

One Ring to Bind Them

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Disclaimers, Warnings, Author Introduction

Disclaimer: This is a work of fanfiction that has been written on the basis of "Fair Use" as a work of political satire, distributed without profit. It is in no way meant to infringe upon the Tolkien Estate copyright of Middle-Earth or the characters therein.

Warnings: This work of fanfiction is for adult readers only, those over the age of 18. It contains the following content which some readers may find distressing: Practices Considered Pagan, Slash (male/male) Eroticism, Graphic Sex, Consensual BDSM, Violence, Torture, and Character Deaths.

Author's Introduction: Sometimes, a work of fanfiction seems like a natural and logical expansion of the fandom's original world and events. And sometimes it seems downright bizarre. A Tolkien fanfiction with a homosexual sadomasochistic affair as its basis may seem like the latter. Especially when the story is otherwise firmly based in Tolkien canon, expanding on magic, culture, and good and evil in Middle-Earth as described in obscure footnotes.

The origin of *One Ring to Bind Them* is tangled in my other fanfiction writing and my reading Tolkien's letters. I became curious about Eregion in the Second Age, the time and place that fostered the pride and craft of the Elves. Tolkien did not seem to want to linger in Eregion, where he set his ideal race up to fall deeply. Why did the Elves of Eregion fall for Sauron? Why, in one history of Eregion, did Galadriel put up with having Sauron around, even though she hated him? How were the Rings made? Why were they so alluring?

I was also intrigued with the failings of the Elves that Tolkien described; pride, nostalgia, a refusal to change at the price of stagnation for others. And, of course, I saw perverse, tempting possibilities lurking in the descriptions of Sauron in fair form "seducing" and elves "flirting." Sadomasochism seemed fitting for an elf-lord and a malicious spirit both preoccupied with power, in their own separate ways. All of this combined with my fevered imagination to bring this story about.

So, here it is. I wrote it, it's done, and I hope you enjoy this story as much as I enjoyed writing it, all the sex, politics, personalities, settings, and things of power great and small.

The critical and editorial feedback of my beta readers, Aayesha and Suzana, was hugely helpful to me. To paraphrase what the loremaster and scribe says in a grateful moment in this story: "There are not thanks enough."

Please contact me at Tyellas@hotmail.com with comments and feedback. You can visit my adult Tolkien fanfic website at <http://www.ansereg.com>.

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Dramatis Personae

Our characters, from *The Silmarillion* and *History of Middle-Earth*, are:

- **Annatar:** The alias of Sauron, meaning “Lord of Gifts,” assumed with his fair form to infiltrate and deceive the Elves.
- **Aranwë:** An elf-smith of the Mírdain of considerable practical skill. An exiled High Elf and survivor of Gondolin.
- **Celeborn:** The Lord of Eregion when our story begins, a noble elf of the Sindar, husband of Galadriel.
- **Celebrían:** The daughter of Galadriel and Celeborn, a young child when our story begins.
- **Celebrimbor:** The leader of the Mírdain, a prince of the High Elves and a smith of great artistic and sorcerous craft.
- **Elrond:** The Half-Elven, of ambiguous yet significant rank in the court of Lindon as Gil-Galad’s herald, favourite, and private agent.
- **Erestor:** An elf of the city of Ost-in-Edhil, chief loremaster of Eregion.
- **Galadriel:** The Lady of Eregion when our story begins, an exiled High Elf, wife of Celeborn.
- **Gwaith-i-Mírdain:** The Fellowship of the Jewel-Smiths, a powerful guild of jewelers and smiths in Eregion, with many resources and a distinctive subculture.
- **Pengolod:** Half-Sindar, half-Noldor loremaster of Lindon and survivor of Gondolin.
- **Sauron:** An evil, powerful spirit, former servant of the Dark Lord Morgoth, returned to try once more to bring Middle-Earth under the control of darkness and order.

The Fairest

In the heart of the Sammath Naur, the Chambers of Fire, Sauron gets used to wearing a body again and lays down his strategy for winning Middle-Earth for darkness and order.

Sauron opened his eyes.

First, he saw blackness. He realized that he faced a wall of black stone in the place where he had given himself form. It was the inside of the greatest volcano alive in Middle-Earth, a nameless mountain in a nameless land. He looked down, and saw the broad ledge he stood on, a shelf of crusted stone, and lifted one of his own feet, examining it.

This channel to the earth's heart was the place in Middle-Earth where he, a spirit of the earth's fire long ago, was most powerful, and it was here he had spun a body about him again. The Maiar and Valar were powerful, but a body was a greater work than it seemed. He thought the long effort worth it as he admired his flawless foot. Without a body, he had felt the world's energy, and sensed its peoples dimly, but the form joined him to the laws of the physical world, and let him affect it. This was why even the Valar of the west normally dwelled in these shapes.

Sauron's new eyes adjusted to the red light of the lava-lit cavern, diluted with dim sunlight at the crater's opening. Fearlessly, he took a first step forward, dry ash crumbling beneath his feet. At the edge of the stone shelf, he looked into the cracking, sintering dome of half-congealed magma at the volcano's base. Now, he distinguished colours, the walls about patched with vivid yellow sulfur, grey ash, and slashes of black obsidian. Steams and smokes arose from the depths, and Sauron tilted his head to hear the cracking and bubbling of stone and gas. The reek of the earth's bowels assaulted his nostrils, and he welcomed it.

Sauron stepped back from the edge and ran his fresh hands over his new body. He was curious as to how much of his Maia's power he retained, this embodiment. Some was lost forever as the price paid for the body's making, a ransom to the laws of nature such a making broke. He turned and gestured at the mountain's wall where it was blotched with obsidian. Shards and plates of the volcano-glass cracked and fell. The wall seethed for a moment, then the remelted glass drooped into smoothness. Sauron felt his face shape into a smile at this first success, and stepped up to his dark mirror. He looked at himself.

Sauron smiled again, for all was as he had meant it to be; his most beautiful body ever. Tall, but only as tall as the greatest of Elves and Men, for he meant to go among them. Fair beyond their measure, too, with a beauty that mingled what he found admirable about both peoples. He had observed the bodies of both mortals and immortals closely when he had tormented them in the War of the Jewels, sometimes spending a day or three on an intriguing specimen.

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Sauron had taken a fair elvish face, balanced between the male and the female, so that everyone who looked on him would see something to admire, however their desires were turned. He had spun long golden hair, rich as earth-metal, and eyes of brilliant blue-green, and dreamed sleek long limbs and a fine-honed body. Elves were easily, foolishly moved by such beauty. They had hearkened to the greatest, darkest Valar of all, Morgoth, when his form had been fair, before Morgoth was marred by anger and wounds.

After all the hatred of Elves Morgoth had worked hard to sow amongst mortal Men, it was well to not look entirely like an elf. Sauron wanted mortals' worship, not their despise. From the beauty of mortals he had taken rounded ears – a little thing – and a golden-tawny skin. Although these features could be found in the children of Arda, the combination of them was unique. He would beguile them all, this way; no folk would spurn him.

His sex was male, for this was his nature. Sauron had considered being female; he had seen in Luthien the power a beautiful woman might wield. But he concluded it was too ambiguous a power, one that made people want to possess, not obey, and he preferred the latter. Sauron stroked his member, nested in a light thatch of spun gold. He knew all folk merited this as a symbol of power. Thus Sauron had not stinted himself, but kept it as elegant as the rest of him, generous yet balanced, a virile ideal made real.

New sensations thrilled through him at the touch. Sauron ran his hands over other areas of his skin, testing his reactions. His hands were smooth and warm, nails short and squared, not the fearful talons he had donned as Gorthaur, the torturer. Yet those hands might do the same work in the end, and in the obsidian mirror he saw his brilliant white smile at that thought.

Sauron knelt slowly, feeling the muscles of his legs and back shift, and took up one of the obsidian-shards. He used it to trim back some of the golden hair over his brow into an even fringe. It would be always orderly, now, more of a shimmering frame for his fine oval face. When that was done, he pondered the sparkling blade idly, then, cool and curious, ran the sharp edge along his golden arm, once, twice, three times. Blood welled up, bright as the magma in the seams below; he had even bethought to make what flowed in his veins lovely. He felt how the pain opened and throbbed, watched the blood run and slow. Then he lifted his cut forearm to his mouth and lapped at the blood, approving of its iron taste.

All Sauron's senses were now alive, keen to pain and pleasure – the price spirits had to pay for donning such a form. And he was ready to use every inch of his body to his advantage, for he considered the sensual congress of the folk of Arda a great weakness of theirs. He had been aware of desperate embraces between the doomed in the depths of his dungeons, and had bid his servants abuse them with rape and even more ghastly physical dishonour. But he had also seen what the passion of Beren and Luthien had wrought, and wondered what he might win if he lured some person of power to him that way.

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Fully incarnate, he paused for a last moment before leaving this place where his power was greatest. No other being could endure this place for long, its heat and fumes. Sauron drew some more of the earth's heat to him, and saw in the mirror that this set fire in his eyes, gave a glimmer to his skin. He tried to draw in more – and could not. The limit was found. He scowled briefly, and saw it in the mirror, and thought he must remember not to do that around folk he was persuading. All his will to power showed, his face shadowed with the wolf-hate he had worn in other, more fell forms.

It was all about control, he decided. Staying in control. He could not let himself be mastered by anger or hatred for the unjust ones who had cast out his beloved lord, Melkor, who they had renamed Morgoth. They had been so close to working pure order upon Middle-Earth! Morgoth was the most superior of the Valar. It had been fitting and fair that he should rule and Sauron should serve. Morgoth knew how to punish those who denied him, and how to reward with power. He had established the vision of the races of Middle-Earth in their place, and worked towards that with the races of Orcs and Trolls. Sauron would continue their great work, and reach out to his lord's spirit, exiled to the Void without. He would start as Morgoth had, with the noblest of Elves.

Unclad as a roaming spirit, Sauron had sensed the Elves who remained, the greatest of all folk on Middle-Earth. He would not make Morgoth's mistakes – but they had been few, really. The Dark Lord done an admirable job of corrupting the Elves. Morgoth's error had been stealing the Silmarils, the jewels of the Elves' lords, and inciting their anger and war. Sauron, too, valued the precious gem-work and things of power Elves might make. He decided he would encourage them in this, and let them keep their works, but bind those works to him. Thus he would use their weakness of the love of their crafts and powers against them.

Sauron was determined not to fail again. It would take hundreds of subtle years. He would have to be as patient as stone. But even stone had its hot triumphs, he thought, peering over at the magma-pit again. He needed no oaths to seal his determination. Foolish oaths would be another weapon the Elves would take up themselves to aid him.

Sauron closed his eyes deliberately, and felt the darkness behind his lids, spangled with phosphenes, the ghost-lights of the mind. This darkness might be shared by all the beings of Arda. He would draw refuge and strength from it when the world's disorder called him on to hateful haste.

Sauron opened his eyes again, and spoke the first words with his new mouth. *Let it be!* he cried, in the words of Maiar and Valar, and the volcano quailed to its heart at its master's power.

Sauron's limbs were far stronger than they seemed, and he began to clamber the pit's walls. The stone melted beneath its master's touch to cup his hands and feet as he went up into the light of the Sun, heedless of pain.

The Elessar

Celebrimbor completes a gem called the Elessar using what mortals call Magic and Desire, and the reader enters the Second Age of Middle-Earth in the year 1252.

In the hours before dawn, Celebrimbor climbed to one of the highest points in Eregion, grappling up cliffs of broken granite and schist. Even his strong smith's muscles ached by the time he kicked himself up onto the ledge where he wanted to stand. After the climb, he stood and breathed to calm his racing blood, placing one hand over the burden in his tunic-vest's pocket. Then he laid down the metal tools that had helped drag him to the height, and the small pack he carried.

Eagerly, he turned to the work he had come there to complete. So that his own name might exceed the smiths of legend, he had decided to recreate a lost jewel, fairer and more powerful than before. He had honed a green stone into a gem. This he would now imbue with power, using the secrets of the elven-smiths, won by long meditation and craft. He unbuttoned his vest, then stripped off the rest of his clothes, letting the winds before dawn sweep him.

The sky lit up like pearl-shell from the approaching sun, the dawn of the longest day of summer. He had some time yet before the sun rose. Celebrimbor glanced at the cliffs about him as their layers of rock grew clearer, reading the stones that he loved as keenly as a loremaster read a scroll. Even with no thought for his bearing, he seemed a very statue of pride and desire, tall, strong, and shameless on the height. It was whispered that his sharp-cut, wide face was the very image of lost Fëanor. He ran both hands through his dark, tangled hair, streaked with a silver-white lock to the left of his forehead, and cast his hazel-eyed glance afar.

To the west, a few stars lingered in the sky. They would be shining still over the firth of Lune and the other great elf-realm of Lindon, a hundred and ten leagues away. Beyond the mountain-pass to the south he could see that mist cloaked the valley of Lorinánd and the vales where wood-elves and tribes of Men wandered. Celebrimbor pitied Men when he thought on them, but that was not often. To the east, the triple mountains that capped Khazad-dûm were dark against the dawn, shielding their mighty host of Dwarves, the elven-smiths' friends and rivals. Perhaps the dwarves had the mithril-mines, but the Elves had something they craved in turn; gemstones.

Celebrimbor unfolded a leather wallet from his clothes, and shook from it the wide, flat green gem, transparent, cut so that bars of light overlapped inside it. The large tourmaline had come from the lowland caves of Eregion. In the higher country, garnets could be pried from the granite cliffs, and sapphires and gold gleaned from the mountain-streams.

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These varied treasures had drawn the crafters and smiths. Other High Elves had followed, those who would stay and have the pleasures of Middle-Earth without the torment of the sea-call. They had built their city, Ost-in-Edhil, and other dwellings. Beneath the city's spire its rulers dwelled, and many said that there was no greater realm standing yet in all Middle-Earth. Celebrimbor was pleased that his own voice weighed for more as time passed and more of the wealth of Eregion flowed through the order of the jewel-smiths, the Mírdain. He looked down to the Mírdain's hall. When the sun was high, it would reflect from the hall's metal-panelled doors, and light them like a star of gold.

Celebrimbor looked east. The sun would soon rise over the edge of the mountains. His skin was cooled and his pulse balanced again after his exertions, and he turned his mind to his work again. Celebrimbor stood balanced, then held the gem carefully and closed his eyes. He chanted words of calling and binding, and his voice rang harsh down the cliffs.

Thinking on the beloved land before him, Celebrimbor summoned the stones' slow, hot life through his feet. Tilting his head back to the brightening sky, he called down the fast shimmer of light. Breathing more deeply, he drew in the green breath of the trees, the cool hints of the snowmelt from the mountain heights. He centred all the fire of Arnor he brought to him through word and call on the gem cupped between his hands.

Almost all; he felt all his body come alive as if the mountain winds were the hands of a teasing lover, not cold at this time of year. The fire of Arnor formed three points in his body; the roof of his mouth, the meeting palms of his hands, and his loins. He felt no shame at the desire that enlivened him. Was it not life itself he called, to live in the heart of the green gem? And was desire not the quickening of life? He opened his hands and ran the living stone down his body, from the hollow of his throat to the base of his belly, then raised it in both hands to meet the Sun, brushing his erection only in passing.

Celebrimbor widened his stance, feeling the Sun rather than seeing it. All his mind burned on his goal for the gem; that it might give its bearer a power to keep things ever-living, deathless as Aman, pure as at the height of summer, to succour the hearts of Elves in the fading, changing world. It would not halt Time any more than the stones of the river could stop its running, but it would renew the virtues of life. He thought on the twin fires of the morning, the Sun's light and the light of passion, the gift of the Valar and the gift of Illúvatar, and bade them both to bide with joy inside the stone. Lastly, he brought the stone down to the centre of his body. He willed a spark of his own spirit into the maze of light at the gem's heart, linking it to the immortality of the Elves, and cried out words to seal the work.

When his arms felt drained, he opened his eyes. Reeling, he stepped back to the safest part of the ledge, carefully clutching the gem. Perhaps it was only that he looked on it in the full light of day, that its green was brighter and more bars of light stood guard in its centre. The gem was hot to his hand, as if filled with the

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sun of noon. "You are the Elessar remade!" he said, raising the gem to his lips and misting it with his breath. "You shall be for our Lady. For Galadriel."

Celebrimbor looked down to the tall spire of Ost-in-Edhil again. Even before she had chosen Celeborn of Doriath as her husband, she had turned him away; kindly, as a woman does to a fellow she does not despise, but away nonetheless. The pain of seeing her choice close to hand had faded, as had the longing to see her every day, but he had not loved again. He looked up into the heart of the sun for a moment. He would aid her as he might, with the arts of the Mírdain and with the Elessar, a tool to make the ceaseless change of Middle-Earth easier to endure. Surely she would not spurn a gift that was all her heart's desire.

Before his face as he stood on the mountain-ledge, an eagle flew shockingly close. He took a step back as the eagle spiralled close about, crying out. Celebrimbor raised his free hand to salute the bird of Manwe and a sudden vision came to him. He would place the jewel in an eagle-wrought setting, a fitting gift for a noble lady. For a moment, he doubted. Even without the wide, bright setting he imagined, the stone was already a troublingly rich gift. Then he decided that it was all or nothing, and when faced with that choice, he always took all.

Celebrimbor set the gem in its safe place and began to dress again. In the morning's breeze, his erection had subsided, but he still felt his loins weighted with desire. To relieve himself at that hour would reduce the virtue of his work. He had been celibate for a month before that morning, and he mulled over breaking his body's fast that night with one of the Mírdain. Even unloved, he might be consoled, and the Mírdain had arts of other hardnesses besides metal and stone.

As he drank a draught from a water-skin, he looked up. The eagle was still circling and crying. He looked around to see if, in that vision-swept hour, it augured anything else. Something caught his eye; a spark in the landscape, like a rider in bright hauberk, coming on the west-road from Lindon. It was the same gold as the light that now starred the doors of the Mírdain, moving to Eregion as if like was drawn to like. The eagle called once, and then rode the wind silently, still looping above.

He could not see much of the approaching one, but if it was an elf, someone had great craft, to make armour or weave a cloak that shone so far and bright. He would go to meet them, he decided. Was it possible that another Elf could be a greater craftsman than he? If so, he would learn all the art they had to give, as he had from the Dwarves. With the gem back in its leather wallet, he began the descent, sending scree tumbling from his swiftness.

The eagle circled a few more minutes, and then uttered a last scream as it flew westwards.

The Fellowship of the Jewel-Smiths

Sauron in fair form, seeking to deceive, undergoes the initiation of the elven-smiths of Eregion.

1. The Lord of Gifts.

Celebrimbor, no other, came to his guest-house to bring him the news. "Yes, it will happen, and tonight! You shall be one of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain when our ritual is done; the first who is not an Elf to join our fellowship of jewel-smiths."

"I am honoured." Sauron smiled with lazy brilliance, aware of the whiteness of his teeth against his golden-tawny skin, his blond hair silken in the sun. He had wrought the form he wore with his Maia's powers, to bedazzle Elves and Men with a face fair and strange. Sauron's full height was narrow and regal, tall as an elf-lord or Númenorean. But he was draped along the edge of a window-sill, lissom and relaxed, white robes fluttering in the morning breeze.

"The vote of our council was unanimous. Little surprise, after how you have aided us these past three months with gifts of knowledge." The elf wore his smith's clothes, a leather apron and leggings with the red shirt that only the Mírdain might wear. His swaggering mien softened as he came closer with a quiet question. "You will go through with it in full measure?"

"Why should I not? I have come to dwell among the peoples of Middle-Earth, and do my works amongst them. To do so fully, I should learn your ways." Sauron had learned early on that the Elves swiftly detected lies, but that he could phrase his truth as words they wished to hear. "And it will be you yourself who leads me; none other. You have promised me," he said, smiling again. "Why do you doubt me now?"

Celebrimbor flicked back his silver forelock. "Do you truly know what you will submit to, Annatar?" To him, this was the only name the golden being before him carried. "We elves live in peace now, but I have told you that initiation of the Mírdain is hard for some. It comes from our old warrior's rituals of ansereg, once meant to harden elves for war and torment. Enduring it means that you are as devoted to the Mírdain as the warriors of the past were to their honour, and to each other. The pain--"

Sauron lifted a hand dismissively. "I am Maia, and will endure it, I assure you." He leaned back further against the window sill, and a ray of light spilled from his shoulder to between his legs, his robes made translucent by the sun behind.

The elf-man looked down, drawn by the line of light. He forced his gaze back up to Sauron's face with a guilty glint in his eyes. "It is not right that I should sing the praises of our ritual to you, when I am the one who will put you to pain. I will send another to you, to give you counsel, that you may make a true choice in this matter."

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Sauron toyed with a lock of his own golden hair, twining it around his finger like a shining ring. "If you insist. But who is wiser than you?" *One of the princes of the Noldor*, he thought, *the greatest living smith of the Elves, proud among the proud, sparked with rebellion. And ripe to fall to me.* He let the hair slip from his fingers and stood. "I trust you fully, Celebrimbor." Sauron stretched one arm towards the elf-man, extending a hand in friendship.

Before the two could touch, they both started at a new sound, a clear horn-call. "That is the call of Lindon," said Celebrimbor, looking through the window. "We have not had one of their messengers since you came to us in midsummer. Did you not journey to Lindon?"

"Yes. Briefly. A fair land, of course; but they are not so cunning as your folk." Sauron stayed back well within the shadows of the room, peering out after the rider only when the horse had passed along the road to Ost-in-Edhil. He did not recognize the rider, but it seemed he was not of rank. The horse was a piebald, not the white horse of a noble. Sauron leaned up against the windowsill with Celebrimbor, and stroked the elf-man's arm beneath the red silk. "Perhaps I shall come with you to the house of the Mírdain now. I would not delay in my tutelage," said Sauron.

"Once you are of the Mírdain, I will teach you everything I know." Celebrimbor stepped aside. "But it is fitting to wait. Matters are strange enough already." The elf did not say anything more, a busy silence, as if he thought much. Sauron thought to be impatient at this. Then he decided it was best to draw Celebrimbor back up to the highlands where the Mírdain's hall stood before he thought to seek the errand-rider of Lindon.

2. An Errand-Rider's Distractions.

"Lord Celeborn, our King Gil-Galad sends this letter to you and your Lady, for your urgent attention." The errand-rider of Lindon knelt before Celeborn and proffered a scroll in a leather case. "Is the Lady nigh?"

