needed, or even to weigh the pros and cons of whether to keep going. He didn't know what to do.

He wouldn't be defeated by this. He was going to fight, and he was going to win. He decided to stake everything he had.

He stood up and brought the Ring to the edge. When the magma was within reach, he dropped the Ring on the hook and dipped it in the molten rock, then pulled it out and secured it to the anvil.

He stood before the anvil. The small circle lay there, red hot and untouchable. He held himself perfectly still, drawing breath and letting it out, waiting to enter the trance-like state necessary for this to happen.

Then he raised the hammer and spoke the words of enchantment, and with a momentous blow, he sunk the greater part of his native power into it. His vision went black for a moment, and he staggered to catch his balance.

Almost the moment he let go of a measure of his power, he regretted what he'd done. If it didn't take this time, he was finished.

He turned his back on the chasm. The magma made a slurping sound as it drained back into the earth. He brought the Ring to the annealing bed and turned over the hourglass. Then he sank onto a bench and buried his face in his hands, waiting to learn his fate.

There were still a few things he could try, like jettisoning Influence and Structures, Languages and Shape Shifting,

Midday

leaving only the ability to bind the Great Rings. He would have to act now, but he felt strangely passive. He started to voice a prayer but stopped himself. Whatever it was had already happened, it wouldn't change anything.

A helper stationed at the annealing bed called out that the last few grains were slipping through the hourglass. The window in which he could take action was closed.

He rose and picked up tongs, his mouth dry, and took the Ring from the annealing bed. He dropped it on the scale. The pan sank low and bobbed up again. He turned away, unable to bear watching the scale come level for the third time.

He screamed and swept his arm across the workbench, sending brass instruments, tools, and glassware flying. A handsome hourglass struck the stone floor, spears of glass piercing the white quartz sand. His notebook landed near it, face open with its pages bent. He threw himself against the wall of the chamber, his head cradled in his arms, and slid down the wall to the floor, wailing.

It was over. What had he done?

He lay on the floor, trying to breathe. A minute went by. Someone touched his arm. "You may want to see this," his Chief Assistant said. Mairon didn't want to move, but he dried his face and turned around. There was the scale, one side distinctly lower than the other.

It took.

March 25 The Forging - Late Afternoon



It was time for the next step, binding the others to the One. Mairon didn't know where they were, but it didn't matter. The One would find them.

Mairon knew how to bind the Seven and the Nine; it was he who put the binding mechanism into the structure of the Great Rings. But he didn't know how to bind the Three, or even whether it was possible.

Mairon knew nothing of the Elven Rings. The first he heard of them was that Celebrimbor, working alone, had made three new Great Rings, different from the others, and more powerful than the sixteen that came before.

But Mairon knew Celebrimbor. Celebrimbor was an artist with a soaring vision, but he had little interest in the mundane details of a project. It was likely, when he made his new Rings, that he would reuse the existing infrastructure. It was also likely he would not examine that infrastructure closely enough to notice, in addition to the practical and unexciting devices, the binding mechanism tucked in among them.¹¹

If he guessed right, the Three would bind the same as the Seven and the Nine.

He sent the others out of the room. He saw the final steps as something like a sacred ritual and wanted to conduct them in private. When the others had gone, he brought the Ring to the edge for the final time.

¹¹ In Object Oriented Programming, this would be called Inheritance.

But this time, he didn't plunge the Ring into the magma, or even hold it over it. He wouldn't have been willing to do so anyway; now that so much of his own power was bound up in it; he would rather fall in himself. Instead, he held the Ring in tongs and knelt by the edge of the chasm, with the Ring near, but not over, the boiling magma. When he judged the gold band to be warm enough, he sang the Binding spell over it.

*"Ash nazg durb-at-ul-ûk Ash nazg gimb-at-ul.
"Ash nazg thrak-at-ul-ûk agh burz-um ish-i krimp-at-ul."*

Fiery writing girdled the Ring. He went limp and closed his eyes, then looked again. The words of the Binding spell were engraved on the band, inside and out. He blinked in surprise. He'd expected to see the inscription, but he hadn't expected it to be in his own handwriting.