"No, my Lady visits the forest realm of Lorinánd, thirty leagues away. She will return in the spring." It was early autumn outside. "Was this all your errand, to bring us one scroll? Do you know anything of the matter?"

The rider, Pengolod, shook his head. "No, my lord. I was the rider because the sea-elves and their lords are busy at this season. And I wished to ride here on my own errand, to learn the language of the Dwarves of Khazad-dûm."

Celeborn had been about to open the scroll, but he put it down in amazement. "Why in Arda would you want to do that?"

"I am a loremaster, of the school of the Lambengolmor. The language of the Dwarves is as strange as their crafts, and I would learn more. They say that Elf and Dwarf were never greater friends than in Eregion and Khazad-dûm, and so I journeyed here." Celeborn's face grew stern. He obviously did not count himself among the dwarf-friends. "Perhaps someone here might be so good as to aid me?"

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"You may do as you please, as long as you like, in Eregion. But if you deal with the Naugrim, you deal with the order of the Mírdain, not the court of Ost-in-Edhil." He gestured to an esquire standing by. "See if one of the Mírdain is near to hand."

"One waits with a message from Lord Celebrimbor," the elf-man said. Celeborn said to bring him in to be heard. Pengolod noted that Celeborn still did not open the scroll, but tapped it in one hand impatiently. "Aranwë of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, my lord," said the esquire, returning.

"Aranwë?" Pengolod was shocked to meet one of his few fellow survivors of Gondolin.

"Pengolod?" The smith stopped short, like a horse afraid to fall on ice. ♦

Celeborn was brisk with Aranwë. "You two know each other? Splendid. Aranwë, take this guest into the charge of the Mírdain; he has come from Lindon to deal with the Naugrim, and thus is in your order's keeping. Make sure his horse is brought to your stables. Is this the latest requisition?" Aranwë handed over a slate and nodded, still glancing nervously at Pengolod. Celeborn read the slate and frowned. "With winter on the way, I cannot place the Mírdain first for wood and charcoal. Make sure that Celebrimbor knows that."

"He does, my lord, and thus we send the requisition as soon as we might, after our morning council," said Aranwë, patiently.

"Mnh. What about the gate-forging we called for? Bring me news of that, next time. And one other matter. Tell Celebrimbor that he and I must discuss the tithing again. I heard you smiths were very successful in trading at the midsummer festival of the Naugrim."

"I shall tell him, lord." The esquire led the two elves out while Celeborn bent to the scroll Pengolod had brought at last.

They stood uncertainly in the entry-hall. Pengolod spoke first. "This is good to find! Eregion seems to suit you."

Aranwë was incredulous. "Good to find? When we last parted – "

"Is it not said that oaths and grudges lead one to one's doom? I have suffered; and you have suffered; and certain matters have ended."

Aranwë looked down at the loremaster's pleasant, narrow face. "You are very forgiving."

Pengolod shrugged, flicking back his black hair. "So few of us of Gondolin remain. Will you speak the language of old with me? I miss it, and those days."

Aranwë laughed, and his next words were not in the common Sindar, but in a near-forgotten dialect of Quenya. "It is not as sweet to my ears; but to oblige you, I shall. Why are you here, from seventy leagues away, to deal with Dwarves?"

♦ These two last parted under stressful circumstances in the Tyellas story "The Thrall of Gondolin," available at <http://www.ansereg.com> at the Gates of Steel sub-page.

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“No, you are my host, you speak first,” said Pengolod. “I knew that your name was in the rolls of Eregion, but I did not expect to meet you here so soon. What brought you here?”

“For a time, I was with the elf-men of Maedhros.” When Pengolod did not cry out in dismay at that, Aranwë unbent further. “They were not particular about who wished to join their company, in the last days of that age. When both Morgoth and Beleriand were downed, and the last of the Sons of Fëanor were fallen, Celebrimbor was their heir, and so I joined his van. And I am here still.”

“A jewel-smith now, rather than a sword-smith,” said Pengolod.

“And glad of the change! The art is – I won’t bore you. Now, why are you still in Middle-Earth?”

“There is always a boat ready to part at the quays of Lindon. It makes it easier to wait another day. And I have many works to complete. In Lindon,” he said, sweeping his sage-green cloak back with a flourish, “I am the chief of loremasters and leader of the school of Lambengolmor.”

“You’ll be trying to cozen pen-tips out of me, then,” Aranwë said. “Your counterpart here, Erebor, never leaves us smiths alone.”

“I had heard of the new metal pens, but we still have only quill-pens in Lindon. When I compare the smiths there to Gondolin...” It was two miles from Ost-in-Edhil, up rising land to the house of the Mírdain, with the piebald horse ambling behind them. Pengolod exchanged all the news of Lindon, then descended into rumour and gossip, delighted at the refuge of the old language.

The house of the Mírdain stood tall at the top of a rise, before more foothills marched up into mountains nearby. It was as great and many-roomed as the main hall of Ost-in-Edhil, ringed with outbuildings. Aranwë explained that the hall was far from the city so that the wrights could harness a mountain stream with a waterwheel, and not disturb the tree-lined city streets with the forges’ smoke and noise. The order of the Mírdain encompassed all the metalworkers of Eregion, and they vied to make even pot-hooks things of beauty.

Once the horse was stabled, they came to the tall doors of the Mírdain, twice Aranwë’s height and covered in a thousand worked panels of gilded and jewelled metal. Two grey hounds panting on the step in the sun, scratching at their gold and leather collars. Aranwë did not pet them; they were guard-hounds on duty. Pengolod had to endure their curious noses before they let him pass over the red granite steps.

3. At the Table of Celebrimbor.

Celebrimbor knelt on one side of a wooden table; the dwarf Narvi stood on the other. With a sombre nod, the dwarf placed the short necklace that he examined back on the table. “No need for you to consult with me on this, my friend; the diamonds are clear as water, and diamonds true for all that.”

“That eases me. I was afraid they were lesser stones, white sapphire or spinel.”

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“Not like you, to doubt your making, Celebri,” said Narvi, giving the elf an earth-wise glance.

“I did not cut the stones myself. The work needed to be done quickly, since this jewel is for giving tonight.” A bell was rung immediately outside the door. Elf and dwarf both sighed at yet another interruption. “Enter!” Celebrimbor said.

“No, it has no particular name,” one of his smiths was saying to a companion, speaking an old dialect. “It’s just a door-bell.”

Celebrimbor listened as Pengolod introduced himself and his errand, then Aranwë mentioned how Pengolod was their guest by Celeborn’s word. “Of course, of course,” said Celebrimbor. “And luck is with you today; please have the honour of meeting Lord Narvi of the Khazad.” Narvi removed his hood and bowed, then stood and straightened the skull-cap he wore.

“At your service and your family’s,” said Pengolod, kneeling smoothly.

Narvi bristled as he looked at the elf willing to place himself eye to eye. “So, you wish our knowledge. We are not as you Elves are, with days to squander; our time and our tongue are precious to us. You are not of the folk of Eregion. You look kin to the Sindar, and they scorned us as uncouth, long ago. Why should I aid you?”

Pengolod took out a suede bag the size of a plum. “I would not squander your days either, lord of the Khazad; I have brought pearls.”

The dwarf’s beard fanned out as he smiled. “My friend from the Sea! Narvi shall be your guide. No other dwarf is as well-spoken as I.” He bowed again. “Celebri, I shall return; this good elf and I must take counsel. I would not have him rooked in the depths of Khazad-dûm.” The two smiths managed to keep plain faces while the loremaster and his would-be teacher left.

Celebrimbor leaned onto the table, eyes narrowed with laughter. “That turnabout was worth one of the pearls! So, how bad were matters down in the Great Hall?” Aranwë relayed the news, and Celebrimbor’s mirth turned to anger. He smacked the table, then strode about the room. “Always the same thing, as if we are a river of wealth from naught! First he foists this fellow on us, then stints us of what we need while pressing for more of our jewels in tithe. It began when our Lady left in early summer, and he tightens the screw. What kind of lackwits does he take the Mírdain for? How does he think the steel for his gates comes to Eregion, and the metal of his silver chair? We Mírdain won it for him. Were these matters in his hands, we would dwell in the lowlands and eat acorns.”

He lifted a placating hand to Aranwë. “I am ranting; do not mind me. But if he was so cold to you, who have the manners of old, we are low in his favour. Celeborn can wait until tomorrow. I suppose our guest did not sweeten his mood by speaking of Dwarves. I heard you chattering to that fellow in an old language. Friends, are you? Is he a widower like you? He’s well-favoured,” he added.

“Nothing like that,” said Aranwë.

Celebrimbor’s teasing smile was gentle. “I thought you appreciated those narrow Sindar backs? Bring the loremaster along tonight, to witness the circle of

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ansereg for Annatar. He will take the tale of our great deeds around. And it will give you two more to chatter about."

Aranwë was less appreciative of this than Celebrimbor expected. "I never knew any Maia of Annatar's name or seeming when I lived in Aman. And Pengolod told me that Gil-Galad sent him forth from Lindon, distrusting his intent."

"What? What was awry?" asked Celebrimbor.

"He could not say; only that he spoke with their lords, and went forth swiftly afterwards, riding hard from their gates."

"And that is all the news." Celebrimbor picked up the necklace from the table, wrapping it around the knuckles of one hand like a fierce ornament. "Annatar's words to me ring true; that he is returned to bring order to Middle-Earth, and work with its peoples. Perhaps he spoke too much of change to them in Lindon. He brings us many a new thing, although his mien is ever modest." Celebrimbor's eyes became sharp. "But he will not be so modest after this night. It shows the merit of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, that one of that high kind bows to us."

"That reminds me of a promise I made to Annatar. Can you spare more of the day? I hate being torn from my work-bench myself, as you do, but this is a more engaging errand," said Celebrimbor.

"As long as I need not go to Ost-in-Edhil again," Aranwë said.

"Someone should counsel Annatar in the laws and bearing of ansereg, before tonight. Will you speak with him?"

Celebrimbor's smith looked pleased but perplexed. "Certainly, but why me?"

"After bearing the scourges of Gondolin and the brand of Maedhros, and the many times you have knelt for ansereg amongst us Mírdain, who better?" Celebrimbor ran the chain through his hand. "And if you still think matters are awry, after you speak with him – come and tell me."

4. Humble Persuasion.

Sauron strode the hall of the house of the Mírdain where he would take his trial that night. It was tall and round, with a roof domed in stained glass, and a floor tiled in curved patterns like the dome of the heavens. The tiles swirled together into a central circle. He sought for what might make the space ready for torment, and was puzzled to see only a narrow iron bar with pulleys halfway across the dome's height. The door opened with a boom, for the chamber echoed every sound threefold.

"Good afternoon, my lord," said one of the elven-smiths. "Cele—the lord Celebrimbor sent me to offer you what counsel I may." With irritation, Sauron noted that this fellow was as tall as he was, with the height of the High Elves of old. Not as fair as he, of course, but who was?

Sauron knew that he had more than one Mírdain to win over. Tonight, he had to seduce all of them to him, those who served as well as their lord. He would

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see how easy it was to draw this one in as one of his allies. "Let us sit here in the shade and speak. I would know what I might of the bearing of ansereg."

"Do you even feel pain, being a Maia?" the elven-smith asked.

"I have more mastery of my body than the children of the One," said Sauron, unable to bring himself to say "Illúvatar." "But it is still a body, subject to the laws of flesh. Yes, I will feel pain."

The smith frowned. "The Maiar I met at the forges of Aüle in Aman felt little."

Sauron gritted his teeth and honeyed his tongue. "This must be why Celebrimbor has sent you to me, then. That soothes me."

"I knew Maiar of old, yes. It is unusual to meet one with a name not heard long before."

"Middle-Earth is great, and I have wandered far. I did not abandon it during the dark days, yet I have spoken with Valar many a time." Morgoth had been that Vala. "Now that I come to know the Elves and their wisdom, I wish other tasks had freed me sooner. Not all my works have gone as I wished," he sighed. "I hoped to try again, to repair the hurts of Middle-Earth, which I love."

The elf-smith looked through him, grieved with memory, and Sauron hid his glee. "I understand what you say about the past not being as you had wished." The elf looked down at his scarred hands. "And wishing to make amends."

Sauron bowed his own head in false commiseration. "I thought I would find kinship among the Mírdain. I have great knowledge of the earth, its stones and metals and their craft – some my own secrets, as you smiths have yours. And once I join the Mírdain, it will be shared amongst them." The elf-man's look was hungry at those words, he saw; this was one of those to whom their work was near to all. He leaned in closer. "Is it not our task to work together, we of Aman, to ease the misery of Middle-Earth?"

"How?" asked the elf-smith.

Sauron said, "Perhaps my design is foolish. I would wait to speak."

"You are wise, Annatar. It is meet not to trust all at the first meeting. But our lord trusts you, and so you have our trust." The elf-man seemed to relax. "I will tell you all you need to know of bearing ansereg. And perhaps later you might think of me when you wish to teach us Mírdain more."

"Most willingly. This matter of ansereg - I should think it as simple as not crying out. How much will they torture me?" Sauron asked.

The elf-man said, "You speak words of fear and dread. There is pain, but not beyond what you may bear. My own story will show you!"

Sauron listened, fascinated, as the elf-man described the ritual of ansereg with the words of one who knew and loved it well. No word of this had come to the dungeons of his old citadel, Tol-in-Guarhoth. Nor had Celebrimbor spoken half so much of taking it as this elf-man did. If the elves endured these trials at

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their own hands, even found a measure of lustful pleasure in it, small wonder many had lived through Sauron's own tortures as long as they did, in the War of the Jewels a thousand years and more ago.

He nodded as the elf before him, won over by his listening beauty, said that there was great wisdom to be had from it. *There certainly was*, Sauron thought. When he moved to topple the Elves, he would not make the old mistakes, trying to break them in the ways they knew. Instead, he would bind them to him. Their link to the life of Arda would be his to use. If he failed, and the Elves were not won to him (as he thought they might easily be in their pride and hunger) he would destroy them without compromise. He did not need them as thralls. There were mortal Men for that, in this age of the world.

For now, he would endure this trial to win all their trust. The smith was telling him enough that he might mimic what the watchers desired to see. By seeming to give, he would take all. As for the one who would deal to him tonight; he would be the Lord of Gifts indeed, and give each torment back to him a thousandfold when the time was right.

A dark hope began to glow in the hollow of his spirit where another being's heart would have been, as he bethought new ways to bind the Elves. "Your tale is wondrous!" he said. "Tell me more of the way pain is bound up with desire. It thrills me to think of it."

5. The Circle of Ansereg.

That night, Celebrimbor walked about the concourse of the Mírdain, who were ringed around the edge of the domed chamber. The hall was crowded up to the edge of the tiled circle. Almost all of the Mírdain were there, two hundred and more, the elf-men in black and silver, fewer elf-women in silver and white, a sombre company. The only jewels any wore were the chokers of the Mírdain, of the same make on each throat, but varied in gems and metals. One of the wedding-jewels of the Noldor was a necklace; thus the choker symbolized that the Mírdain were wedded for life to their order and their works.

Two silvered chains had been hoisted to the bar that split the dome's height, their lengths sparkling in the lamplight. Each ran from the bar to coil for several ells along the floor. Celebrimbor saw that the watchers for the ritual had arranged some helpful things: water to drink, dark-dyed wool towels for catching sweat or blood. He took his ease, strolling the edge of the circle and speaking with all and sundry. He was not like Celeborn, he thought, who was high and remote. No, all the Mírdain were equal together, after the circle of ansereg and the Mírdain's oath.

At the edge of the circle, Celebrimbor could see Pengolod, and smiled to note that he was wearing a borrowed black and silver cloak that was too long for him. Well and good; there would be a story taken around, to increase the merit of the Mírdain. It was up to him to make it a tale that was worthy.

Celebrimbor realized that he was thinking of anything but the golden flesh that was about to come under his hands. Annatar's beauty in the sun that

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morning had unnerved him. Hearing that Annatar had craved deep counsel of ansereg, receptive to every idea, was the last spark needed to kindle desire for the Maia. Part of his mind said that he aspired too high, and that he should share only knowledge, not desire, with one not of elf-kind, lest he come to a strange fate. But his spine felt stronger and his flail-arm itched at the thought of having all a Maia's power kneeling at his feet.

The ritual did not begin until the one who was to be initiated was ready. A Mírdan came with that message, then left to bring Annatar. One of the seconds rang a clear bell, and the crowd fell silent. To the side, a musician began to play a drum; the music would endure for the rite of ansereg.

And Annatar entered.

The door was closed with a boom behind him. In the silence after its echo, he stepped forth into the circle, head bowed, tall and supple as a willow tree, wearing a brief linen loincloth. Amidst the dark throng and their pale faces, he was unique, a being of gold, revealed by near-nudity to be unalloyed and pure. He cast one hesitant look around the crowd, then knelt and locked his gaze to Celebrimbor's, as if taking refuge there. Celebrimbor had seen many things in the faces of those who knelt before him; nervousness, pride, dark hungers, incipient joy. Annatar mingled a touch of fear with a profound receptiveness. The beautiful, waiting face before him seemed forged from the precious metals of his dreams. He collected himself; everyone was waiting for him to speak.

"The initiation of the Mírdain begins!" he said. "Tonight this one is come to show his worth. Name yourself!"

"I am Annatar."

"And name your desire."

"To join the Gwaith-i-Mírdain; to be one of your number, and labour with you."

And at this near all the watchers said, in one voice, "What do you bring us?"

Annatar opened arms and spread hands, and said, "Myself."

The crowd cried out again. "How do we know this?"

Annatar folded his arms to his bare chest. "I offer myself to the Mírdain in the circle of ansereg, that they may witness how I endure to gain my desire."

Celebrimbor alone spoke. "Then rise you and take up these chains. As long as you can endure, hold to them; nothing binds you save your will and pride."

Annatar rose and stretched his arms high, taking the chains. He might run his hands down the length to splay on the floor, or even swing higher if he was strong enough. Celebrimbor took the measure of the elegant back, the cupped croup divided by white linen, the sweeping lines of the arms and legs. He paced around the postulant in a circle, running a hand over the golden chest to gauge the weight of flesh, and had to tear his hand away. Annatar's skin was temptingly radiant to the touch.

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Celebrimbor went to the side; a word to a second, and the first of his flails was in his hand, a light horsetail that stung more than it seemed. He whisked Annatar sharply, every inch of his back, raising a touch of redness to that flawless skin. When he went around to the front, Annatar gave him a taunting look, as if to say; is that the best you can do? He flushed himself to read that, and handed off the horsetail for a flail of leather straps.

The drummer paced faster as Celebrimbor began to flog in earnest. All the fine craft of his hands was extended into his flail-arm, and the same joy and tension of creating ran through him. As at his work-bench, he was lost in the art and in the gold before him, its shape and response. Annatar was silent beneath his hammering, only arching slightly, making the chains chime. The snap of the flail met the rhythm of the drum and the pulse of his wheeling heart.

Celebrimbor paused when the back was evenly marked to admire his work. There was a golden girdle of skin about the waist where the flesh was fragile, but from the ribs to the shoulders, and the spine-base to the thighs, was flushed red from the strikes. He strode around Annatar and realized that his victim might be Maia, but his body was flesh with the flesh's betrayals. Beneath the linen loincloth, he was erect, and he met Celebrimbor's eyes daringly. "Give me fair measure; for I am Maia!" said Annatar, the words drawing a murmur from the watchers.

Celebrimbor leaned close to him, running hands down Annatar's chest, clasp his dark-golden nipples and twisting them. "Do you mean that?" the elf asked, not daring to believe.

"Yes. I swore to give myself to the Mírdain. Take what you will." The face before him, shadowed within the long golden hair, was both rapt and knowing. Celebrimbor called for another tool, and handed off the flail.

He took up the scourge of one tail that he adored, a snakelike whip as long as his own arm, and the seconds pressed the crowd back tighter. A fitting tool, he thought, graceful for this graceful one. Hardly anybody could bear it for long. He usually saved it for a few strikes at the end, that he might take a taste of what he craved to deal out, and that the postulant might feel some terror and, later, pride at the stripe or two they carried. One of the seconds gently brought Annatar further forward in the circle so that there was more space to swing. Then Celebrimbor began.

He stalked behind Annatar in an arc, dealing out strike after strike. The scourge made both Annatar and the air itself cry out. He felt himself smiling, and shook himself to loosen his shoulders more. The sweat poured down his own bare back, and he felt his cock hard, his body seething with dark heat. Sparing a glance at the crowd did not abash him; they were as humbled watching as Annatar was beneath his whip. The seconds looked stunned. All hung on his hand, his moves, Annatar more than any other. He felt that he drew the hunger of the watchers into him, and whirled the whip again, to give them more. The blood surfaced, brilliant as rubies; one, two, three more lashes, and Annatar still held the chains. But he slumped to kneeling.

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Celebrimbor went and stood in front of him. Annatar cast up again the same serene, receptive look, his lips parted dreamily, as if he was vision-swept after his suffering.

The elf dropped to his knees and took the Maia's face in his hands. Celebrimbor's voice shook as he spoke, but all heard his words. "The trial is borne. Are you ready to be made Mírdain?"

"Yes," said Annatar, untroubled and clear.

One of the seconds handed Celebrimbor first a towel, with which he wiped his own sweating hands and brow. Then he handed over a small knife with a sharp, flattened tip. Celebrimbor grasped it; to hold it was to feel as if your hand itself was a blade. He tilted back Annatar's head, and measured one thumb's depth below Annatar's winged collar-bones. Along the surface of the skin, on each side, he made a slow slice. Some barely bled at this, but Annatar's crimson flowed again. From a breeches-pocket Celebrimbor took the short chain of gold and adamant he had completed that afternoon. He ran it through the blood, then held it over his head and stood back up.

"Can you speak the oath of the Mírdain for us, Annatar?"

"Thy works are my works, thy secrets are my secrets, and I am bound to thee. I shall stand by you watchers, Mírdain among Mírdain."

Celebrimbor pulled Annatar up from the floor, brushing aside the heavy hair to clasp the collar around his neck. "The deed is done; Annatar is of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain!" he cried. The drum ceased.

In the moment of silence, Annatar flung himself upon Celebrimbor, the lean golden body melding to the strong-thewed elf-man, bent to kiss him. The crowd gasped, and the seconds stood wary. Celebrimbor reeled at the fiery whisper in his ear, "I am undone." He felt the Maia's erection pressing high against his loins.

"Wait, wait but a little," breathed Celebrimbor. So much had passed between them in touch and glance, it seemed natural and destined.

"Here and now," Annatar said.

Celebrimbor wrested back the urge to pin Annatar to the floor and turned to the hovering seconds. "We shall stay here," he whispered. One of the seconds rang the bell again, bringing the ritual to an abrupt end. Annatar's wild move had silenced the crowd of the Mírdain, and held them back from congratulating their new member and their leader. The pair was isolated as the crowd slipped out, respectful, dazzled, titillated.

The pair swayed in their embrace as the last watchers went. When the great doors shut with their echoed boom, Celebrimbor grasped Annatar's hair, and they kissed again, hot mouths probing each other without restraint for minutes.

"I never dreamed the arts of the flesh were so fine," breathed Annatar. "No wonder Elves and Men love Middle-Earth, if such bliss is to be found here, on the other side of its suffering."

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"You understand we who linger better," said Celebrimbor, reaching down to undo Annatar's loincloth. "What would you have of me?"

"Others have spoken to me of what it is to be taken, of your warrior's loves."

Celebrimbor's knees buckled. Was Annatar reaching into his head to draw out what he desired? "You know it may be painful."

Annatar stroked Celebrimbor's cheek, and his chrysoprase eyes half-closed in mirth. "I am learning that Elves say that about the most interesting things they do."

Celebrimbor tumbled Annatar into another kiss, while finally undoing the linen ties of his loincloth. "Lay at your ease, while I..." He cursed to himself as he felt his pockets, no tin of unguent or even a lump of jeweler's wax about him. The seconds had not thought of this, and he had not dared anticipate it. Then he laughed at his cleverness, and walked to the wall, taking down one of the many glass oil-lamps. He blew the lamp out, touching the hot glass lightly to undo its light shield and wick, bringing the oil-vessel back to where Annatar reclined.

"First, I shall soothe your pain, before we see if any more suffering awaits," he said, pouring oil generously into his hands. He slathered the light-warmed oil all along Annatar's beaten back, then worked along his arms, thinking they might ache from clasping the chains so long. Annatar turned about like a coaxing cat in the oiled embrace, laughing lightly and tracing his own fingers along Celebrimbor's limbs. They pressed and slid against each other, and Celebrimbor, in a move as old as the life of the Eldar, slid his hands down to Annatar's rump, sleeking oil into the skin and the cleft. Annatar uttered a sound halfway between a breath and a gasp.

"Try this, a first finger."

Annatar closed his eyes and rolled his head. "You lied to me, Celebrimbor; there is no pain."

Celebrimbor laughed against Annatar's shoulder. "There is a lot of oil, here! Let me bring more." He turned to the lamp-vessel again, and slicked his fingers further, then worked two fingers into Annatar's backside.

"Is that well, beautiful one?"

"Take what you want, elf-man. I will grasp your chains again, and if you do more than I can bear, I will release them. Agreed?" Annatar leaned along the floor and grasped the trailing ends of the chains, bending over in offering.

The sight inflamed Celebrimbor. The shining golden body linked to the silver chains, dripping gems of oil on the blue tiles; the spill of shimmering hair; best of all the look of anticipation on Annatar's face, on the brink of knowledge, sly and wicked, daring him. He wiped his hands on his own chest and unhooked his breeches, then knelt up behind and slid his aching cock along the oiled flesh until it glistened. Annatar shoved himself back, looking over his shoulder again to see how well Celebrimbor was endowed. For the first time, the Maia made a request. "Could you oil yourself more? Just to be certain."

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After Celebrimbor obliged, he worked fingers into Annatar until the kneeling one moaned and rested his face upon the floor. Then he replaced his crafty fingers with his cock, and groaned to be buried in the flesh he had tormented. The arse-channel was so hot, it felt like the fire of Anor seared him at the root. He bent almost double as he moved, placing his hands on Annatar's shoulders, then reaching to feel Annatar's collar of gold. He placed his hands over the collar and the throat, feeling the life pulsing there, not compressing, only holding his hands where he might compress. Yet this was a Maia he pierced. There was no need to be gentle. He could not slay him, could not break him, could just go on and on, taking more than he'd ever known could be given.

The heat of the flesh beneath him seemed drawn from the fires in the heart of the Earth, more than any elf's touch. He felt the smooth legs bucking back to meet him, the divine, impossibly tight arse all but milking his cock with its pressure. He looked at the perfect lines of the back below him, the red marks of the whip beautiful to his eyes, looking down further to watch himself taking, possessive and proud. Reaching down, he rolled his grip along Annatar's cock, an arm-motion that reminded his body of the joy of wielding the scourge. As he had timed his strikes to the drums, so he timed his thrusts with his hand's pull now. Annatar bucked back against him with a cry of astonishment as he came, and Celebrimbor let go at last, emptying himself with a cry that resounded in the echoing chamber.

When he returned to himself, Celebrimbor moved back, careful and stunned, and sank against the inlaid floor, glad of its coolness. He would bring them both water – surely the Maia would thirst – once he could stand. Annatar withdrew to sit upright, his arms ringed around his knees, serenity broken by a smile.

“Marvellous, for the first time,” said Annatar.

“A first time?” he asked.

“I was told it would be better the second time,” said Annatar, innocently.

Celebrimbor laughed, and said “One for the Mírdain!” He reached out to embrace Annatar fully.



In the halls outside, Aranwë fell back from the group that he was talking to, conscious that Pengolod was walking alone, seeming bemused.

“What did you think of all that?” Aranwë asked.

“You know, when we bring someone new into the Lambengolmor, we gather in concourse, dressed in our cloaks of green – and then have dinner together. Perhaps we might be more interesting.” They both laughed. “Of course, they made us leave at the part I would have most liked to watch,” Pengolod added, and Aranwë became silent and grim.

“Have I offended you?” said Pengolod.

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“Yes. What you craved to see is not what our rite is about. A private trial, maybe, but that was...unusual.” Aranwë spoke half to himself. “That was on the edge of its laws, there.”

“I would not offend a Gondolindrim. I will speak nobly of the Mírdain and this rite, I promise, by the ink on my hands.” Pengolod’s raised right hand was blackened on one edge and several knuckles from the ink of millennia of scribing.

“Ah, you are marked by your work, as am I,” said Aranwë. “We smiths forfeit our hands to our making.” Pengolod clicked his tongue in commiseration, and ran his ink-stained hand over Aranwë’s scarred ones.

“It has been better than I thought, to meet an old city-mate,” said Pengolod, speaking low. “Perhaps you and I might speak more in the language of old – its most intimate words?”

Aranwë stepped back, and a few long strides took him well away. “No! This is just the heat of the hour. You would be sorry, tomorrow.” He did not explain why. “I would not lose a friend thereby.” He went to go down a smaller corridor, away from Pengolod’s path.

Not knowing what else to say, Pengolod cried, “I still have your cloak!”

Aranwë turned around. “Keep it for your journey to Khazad-dûm tomorrow. You said yourself it is warmer than your own, and you will need it in the sunless depths.”

Then Pengolod was alone in the stone hallway of the Mírdain, its few night-candles dim after the lamps of the chamber of ansereg.

Coupled Power

Galadriel returns to Eregion; Sauron and Celebrimbor agree to make the Rings of Power; and Sauron reaches some conclusions as he witnesses an instructive demonstration.

1. A Mortal's Tale.

After nearly a year in the wood and reed dwellings of Lorinánd, Galadriel's chambers in Eregion seemed suffocatingly rich. Crafters of all Eregion's orders had gifted the Lord and Lady with their works, woven and wrought. She and Celeborn had agreed that it would have been rude to refuse the Mírdain's latest gift, although they both found it oppressive: windows of stained and painted glass. The windows had been installed in her absence. She shook her head as she looked on them for the first time, so detailed and tinted that they made the room gloomy in the dusk.

"There is one mercy to this caging glass," said Celeborn, reaching out to press a latch by one window. "The Mírdain are so mad for their devices that they made each one so that the shutters outside might be reached." He opened the window, and they stood together in the soft, rain-scented spring air that flowed through.

One lingering kiss, and then she turned back to a heap of scrolls and cards upon a table. She lifted a metal card that was engraved with a message. "And Celebrimbor sends word that another gift awaits me."

"The Mírdain had a rich summer's trading last year. You would think they might send things that are needful, not these indulgences of jewels and glass. Instead, I must ask for succour and tithe," said Celeborn. As Galadriel sat to read, he came up behind her, and she smiled as he softly lifted her circlet. She unpinned her hair and leaned back, relaxing as he unwove her braids. "How did your work in Lorinánd go, truly?" he asked, as he caressed her neck. There had been the official words she had spoken upon her return to Ost-in-Edhil, of the friendship and increased alliance between Eregion and the wood-elves she had visited. It had been unusual that those proud, free folk asked for help from an ordered realm. Galadriel would not have left Eregion otherwise, for her daughter Celebrían was still in childhood, now tucked up to sleep after the excitement of welcoming her mother.

She arched back to his touch and smiled up at him, pleased to mingle business with pleasure as they talked. "Well enough. I taught their wise women everything I might about warding their bounds. They were troubled further this winter by fell creatures. This gave them more of a will to change their ways, from wandering the woods to being settled. I do not know if they will keep these ways now that spring has come. Some speak of going north, to join the folk of Oropher."

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Celeborn said, "An ill sign, that the free folk of Lorinánd are so troubled they seek counsel and lordship. The greater peace is, the less people need governance."

She bowed her head to re-read a scroll that had come from Lindon that past autumn. "*Annatar sought leaguer, and offered many great things. Seeing that his name and seeming were strange to us, we bade him go forth and fulfil his errand elsewhere, and are thereby sending word to the Lord and Lady of Ost-in-Edhil...*"

Annatar; the name meant the Lord of Gifts. She had only heard of one spirit named for gifts before, an emissary strange who had come among mortals in their early days, and corrupted some of them to the worship of Morgoth and the fear of mortal death. Her brother Finrod had told her the tale, learned from a mortal wise woman. All that she had heard of Annatar rang of this tale to her. She had never thought to speak of this to Celeborn before; most Elves thought lightly of such mortal's tales, saying they became false fancies as the tellers died and a new speaker took up the story. Perhaps there was a whisper of truth in this one? "This news of the one called Annatar is strange. Gil-Galad does not speak lightly, or warn without need. I see you kept your own counsel in this matter," said Galadriel.

"As far as I might. The very day the message came, the Mírdain made him one of their fellowship. With all that entails. Even had I known, I cannot say if I would have spoken against Annatar." Celeborn rested his left hand on her shoulders. "This matter placed me between hard holly-wood and a steel axe. It arose when I needed to levy more tithe from the Mírdain. Not the arts they share and boast freely, but iron-work, to arm our own borders better. Lindon warned against Annatar; but after he joined the Mírdain, they were so pleased in their pride that I was able to gain what was needful for all Eregion."

Galadriel was quiet for a moment. She reached up and placed her hand over her husband's. "A hard place to stand, indeed," she said. "Have you heard anything ill? You are uneasy, I can tell."

"No, nothing ill. Governing little has brought peace where the Mírdain are concerned. If they do not harm Eregion, let them have their way. The tithes are paid, their scandals are few, Celebrimbor is closely engaged with Annatar – our borders have been troubled, but otherwise I have not had so quiet a winter since we dwelled in Doriath." Celeborn looked at the heavy, detailed carpet and shook his head again. "I do not trust my own dismay in this matter, for Annatar's success among the Mírdain is bound up with ansereg. You know I do not care for ansereg." He now ran both his ever-gentle hands over her shoulders, still tense despite his touches. "There is enough pain in this world already, without these trials that evoke the Kinslaying. But ansereg is the pleasure and will of the Mírdain and of many of the folk here. I am loath to constrain any from their will, any more than I would make all trees grow the same."

Galadriel turned her face up to him, alarmed at the turn his words had taken. "You said that Celebrimbor and Annatar are closely engaged."

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"As your Noldor warriors sometimes are," said Celeborn, with an edge of wit to his voice. "Not for a wanton night or three. There is but one bed between them."

She stayed still as he continued speaking, with the same smooth, amused note. "My patience in enduring his courtliness to you is well paid. His heart is turned, and if he and I are not friends, we are grown agreeable."

"He and I? You and Annatar?" she asked.

"No, Celebrimbor. Annatar is always among the smiths." At that answer, she rolled the scroll up and jammed it into its case. Then she glanced at the metal card again.

"I suppose I shall see all that is new tomorrow, when I visit the house of the Mírdain," she said, lightly as she could. All she had so far was a suspicion, a mortal's tale an age of the world old. Whoever Annatar was, he was canny, to weave himself into the warp and weft of Eregion so soon.

He bent to her, and they kissed again; yet by the tightness in her throat, she did not feel it as sweetly as the kiss but a few moments before.

2. Immodest Proposals.

Celebrimbor awoke and found that, as always in the half-year they had lain together, Annatar was awake before him.

"Of what did you dream in memory last night?" the Maia asked, softly.

"Our early days here; there was so much to be done." Celebrimbor sat up and arched back. "An agreeable time."

"That is something I admire about you elves, that you are so devoted to your work," Annatar said, tracing a light hand down the elf-man's chest. "And perhaps you will let me have the first work of the day?" He ran his hand down further to shunt away the red covers. Like men of all kinds in Arda, Celebrimbor met the morning hard.

Before moving to touch him, Annatar folded the rumpled coverlet into a crisp-edged rectangle. Celebrimbor smiled as he watched the little ritual, but Annatar was above jesting, and bent to him with a serious look.

Celebrimbor stretched back along the sheets dyed with madder, and weighed the supple body lying between his thighs by draping one of his legs along Annatar's back. The contrast between his pale skin and the golden-tawny Maia piqued him. The mouth that enveloped his erection had gained its skill from his own tutelage, both willing example and wilful teaching. "Gentler, fairest one," he said, looking down. Annatar tilted his head up just enough so that their eyes met, even as Annatar continued his service, brushing back his straight golden hair.

He accepted the long pleasure, giving himself over to the Maia's heated mouth, his hardness first pressed against the soft, napped tongue, then with the full length slid and sucked, until he spent with a growling sigh. Although his heart still swelled with the sense of power he always felt when the Maia came to

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him, it was not in him to do nothing but master, first thing in the morning. He reached down for Annatar fondly. "Get up here, you, and get your own back from me!"

"No, lord; it is my pleasure to serve you." Annatar withdrew and knelt, a little ways out of Celebrimbor's reach. "I am content for now. And I anticipate the display you have planned for tonight. Even my form is not tireless, so I would wait."

Celebrimbor looked on the self-possessed being, composed and receptive as if he knelt in a circle of ansereg. "You need not always be so formal with me." He pulled the coverlet back up and added, sadly, "It takes much for me to strive to meet you in this at every hour. If you care for me, you can turn to me as more than one who dominates your lust, or labours as a jewel-smith. There is more to me than those two faces."

Annatar was cool. "You speak to me of care. I did not come to Middle-Earth to love one elf over another, but to do great works. For I am Maia. My care should be for the world, not for one."

Celebrimbor bowed his head. "I am not that much of a fool. Why do you tarry with me, then?"

"I give myself to you that you might know power and pleasure, and that I might know you in all your arts. And I count my hours under your hands well spent, for all that I have learned." Annatar stood from the bed and strode to open the windows. As he parted the shutters to the morning light, Celebrimbor saw him silhouetted in black against the blinding day.

"And I merit you above all others in Eregion, for what you can give to me. The hour has come for me to ask of you what I need, elf-man." As Annatar spoke, some submissiveness returned to him, as if he opened up at last.

Celebrimbor said, "Name what you need!"

"You and the Mírdain, to aid me in my work. Long did I know my desire; to bring order to Middle-Earth. And I have now conceived the best way for it. I have seen how you elves work to make jewels and the work of your forges into more than they are. Your works in this manner could be mightier yet, for your art can harness the powers I bring. I might show you how to make new jewels. Rings of power, linked not just to the virtues of one or two spirits, but linked to many, the life of a whole people to magnify their strength and virtue, and help them endure the harshness of time."

Annatar stepped close to the bed, eyes brilliant. "We would make strong the elven-kings under the sky. Help your friends the dwarf-lords in their halls of stone. Even succour mortal men, doomed to die. All this if I need not labour alone! Will the Mírdain aid me?"

"Now I see why you turned to me; for your yearning and mine run close together." The idea struck a clear note in his mind, as when he bethought a work meant to be. It seemed something that might exceed even the works of Fëanor. But Fëanor hoarded, and the Mírdain would give freely, and to all. He should not

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let his own desires stand between such great tools and the world. "Are you done with our passions, then, now that you have spoken your mind? It might be better, thus."

Annatar came and stood close in front of him, and spoke low. "I have gained more wisdom from the love of the body than you could possibly know. Thus I am still willing. Would we have come to this counsel, if not for how deeply I knew you through kneeling before you?"

Annatar, standing before him, could not bring him love. But he could bring him everything else he craved; craft, fame among the Elves, companionship at the greatest of works, desire fulfilled. And power. "Perhaps I grow brave enough to venture everything I might, after mastering you," said Celebrimbor. "We will mingle our knowledge to this end. The oath you made to us Mírdain in the hour of ansereg will be fulfilled thereby."

Some beautiful faces were disturbed by a smile, rendered less perfect, but not Annatar's. "That is as I meant it to be."

3. A Rich Gift.

On a bench in the round hall of the Mírdain, Galadriel turned the wide brooch of the Elessar in her hand, saying nothing. "It will look very fair, I thought, on the robes you like; and I know you prefer silver to gold," Celebrimbor said. The clear green stone's colour would shine true and bright on the white gowns she favoured, and the eagle-shaped setting was as finely graven as a bird's own feathers.

"This is a great work. How long was its making?" she asked.

"I began it before you left, and completed the stone on the day of midsummer," he said. When he had spoken, she unclasped it and pinned it at the centre of her gown's collar, then rested her hand over it, eyes closed. As she thought; only Celebrimbor had touched it.

"I can feel its virtue," she said, smiling at last. "Thank you, my friend; this is a rich gift. And now I am challenged as to what I might give you to match it," she added.

She saw his face fall. Her words showed that she was accepting his gift as one from a lord to another lord, not as a present from an elf-man to an elf-woman. Resolute, he went from standing over her like an anxious swain to kneel as elf-knights did. "You wound me! I ask only for you to use it, lady, for that is what I made it for; to keep a part of Middle-Earth green and deathless, as you would have it." He drew a deep breath. "You may even aid Celeborn of the Trees thereby."

"Celebri," she said, bending to him. "You never used to be so formal with me."

He stood back up. "You are also different. Once you praised my great works with many words; now you speak less."

"I do not mean to lessen your works thereby. What are you creating now?"

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He strode about the star-tiled floor, the many colours of the sunlit stained-glass dome patterning him. "I am still taking the counsels of Annatar. Part of me regrets that I made your gift before he came. It might have been greater." After looking at her and finding her quiet at that, he went on. "Annatar feels the same about his works as I do about mine. It is a great thing, such understanding and working together." She noted that he had taken a piece of jeweler's wax out of his pocket as he spoke, and rolled it in his hands until it was warm, now pinching and shaping it. He was never at rest from making.

"That is a fine thing, and I know its meaning for you." It was the polestar of his heart; he had turned long ago to Galadriel because of her own love and knowledge of the Noldor's arts. She had not cared to compete endlessly with the forge, nor to wed a kinsman so close, for all that she wished him well. "I understand you have other companionship with Annatar as well. Is it wise?" she asked.

"Is it your place to ask me this?" He stood with his stance wide in the midst of his hall, bright with coloured light.

She perceived that he sought her approval no more, and was troubled. Then she cupped her hand over the jewel he had just given her. "Yes."

Understanding what she meant by the gesture, Celebrimbor sighed, and began to pinch at the wax again. "All right, all right. I am caught in my own trap! It is not a love as the laws of the Eldar would have it. First, it is warrior-turned,[♦] and then he is of a higher kind than we. But I am consoled for a time. Perhaps this is better for me, and it is not for me to love."

"I would not hear a friend say that, Celebri," she said.

He gave her a grave look. "You are kind, lady; to your friends."

At his renewed formality, their conversation declined into courtly words without meaning. She made him a courtesy and left, feeling burdened. The jewel was too heavy for her light gown, and dragged the collar down further than she cared to be exposed. There was a hot sparkle when it touched her skin. This was a jewel you could not forget you wore. She hoped Celebrimbor had had the manners to mention the gift to her own husband, for some word of approval. At least Celebrimbor did not seem that changed from the elf she had known before; still dramatic, proud, stubborn, his heart distracted by his burning for his craft.

"Do you like your present, lady?" a soft voice asked. A figure strange was standing to one side; a tall, lithe male with blonde hair of a richer gold than hers, straight and heavy as metal. Astonishingly, his skin also seemed touched with a note of gold in its tawny, making his brilliantly hued eyes startling. No mortal nor elf was ever so flawlessly fair. With a twitch of irritation, she noticed that he too wore a long white robe.

[♦] A phrase used here as the equivalent of "homosexual", specifically referring to male homosexuality.

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"Annatar," she said. "We have not met before. I see I am known to you."

The tall figure bowed. "Your elf-lord Celebrimbor spoke to me of you, and the present he planned to give you. He was most anxious," said Annatar.

Galadriel frowned. "You are close in his counsels."

"I understand that he held much store by you." Annatar's smile was forgiving and complicit. "But I do not rue his gift that you bear."

Dismayed at all his words implied, she began to walk away, and he fell into step with her. Their white robes trailed side by side. "Why come you here, Annatar, to Eregion? I know you were turned from Lindon."

"It is my labour, lady fair, to work with the peoples of Middle-Earth. If it would please you, I might aid you down in Ost-in-Edhil."

She ignored that and walked proud. "Why do you come to the Elves, then? We have the least need of any of the Free Folk."

He gave her a clear look. "I learn as much from the Mírdain as they do from me. It is an exchange. Your lord Celebrimbor is very wise. We have much profit from our time together." he said, and she gritted her teeth at the insinuation of the last words.

They had now come to the great entrance, and she went out to the step. He followed. From the edge of her eye, she saw something shift, and heard a whine. The guard-dogs on the steps were shying away from him, uneasy, even as elves passing by turned back to look on his bright face.