Only one task remained. Like all the other Great Rings before it, the One Ring had to be claimed. He took a deep breath and prepared himself. The words had to be spoken with absolute conviction.

He put the Ring on his hand and raised it above his head.

"I take this thing for my own and declare myself the Lord of the Ring."

The Lord of the Ring. Durbgu Nazgshu.

His hand tingled. The feeling ran up his arm and washed over his body. He couldn't breathe.

"What is?...I can't...."

He staggered backwards and clutched the edge of the workbench for support. A piece of glassware teetered and crashed to the ground. He heard footsteps running.

"My Lord? What is it, what happened?"

His eyes were closed. He felt weak, completely spent, and at the same time, he felt stronger than he'd ever been before.

"Melkor's chains!" Mairon leaned against the workbench and closed his eyes.

One of his helpers whispered to another, "Looks like someone hit the money note."

As soon as he put on the Ring, he could read the thoughts of

Ring

the three who wore the Elven Rings. But a few minutes later, the connection was severed. He didn't learn who they were or where they lived.



Mairon thought he'd need eight or ten hours to complete the forging, and the dry runs confirmed it. But by the time they finished that day, he'd been on his feet for more than twelve hours. He hadn't yet told his helpers whether they'd been successful or not.

"Attention." Mairon said. He kept his face still, revealing nothing.

"Remember this day, because you will tell this story to your grandchildren, and they will tell it to theirs." He looked at them solemnly, and then he grinned.

His people, his apprentices, helpers, and scribes, grinned back. Then they began to applaud and cheer.

"Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!"

They surrounded him then, embracing him and slapping him on the back.

"Hail Zigûr, Lord of the Ring, Lord of the Earth." they chanted. He smiled. It sounded good.

They all headed out to the camp, talking and laughing all at once.

After the heat of the forge and the greater heat near the edge, he felt cold as he stepped outside. The temperature dropped after the sun went down. The wind picked up, too. Someone gave him a blanket, and he wrapped it around himself, shivering.

He went to his tent to get dressed. Clean clothes had been laid out for him on his cot, but he was so grimy, he hesitated to put them on. All day, sweat had poured down his sides, mixing with the soot and sulfurous smoke.

There wasn't enough water at the campsite to wash in, but there was a slake barrel near the charcoal forge in the chamber, the one his helpers had forced his arm in earlier today. He made his way among the rocks to the chamber, where he lifted the slake bucket and upended it over his head. The water to

quench hot metal soaked his hair and ran down his shoulders. He put his clothes on over wet skin and went back outside. The wind was chilly on his wet skin. It felt good to be clean.

He returned to the campsite and found the others sitting around the fire. He sank into a camp stool, feeling sleepy and content. The horses were tied up nearby; one of them stomped and whinnied. The mood around the campfire was festive. Someone passed around a wineskin. Someone else was telling an animated story. Mairon was too tired to talk, but it was pleasant to listen to the others tell the tale of the day's adventures.

The Ring sat on his hand like a living thing. It seemed to contract around his finger as if it were breathing, and sometimes it would sigh. He sensed in it a rudimentary intelligence, less than an animal's but still real, and a will of its own. It was almost frightening to care so much for something outside of himself.

He longed to show the Ring to Aulë. Aulë would mutter a grudging, "Not bad," the highest praise he ever gave, followed by "Would you like to hear how you could have done better?" It was a shame that, on the greatest day of his life as a craftsman, he couldn't tell Aulë about it.

He wondered if the others knew how close he came to disaster today, he hadn't told them. But if they didn't hear him cursing after the first two infusions, they must have noticed after the third, when he collapsed against the wall and wept.

His hand rested in his lap. His eyes kept going back to the band of gold around his finger. It felt heavy on his hand. He admired the way firelight reflected from its smooth surface.

He wasn't used to wearing it. The tips of his fingers tingled slightly. It must be a sign of the Ring's power. Did it feel like that when he first put it on? He couldn't remember. He rubbed his hand. Maybe it just took getting used to.