The Maia bowed low to her. "Lady, I see I grieve your pride. Forgive me; it should have been I who came to present myself to you at Ost-in-Edhil. My dwelling is here among the Mírdain, but I will come and pay you honour anon."

"No need to trouble yourself, Annatar," said she. "I feel we are introduced."

Annatar went back through the gold-panelled doors, leaving Galadriel standing in the sunset, alone for a rare moment, thinking of the legend her brother had told her. A bright one, a shining one bearing gifts, the wise mortal woman had said. At Annatar's departure, the dogs lay at their ease again. She knelt down to pet one of the hounds, scratching its ears, well aware that only the dogs' keepers were supposed to touch them. It was a small act of defiance against all the wills of others she felt constraining her. Celeborn's relief and Celebrimbor's soothed pride were sharp in her thoughts. So was Annatar's keenness to her dismay. The guard-hound she caressed nudged her hand. "The way things are, they will think me kin to you, if I speak against Annatar," she murmured, as she petted the brindle bitch. "Still, this I must do." At least she could always talk to her husband, she thought; but her throat felt tight again.

4. Pens and Swords.

After Pengolod checked on his horse at the stables of the Mírdain, he asked about his second errand. He was sent to a jeweler's studio in the oldest part of the Mírdain's house. Amongst the rambling halls, he stopped to admire works shown in cabinets, items that were too dear to their makers to be traded away. In front of

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a silver-framed glass, he paused. He smoothed out his black hair, he glanced at himself turned sideways; rearranged his cloak; and then gave up. "Foolish to try and look well in the middle of a journey! Wise man indeed," he said to his face in the mirror. "As the dwarves said, I look like any other elf." It did not occur to him that this was praise for his fair, thoughtful face and rider-lean form. He went on, peering through doors until he found Aranwë.

Aranwë was at work there at a jeweler's bench, wrapping gold wire to hold leather braiding around the hilt of a sword. The loremaster watched Aranwë for a moment. He twisted the thick wire using his scar-braced, capable hands, and his wrists alone were strong enough that his smith's shoulders barely moved. Once there had been many like to him among the Noldor, tall and strong; but many had returned over Sea, and hosts more had been slain in centuries of war. Now most in Middle-Earth thought elves were all lean and lithe. Those born in later days seemed diminished to those who had known the hosts of Nevrast and Gondolin. Pengolod shook himself from his reverie and spoke in an antique Quenya dialect, and the smith looked up, startled.

"Well met, Aranwë. I have brought your cloak back, and I owe you many thanks."

Aranwë answered him in the same language, setting the sword aside. "You are returned soon from the dwarf-halls." He stood to greet his visitor, wiping his hands with a red rag from his back pocket.

"Soon? The days were long without the sun, for six months. But I have the knowledge I sought." He looked on Aranwë's work. "I thought you did not make swords any more?" he asked.

"We have had much lore of Annatar, of both gem-work and other tasks of Aule, even of the very nature of metals. Some of us thought to test the new learnings, and to try some new steel-work and alloys, I went back to my old work." He picked up the long, damasked blade. "With much of it, we do many of the same things as before, yet now we know why they succeed. Less by art, and more by measure, you see."

Pengolod changed the subject to discourage more shop talk, holding out the black and silver cloak Aranwë had lent him. "You were right about the cold of Khazad-dûm, and your kindness kept me warm many a day in the depths. You shall have a fair copy of my book, when it is done – the dwarf-language of speech and gesture might help you deal with them."

Aranwë took the cloak back and laid it on the bench. "A book for a mere loan? That is out of kilter. I have something for you that will set that score right," he said, turning to rummage on a shelf.

While Aranwë's back was turned, Pengolod mustered his courage and said something he had brooded on when clad in the black cloak. "The night I witnessed the trial of the Mírdain, you said I spoke to you then from the heat of the hour. And your words then were true," he admitted. "But that does not mean I do not regard you kindly."

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Still facing the shelf, Aranwë said, "I thought of you, as well, and I readied this." He turned and handed the loremaster a narrow, flat brass box. Pengolod opened it. Within was a set of metal pen-tips, steel and gold, and three engraved pens slotted to hold them. "You said these had not reached Lindon yet. A fitting end to your stories about the Mírdain, something to write about us with."

Pengolod shut the box and weighed it in his hand. As a tool for his work, the gift was more to him than the same weight of mithril. The pen-tips inside had a tinkling rattle in their compartments, as if they would speak what the elf-man who gave them could not. "There are not thanks enough. These shall only write fair tales of the Mírdain! A gift like this is not so much an ending, as a whole other story. Speaking on such, perhaps tonight, I might tell you all my tales of the deeps, if you cared to hear them?"

Aranwë unfolded the cloak. "Tonight I am engaged; a matter planned for some days. You brought this back to me just in time. But tomorrow, it would be a pleasure."

Pengolod leaned against the jeweler's bench, with a resigned smile for their subtle flirting matched to his ill luck. "A trading party returns to Lindon tomorrow, and I would ride with them. My journey down was troubled with orcs and would-be thieving Men. I had only three arrows left in my quiver by the time I reached the holly-hedge of your borders."

Aranwë looked shadowed. "All the news from the west and north has been the same for the winter, and such tales increase. The party carries some of our jewel-work to Lindon, and they have waited until the weather cleared, to increase their strength with willing riders. You do well to join them, if you must return. I do not envy you three weeks on the road in the spring mud – my riding is terrible at the best of times."

"After months in the caverns, it will be an endless pleasure for me, even if it pours!" Pengolod opened the box in his hand again. "Do you have any ink to hand? I long to try these."

5. The Silver Fist.

Sauron reclined on the crimson bed that he had risen from that morning, watching the rite of ansereg before him. In the space before the bed stood two elves, unclad in the red light of a glowing ceramic stove. The one who was enduring stood still and stable; the one who was meting out was moving, active, powerful. Sitting up, he saw Celebrimbor wield the thin rod wrapped in braided linen-threads more harshly. Celebrimbor had worked the subject over in his own distinctive style, moving from tool to tool for the harsh music he wrought. The snap of the thin rod's blows, and the quiet, pained measure of the subject counting out the strikes, were fairer to Sauron's hearing than any other elvish tune, the song of order and power.

Sauron always insisted on the full ritual, saying he found it beautiful, and the two elves on display had obliged. It was a great pleasure for him to watch the Elves at this, for what he saw and for how his watching changed the way others

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acted. Celebrimbor's subject was twice as undone beneath his eyes, and Celebrimbor himself always glanced at the figure on the bed, never forgetting that his ostensible dominance was on show. He laughed inwardly at the thought that this was supposed to be an object lesson for him. It was. He who had been near a stranger to the ways of the Elves was learning from submitting to one how to wield subtle control over them.

Warmed with excitement, he slithered out of his white robes. Combining desire with submission brought back an echo of the satisfaction he had known in serving the greatest of dark lords. Morgoth had always been unrelenting in his power, the Vala as above him as he, a Maia, was above the elves. Kneeling to Celebrimbor was a taste of that, and the body's release was a blissful moment of return to the pure Void. But Sauron's pleasure was always mixed with resentment. The echo was never the same, never enough. Celebrimbor did not even perceive the depth of his need. He understood this through his watching, for the kneeling elf-man was at his limit; the linen-woven rod was fine but cruel.

Sauron walked over and slid up behind Celebrimbor, running his hands across the fire-flushed skin. "This rod is like you, Annatar, golden and supple," said Celebrimbor, half-turning back into him, caressing him sidelong. "Do you want to deal a strike or two?"

Sauron refused. Once he had been Gorthaur, the torturer; if he wielded such power he always sought to be like Morgoth and take it to the ultimate. Instead he said, "Give me a taste," mixing pleading with brassy challenge as he proffered his chest. Celebrimbor dealt a few crisp stripes across him, not holding back. The subject winced in sympathy, then tilted his head respectfully when Sauron did not even flinch.

With supernal grace, he sauntered aside and reclined again. Celebrimbor now spoke to close the circle of ansereg. This private rite was unrestrained compared to the public ones. He watched the pair backlit by the stove, the kneeling elf bowing his head against Celebrimbor's loins. After words of fealty and rough, intimate touching, the pair joined him on the red coverlet.

Sauron sat up straighter to see everything as Celebrimbor directed his subject to kneel and bend upon the bed. The display tonight was for Sauron's approval. Celebrimbor had said that he longed to take his leman as deeply as possible, using a full hand, and when Sauron had been incredulous, had arranged this for his watching.

Celebrimbor turned to Sauron and caressed him briefly, reassured by his honest fascination, and turned back to the subject. Sauron knew the names of all the elves of the Mírdain, but he rarely thought of them by such. To him, there were the elven-lords and their subjects, a pattern rather than a people, and he concentrated on the higher ends of the order. The two elves he watched now, lord and subject, were well matched, each tall and strong and dark-haired like many High Elves. He thought Celebrimbor the fairer, as was fitting for his mastery, just as Sauron was fairer than any in Eregion. Even, he thought with satisfaction, fairer than their Lady.

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Celebrimbor left off addressing his subject in a soft murmur to call to him. "Come as close as you care to, Annatar," said he, and Sauron went and knelt beside the two elf-men. Celebrimbor had coated his hand and wrist with clinging grease, and it gleamed silvery in the lamplight as he began to work fingers into the elf-man's nethers. Sauron knew himself how hard and wide that hand was, from bearing its blows and harsh touches.

"Will you tear him, as you force it in?" Sauron asked with interest.

Celebrimbor laughed softly. "There will be force for but a moment. I'm slicked with enough grease for a broadsword! And I have four fingers secure already. That is all right, isn't it?" He smacked the subject affectionately with his free hand.

The subject assented, with a desperate, desiring gasp, then forced out the words, "Yes, my lord." Celebrimbor began to fold his hand in on itself, sliding the thumb between the fingers, and spoke a word of warning to his elf-man as he worked in short thrusts. Sauron's straight nose twitched at the rousing smell of hot, excited skin and melting grease.

The elf-man was uttering deep, singing moans now, and had curled his scarred smith's hands into fists. Celebrimbor closed his eyes as, not breaking the rhythm he had built, he thrust his hand entirely inside, buried to the wrist, and the elf-man cried out sharply. Sauron leaned in again, noting two things. With the hand slid home, the spectacle was less dramatic to look upon than he expected. The pierced elf-man was frozen still, beyond words, breathing raw between loose moans. Celebrimbor's arm was very slow to move, but his face was as alight with lust as if he had buried his member, not his hand, in the forgiving flesh. And neither looked to their watcher. Celebrimbor was ignoring Sauron for once, attentive only to his hand's work. Watching their pleasure, Sauron crossed yet another torment off his list as one enveloped by ansereg.

Sauron moved around to the subject's head and caressed a scar on his arm with a hot hand, exerting all his charm into the touch. The elf looked to him with a dazed start. Sauron smiled down at the elf, his Maia's power focused through the bright lens of his beauty. With a riven moan, the elf turned his face against the scarred arm, and Sauron looked up to meet Celebrimbor's drawn gaze.

With their eyes burning together, Celebrimbor moved his arm slowly, fisting his subject. Sauron gloated to feel that Celebrimbor's will to dominate was turned his way again. He whispered to the upright elf, "Harder and further," and Celebrimbor obliged. He smiled again at this obedience, thrilled at his success in inciting it. Their subject cried out, near to a scream, and Celebrimbor broke the gaze to lean and murmur again.

"Shall I finish him? A turn of my hand, and he is spent. Say the word!" cried Celebrimbor.

Inspired by the word "finish", Sauron allowed himself to picture the elf-lord slaying a subject at the peak of lust for his sake, then said, "A moment more." He watched as Celebrimbor sacrificed the elf-man, caught between pleasure and

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pain, to Sauron's gaze. Finally, Sauron relented, and withdrew from the chaos of their subject spending himself. He waited for Celebrimbor. But Celebrimbor did not turn to him immediately, instead consoling the undone elf-man.

"Annatar, pass me the flagon of water?" Celebrimbor said, not looking up. His nostrils flaring, Sauron obliged, holding his thoughts behind a calm face. He watched in revulsed disappointment as Celebrimbor set aside the will to power he had burned with moments ago to embrace and praise the subject. This exemplified the elves' chaos, that they could take their own rules and order and switch them about in an instant, going from dominating to servile soothing. And he burned with humiliation at the thought that he himself had submitted to one who inflicted such about-faces on him.

Sauron closed his eyes, blocking out the disorder before him for a moment of peace in darkness. If the world could not have everything the same, as in the beauty of even, unbroken blackness, it could have things in a strict order. He did not seek to topple the Elves out of malice, he thought, but to harness their disorder, part of having everything and everyone in Middle-Earth in its marked place. Even Celebrimbor was too soft, too distractible to endure the height of dominance for long. Humans could be taught, and dwarves could be bought. But like the Ents, Elves' long lives made them too set in their paths to be changed for the better. Only he, Sauron, could understand true order; only he was strong enough to wield power unbroken, in memory of the lost and cherished Void. He would dominate the Elves unrelentingly, when his work was done.

Obviously, Celebrimbor was going to complete the disorder of this assignation by demanding services of both him and their subject – as if Sauron and the mere elf-man were peers. He consoled himself by thinking of his great work. Even this shifting and changing was something Sauron could use to shape to his own designs; he would use the elves' lust to tap into the elves' unity with the world. Sauron had spoken to Celebrimbor of the great work of the Rings, but not of its crown. He would remain silent until his ordering was complete. And Sauron thought of one ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

Celebrimbor drew up beside him at last, and brought one arm around Sauron's golden shoulders while still touching the other elf-man. "Will you let me do that to you?" he asked, with a deep look

"If you let me do so to you, yes," he breathed, adding a canny touch of hesitance to his sensual voice. He might not call in the physical favour. But the metaphor was apt.

Celebrimbor beamed with pride, as if pleased that all had gone according to his plan. "A sweet bargain indeed."

6. The Song of Eregion.

Pengolod spent his last evening in Eregion with their loremasters, as the guest of Erestor. When the chilly spring night came down, they walked to the great hall to hear Erestor's spouse sing for some dancers. Pengolod drew his green cloak around him and told his counterpart about Aranwë's loan.

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“Your smith-friend did you a greater favour than you know with that cloak. The smiths are so devoted to ansereg that the dwarves think black and silver garb are one of the marks of the Mírdain. Perhaps the dwarves took you for one close to their order,” said Erester.

“I thought they were forthcoming. The dwarf-folk of the Blue Mountains would tell me naught, but here I had all. I shall be years writing,” Pengolod said. “You Eregion loremasters and the Mírdain seem close in league,” he added. In Erester’s workroom, he had admired the silver on their scrolls, the gilding on their books, and their metal pens and rulers. If he did not carry a box of the pens now himself, his grey eyes would have turned green from jealousy.

“Since Annatar came, they have much profit of his learning. Our order and others benefit, for Celebrimbor is generous.” Erester began to describe how various orders had gained from the Mírdain’s increased craft with brighter jewels for trade, sharper steel for finer tools, new lore for their own works. Pengolod listened while he looked around the crowd of Ost-in-Edhil. These folk had more pride to their bearing, and more ringing voices, than the people of Lindon. He noted a fair few were clad in black and silver. From the corner of his eye, he saw someone draw up their tunic and show some marks to a friend, as part of a tale of a past night’s events.

Erester saw him shocked by this. “It is not only the Mírdain who are daring and strong in Eregion. We others have our arts as well, and we loremasters record all,” said Erester. “I shall tell you some tales after the dancers.”

The Lord and Lady of Eregion were there, both clad in white. They were distracted from the singers, talking close and tense. There was a tension to the hall as others watched the central pair ill at ease with one another. Pengolod wondered what was so urgent that they sat squared against each other, eyes flashing, faces stern. The Lady gestured towards a green-stoned brooch she wore, and the Lord seemed to wave some point of hers aside. At that the Lady turned and looked ahead. *It would have been better for them to stay private this night*, thought Pengolod. *And yet it is not their names that I hear spoken by the folk in these halls, but those of Annatar and Celebrimbor.*

“Now, listen to that fair voice for these dancers: that is my beloved, who will sing sweet and long,” said Erester. “The dancers combine the grace of lost Doriath with the arts of the Noldor.”

Pengolod watched the dancers, clad in bands of silk and hung with jewellery. The silk was the red of the Mírdain. For all the weight of chains and stones, they were as light as linden-leaves on their feet. As they whirled and the singer’s voice pealed out, the susurrus of conversation in the hall never ceased, an undercurrent that once or twice even cut through the song.

At the last piercing note, the dancers bowed with unbroken grace for the still-faced Lord and Lady. Pengolod saw that Celeborn did not watch the dancers sway away, but stared at the floor where one of the dancers’ jewels had tumbled. And again he thought again of the frequent mention of the leaders of the Mírdain.

The Center Cannot Hold

Sauron finds that, in rape and in rebellion, Celebrimbor can only be incited so far. A modest rebellion has unexpected results, Sauron surrenders the last knowledge needed for the Ring-Making, and counsels are requested by Elrond in Lindon.

1. Set in Stone.

Celebrimbor looked back as the western doors of Khazad-dum ground closed behind him. In the early evening, the elf-runes on the door were lit with uncanny brightness from the merest glint of moonlight, startling against the granite. *I, Narvi, made them; Celebrimbor of Hollin wrote these signs.* Only the words, and Narvi's other works, remained. Deep behind those doors, Narvi lay in a tomb of stone, dead after the full span of a dwarf's years. Celebrimbor had not been bidden to the rite where Narvi's secret name was spoken to hallow his spirit to Aule. But the dwarves had suffered him to visit the stone tomb, and he had grieved and thought there long in the near-darkness.

Celebrimbor had thought little of the death of mortals, though Annatar had spoken to him of the fear other kinds felt at its approach. Narvi's fate brought it home to him at last. He had known mortals who perished before, but always in battle, or an aged Dwarf or Man had simply ceased to come among the elves. Some elves envied mortals their freedom from the long years. Not I, thought Celebrimbor. Eternity seemed too little time for all the works he would do. He and Narvi had shared that wish, and it shadowed him that Narvi's works were done. Sadly, he took off the dwarf-styled hood he had worn, and folded it in his hand, not knowing when he would wear it again.

He reached up and touched the enchanted metal of the doors, inlaid into the living walls of the mountain. "And may these endure longest of all our works together, that I may look on it and remember you," he whispered, then walked along the path that led beside the stream of the Sirannon, back to Eregion.

Once he would have sought out Galadriel and spoken with her about this; she too admired the Dwarves. Did she still? Since Annatar came, he had taken far less counsel with her. There were only so many hours in the day, and Narvi was mortal, and Annatar would not linger with the Elves forever. She spent many hours with her daughter, Celebrían, now. Their need for each other's friendship had faded – or perhaps it had been more based on the current of desire denied than either of them had cared to admit.

He walked, musing, for several miles, until the path of the Sirannon drew near to the road from Caradhras. In the midst of his thoughts of loneliness and sundering, his heart was gladdened, for he saw a lithe white-robed figure slipping down that road, bright in the falling evening. "Annatar!" he shouted, and bounded up to meet the walker. Had it been merely a hundred and fifty years since the fair Maia came to them, and joined him in his bed and at his side? Time had flown; there were never enough hours, with so much happening and waiting

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to happen. "Annatar. Again you come to me from the West, as at your first riding!"

Annatar let Celebrimbor embrace him, and spoke sombrely. "I have been speaking with some of the Men who came to the valley to trade, telling them tales to inspire them and giving them counsel." If he was to bring all the races of Arda under his thumb, it was not too soon to start luring Men to him, with enticing tales of what worship of the Dark would bring. "They have left by the pass of Caradhras yonder."

Celebrimbor looked at him admiringly. "This is part of why you are my boon companion; you too have a care for other races of Arda. I admit I like the Dwarves best, but you are always so helpful to the Edain and other Men who come amongst us."

Annatar laughed softly, and drew back a bit. "They are so afraid of the dark that awaits them. I try to reassure them, to show them that the way things is not so troubling, and to guide them to what power they might have, as I do with the Elves. Do you not feel pity for them yourself?"

Celebrimbor looked down at the dwarf-styled hood he clenched in one hand. "Pity, yes. And now grief. I understand you better, Annatar, and the Rings that you have proposed to me." He looked back up at the tall figure, close enough to grasp, glimmering in the falling dark. "You have delayed your last teachings to us. We Mírdain are ready for this work – hungry for it."

Annatar read the elf-man clearly; Celebrimbor might not lash out at death, but the elf's anger and sorrow would strike at the nearest target. So he offered up the target he wished Celebrimbor would fell. "What I would show you is no small thing. You must be able to give yourself to it fully. I have been waiting for you to have the time to spare – now that your friend is perished, perhaps you understand me better. Matters steal hours from you each day. You are dwindled with fretfulness about the politics of Eregion. Can you not cease your endless quarrels with Celeborn? Granted, he is never fair to the Mírdain," said Annatar, silkily, waiting for the elf's contrary reply.

"Even when his forestry blooms all the greener with the Elessar in the hands of Galadriel." Celebrimbor nearly snarled.

Annatar sighed. "The will of your leaders binds me as well. I know Galadriel does not care for me, and therefore I strive to be humble. I do not dare to teach the Mírdain all I might against the disapproval of your lords."

"If I left governance to them alone, I would have far more time. But I will not withdraw from the councils! Pure foolishness, when the craft-folk I speak for are the fortune of Eregion."

"By your kinship to Fëanor, are you not the true High King of the Elves, last remaining son of his sons?" asked Annatar. "Why do you bother to bide by what they say? Great lords should have their will."

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Celebrimbor looked at him long, gazing at the fair face he knew better than his own. "If I resolve these matters so that we may have our will, and I am less diminished by these quarrels, you will teach me the last I need to know? Tell me!"

Annatar leaned in to whisper in his ear. "Yes," was all he said, and traced the edge of the elf-man's ear with his tongue. Celebrimbor started, then leaned into the melting rush that ran through him, glad at this sign of acquiescence. After some plan had been laid, or a design of craft or power had succeeded, they often lay together to confirm their fellowship, Annatar giving of his beautiful body as he had of his knowledge.

Celebrimbor only gave in to the sensation for a minute. With Annatar as a lover, always kneeling, sensually servile, assertion had become second nature for him, his refuge when things did not go as he wished, his refreshment for the struggles of politics and creation. A hundred and fifty years ago, he would have asked with subtle words if his lover wished to lay amidst the long grass with him. Now he seized Annatar's arm and took a step onto the sward.