Actually, it was more than a tingling, it stung. He could feel his pulse in his fingertips. That was odd. He flexed his hand, but couldn't close his fist. The tingling started to feel like bee stings. He wondered what caused it. It couldn't be the Ring, the Ring was a part of him.

Ring

Magical objects could burn. He'd forgotten that.

It should have been obvious to someone who knew what Silmarils¹² were. Melkor had worn them on an iron band on his brow even though he couldn't touch them. He burned himself if he reached for his crown without thinking, but it had been manageable.

If he reached for his crown without thinking, he burned himself,

Mairon would figure out how to keep the Ring from burning him. He could wear it on a chain around his neck over a heavy shirt, or inside a locket, but he felt the disappointment keenly. He wanted to wear the Ring on his hand, not on a chain.

His whole hand throbbed. He knew he should take off the Ring, but he didn't want to. He set his teeth against the pain and wished he had something to bite.

His Chief Assistant turned to speak to him, but interrupted himself in mid-sentence. He got to his feet and returned with the healer.

"I didn't summon you." said Mairon.

"Well, I'm here anyway. Show me your hand." the healer said, reaching for it.

Mairon yanked it away. He didn't want anyone touching the Ring, or even getting close to it. The intensity of his feelings surprised him.

He touched fingertip to fingertip and transferred the Ring to his left hand without taking it off. He wondered how long it would be before his left hand started to burn, too. He tucked it under his leg to hide it, then offered his injured hand to the healer.

"I put a salve for pain on your hand when you burned it, but that was hours ago. It must be wearing off by now." said the healer.

Oh...right.

He watched as the healer examined his hand. There were blisters wherever he'd been burned, one between his fingers

¹² The Great Jewels, which burned any evil-doer who touched them.

and several on the palm of his hand.

"Do you have more of that salve you gave me earlier?"

Mairon asked.

"The numbing agent? Yes." the healer said.

He took out the phial and began painting on the clear liquid that erased pain. Whatever it was, it worked quickly. The pain simply stopped.

The cook was making something in an iron cauldron, and it smelled wonderful. Mairon suddenly realized how hungry he was. This morning, he'd been almost too nervous to eat. And after they'd started, they hadn't taken a break until they were done.

He rested his eyes for a moment. His chin fell forward, startling him awake. When it happened again, he said to the others, "I'm going to lie down for a few minutes. Call me when the food is ready."

He got up. The servant who looked after him followed him to his tent and held the flap open for him. Mairon sat on the edge of his cot, exhausted.

"Lie down, and I'll remove your boots for you." said the servant.

He lay with his eyes closed and his hands resting on his stomach. The fingers of one hand covered the gold band on the other. Hands grasped his ankle and started to ease his boot off. The room was spinning, or else he was falling backwards, he wasn't sure which. Then nothing.



"Lord Zigûr." Someone was shaking his shoulder.

"Supper's ready, if you want it."

He struggled to wake up. He was still lying on his back with his hands folded over his middle, one hand over the other. The gold band was smooth under his fingertips.

It was darker outside than it'd been when he'd lain down, and colder. Someone must have covered him with a fur rug, but he had no memory of how it got there.

"Give me a few minutes." he said.

Ring

"That's what you said this morning. Since then, you haven't stirred. We kept checking on you to make sure you weren't dead."

"Is it morning already?" he asked.

"No, it's evening. You've been asleep since this time yesterday."



They packed up to leave at first light. Mairon gathered up the long timeline scroll and all of their individual scripts and threw them into the chasm. They were caught in the updraft and then burst into flame before they reached the magma.

He planned to throw his notebook in after them. He lifted it and picked a spot in the magma to aim for, but he'd worked too hard on those pages of drawings and calculations to do it.

He found the gold-iron ingot, once so precious, lying discarded in a crate with other pieces of scrap. It was gold, but it had no value for jewelry or coins, since the alloy was a dull grey-white. But he didn't want it to fall into the control of another. There were other ring makers out there who might attempt to make another One.