The white-clad Maia eluded his grasp, slipping among the boulders near the path with a sly, tempting look the masterful elf knew well by now. Celebrimbor followed, unclasping his cloak-pin, ready to spread the dark fabric on the ground for their coupling. A ways from the path, among high green grass and shielding stones, Annatar paused. "Show me how strong your will is. Work it upon me!" He leaned back against a tall grey stone, his bright eyes and teeth gleaming in the dusk.

Celebrimbor stepped up and pinned him against the cold granite, dragging at his golden collar to lower him for a wide-mouthed kiss. Annatar shifted to elude him, with a mocking smile.

"Do not taunt me," Celebrimbor said, his voice strained after the heart-wrenching day.

"Do not vex me," Annatar replied, "If you want me, seize me." Celebrimbor held back, uncertain. This was a new game. Annatar had never broken their lovers' rules to defy him so before, with teasing words and a denying body. That body was the only warmth in the cold glen of stone, the chill reminding him of the tunnel of Narvi's tomb. His mouth hungered to taste Annatar's spicy skin, his arms to cage the Maia inescapably; this one he cared for would not flee him into the darkness.

Annatar tilted his head away until Celebrimbor pulled him down again harder, forcing the kiss. Annatar melted to it just enough to incite him, then drew away again until Celebrimbor rammed him back against the rock.

"This is what you want?" Celebrimbor breathed. "You have been spending too much time with mortals, if you want to be ravished."

Annatar said nothing, instead dipping to the side as if trying to escape. Celebrimbor half-fell upon him, grabbing his wrists hard, and they strove together, falling down to their knees. It was better than tears for Celebrimbor to feel the breath burn his lungs, to finally pin the flesh-clad spirit beneath him, hot

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and sinuous as a fire-drake, both tempting and denying. Even as Annatar tried to break his grip, the long legs spread beneath the white robe.

Annatar fumed with a mixture of anger and lust to feel himself borne down, but not hard enough, never hard enough. He was tempted to turn back around on Celebrimbor, strike at him, ravage him in turn. Never had he longed more to take up his true name of Sauron and show the elf how it was done! Grief had made Celebrimbor vulnerable to anger and impatience, and lust would complete his work. He had saved this disobedience until the time was ripe to inflame Celebrimbor into lordly fury, priming him to defiance and wilfulness. The double game he was playing inflamed him, and he half-turned to let Celebrimbor feel his arousal before feinting at escape again.

Celebrimbor knew that the Maia could outstrive him, if he wished, but the harsher he was, the more the hidden limbs parted, and Annatar's face became a gloating mask of contentment. Just as Celebrimbor relaxed to see it, Annatar nearly slipped away from his softened grip. Celebrimbor pinned him for the final time, belly against the grass, to ruche up the white robes from behind.

"Now I have you," Celebrimbor laughed. "What a look you give me!" He bore down with all his weight, pressed his face in the warm hollow between Annatar's shoulder-blades. Then he bit and licked at the Maia's own ears, starting to buck his hips against the lean, tempting loins beneath him.

Annatar made sounds of protest and swerved his head away as Celebrimbor whispered to him. "But no coarse mortal am I, to force you to it. Say that you want it! Beg me to take you."

Stubborn in silence, Annatar thrust his own hips back against the elf who held him down, deliberately sliding to bring Celebrimbor's hardened rod along the cleft of his arse.

"Say it in words," said Celebrimbor.

He heard Annatar breathe like a spitting cat, felt the Maia quiver in frustration that his game was not going as he willed it. Then, with a hissing exhale, Annatar whispered, "Take me." Celebrimbor let him go to open tunic and breeches and spit into his own hand. He forced that wetness up inside Annatar before placing the head of his phallus, moist and sliding from its own fluids, ready to pierce.

"Ask again," he said. And as Annatar asked once more, the solution to the politics came to Celebrimbor in a flash, and he laughed for the joy of it as he thrust in.

When Annatar felt that thickness split him, he set aside his plans for the hour. His spirit's senses told him that even if matters had not gone as he would have them, something about the elf's dominance was sealed by his acquittal. Annatar thrust his body back against Celebrimbor's hammering, reaching for the darkness that was near, deep inside his body, his coming release.

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Feeling Annatar give himself over to what he had asked for, undone in the end by his desire, set Celebrimbor free. He urged Annatar, "With me, now, I can scarce hold!" Their mingled cries of release were stifled in the long grass.

Annatar felt Celebrimbor sag above him and thought that he, too, was weary of holding back. Unlike the soft-hearted Elf, he would have no moments of weakness when power came to him. He turned about beneath Celebrimbor, eyes fiery. "Tell me that you will force the lords of Eregion to submit to you so!"

Celebrimbor laughed deep in his chest and leaned on him again. "No, force is not the way to victory in this matter. I know what to do, now; it came to me even as I asked you to beg. And I might not have had the idea if not for your strange game." He smothered Annatar in a heavy kiss.

When his mouth was freed, Annatar asked, "Your solution?"

When Celebrimbor told him, it was all that Annatar could do to hold back his own laughter, which would have rung from the cliffs of the Sirannon. It was the last thing he had expected, that the way in which he found Celebrimbor the least satisfying, his insistence on following the will of others, would be the key to his gaining power in Eregion. But he could see the proud lords falling before the feint. He would enjoy watching this.

2. A Modest Rebellion.

The first Aranwë heard of it was at a work meeting of his fellow steel-smiths, when one of the smiths complained to their leader about his requisition. "Not more pen-tips, Celebri! A hundred and forty-four - are the loremasters eating them, lately?"

"Sorry, my friend. They are needed for a coming council. And you have a fine hand for them." Celebrimbor's charm failed, for once. The smith announced that he was weary of them for the nonce, and offered to trade the task with someone else. Aranwë accepted, glad to get rid of something he found dull, then asked about the detailing for the pen-tips. "Plain as can be, do not trouble yourself," said Celebrimbor. "And no need for pens themselves, a wood-turner is making them."

"I'm surprised that Celeborn is sparing the branches," quipped the pen-free smith, and the others laughed. Such asides had become common, lately, in the highland house of the Mírdain.

"We will not need to fret about that, in the future, if the council goes well," said their leader. There were some murmurs at that, but Celebrimbor let the tempting comment lie, saying only that the pen-tips were needed for the end of the week, and inviting all to the council.

Later, Aranwë engaged in the delicate steel-cutting and filing, not bothering with the engraving and gilding he had done for Pengolod's gift of pens, wondering what was afoot. All the folk of Eregion could read and write. It was a point of pride for them, as for all the High Elves, and other elf-folk who came to dwell among them learned swiftly. Still, at normal councils, those who recorded

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notes wrote on slates with chalk, and scribed with ink only at need, for paper or vellum were saved for lasting works.

The meeting took place on a soft, overcast morning. The glass dome of the Mírdain's largest chamber was still bright. The tiled floor was crowded, without its central space. There were more Mírdain than there had been a century and a half ago when Annatar first came. And members of other orders had also been invited, surprising the Mírdain; loremasters, game-rangers, foresters, breadgivers who both sowed and baked the sacred bread, vintners, marchwardens, and more. Celebrimbor stood on a wooden table to be seen and heard by all the throng as he spoke. Two chains still hung from the iron bar that spanned the dome, trailing silver onto the table, and Celebrimbor reached his arm up to grasp one of these, as if he would submit to the company when he spoke. He jangled the chain to draw everyone's attention, then began his measured speech.

Once he had won the crowd by praising their work as the lifeblood of Eregion, they did not shout down his proposal right away; that the governance of Eregion should go from the Lord and Lady to a council from all their orders, under the guidance of the Mírdain. "Celeborn's lordship, by ideas of royalty rather than ideas of merit, is past its day. Does he speak for us, for you, or for his past dreams of Doriath? We Mírdain would bring Eregion a better way."

"What of our Lady?" a breadgiver shouted. "She stands beside him as his equal."

"She deals in diplomacy, in warding, in defence. We might do these things, too, again on merit."

Someone called out in protest, "You call for rebellion! I would not be a rebel again – no, not after I was fool enough to follow Fëanor!"

Celebrimbor managed to hush the outcry, and kept his voice quiet, so that everyone leaned to him to hear better. "Not a sword shall be unsheathed, not a red plume shall be seen on a helm. Yet it might be as I saw in the past, at Nargothrond; my own father Curufin was turned out as their lord, by the people's word, and even I turned from his ill deeds! A change of lordship may be gentle if it is the will of the people, and for the right. Hardly a change, even. All of you direct this realm already, in sooth. This will simply make the truth of how Eregion's power lies more clear and right."

"And would you be our lord now, Celebrimbor?" called out the one who had followed Fëanor.

Celebrimbor turned the heckler back neatly. "That should not be your question. You should ask yourselves if that is what you want, and I will follow your word. The governance will chiefly be by the council, for I have works of my own craft to do. Erebor, chief of the loremasters! How many dwell in Eregion?"

Near the table, an elf-man in sage-green waved a scroll above his head, then spoke a number of thousands.

"Very well; if most of the folk will have me, I shall be your lord, and your council shall have its will. Your wish shall be known by your name signed to one

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of these sheets." At that, he reached down and pulled Erestor to the table-top; the loremaster carried an armful of vellum sheets, ready marked with places to sign, and the pens that had been forged and turned. He laid most down, and held up one pen and sheet for all to see, as Celebrimbor jumped down from the table and, most humbly, began to lay out the sheets and some of the pens at the ready, uncorking some ink.

The crowd arranged itself into spiralled queues around the centre of the hall. Knots of elves stood in converse to the sides, quibbling and debating; a few walked out. Aranwë was at the back, so he had plenty of time to think, and unlike some of the excited folk, he took it. Celebrimbor hardly needed to say little against Celeborn in that hour, for he had said plenty at other times, until the Mírdain spoke against Celeborn easily. It had been wise of him to say little against the Lady, and to place her in parallel to powers others might have. From the chatter in the ones lined to sign, many were moved not by dislike of the current lords, but by a chance to hold some of that lordship themselves.

Aranwë was able to confirm a rumour for some of the folk of other guilds; that the Mírdain were on the cusp of a great work, an enchantment to aid and elevate all the folk of Arda. "Still, this is a great change," one said, softly, looking uncertainly at the table where sheets were being signed, and volunteers to take the news around and gain more signatures were being arranged.

"To me it seems as Celebrimbor said, to make things more as they are already," said another, "the Mírdain and those with skill as the ones who steer this land." Aranwë recognized the speaker as Erestor's crisp-tongued wife.

As for himself, Aranwë did not mind Celeborn, particularly, and had always honoured the Lady. But he owed more than fealty to Celebrimbor, as did others in that hall. They were bound by all that it meant to be a Mírdain; the love of their crafts, the works and successes they shared, and the intimacies of ansereg and more. Few of the Mírdain took spouses or lovers who were not at least kin to another Mírdain.

Aranwë was not the only smith to find refuge in the house of the Mírdain from the dark history of the Elves, the ill-fated oaths and bloody deeds of the War of the Jewels. He did not speak often of his time in Gondolin, nor of his years with the elf-men of Maedhros. If asked who he was, he said first that he was of the Mírdain, and took what contentment an exile who lingered in Middle-Earth could have from that.

And if this gentle rebellion failed, he wondered, what then of the Mírdain? He joined one of the spiralled queues to sign his name with one of the pens he had made in part.

3. The Black Chasm.

Celeborn and Galadriel sat stiffly, their tall daughter Celebrían standing, to hear Celebrimbor's speech. They had had every word from the Mírdain brought to them for three days, since rumour of the fomenting rebellion reached Ost-in-Edhil, and decided to wait and see what the embassy brought.

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Celebrimbor spoke as graciously as he might, attended by representatives of many orders. Then he presented the stack of signed papers, explaining that they had been assembled over the past three days, and what the will of the folk of Eregion was. Each sheet had been signed by the same number of people, so that all one need do was count the number of sheets to understand how many names there were.

Galadriel riffled through the pages, estimating the count of the sheets; three, six, twelve, twenty-four, forty-eight, more still to count. She glanced up at the embassy before her, and her husband saw that she was white with rage, a slight flush on each cheek. Placating, Celeborn placed a hand on her arm and murmured, "Counsel?"

"Yes," she growled. They looked at each other, then at the expectant embassy. With extreme formality, Celebrimbor said, "We shall leave you, honoured ones, to consider the people's will in this matter. When might we return to speak with you again?"

"One hour," said Galadriel. As one, the embassy group bowed, and left to wait in the courtyard. The pair saw the varied people turn to Celebrimbor as they all left, and begin to whisper excitedly. Without speaking further, the rulers and their daughter swept off to a side salon.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life!" gasped Celebrían. "They want you to step down? I never heard of Elves being ruled by such a thing as the council they propose!"

Galadriel smacked the stack of papers onto a table without completing the count. "Once before have I heard of this; at Nargothrond, when they swept out the sons of Feanor and reinstated my brother Orodreth."

Celeborn swept up the papers and said, "With these sheets? Never did I think that so many would give the Mírdain their word for this."

Galadriel nodded in stern agreement. "At Nargothrond, there came merely an embassy as we had today. Reinforced with a few swords."

"They had no swords today, mama," said Celebrían.

"This is more bitter, to see the names of all who would have me gone. It was many hands to prepare this. Aye, many hands, and the chief of them stand in the great hall."

Celeborn looked at a window that would have been a view, was it not filled with another of the Mírdain's stained-glass works, and turned away from it. His voice was weary when he spoke. "How long has Eregion slid from our hands? Are these our people? By our service to them, yes; by their own word, no. They are grown strange to me, and I cannot speak for them as I once did. When did this cease to be a realm of our desiring?"

Husband and wife looked at each other, he tired, she enraged, as Celebrían stood by, torn between anger and tears. They had discussed all the options: to call up guard and sword in anger: with words, to try and work their own will over that of the people: or to step aside. "I know the day, the very day," sighed

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Galadriel, "though I was not here at the time." Celeborn grew cold at that, for they never had agreed about Annatar.

"Perhaps if you had felt as I did in that matter---" he began, but Celebrían interrupted. "Papa, please! What are we going to do?"

Galadriel looked at her husband, and weighed his words with their options. "I would go for a time to Lorinánd," said Galadriel. "They would welcome us there, and we might do some good. The lands grow yet more fell and troubled. It will be a swift journey through Khazad-dûm. What say you?"

Celeborn surprised both the women. "I will not walk through Moria." Both gasped at the cruel name Elves never spoke to the Dwarves; the Black Chasm.

Shocked that her compromise was refused, Galadriel snapped, "If I can set my pride aside enough to surrender a realm I helped build, for the sake of your weariness, you can endure the Khazad a day or two!"

"No," he said, his voice low and heavy. "I have endured much of them, but I will not honour their halls – not after they desecrated ours in Doriath. Nor will I abandon the woods I nurtured here to the heedless hewing of the Mírdain. I have lost enough in my day. It is too much!"

Galadriel said, "The insult I am dealt today is too much for me. I will not stay where I am not wanted. Though my bed be cold, I am going."

The two glared at each other, proud against place-bound, undermined by a century and more of thoughts half-unspoken.

"And I am staying," said Celeborn, at last.

"On your own head be it, then! I suppose you shall speak to Celebrimbor and make your arrangements. I shall go to make my own," said Galadriel. She stepped back, as if waiting for Celeborn to break and agree with her, but he had not by the time she left the overdecorated little room.

The tall maiden Celebrían stood there, riven, now looking at her defeated father, now turning after her stern mother. She swallowed. "Father, I am sorry. I cannot stand it, either – I will go with Mother."

"Child, are you sure? This has been your home all your life," he said, thinking sadly that the bright girl deserved better than the unspoken conflict that had hemmed her days.

"I'm not a child any more!" Clinging to her own anger, she dashed off after her mother.

4. The Song of Sauron.

"So it all went perfectly, then," Sauron said. He was curled on the carpet at Celebrimbor's feet, in the elf's most private chamber. Celebrimbor had slumped into a carved wooden chair, near exhausted after a day of chaos, and was staring at the light in a figured lantern.

"I...suppose." Celebrimbor sat up, then leaned forwards onto his hands. "Mind, I respect Celeborn for his decision to stay here and be my gadfly over his forestry; 'tis what I've done to him for years, after all! Caught in my own trap,

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again. Well, easy enough to manage him alone. The first wood we will have will be for the Council's chairs. That will rattle him."

Sauron smiled to hear Celebrimbor's relish at the rivalry continued, but the elf-man's voice dropped. "But it is very evil that he and Galadriel are riven over this. I never imagined they would fall out so. She would have been welcome to stay, as well; I would have honoured her."

Sauron was well aware of that, and had to restrain his delight at her leaving. "I fail to understand you, Celebrimbor. You wanted power for yourself."

"No, I wanted power out of their hands. That does not mean I would have this!" Celebrimbor cried. "To us Eldar, it is a rare insult when wife and husband separate – as rare as the sin of Kinslaying," he said, gravely.

"All to the good she would not have you, then. What if it was you from whom she separated?" Sauron watched that thought hit Celebrimbor like a cobblestone to the heart, and waited.

"That is why I will not insult Celeborn further with exile. Let him remain, if he wants to stay." Silence fell, save for wax hissing inside the lantern. At last, Celebrimbor looked at Sauron, glaring at him from the shadows at his feet, clearly displeased, and spoke again. "I promise not to dwell on it more, Annatar. That was the point of all this, to have less distraction, and all the support we needed for the great work. And great it must be with the price that is paid. You owe me what you promised me: the last."

Sauron shifted so that he knelt before Celebrimbor, bowing his head so that his face was hidden beneath the long fall of rich golden hair, and spread his hands. "Masterful you are grown indeed, and a joy it is that others see in you the fair strength I see. The last you shall have. Harken to me."

Sauron did not begin to speak, but to sing. One brief cantrip was all he sang; piercing enough that he saw the elf-man shaken to his vitals, deep enough that the lantern and chair seemed to vibrate, and the silence that fell afterwards was as pure as the silence at the beginning of the world.

Celebrimbor understood immediately. "The Music of the Ainur," he breathed. "The power you great spirits use to shape the world."

Sauron stood, tall as a tower before the awed elf, and his voice had the ring of doom echoing from his deep singing. "Yea, some of this you shall have. The will of all your race it shall bring to you, and you may bind that will and power to your making thereby."

Then, the Maia thought, he would link their ring-making to his, and they would fall beneath him. As joy lit Celebrimbor's broad, handsome face, Sauron thought of the Men who wondered at him now, and the hatred of the Elves and worship of the Dark he sowed amongst them. Too, there were the Orcs. In secret moments, Sauron was working the slow magic to draw the hidden Orcs from their holes and hiding, and down to ready the realm where they would serve him.

And were not Orcs once Elves?

5. Unofficial Business.

When word of the events in Eregion came to Pengolod's workshop in Lindon, he did not even try to stop the scribes from putting down their pens. "Leave off for the day, go and have the news," he said. "Tell the teachers showing the youngsters their letters the same. And give me back that pen, Galdor – it's one of a set. I shall clean it myself." He lingered as the loremasters and apprentices scattered, noting what was left undone here, clicking his tongue at a pot of gilding not sealed shut there. He was contemplating the engraved metal pen in his hand when Elrond found him.

"Where have all your folk gone, Master Pengolod?" Elrond asked.

"Should I try and keep loremasters from finding out the news, Master Peredhil? I might as well try and build a sea-wall from loose sand. But with you, the news has come to me. Do you need a scribe for your councils?"

"No, I seek one who knows languages of old. Did you ever speak the Sindarin of Doriath?"

Pengolod bowed. "But of course! I learned it in my sojourn at Nan-Tathren, where many folk came together. I remember it clear as starlight, a dialect most antique, useful in untangling the origins of certain words."

"If I gave you some messages to write in that language, you can do so, then, without delay?" Elrond's look deepened. "Being the chief of the loremasters, you might work in secret, with none questioning you."

"I can indeed." And why, he thought, would Elrond want to code messages so? Those who knew much about Lindon knew that there was the King's official word, and then there was the strange role of the Peredhil in his court. Elrond was kin to kings, yet he only carried the title of "Master"; he was the herald and favourite of Gil-Galad, but not named as a prince of the realm. Despite that, the wise knew that for what truly mattered in Lindon, you watched where Elrond went. "One always writes better, lord, if one knows who one's audience is?"

"These messages will be for Celeborn of the Trees."

"Ah. Now I understand." So Gil-Galad and Elrond would keep the deposed lord of Eregion in their counsels, and be discreet as well. The old language of Doriath was not an unbreakable code, but it might make the messages more difficult to read, while being seen as a courtesy, not an obstruction. Pengolod looked up, forcing a smile down for a neutral expression.

"Last time I went to Eregion, lord, I went on my own behalf. When some scribing is done, I have a book or two that must go thence; fair copies for their loremaster, for the kindly Khazad, and for another friend or two." He ran his fingers along the fine engraving of the pen he held, a gift from one in Eregion. "Is this helpful to you at all?"

Elrond smiled himself. "Would you grudge to ride there again? The road is grown dangerous. But someone travelling on their own behalf, unofficially taking

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scrolls and books around, would be useful to us in sooth. Have you any kin there?"

"No," said Pengolod, and a shadow fell upon his face; he had no close kin anywhere since the fall of Gondolin.

"That is for the best, in these matters. Let it be known to us when your books are ready. Come with me now, with your tools, and Gil-Galad will give you the messages for translation." Pengolod took down some of the fine vellum used for the letters attached to messenger-birds, then picked up his brass box of pens.

"Fair tales of the Mírdain," Pengolod murmured, shaking his head at life's ironies. To Elrond's curious look, he only said, "Talking to myself, my lord; never mind me. Shall we go?"

One Ring to Bring Them All

After the Rings of the Khazad are finished, Sauron turns to other works; the Elven-Rings are completed; the third time is the charm for the errand-rider of Lindon; Sauron makes the One Ring; and Sauron comes to Celebrimbor for an encounter with a shattering conclusion.

1. The Meaning of Mírdain.

After the night's ritual was through, the round hall of the Mírdain felt diminished. The smoky air was cooling after an intense hour of song and spirit-calling, all focused on the Rings of the Dwarves. The lamps had burned down irregularly, some blown dark, and a few forgotten items littered the floor's edge, a pair of sandals, a crumpled wrap. All the Mírdain who had aided the ritual had left to eat after fasting, and maybe to embrace the beloved after celibacy. Only the chief of the ritual's sorcerers remained, Annatar and Celebrimbor.

Annatar stepped up to the stone plinth that had been placed in the centre of the Mírdain's round hall, and picked up one of the seven jewels that lay upon it. The ring that he caressed between thumb and finger was alive with power, an earthy heat and glow. Within the mithril and gold of the ring's setting, a changeable gem flashed, to represent all the different kinds of wealth that might gladden a dwarf's heart. The rings of Men had been simpler, each with an amethyst in a setting of sleek steel, the most mortal of metals.

Celebrimbor leaned on the edge of the plinth, exhausted but still controlling, as he had been throughout the ritual. Silently, he held his hand out to Annatar, and Annatar gave him the ring. Celebrimbor placed it on the plinth with the others, then began to wrap them, one by one, in tiny suede bags.

"Once we have completed the Elf-Rings, we will bestow them," said Celebrimbor, "to the folk of the Blue Mountains, the Iron Hills, and of Khazad-dum."

Annatar knew why they waited. The rings were great now, but their full potency would spring to life when the Elves wore their rings. "Tell me again how the Elf-Rings give the jewels for the mortals even greater virtue." He wanted to be absolutely certain he understood, before he began his own work, making one ring to rule them all. He had exerted as little of his power as possible that night, just enough to add the hook of his own will to the Dwarf-Rings. Let the Elves weary and bind themselves to this making!

"The other rings bear a gift, a dream, our good will. But the Elven-Rings will fulfil our own desires, and of course we feel these most keenly. The wish is greater; the will for their making is greater; and we will draw most deeply of ourselves for them. The fire we place in them shall be returned to us threefold. So too our good will shall be magnified, and the mortals' rings shall reflect that." Celebrimbor was tranquil as he spoke, confident after completing the second

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Ring-making. "Yea, all the children of Arda shall be united as never before; the Firstborn, and the Secondborn, and the folk of Aüle."

"More of your selves," mulled Annatar.

"Yes. But we do this with all our works. The very word "Mírdain" has two meanings; jewel-smith, and jewel-men, jewel-people. The word for a smith or maker is the same as that for a person in the very highest sense. It is what separates the children of Illúvatar from the goodly beasts, that we think and make and are aware. Thus in a sense we Mírdain are the same as our works." Annatar held back from rolling his eyes at Celebrimbor's words. Elves were prone to these flights of etymology, one of their many distractions.

Setting the Rings aside, Celebrimbor came up to Annatar and grasped his shoulders. "Never more true than with you, fair one, man of gold. Many wonders have you wrought, and your own self fairest among them." He kissed the Maia, soft and lingering, then asked, "Do you truly have to leave Eregion – to leave me?"

Annatar's face was shadowed in the dimming hall, and he answered, "Yes. I have said before that am not just here to aid the Elves. The first two parts of your work are done, and you are on the path to power. Thus I would turn to ordering other realms."

Celebrimbor asked, "Where do you go? To Lindon? The High King might receive you better there, now." He did not mention Lorinand in the South, where Galadriel now dwelt, even though he had reckoned it as one of the high-elf realms in his count of the Elven-Rings.

"Many men dwell to the south, around a place they call Lake Nurnen," said Annatar.

"The south-men are savage. You go from the highest to the lowest," said Celebrimbor, scathingly. "It would be better to go over Sea, and take counsel with the high men of Númenor."

"That is a fair idea. I will do that when the time is best. Yet order should touch everyone. I see it in Eregion; you are governed with ease, the great work has gone forth with the focus of many of your Mírdain. You have learned as much as I can teach you. And I have learned as much as you have to give."

Celebrimbor embraced Annatar, remembering the first time he had taken the Maia in his arms, in this very spot in the hall. He had known for long years that this day would come. He would lose the wisdom that had mentored him, the power that had knelt before him, the lithe being who had warmed him many lonely nights, even without love. "Even if you go soon, tell me; were the lessons I gave you sweet?" Celebrimbor knew better than to ask for an expression of care from Annatar. It seemed to be against some high principle the Maia held.

So it was an unexpected delight to feel the Maia twine deeper into his embrace, like a serpent seeking to warm itself against his crevices. "Ah, Celebrimbor. My time in Eregion has been far more to my desiring than you will ever know." Annatar drew back and, for an instant, twined Celebrimbor's silver

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forelock like a mithril ring around one of his tawny fingers. "Perhaps I shall return, if my works allow it," the Maia murmured.

2. An Errand-Rider's Return.

As Celebrimbor prepared to dive into the cold spring-pool, he stopped and looked along the westward road. There, as many times before, the horn-call of Lindon rang, loud and glad for the first trading party of the spring. After the Council and Celebrimbor had sent messages of fealty and peace to the High King, Gil-Galad, Lindon had continued trade and exchange with Eregion. The court of Lindon dealt chiefly with Celebrimbor. The official word about this was that the ever-changing Council was "less convenient," but Celebrimbor thought that Gil-Galad enforced his own lordship by clinging to the older way.

His keen eyes picked out the party on the grey stone road through the holly groves. Of twenty-three riders and one empty horse (either a spare or the steed of someone slain on the road), twenty-two and the horse turned toward Ost-in-Edhil, where the Council of Eregion worked and the markets were held. The twenty-third rider turned southwards, to the lowlands of Eregion. Celebrimbor peered at the rider, but could tell little about him or her, save that they were clad in sage-green, and riding on a piebald horse. A loremaster, by the guild-colours, riding to where Celeborn had his house among the sheltered oak groves. He smiled wryly.

Being the ostensible ruler of Eregion had taught Celebrimbor much. Now he was the one who had subtle workings going on behind his back, and those who were dissatisfied with the Council and Celebrimbor turned to the former ruler in his lowland house. He had known for a long time that Gil-Galad kept Celeborn in his counsels, even that he received messages that did not come to Ost-in-Edhil. He put it about that he was aware and disregarded Celeborn anyway, but he kept an eye on the thick groves of the lowlands, nonetheless.

Celebrimbor shook his head to clear his thoughts, then plunged into the deep spring-pool. The water was clear, and at the bottom, he found what he sought, and then swam upwards, reaching the top of the water with a gasp. He pulled up to the side of the pool and opened one clenched hand. A ring of gold and sapphire glittered there, as bright as the water in the sun. "Well met," he said, shaking the drops of water from the jewel that would soon be a completed Elven-Ring.

Its making had been long and slow, seventy-five years since he had bid a fond farewell to Annatar. Three times had the jewel rested in the spring to draw in all the water's virtues and powers. Two times had the Elves sung and chanted over the Ring of Water. In two days, at the Elvish New Year, they would finish the work. He had already retrieved the Ring of Air from its high perch in the mountains, where it had taken in the powers of the breeze and light. The Ring of Fire rested by a brazier in the Mírdain's main hall, always kept lit and guarded by the apprentices. Celebrimbor hauled himself out of the water, shivering in the

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cold of the early days of April. Spring never came as early as one might think, in the chill highlands of Eregion.



The next day, the piebald mare and her rider took the highland road again, up to the stables of the Mírdain. The rider was a persuasive fellow; though there had been no word of his coming, the stable-master agreed to let the horse remain there a day or two.

He went with the hostlers to see her set in a stable, and nicked a section of apple from another horse's feed as a treat for his own mare. "You piebalds are always good luck for me," said Pengolod, feeding her the apple from his ink-stained hand, black and white like the horse. "So give me what fortune you can, eh?" The horse licked his hand, then bumped it away.

He paused in the main foyer, marvelling at the latest work on display. It was a tall crystal urn rippled and faceted like the shimmering Sea, filled with wild rose-canecan in bloom. At first he thought the flowers more wonders of the glassblower's work, but when he stepped up for a closer look, the fragrance of the living roses came to him. He touched a soft petal and wondered where the Mírdain had found the flowers of summer in the cold start of spring. Pleased to have a question to start a conversation with, he hurried on his way.

Pengolod never forgot anything he had learned, and he remembered the way to Aranwë's jeweler's studio. Gratifyingly, his friend of before was there, even at a similar work, setting an onyx cameo into the hilt-knob of a sword.

"You are as fixed in place as one of your anvils, Aranwë," Pengolod teased, in the old language of Gondolin. "Don't you ever leave?"

Aranwë looked up with a start, and spoke defensively. "You are fortunate to find me here this day. At this time of year, many of us go prospecting, before – wait a moment. I should be asking you if you ever stay home, rider of Lindon! What brings you to us again?"

Pengolod laughed, "Taking writings and messages about. And I have your book at last, a little late, I admit," he said, handing over a volume bound in red leather. He stayed silent about the rest of his errand and the messages Gil-Galad had finally seen fit to have him carry to Celeborn. As Aranwë took the book with praise and leafed through the pages, Pengolod added, "See, at the front, there is a list of all the matters you will find in the book, and each page is marked by a number, that you may seek it swiftly. What is so funny?"

"Just that each of us has our arts, and what is fine craft to one may be unnoticed by another," said Aranwë. "So it is well that you tell me how your work excels."

"I excel at many works, my old city-mate," said Pengolod, voice edged with insinuation, "and some of them I need naught but my loremaster's tongue to show you, if you will."

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The other elf-man looked away at that. Pengolod cursed himself for squandering a third try with haste, and spoke lightly to cover his dismay. "I may not be thraven enough for your tastes, and I can understand..." He fell quiet at the expression Aranwë bore when he glanced up.

"You are fairer than you reckon, Pengolod," said the smith, moving a few things around uselessly on the work-table. "But I wonder what you merit in me, that you turn to me so. You of all people know what a knave I once was."

"And as you hear me now, you know what a fool I am. A fine match." Then Pengolod changed his tone. "This we share; we are both shadowed by the past. I am not that foolish to not see it in you." Aranwë nodded, drawn in by his seriousness. "It is with someone who remembers as I do that I can be released from memory, for a time, and draw close rather than feeling riven. What say you?"

"Hm," Aranwë muttered. "Well. Hm. I'd be a knave again to refuse you, and I have no wish to do that."

Pengolod caught the smith's hand in his, and bowed over it smiling. Before he could choose a riposte to the tangled acceptance, Aranwë continued. "But one matter that stands between us. All of us Mírdain are being celibate right now; a great rite is planned —"

"All of you?" Pengolod stood back, hands on his hips. "Every last one? 'Tis a plot. A conspiracy. An ill fate is on me!"

Aranwë began to laugh, merrier than Pengolod had seen him in Ereinion. "Not so ill; the ritual is tomorrow, and then we are freed." He explained the work the Gwaith-i-Mírdain would do, fixing the last of their power into the great Elven-Rings that would gentle the passing of time and aid the other peoples.

At these words, Pengolod remembered something. "In your entry-hall, I saw the roses of summer out of season. Is this an enchantment of those Rings?"

"No, we made some lesser rings, as practice," said Aranwë, holding out his left hand; there was a plain band of mingled steel and gold there, without a gem. "Those flowers have stood there for ten years, if you will credit it."

"Do they grow?" asked Pengolod.

"No, they remain perfect forever."

Pengolod continued to puzzle over this. "What if you took them and grafted them onto a rose plant? Would the flower come to fruit, then?"

"We have not tried," said Aranwë.

Pengolod frowned at this, thinking it strange and sterile, then decided to say no more for the nonce, with an assignation to plan. "How soon after your ritual will you be freed? Or do I ask too much?" he said, giving Aranwë an arch, hopeful look.

3. All Our Will.

All was ready to complete the Elven-Rings.

Celebrimbor looked about the round hall of the Mírdain, ringed about in concourse, as it often was. Smoke traced through the air, bearing the incense that they had all come to associate with these rituals of power. The crowd of Mírdain was waiting orderly, each singer in a specific place marked by the timbre of their voice, ready for Celebrimbor to begin conducting the ritual. The stone plinth had been placed in the hall's midst and draped in black silk, the rings shining upon it like three stars. The Mírdain had lavished all their craft and love upon them, more than on the other rings, even going so far as to name them like favoured weapons; Nenya, Vilya, Narya. Extra lamps had been suspended above the centre, so that the rings were in a pool of brilliance.

Celebrimbor, in a long black cloak and the red tunic of the Mírdain, was drastically shadowed, the strong bones of his face carved dark where they blocked the light from above. He felt himself held separate in the light, as his lordship and his sorcerous power, much gained from Annatar, held him above the other Mírdain. When he looked outside the pool of lamplight where he stood, it was hard to distinguish the Mírdain from each other amidst the shadowy crowd. He would have been hard put to pin a name to a face. But they were his people, there to aid him, and he loved them for it.

The Rings were the centre of his vision, the heart of the hall, soon to be the heart of Eregion, even of elf-kind. He held his hands spread above the Rings, feeling the power they already carried, and saw all the Mírdain turn to him in ready silence. They had sung as they cast the Rings, sung as they polished their stones chosen from amongst thousands, and they were ready to sing more now.

The ritual did not begin with any hallowing or call to the Valar. Annatar had claimed that to do so made the things of power less linked to the Elves' will, and more to the fates, and said that he thought the Elves were sacred in and of themselves. Some had been charmed by that, and some consoled, to hear such a thing from a Maia – it must be true, then.

Celebrimbor sang the first notes, with words urging all to give of the spirit within them for the ritual, to call on all their will and love, their art and force, to bring it forth in song. A pure tenor on one side let his voice ring out, met by an alto woman's voice of nearly the same note. One by one, a lower voice and a higher one joined the song, until even the richest and most silvery singers had joined the music.

The singers' words commanded the will of the earth, bound fast the sight of the stars of heaven, demanded obedience of plant and stone and water, calling it all to serve their will by enduring in beauty. The song changed into more of a chant as the words of its heart were repeated, the sound growing more beautiful with each new utterance. They called it on, drew it in, fixed it to them, gave it to the one who would give it to the Rings.

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As the chant rose, it took on a note beyond any other song, the echo of the music of the Ainur that Annatar had given them. The rhythm would have been harsh and clamorous, had it not been sung by so many fair voices, and with such a loving will behind it, force driven by desire, calling on.

Celebrimbor felt the song pierce him with its power, sweet as being filled and pierced in passion. The sensation was as beyond lust as the greatest love was beyond fondness; alight, alive with all the desire of the most passionate Elves, engulfing him with the flame of Anor. He flung his head back and spread his arms to the side, letting himself take all the power, even to the traces of the singers' very selves.

The song reached its depth and height, every voice at its peak, and the stained-glass roof above trembled, its rattle unheard. The concourse fell silent at Celebrimbor's gesture, and when the echo of their clamour faded, and he sang the last keen, triumphant cantrip, emptying himself of breath as he gave all the joyous energy that flooded him to the Rings below his hands. So great was the strength of that hour that, at the last ecstatic note, there was a flash of white light about the jewels.

After the flash, a strange tranquillity rippled through the hall, then spread out through the corridors, into the night. A breath of timelessness refreshed the air, lightening the burden of change. The Mírdain savoured it in silence, every face open with wonder. Their greatest making worked.

Celebrimbor turned up from where he stooped over the three treasures, all the peace and triumph in his face, and when he straightened, all their shared pride was in his stance. He looked around at the unity in the hall.

"Thank you," he said, and bowed.

All bowed in return.

On the side, he heard one Mírdain whisper, "Is this what it felt like – in Aman?"

"Very close," one said.

"Good enough for me," said a second, and a few laughed at that; then a few more. The silence was not broken, but flowed into a gentle sound of joy, chatter and wonder. Celebrimbor basked in the centre, smiling at all, speaking to none, hovering over the precious things he had made. It had been worth all the striving and the outpouring, he thought, worth the difficult changes in Eregion.

And the Elven-Rings were complete in that hour.

4. Past Perfect.

Eregion had a cold climate. The quarters of many of the Mírdain were scattered amongst their workshops, lofts above rooms, chambers tucked to one side, so that they might be warmed by the small furnaces fired for their crafts. So it was with Aranwë, whose chamber was aside the workshop he managed. When he entered through the shop, he barred the workshop's door, then added another

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shovel of charcoal to the low-banked furnace. The embers cast the only light into the equipment-filled room, with its tall work-table and its benches.

The time-lightening engendered by the Elven-Rings was still in the air, new enough to sense. Aranwë turned to the elf who sat silently by the window. "You could have added more to the fire, if you wished. It took me many a year to get beyond how we husbanded charcoal in Gondolin," he said to Pengolod. "Were you bored waiting?"

"Listening to your ritual's song? Do not look so surprised; yes, I heard it. I dare say every elf alive in Middle-Earth did, and every houseless spirit." Pengolod had drifted over to where Aranwë stood, in front of the furnace's mouth. Aranwë was relieved that Pengolod's mien was quiet and serious, a match for his own, still limned with the energy of the great ritual. He had been too proud to reveal his eagerness for this hour. Before Pengolod could change the mood with distracting conversation, he sealed his mouth to the loremaster's.

Much about how it might be between lovers can be divined from one kiss. Pengolod's mouth was as fresh as a draught of living brook-water, soft and strong. In a light embrace, their bodies fit together better than either had expected.

"So, d'you think we Lambengolmor are well named?" asked Pengolod.

"Yes," Aranwë rasped, his voice raw after the singing, breath drained by the kiss. "What would you have of me? You have not said." And I have been too craven to ask, he thought.

Pengolod started back. "I...what would you wish?"

"I would please you," said Aranwë.

"And I would do the same," said Pengolod, smiling a little at their impasse.

Aranwë fell back on manners. "You are the guest, here, and the first word should be yours."

Pengolod inhaled, and his voice fell deeper than was his wont. "I want you to take me. I have heard your dark tales, Aranwë; I know well what you smiths are like!"

Aranwë ran a finger under the collar of the Mírdain around his own neck. He did not know whether to regret the wine he had drunk after the ritual, or wish he had downed more. He had pictured himself serving the lean, handsome elf-man, showing him how much he might ask for, and instead...

"Very well; to please you, I shall take you as I would be taken myself," he said.

"No greater kindness to another," said Pengolod, looking pleased and steadfast, then half-laughing, "I even brought a phial of oil."

Aranwë winced, and weighed the moment. He strengthened his grip on Pengolod's shoulders, and shook his head. He leaned down and tasted Pengolod's mouth again, drawing the loremaster's head back by his long hair, backing him against the table. "Those phials are better to look at than to use. They always run out," said Aranwë, between kisses. "Nor can I close the wretched

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stoppers again with slippery hands." He slid one leg between Pengolod's limbs. "And the oil spills and stains all. Knave I may be, but I have something far better to ease our way." The loremaster was agreeably breathless by the time Aranwë turned away to find the sword-grease the smiths had long adapted for such hours.

By the time he turned around and span a stoneware jar down onto the table, Pengolod had started to disrobe, showing himself lean and lithe, muscles honed tight by his errand-riding. Aranwë fought back the urge to fall to his knees and caress the virile grace revealed from top to toe, staying standing as he ran his hands over the other elf-man. He stood still as Pengolod assessed him in turn with a touch across his crotch. "True what they say about you tall ones, and about smith's tools. What about undressing yourself? It's certainly warm enough," said Pengolod, and Aranwë removed his black cloak and red tunic, leaving it at that for the moment.

Pengolod grew sombre, then, for Aranwë bore many scars. He reached up to stroke first the brand-scar on Aranwë's right arm; the rune of the elf-men of Maedhros needed no explanation. Two faint lines below the collar-bones Pengolod touched, and murmured, "From your Mírdain's rite." Aranwë nodded. Next, he touched the fine, sinister lines that cut hard at intervals along Aranwë's chest, too precise to be a warrior's wounds. "How came you by these?" he asked, softly.

"Ansereg," he answered. "Not here; in Gondolin."

"Ah," said Pengolod. After feeling the scar-lines out with his fingers, he bent his dark head and ran his mouth across them, mapping out a place that now existed only in memory. When he turned back up, Aranwë was stricken by the mingled sympathy and sorrow in his face, reading the elf-man's grief that so little of the past remained.

Aranwë felt in himself again a flicker of the power from the ritual, a touch of uncanny heat in the plain ring he wore. As he had given that fire and good will to Celebrimbor then, he turned it to Pengolod now, channelling it not by song but through a deeper, longer kiss. When they parted to breathe, Pengolod turned his head against Aranwë's shoulder, leaning in, tension shuddering out of him as Aranwë caressed.

The smith whispered in the language of the lost city, honing its crisp, distinctive accent. "I remember how you were then, bright and wise," he said, drawing a hand down Pengolod's back, all the way to his hardened rider's thighs. "Wise and fair. As you are now, too fair for a knave like me. But I shall have you anyway."

"And without delay," agreed Pengolod.

Aranwë unlocked their solder-hot embrace and unbuttoned his leggings, then firmly drew Pengolod around. The loremaster, facing the table, lifted the stoneware lid of the sword-grease jar and dipped a curious finger. Aranwë leaned

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in, fencing Pengolod between his arms and the bench, and scooped half a handful out of the jar.

“This stays where you put it, more soothing than thin oil,” Aranwë said, feeling his partner start as he applied the generous grease. He did not spare the loremaster’s measure in this, delighting in the other elf-man’s arousal. When Aranwë moved his touch back further, Pengolod leaned over the table; by his tightness against the smith’s exploring fingers, not all the tension had left him. Aranwë was unsteady in turn as he edged in to lubricate his hardness by sliding it between his partner’s slicked cleft. The friction of that narrow backside that moved to meet him was almost enough to make him spend.

“Are you certain you wish this?” he asked.

Pengolod turned back with the fiery look of one tempted to the edge. “Eichtho-ni, hecilo,”[♦] he half-whispered, voice sharp and sibilant.

Riven by that demand, Aranwë forced his tool inside, and they both cried out. “You asked for this,” Aranwë growled, seizing his partner’s hips in a bruising grip, sheathing himself fully.

Aranwë stabbed him deep, taking him hard, blinded and burning in it. He remembered himself enough to reach about for the other elf-man’s cock, working him in long strokes even though he could scarcely stay standing. He started as Pengolod’s hand came down over his. Beneath his hard use, the master of tongues was left with only one word, but that word, beyond all his expectations, was *yes*. Between sound and sensation, he lost himself and came.

The loremaster found his tongue again, leaning back and gasping, “Ai, I felt that, I felt you spend inside me, I never--” then spending himself against Aranwë’s loosened grip.