He drew back his arm and threw it as hard as he could. The ingot sailed over the edge and fell into the chasm, where it punched an orange-yellow window in the dross covering the magma. It rested on the surface for a moment, and then it sank and was gone.

April 28 In Retrospect



Mairon sat in his room in the highest floor of the gatehouse tower. A view of the plain of Gorgoroth filled one window. Lava shot high into the air and fell against the slope of the cinder cone. Orodruin was erupting hard and had been ever since he put on the Ring.

The room was filled with the sounds of construction. The *tink tink* of chisel against stone, the clicking of a ratchet, and the curses of workmen filled the air. The stone dust settled on every flat surface and clothing as well, greasy to the touch. Now that it rested on stable foundations, the Tower was rising as fast as the stones could be lifted and put in place.

He studied the papers spread out on the table before him: sketches, notes, drawings, calculations, and schematics. His notebook from the Forging stood open to the pages where he'd drawn the new design.

Mairon couldn't stop thinking that he should have made his original design instead of the new one. The new design turned out well, but he regretted how much it had cost him.

He suspected the new design had a flaw in it which caused the near-fatal glitch. The new design looked good on paper, but he'd sketched it out in a single day. He'd barely reviewed it, and he hadn't tested it at all.

If he'd built the original design as planned, the first infusion would have taken, and he could have completed the Ring without sacrificing the greater part of his own power. He'd developed the original design over a number of years, and

Ring

while it wasn't as elegant as the new design, it was well thought out.

It didn't matter now. He couldn't do anything about it, but he wanted to know where the flaw was.

Mairon found two blank sheets of paper and laid them side by side, one for each design. He listed the important features of each as methodically as he could. Diagrams, schematics, and calculations showed where the two designs were the same and where they were different.

It was as he'd thought. The original design was serviceable and workmanlike, but not particularly efficient. The new design, the one he did make, was sleek and elegant. As far as he could tell, there was nothing wrong with either one.

Finally he found the flaw. One of his assumptions was wrong, and that's what had gotten him into trouble. But it affected both designs equally, both designs were flawed.

Then he noticed something else. The efficiency of the new design created a margin of safety the original design didn't have. And because of his false assumption, he needed that margin.

Mairon stared at the numbers, not understanding at first. Then he did.

If he hadn't made the design change the day before the Forging, or if he'd let the coin toss decide on the original design, the third infusion wouldn't have been enough, and he would have died.

A wave of nausea swept over him. The floor fell away; he staggered and grabbed the edge of the table for support.



With the Ring on his hand, he felt as powerful as a Vala. He toyed with the idea of recruiting some Maiar of his own. When he served Melkor, his status was high. Melkor assigned three other Maiar to him to be his servants, Thuringwethil, Draugluin, and Carcharoth. He would like to have Maiar servants now.

He'd led a group of Balrogs at Gondolin. Maybe some of

In Retrospect

them survived the First Age and would be willing to follow him again.

Then he remembered how, after a hard day training, he bought them dinner and a few rounds. Generally Balrogs were shy around him, and maybe even a bit apprehensive, but after coming off-duty and lifting a few pints, they started to relax.

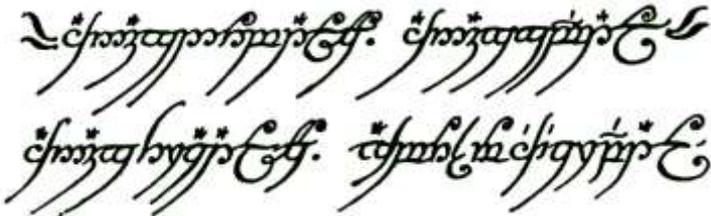
Sitting down to a meal with half a dozen Balrogs is an experience. He was accepting of peasant ways, but even he had his limits.

There they were, sitting around the table, belching and farting. Soon, one of them was demonstrating armpit noises, another blew his nose on the tablecloth, and a third started telling knock-knock jokes.

He pushed his plate aside, untouched.

“Chief, what’s wrong? Why are you covering your face with your hands?”

Maybe he’d do without Balrogs for now.



Ring inscription by J.R.R. Tolkien