They slid apart, Pengolod slumping against the table to collect himself, Aranwë staggering to lean against the solid furniture. He noted a trace of blood and braced himself for a pained expression when Pengolod turned to him. But apologies froze in his mouth when he saw the look on Pengolod’s face, untouched by pain. The loremaster was still sad, but lit by peace; carrying a look that said memory was fulfilled and enough, and in that finding freedom from time.

“Are you—was that--all right?” he whispered. Pengolod closed his eyes and breathed deep, then smiled an illuminated smile. And nodded.

As they embraced again in the light of the jeweler’s furnace, in his rejoicing heart Aranwë blessed the Elven-Rings, and the magics Annatar had brought the Mírdain for that hour.

5. Ash Nazg Thrakatuluk.

Sauron stood in a dry, ash-strewn land, on the slopes of the greatest volcano in Middle-Earth, and looked directly south. He was pleased; the work of raising a

[♦] “Pierce me, outlaw,” in Quenya. Note that the verb *eichtha*, used here as a command, also means to goad, prick, or insult.

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great tower was nearly done, the folk of Lake Nurnen both the first of his thralls and his overseers. In their past they had never ventured north to the lands of the Elves, so no word of their change had come to the immortal folk. It had been seven generations since he had bound the men of Nurnen to his service, before he took himself to Eregion, and rebellion was near to forgotten in his new order. Would that the Elves were half so easy to win and teach, he thought. On the other hand, mortals eventually escaped him through death. Binding the Elves to him would be a far more enduring victory.

As he thought of the Elves, he turned his mind their way. In his time in Eregion, he had drunk in every piece of knowledge he could about the Elves and their customs, and traced his spirit's intuition among many of them. They often did their great rites, weddings and final makings, on the day of their New Year, and so he turned his mind to them often when that day fell; he had sensed them at their Ring-making in recent years on that date. He stood there for a long time. Darkness began to fall as he closed his eyes in meditation, sending his spirit forth to feel and watch. Even if he had not been focused on them, he would have felt the echo of the Music of the Ainur, and the fine net of power that spread out over the Elves' places after their Ring-making was complete.

Sauron opened his eyes, nostrils flaring. His hour was come at last.

He turned around to face the mountain of fire, the mountain of doom, the core of his power in Middle-Earth. A fissure had opened in its side over the centuries since he had taken shape there. Walking up to it, he exerted some of his Maia's powers to smooth it into a tunnel. Then he took up the tools he had borne in anticipation and walked down it.

The tunnel plunged into the heart of the mountain, to the level of its magma-pit. The pit was cool, this year, its plunge surrounded by a firm ledge of rock, and the light inside was faint from the crater overhead. On the black rock Sauron laid out his tools; a crucible on a long handle, a ring-mold ready for casting, a forming spar, several hammers, a pair of pliers. Into the crucible he placed blobs and pieces of metal filched from the Mírdain's workshops. They were the scraps from the making of the Rings of Men and the Rings of Dwarves. Then he took the golden collar, sign of his membership in the Mírdain, from around his neck. With the pliers and his hidden strength, he cracked open one, two, five of its heavy links, and added the rich metal of three links to the crucible. The rest of the collar he set aside.

Sauron placed all the tools in order again. He listened to the near-dormant rumble of the earth; the volcano was grown quiet these past centuries. It might have slept in peace if Sauron had not called it to him. Down into his own core he reached, exerting more will than he had for four hundred years, and sang a deep, grinding song, pulling magma up from the depths. The ground moaned in agony. The cooled cap of stone cracked and spread, opening up its fire. The pit refilled with glowing magma, and the power of its heat and light illumined the mountain's core and the mountain's master. Now limned in fire and shadows,

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Sauron continued to sing as he held the crucible to the stone-pit's heat, tilting it to blend the melting metals.

Sauron's might exceeded that of the Elves for this making. As he sang, he reached out with his mind to alloy all the different metals, steel, mithril, and chiefly gold, together into a perfect blend, locked together by his will, suffused with the heat of magma and his own will. He did not need to let the metals linger in nature to absorb the world's powers; he did not need to repeat power-bindings. His chant reached up to the roof of the mountain's crater, and ash fell from the walls, stone crumbled, obsidian was shattered anew.

What had begun as a song was now a deep, unreal, multi-layered sound. It would have burst the mind of any elf or man who heard it. All his powerful will, and his denied rage, he poured into the sound and the metal. Then the horrible music shifted to become piercing, shatteringly sweet. It evoked all the beauty and seduction he had at his disposal, and that was very great, all the desirability of power and wielding that will, the fire of his Maia's body and the fire of his will uniting.

The crucible's contents glowed white-hot, and he poured the metal into the mold. A little excess metal dripped out. Touching the mold, he sucked out the heat so that the metal was shocked cold and still, brilliantly annealed, and with the same gesture cracked the mold open. Sauron removed the rough ring, snapped off the stem of metal from its casting, and placed it around the spar. He hammered it to round it a touch, still singing, putting his will to beat down any who defied him into the hammer's blows. Then he took the Ring, warmed from the belabouring, and held it between his hands, smoothing it with the same power that had cooled it.

As the climax, with heat of his mind he incised the very words of power that he chanted into the Ring, with craft to exceed any elf. It was the first time he spoke in the new language of power he would teach his Men and Orcs.

Ash nazg durbatuluk!

Ash nazg gimtabul!

Ash nazg thrakatuluk ag burzum-ishi krimpatul!

The sun that came through the crater's opening was shadowed for a moment as the words rolled from his lips and were branded into the heart of the One Ring. *One ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.*

The earth roared in fiery release.

Sauron stood there in the wind that whirled through the dome, carrying up foul fumes, and held his making high, the One Ring glowing red.

As Sauron stood separate from the Ring, his golden beauty was dimmed. The tones of his skin and hair became brassy, his eyes more evilly green than chrysoprase blue. The One Ring glittered and shone, radiantly lovely; much of the power that gave him his beauty had been poured into it, to be magnified. The being and the jewel were inextricably linked.

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Lust swept him. So tempting to don it immediately! But such haste would be his ruin, the fall of all his plans. The One Ring was linked neatly to the rings of Men and Dwarves, and to the Elves' works, but not yet to the Elven-Rings. He needed to return to Eregion one last time to do this thing. Then the Ring would be the height of the pyramid of dominance and order.

Sauron knelt to the broken collar. He took the two sundered links and placed the One Ring between them, bidding it to shrink in size to match the other links. Then, with the pincers, he pinched the open links shut. The One Ring's smooth roundness did not match the flattened oval links of the collar's chain, but it was to the back, where it would be hidden by his long hair.

He clasped the collar around his neck again, tighter than before, so that all the links pressed into him. As he placed the Ring fully next to his skin, his beauty flared forth bright again, as tempting as before, even more so, magnified by the linking Ring, which allowed him to draw more than ever on the world's power. Once he wore the Ring on his hand, his fairness would be more terrible than the Sun, and wither lesser ones who looked on him, if he willed it.

Sauron indulged in a laugh of anticipation, and the earth rumbled in response. He turned and left that place as magma began to ooze up further and become lava. The Mountain of Fire would erupt that night. Not even Sauron could turn back the roused earth's fires, or undo work that had been done.

6. One For The Dark Lord.

A week after the Elves' New Year, the weather in Eregion was cold to the point of being unseasonable. There were some compensations. The trading-party of Lindon was glad to linger amidst the weird peace cast by the Elven-Rings, though rumour whispered that none had donned the jewels of power yet; they were still held by Celebrimbor. The strange weather and clouded days brought the loveliest sunsets of hundreds of years, the sky's brilliance rivalling the Mírdain's multi-hued glasswork.

When Sauron rode back to Eregion, he arrived at the doors of the Mírdain in the midst of such a sunset, his white robes hued gold in the light. There was great joy at his coming unexpectedly, but he set all aside for Celebrimbor. The twain soon retired to take counsel, as Sauron had planned. Like other unwed smiths, Celebrimbor's lodgings were in the house of the Mírdain, and they soon entwined on the bed, as Sauron had planned. And when matters began to go awry, he recovered himself soon enough.

"Have you grown fairer through your goodly deeds? You seem more beautiful than ever," asked Celebrimbor, stroking back his hair in wonder, and Sauron flinched back, lest the elf touch the One Ring too soon.

"No more fair than you are grown strong," Sauron said. "I felt your song of power even afar, and came to congratulate you, and see your fairest works. Where are the Elven-Rings?"

"Back where they lay when we were enchanting them," said Celebrimbor, and Sauron sat upright at that.

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"How odd. By the radiance of your land, I thought surely you wielded them," he said, smoothly.

Celebrimbor shook his head. "I must decide which one to keep for Eregion, and they are all such wonders I cannot choose, all precious to me. I tried each in turn briefly, and..." He sighed. Sauron suffered his kiss and picked up the traces of one of the plans he had readied. If he had been able to touch one of the elf-rings, his work would have been done in an instant. Still, this would suffice, to touch the one who had worn them.

"Have you broken your celibacy yet?" Sauron purred.

"No. Not very like me, is it?" Celebrimbor laughed. "The ecstasy of making the Rings has been so great that only your love could match it. I have been continent before this last rite, as well; you have spoiled me for lesser ones."

"My love?" asked Sauron, raising one golden eyebrow.

Celebrimbor realized his mistake. "Your passion, your giving, your –" He gave up. "Annatar, I am an Elf. Not a mortal to use you for mere passion's sake, and not a Maia to be above attachments for higher matters. You have some of my heart. How could I not care for you, who made our greatest works possible, and who have taken more from me than any other?" Sauron lowered his head at the unknowing truth of his last words. Taken more indeed.

Sauron said nothing, and let the elf's anxiety rise. He rose from the bed and stood against one of the room's windows, his frame outlined against the last traces of the vermilion and violet sunset and the blue night coming down.

"Perhaps it is fitting that you love me," Sauron mused. "But there are greater things in this world than love, I ween. There is power; there is order; there is what is right. And this I would embrace in you, in the way of the body, as you taught me."

Celebrimbor arose from the bed, his expression guardless with hunger. "Will you come to me as you did before? To kneel before me?"

"Yea, and take from you everything you have to give. Walk you your circle of ansereg and take up your tools," bade Sauron. "We shall surpass everything we have known in our congress before. Thy very spirit I will touch, before this night is through." Before the window, he fell to his knees, and Celebrimbor stood before him, both of them limned black against the evening's fading light.

They did not fall to immediately, for Celebrimbor's aide came to light the lamps and pour golden wine. The aide said little when his elf-lord stalked around the room, restless with domineering lust, and commanded him sharply to lay out some linen towels, and pour out some spirits. The aide had seen this before, and before he left laid out a small ebony coffer banded with mithril, and Celebrimbor thanked him for this. He snapped the coffer's lid open. "Kneel," he said, and Sauron stepped out of his white robe and knelt where the wooden floor had been inlaid with a varied ring of wood.

Sauron refused nothing; not a crisp blow that struck his face, not words of fealty that Celebrimbor demanded (and Sauron read him anxious still thereby),

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not his body's stillness beneath a whirling belt, not the blood that flowed. He put all his will to being more radiantly focused than ever before, listening for every step and shift. No, he did not love Celebrimbor. But it occurred to Sauron how it might have been if he had, when last clad in a body, given himself to the Dark Lord so, to Morgoth. What might their sport have been? That thought helped him tolerate what the elf-man did next to him.

The toys of ansereg were never more splendid than in the chamber of the lord of the Mírdain. Each flail was worked and gilded, and the coffer held devices of pure metals, picked out in pinpoints of ruby and adamant. Celebrimbor, some of his overwrought emotion spent, had taken up a chain of gold, two handspans in length, with two pinching clips at each end, fashioned in soft gold as serpent's heads. He closed the clips around Sauron's tawny nipples, and like serpents they bit. Further to this he took up more clips of gold, each one with its tiny flaring grips engraved and shaped with black wit as the wings of a wasp. Some had rough gold where they clasped the flesh, and some had tiny teeth. They made the flesh around them crawl, stung and flushed, then drain paler than the skin about.

Celebrimbor studded him with many of these cruel jewels, along his chest and flanks, along the tender sides of his arms, even, humiliatingly, along his thighs and nipping the base of his cock. Sauron felt the Ring throb against his neck, but forced his fury at the goading sensations down. "Why this torment, lord?" he asked.

Celebrimbor stood above him, his voice that of a dreamer. "These I had made against your return, fairest one; they have bitten no other. The way the clamps draw out your flesh," he said, shifting one with a finger's touch, "seeing your skin redden, less perfect, makes you more like to us Elves. And to have you endure my making reminds us both that you are of the Mírdain, one of the jewelmen. You swore your oath, and tonight, tonight I claim you anew" He drew a caressing hand about Sauron's neck and gripped the collar of the Mírdain, as Sauron had planned.

He gave Celebrimbor long service with his mouth, then, and the elf-lord cried out to feel the Maia's hunger as he drew hard. One of Celebrimbor's hands sank into his hair, twisting and pulling, and the other one kept its grip on the collar. "Ai, many arts you gave us, Annatar, but this one I gave to you!" He pulled Sauron's head back and gazed stern and wild into his eyes. "The best of my makings is your desire, fairer than ring or gem. Take me, drink me down!"

Sauron dove, because Celebrimbor's wish matched his wiles perfectly; he had known how the stallion would run when he laid the traces, and he looked up to share his sure expression of satisfaction and desire fulfilled. Celebrimbor's grip was fading as the rest of him stiffened towards release, and Sauron placed one of his hands to hold the elf-smith's hand at his neck, so that his touch would be conducted through the collar, to the One Ring.

In brief defiance, Sauron pulled back and said quickly, "Give it all to me!" As he endured the shaft in his throat again, he thought of the notes of his music in his mind, and turned all his Maia's power to drawing in everything of

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Celebrimbor. With a cry like one of anguish, Celebrimbor came, a hard release and not swift after such a long denial.

Soon after, Celebrimbor cut short their rite and released the circle, weary unto staggering, grown gentle again. "Thank you, my friend," he breathed. "I needed that. Tomorrow, I shall be myself again." His hands never left Sauron, caressing where the marks faded almost instantly from the golden skin.



In the heart of the starry night, as Celebrimbor slept, Sauron slipped away. The horses quivered with terror in the stables as he came and drew his black steed to the ready. The enslaved Mearas was barely bound even by Sauron's will to tolerate him who all good beasts loathed. He mounted and rode to a stony rise overlooking the house and outbuildings of the Mírdain, then dismounted and looked into the valley below him. The dome of stained glass was lit, an immense jewel in the night, boasting the power of the Mírdain to all for miles around. Sauron dimly sensed that some elves were within at their sport of ansereg, and at that, reached up and tore the collar of the Mírdain from his throat one last time.

He cast it to the granite-stone beneath his feet, and at his will the loosened links cracked. From the collar's wreck, Sauron plucked out the one whole loop; his Ring. Savouring the moment, he held it in his hand. Patience had brought him to this hour; he could spare a moment to gloat, for once. Even without donning the Ring, he sensed the Elves more than he ever had before. The minds of those who wore the lesser rings seemed very near. Sauron looked up in hatred at the Moon and scattered stars, signs of defiance from the chaos-loving Valar, who hated the pure dark. Perhaps he would even cast the lights of heaven down, by the time he was done ordering Arda. He inhaled, and closed his eyes to salute the darkness pure. It was time.

Again he spoke his words of power and darkness, and they rang down the sloping hills of Eregion. Then he thrust his finger into the One Ring. Dark heat ran through him, and he cried out, a fell cry, and shivered as his making took him. He felt himself aligned into increased order; the smallest parts of his being were brought to greater power and perfection. Magnificent!

Sauron reached out with his mind, and felt something pulsing back at him; the myriad sparkling wills of the elven-race, as disorderly as the stars above. He grasped all he could sense in the grip of his ordering will.

And by the cries of horror that rang through the night, it seemed like the house of the Mírdain itself screamed.

He laughed in his black bliss, and then scowled. Scorched by the touch and knowledge of Sauron, the elf-minds were growing fainter. They were foregoing their power, taking off their rings. When they succumbed, when they took up the power that was waiting for them, he would have them! They might use the great Rings and fall to him; or set them aside and, weakened, fall before him. Either way, he would rule them all, and in the darkness bind them. His long anger undimmed, he lifted the hand where the Ring shone, and reached out to burn the

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mind of Celebrimbor. *Deny me not, you who had a care; take up your Rings, and know true order. Here is a taste of what refusal will bring!* Then he gestured at the dome of the Mírdain, using the Ring's power for the first time.

In a brilliant explosion, the glass roof shattered.

Sauron reeled. The magnified power was greater than he expected. He would have to master this, and then hammer his order down, starting with Eregion. With harsh words of the Black Tongue, he bid his steed kneel, and mounted anew. The black horse bolted beneath him, screaming its terror into the night like a wraith, but its fear served Sauron well. He let it carry him beyond the reach of the alarmed Elves.

They Knew Themselves Betrayed

Celebrimbor copes with the knowledge of Sauron's betrayal. The shadow of war drives apart and brings together. Sauron and Celebrimbor have their final confrontation, and it is revealed who survives the ruin of Eregion to make it to the valley of the riven dell.

1. Midnight Awakening.

At first, Celebrimbor could not even think about the depth of the betrayal. He felt it in his body, crawling under his skin like poison, a coil of hot wire searing his heart. For Annatar had plunged into his mind and shared his other work, the One Ring, and his other name, the one the Elves had given to him long ago: Sauron. The Abhorred.

He staggered up from his bed. He heard cries of woe, then a massive crash. The floor quivered. Cursing, he flung on clothes and boots, and managed to light a lantern. As he turned to go, he chanced to look on his bed, where earlier that night Annatar – no, never again, ever Sauron – had lain beside him. Before Sauron had stepped out to make his true self known, he had, as always, straightened his side into smooth order.

With a shout of agony, Celebrimbor ripped the linens from the bed, then took up the lantern and raged from his chambers.

He hurled himself down a set of stairs and fell in with some of the Mírdain, also dashing to the main hall. Another shock was waiting there. Outside the hall, two elves were frantically binding someone slashed with a thousand cuts, and a dead elf-man was lain out beside them, in a pool of his own blood. “Did Sauron do this?” Celebrimbor cried.

The wounded elf gave him a dazed look. “Who? No – the hall – the roof—”

The growing crowd peered through the hall's high doors in dismay. For the dome of its roof was burst, the floor ankle-deep in broken glass, lead, and stone. A few of the lamps around the side were still whole, and cast a fitful light. The crowd behind Celebrimbor began to murmur, recovering from their own mind-shock. He turned to them and said, “Outside. The farriers' yard in the back. Tell everyone to gather there.” Everyone was so horror-wracked that his shaky words still carried authority.

Giving orders, his mind unfroze at last. Sauron had ever aided the forces of darkness in Middle-Earth, waging ceaseless war with the Elves for all of the First Age, until Morgoth was defeated; Sauron had fled then, a craven, houseless spirit. But in years before he had tormented countless Elves and Men, and slain Finrod, Celebrimbor's honoured kinsman, Galadriel's brother. And this one had taken up the name Annatar to seduce the Elves; to seduce him; to learn all the Elves' arts. Celebrimbor clenched with nausea as he thought of their long hours in each other's arms, Annatar's gilded skin and searing touch, the way he had taken his

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fill times without count. Sauron's other name had been Gorthaur, the torturer; and this had been the one who knelt before him, and declared himself mastered.

"Celebri, what has happened?" one of the Mírdain asked.

"We are betrayed," Celebrimbor said. "Stay here and send any who come to the yard; we will piece this together there." He turned for a moment to the wounded and his aides, and despaired to see how a word from their lord reassured them. They did not understand that he was the one who had betrayed them. Listening to the crowd, he realized Sauron had touched all their minds, too, not just his. Then he waded into the glassy ruin of the high hall, to retrieve the Ring of Fire from the brazier where it slept.

It was some time before the Mírdain who dwelt at the hall could be gathered in the farriers' yard. Now that the hall was ruined, there was no chamber large enough for everyone to come together. Save for the dome and the hapless elves who had been at a rite of ansereg within when Sauron struck, no others were harmed, but many were still incoherent with anger or fear.

Celebrimbor, having collected his thoughts and the knowledge Sauron had burned into his mind, stood on a mounting block to speak to the crowd. Most of them were half-clad, tumbled from their beds, but here and there some mindful veterans had dug out their shields and swords. Celebrimbor tried to remember their faces, for he would need them, later. One of the farriers had passed him a rider's horn, and Celebrimbor blew it with the call of Eregion to still the crowd, who fell as hushed as death.

"Mírdain and company," he said, as loud as he could against the absorbing night. "Many of you saw Annatar ride to us last evening. This midnight, he has shown us how he deceived us. He is in sooth Sauron, our foe of old, clad in fair form." He had to sound the horn again to still the chaos of dismay that rose at his words. "Yea, this is ill news and an ill hour! For he has all knowledge of our ways and crafts. Much of it, much due to me." The crowd was still, so he went on. "Worse, he has found a way to control the greatest of our works, the Rings of Power."

"Did he steal them?" someone yelled.

"No! We have them still!" He held up the Ring of Fire, and prayed to Aule that the other Rings remained where hidden. "But his will is hooked to them. To wield them now is to be drawn into his power. Who else felt him reach with his burning to tell of his One Ring and bid us kneel to him?" He had to blow the horn a third time to bring the crowd to order again. After leading so long, he was able to speak to persuade even when he felt his heart perishing within him. "Take heart! Sauron is not Morgoth, merely one of his servants. Maia though he be, we shall triumph against him, with counsel and alliance. We shall scout and find where he skulks, and what he has readied against us, and we shall gird ourselves against his wiles. Our craft is great, and even if we may not wield the Rings, we are strengthened by them." The Ring he held aloft burned like a red star of war in

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his hand. All there were swayed by his words and his resolute, red-lit face in that moment, and roared in approval.

“I go now to counsel in Ost-in-Edhil and with other lords. We shall speak again at mid-day. Friend farrier, ready me a horse! The rest of you, ready this hall for defence, and yourselves for war!”

Celebrimbor remained on the block while the crowd thinned. He did not feel that he lied, but his words rang hollow to him. Stepping down, he saw two old campaigners who had armed themselves well before joining the throng. He went to fortify himself with a word to them, and paused when he realized one of them was not a Mírdain. No, this was the fellow of Lindon Celebrimbor had aided years before, loremaster and errand-rider. By his green cloak, this was the self-same rider who had gone discreetly to Celeborn a week and a day past. Nausea struck him again; what would the tale-teller carry away? Was he betrayed from every side, this hour?

The loremaster was keenly lecturing one of his smiths, gesturing with a short-bow to emphasise his words. “Despite the fine words your lord has, he is wrong in this: Sauron was no mere servant. But he speaks true about war.”

The smith, Aranwë, pressed his own temples, a shield on one arm, an unsheathed sword propped against his leg. “Ai, give me a moment, Pengolod. My head still burns.”

Celebrimbor stepped forward grimly. “Yes, rider of Lindon. I did not know your errands to Gil-Galad and Celeborn brought you here.”

Aranwë glanced up, bewildered, as Pengolod whipped around. “Lord Celebrimbor,” he gasped, and bowed. “I would say well met, lord, except—”

Celebrimbor cut him short with a hard gesture. “You were at the Mírdain’s rite for Annatar. I remember you. How much do you know, about the Rings, and what has happened tonight?”

“All the tale of their making, lord, and all that you said to the crowd here,” Pengolod said.

“And will you take the tale of this to Celeborn as well?” Celebrimbor growled.

“My duty was to take messages to Celeborn, not to spy for him. I am at your hall on my own errand, lord.” Pengolod’s voice was steady, but he did not meet Celebrimbor’s eyes. For a moment the elf-lord was wroth, thinking that it was a lesser liar who waited on his word. But he felt the ring Narya flare in his clenched hand, and saw true where Pengolod glanced for forgiveness: at Aranwë.

The quick look the two elf-men before Celebrimbor exchanged was a small thing, small but true. All the emotion Celebrimbor had tamped down burned him again, the unutterable agony of the great betrayal, the despair at being unloved and used. He collected himself. “Well, since you are here, you shall be of use to me. You shall be the one to tell Gil-Galad of what has passed this night; I assume you would tell him anyway. Stay at this hall until I summon you. Speak to none of the trade-riders of Lindon about what you have seen tonight. Aranwë, he is in

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your keeping. Make sure he bides by my words." The smith murmured assent and bowed.

"Aught that I might do to aid you, lord, I shall," Pengolod said, bowing again.

Celebrimbor dismissed them and watched them go. Pengolod had turned to Aranwë and put aside his noble manners to say, "What your lord said about Celeborn - I can explain..." He felt that Aranwë would forgive his friend for his silence. And some good might come of it; unlike his own choice. A farrier brought him a horse, and he mounted up, to ride into the heart of the night.

2. The Garden of Celeborn.

Celebrimbor paused at the cross-roads between Ost-in-Edhil and the lowlands of Eregion. The grey destrider he rode snorted and stamped in the chill before dawn. The Council in the city, he knew, would support him; some might have already had the strange news. All at the hall of the Mírdain had supported him as well, stood by him as their lord, and after his deeds that felt so wrong it made him ill. Celeborn was not his friend nor his ally. But it was easier to wake one lord than to collect a council of forty-eight in the hours before dawn. Better to get the worst out of the way, he thought, and look Celeborn in the eye as he, no lesser messenger, gave the evil news. He touched the horse's neck gently, and it began to trot on the downwards road.

Celeborn had not retired for the night when he arrived. Like many Sindar and wood-elves, he preferred dusk and starlight to the glare of day. Without the burdens of governance, he kept those twilight hours. Celebrimbor looked about curiously as a servant took him through the house of Celeborn's choosing, more a set of half-open pavilions than a dwelling with walls. When they came to a garden courtyard, the servant struck a silver bell and left without a word.

"This is unforeseen, Lord of Eregion," said Celeborn, rising from his meditations beneath a tree. "To what do I owe the honour?"

Celebrimbor stepped into the courtyard, placing his smith's boots as lightly as he might on the mossy pathway. "Have you sensed any disturbances about the land tonight, Lord of Trees?"

Celeborn's feet were bare, and he did not bruise the delicate plants when he stepped up to meet the chief of the Mírdain. "I have sensed many strange things these past days. I am not artless, for all that I am not a smith. Explain."

This took some time. Celeborn knew less of the doings of the Mírdain than Celebrimbor had expected, but one or two of the lesser Rings had been used in the lowlands, so he was well aware of their magics. The most delicate part was speaking of his lustful congress with Sauron, admitting that it was after their long sport that evening past when Sauron had taken up his One Ring and made his will known.

At the end of it, Celeborn said nothing. He drifted back to the tree, a birch hung with catkins and silvery new leaves. "Why do you bring this news to me? I

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am not one of your lords any more, and not on your Council. Nor am I Galadriel, to counsel you in how to handle your strange craft gone awry."

"I remember your arts when you were the chief lord here. You were forester and seneschal – and a leader in war," said Celebrimbor.

Celeborn shook his head. "That was not what Eregion needed. War never came, in my day."

"Weapons are my art more than war, and war will return as well." Celebrimbor shivered. "Neither of us are fools; we have played a long game, you and I. I know you maintain separate league with Gil-Galad, you take audiences with those who have grievances. The lowlands' populace has grown since you moved here." Celebrimbor knelt and held his hands open, beseeching. "Celeborn, one who I thought my ally has betrayed me more than I thought possible. I do not even trust myself, any more. We were never friends. But you were true to Eregion even when Eregion turned from you. Will you aid us?"

Celeborn fingered a branch of the tree, and he seemed to muse at random. "Life is a strange thing, is it not? Once I was the Lord here, with my golden beloved by my side; then you, with the treasure of your heart beside you. And now we are both dispossessed." He looked up. "What would you have me do?"

"You say you cannot counsel me about the Rings," Celebrimbor said. "Would you go to Galadriel, and ask her advice?"

Celeborn inhaled sharply, and was silent for a time. "Ask for other succour from me. There are more walls than the doors of Moria between she and I." He snapped a twig from the birch. "If you feel such counsel needsome, you must send another."

Celebrimbor nodded, even as more shame weighed the pit of his stomach at further misery that could be traced to Sauron's machinations. "With your leave. But promise me this; that you will return to Ost-in-Edhil, and take my seat on the Council, while I journey to her."

Celeborn looked at him again at that, surprised, and Celebrimbor shrugged. Eluding that he had said he would go to Galadriel, Celebrimbor pleaded, "They need someone, I see it already. Disaster makes people seek leaders, and such a leader you have been."

"Disaster," Celeborn mulled. "More than that it will be, if war comes to this land. We are ill-protected on three sides, open hills and plains, and the fame of Eregion's treasures is legend. If the growing darkness of the lands about gains a guide in Sauron, then disaster is on our steps indeed."

It was strange that Celeborn's grim words reassured him, but they did; the truth was the truth, for all its direness. Dawn was starting as a touch of grey against the sky. "Will you ride to Ost-in-Edhil with me? We need to set the Council in motion."

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Celeborn tucked the budding birch-twigs behind one ear, and gave a last look at his garden; barely tended, lonely, yet peaceful. It came to Celebrimbor that this was the garden of someone who had hewn with war-blades enough to never want to strike anything down again, even the least plant. Celeborn was silent until he passed over the garden's threshold, respectful enough of its peace to leave it entirely before calling his servant for travel garb and weapons.

3. The Glade of Galadriel.

When Celebrimbor passed through Khazad-dûm, the swiftest road to Galadriel in Lorinánd, he felt as if his shadow grew longer. It was a relief to be among the Dwarves who respected his silence. The comfort he felt among them increased his guilt. With no orders to give and no leaders to charm, nothing to do but trudge through the depths and think, he ran through all his actions again and again. At first he thought there had been no hint of Sauron's treachery in their many years together, but the pieces came together, undeniable. Subtle words that seemed to reach for peace; greater knowledge than the Children of Arda should have; most of all, the strange looks of resentment and denial that had drifted across Sauron's face as they lay together or engaged in ansereg. The trap had been laid, and he had walked into it, and claimed it proudly as his own.

By the time he left through the East-gate, he was convinced that there was no greater traitor, living nor dead, amongst his folk. Not even the radiance of the three Rings which he bore, looped together on a chain around his neck, could light his despair.

He emerged from the East-gate into a grey dawn; the valley of Lorinánd was draped in a thick white mist, and he passed down the path to its vales as silently as a ghost. An elf-sentry clad in mithrim-grey greeted him with a gesture at the vales of the valley's forest, and bid him follow. After the coal-smoked airs of Khazad-dûm, the forest's mist was refreshing. Its soft coolness against his face made him feel all the more sullied.

The glade they entered was entirely natural. Even the rock where Galadriel had her seat was raw and mossy, not a worked chair. The sentry left Celebrimbor there, stiff with astonishment, as Galadriel rose to greet him.

"Did you think I would not sense your coming? Like calls to like," she said, touching the brooch of the Elessar that she wore. "I do not know what it is you carry, but it is your greatest work yet, I ween."

He shivered to look on her, paler far than he remembered, and to hear her chill voice. "My most infamous, it may yet be, if you cannot aid me – aid us," he said.

"Eregion would not have me," she said, expressionless.

Celebrimbor inhaled. "Matters are changing again. I gave Celeborn my chair at the Council myself. He has the chief word in Eregion for now, and they are glad of him, I gather." Galadriel's eyes lit with curious hunger at these words of her husband, and he was both glad and despairing at the sight. "Let me tell you the tale."

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Again, it took some time to explain. The story spilled out of him, longer than he had told it to any other, for he added many of the remembrances and thoughts that came to him as he walked Khazad-dûm.

Galadriel was calm when his self-castigating tale was done. "So it was Sauron who deceived you. I thought it a lesser servant of Morgoth, some trickster sent to seduce your heart."

Celebrimbor asked, anguished, "Why did you say nothing?"

"I, who turned you away, tell you to reject your lover? It was not only your own affairs that were soothed by Annatar's passions! Would you have listened?"

Before, Celebrimbor would have shouted that of course he would have, but the triple sparkle of the Rings over his heart seemed to warn him from that. "No. I would have thought it was Celeborn's words in your mouth; his dislike of anserëg, of smiths, of me." He looked up. "I misread him much."

"Misread who?" Galadriel asked.

"Celeborn. And Annatar – no, Sauron – as well." Celebrimbor took the Rings off their chain and laid them upon his palm, holding his hand out to her. "These are the Rings I described to you. We dare not wear them to use them, lest our minds be laid bare to Sauron. What is your counsel? How can we free them from the bond of Sauron's will?"

Galadriel stepped forward, and a touch of rose flushed her face as she held her hand over Celebrimbor's outstretched palm. He watched her close her eyes and read the power in the jewels, saw her wince as she felt the hook of Sauron's own power within them, and drew his hand away.

"You cannot undo what you have done," she declared. "I have never heard tell of a thing of power such as this being unlocked, to free what is within it; to try is to destroy."

Celebrimbor closed his hand around the rings. "No! We will be diminished, if we do; all the Elves who remain, all us exiles. There must be a way!"

"Ai, Celebrimbor!" she cried. "Ever do you run contrary! If I told you to treasure them forever, would you unmake them?" She paused for a moment. "May I see them again?"

Celebrimbor opened his sweating hand, and she stepped close and picked up the ring Nenya. At her touch, a light breeze swept the glade, thinning the mist enough so that the grey veils of it turned to white, the sun milky and luminous as it rose. "If only we might gain the One Ring," she murmured. "But if it has the same call that these fair things do, he will not willingly be riven from it." She replaced the ring in Celebrimbor's hand and looked him in the eyes.

"If you would not unmake them, do not keep them in Eregion. Hide them. Sauron has said he will return to claim them. Knowing that Sauron moves again explains many things. I have felt a fell force to the South, far from the Greenwood. Wanderers say that a mountain there smokes like the pits of Morgoth did once."

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Celebrimbor gazed into her face, framed by her light golden hair, waved and disordered in the humid morning. "They shall go to Lindon," he said, with a pang. "When I send Gil-Galad news that I have betrayed us, when he feels these Rings, he might understand. If I am bringing war on the Elves, I would show him it was not my intent, at least."

A small smile touched Galadriel's face. "Ever the diplomat, when you cared to be, Celebri."

He took courage from the fragment of approval. "Will you come back and aid us? Celeborn – well, I'd miss you, if you were mine." Galadriel walked away from him a few steps, withdrawn, but whether at the mention of Celeborn or his own yearning, he could not tell.

"Galadriel. Don't be angry at me for saying that. I never chose to love you as I did. Much of what I loved in you – I thought I had found it again in him. The strong will, the love of craft, such fair golden beauty. Such pride. I thought we'd stand in legend beside Thingol and Melian." He saw her appalled at the comparison, and went on hastily. "And I was never more wrong. No, I was only right when I said to you once it was not for me to be loved. For you see what my seeking love has brought to us all."

Galadriel sighed. "Oh, Celebri. It still hurts me to hear you say that. Do not blame love or passion, nor even your ansereg, for this betrayal." Her eyes narrowed. "Blame the lies of evil, that seek to deceive and empty our hearts, that they be cold as the Void."

"I blame myself," said Celebrimbor, "and I will do penance for my blindness."

They were both silent in the glade; the full-risen sun had dissolved the last of the mists.

"You will not come back?" he asked again.

Galadriel took on the same look of hurt. "I suppose you're the last person he'd give a message for me." Celebrimbor had no reply to that. He had not asked if Celeborn wanted to send one, and she spoke on. "Then I will not, just yet. I will aid you from here. We will ward the passes and the river banks; we will send our scouts forth, and gather in the wanderers. There is much to do."

Celebrimbor held out the ring of the Three she had chosen. "Take this one. Its name is Nenya, the Ring of Air."

She held up a hand in an ambiguous gesture, seemingly pushing away, yet stretched out towards the jewel. "Too rich a gift by far, Celebri."

"Please! Even if you cannot wield it fully, it has its virtues. And dividing where they hide makes them harder for Sauron to find," he said, "You are one of the few strong enough to endure him, I ween; like to a Maia yourself."

She reached out and accepted the jewel, and he held his breath at the brush of her fingers again. "I will guard this Ring; and we will hold the Anduin, and

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send our own scouts to the South. We will see how much we might hope, in the days to come. Will you take the other Rings to Lindon yourself?"

"No; even with Celeborn in my chair, I am needed in Eregion. There are others who will ride for me."

4. An Errand-Rider's Farewell.

Two ridings to Lindon were assembled at the stables of Ost-in-Edhil. The trade party had been bid to stay until Celebrimbor's return. Now they were free to ride out. Another group would leave at the same time, riding hard and fast; twenty-four knights of Eregion, in red livery and golden armour, each with a swift white horse, to bring tidings and a precious burden to their King, Gil-Galad. All the knights carried a ring on a wallet fixed fast inside his armour; only two of them were the true Elven-Rings.

"Very fair and noble your riders are," said Pengolod. "A shame I go with them; I ruin the look of it." He scratched the nose of his piebald mare, no noble's steed but fast enough to keep up with the burdened knights, and adjusted the pannier of scrolls she carried. Celebrimbor was sending a great deal to Gil-Galad; maps, trade notes, not least messages and warnings that Pengolod carried in memory only. "It is good of you to come and see me off, Aranwë." He gave the trade riders a shrewd look. "I'd forgotten that the traders had a spare horse. You could come along with them - they'd appreciate another sword for their defence, I think. And you'd have a fine welcome in Lindon. I'd make sure of that."

Aranwë had borne no grudge about Pengolod's errand to Celeborn, and that was well in the days of waiting they had endured. The embraces that had been their pleasance in the days after the Rings were made became a desperate refuge after Sauron's will was known. The two survivors understood, more than many others, what horror and loss war might bring.

Aranwë shook his head. "I'm a terrible rider. I would be more hindrance than help. And I do not have your luck." He grew more sombre. "You have been a boon companion to me. But I have my duty, as you have yours. I am Celebrimbor's man, and sworn to the Mírdain. We are the ones who placed all our folk in peril. It is our place to take the brunt of what may come." They both looked up as one of the knights blew a silver horn with the proud call of Eregion. The noble riders began to clamber onto their horses.

Aranwë helped Pengolod mount, then gave him a harrowed look. "If it comes to war – again – then try to forgive..."

Pengolod did not let go of Aranwë's arm, looking down into his eyes. "Gondolindhri, I forgave you long ago."

They remained so, one standing and one mounted, until the horn sounded for a second time, calling the riders to assemble. After one last firm grasp, the two elf-men let go. Pengolod rode to take his place in the middle of the double line of knights.

The horn sounded its third time. All the knights clashed their pikestaffs against their shields, moving as one, and their horses stamped forwards together.

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Pengolod's mare matched their pace but not their stride, seeming amused by all the fuss, and the loremaster turned back with a wave and a call. "I'll see you again when I need more pen-tips!" Aranwë was not the only one laughing at that as the riding left. When they were gone, those who remained felt doubly diminished, bereft of both splendour and mirth.

5. A Long Noose.

Later, the survivors remembered the century before the Elves' nameless war with Sauron as both a long torment and as time that sped by like a bitter draught, swallowed quickly.

First, messengers came, mortal Men as presentable as Sauron could muster. Three times they came to Eregion, demanding in the words of Sauron that the Elves enter leaguer, or give up their Rings, since they could not have been wrought without the aid Sauron had given them. Each time, the messengers warned that declining this offer would lead to war. Each time, they were refused.

Sauron seethed at their unwise lack of gratitude, and set his plans in motion.

In Lindon, the gulls cried, the shipwrights hammered and the ships sailed. Some went to plead to Númenor for aid, and some to carry ever more Elves over Sea, away from the shadow growing. Pengolod's scribes had fewer children to teach, and then none, for Elves did not bear children in times of war. Instead, the loremasters were put to teaching those who would be soldiers the languages of Eriador, to drawing maps, and to writing down all their tales, lest their knowledge perish with them.

Sauron had much of the Elves' lore, now. He knew how the loremasters would aid the forces of the Eldar, and told his troops of Men and Orcs that there was a bounty for the sage-cloaked teachers, whether prisoners or corpses.

In the glades of Lorinánd, fallen wood was raised into flets far from the ground. Wandering wood-elves took refuge there, and took up arms, bending choice branches into bows, fletching arrows from the reeds of the streams. Galadriel watched the shadow growing in the South. She took up her scrying then, spinning spells of warding and foreseeing, dipping into the secret knowledge another Maia, Melian, had given her long ago. If she had any aid beyond that knowledge, she never spoke of it, but the wards of Lorinánd soon became renowned.

Sauron cursed Galadriel. He knew he would not take the east-gate of Khazad-dûm, nor the pass of Caradhras into Eregion, while she warded the lands about. His road to war was made longer, and he turned his thoughts westwards.

In Eregion, stone was hewn and walls were raised. Wire was pulled, mail-shirts were ringed, and the water-wheels of the Mírdain spun to polish not jewels but blades and armour. Aranwë took up sword-smithing again, and had no idle moments. Those who made jewels made them to tempt the Dwarves, cutting stones to trade for steel and nickel, and Celebrimbor used all his wiles in trade and diplomacy with Khazad-dûm. Celeborn let the Mírdain hew down trees of

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his treasured lowland oak-glades to fire their forges; better them, he said, than the orcs of Sauron. He even sacrificed many of the holly trees as wood for the hardest weapon handles, but he bid the holly-hedges of the borders grow thorny and high.

Sauron hearkened to his spies, and knew the troops of the Eldar would be terrible, neither giving nor taking quarter. He lashed the Orcs to a frenzy of mad despise, and warned the Men of the cruel ways of Elves, calling them selfish and undeserving of their eternal lives, tempting would-be fighters with tales of the rich booty that awaited in Eregion.

Amongst the Elves, the fearful sought courage and the proud sought penance in the circles of ansereg. There was little lightness to it, but the desperation of old, and for none more than for the Mírdain. The tiles of the round hall of the Mírdain were swept clean of every shard, and the silver chains raised again. They could not spare to repair the glittering dome, so the hall stood roofless, and they hardened themselves with ansereg beneath the wind and the cold, starry sky.

Sauron did not plan to waste time with torment, as he had sported with elf-prisoners in days gone by. If the Elves were not his allies, he would not tolerate their disorder. He would simply destroy them. There was only one elf he would spare the time to torment; after all his patience, he thought he could allow himself the luxury.

And ever the lands about the elf-realms grew more perilous. In the wilds between, warg and wolf roamed, at war with bear and eagle. Bats and crebain-crows harried the messenger-doves and grey finches of the elves. Men took up strange sigils and spilt blood in rites of worship, or fled to the coasts of the Sea, to serve the proud men from over the water, lest they lie upon the altars of sacrifice. Grass grew tall on the trade roads, hammered flat by horses and ox-wains no more. Against all this, the Dwarves closed their doors and grew more secret than ever. But the hammering of their forges made the earth tremble.

The orcs roamed, the trolls came down from the North. The wind from the South bore strange traces of ash and sulphur-clouds. Sunrises were clouded and sunsets were blood-stained, and for the first time Elvish scouts saw and named Mordor and Orodruin. If the Elves appeared in Eriador far from their realms, they were hunted; then they were hunted near their borders as the noose drew tight.

And Sauron came forth from Barad-Dur at last, bringing a black sea of war.

A great march could not be swift, and Sauron's forces were scouted well in advance. The messenger-birds flew forth to Lindon, to Lorinánd, to the high towers of Khazad-dûm, and forester and jewel-smith united for defence. Their strategy, like the lost Rings, had three desperate parts. All knew that if aid did not come in time, then to walk in the troops of Eregion was to be walking to the halls of Mandos.

The black sea of war broke on Eregion before any replies were received.

6. The Glamhoth.

"My lord, look hither," said Elrond's esquire, "The holly-hedge of Eregion still stands. Greater than I thought, twice the height of an elf."

"So our race is ended. Have we won it?" Elrond murmured. He turned back and looked over his following host of Elves; the glittering army stretched for a mile and longer, along the old road they had battened down again. They were striking for the same place that Sauron's forces sought, the south-western borders of Eregion, a late-called rally to aid the army of Celeborn. "Where are the last of the scouts?" He peered amongst the low hills.

Even as he spoke, a rider came tearing up from the south, cloak streaming behind, three other riders following. For a moment they thought it was the full group of scouts returning, but then the rider in the lead turned and shot an arrow at one of those who followed. Elrond shouted for archers, and more mounted warriors leapt out. The sortie was swift. The elves' phalanx of riders met the horse in the lead, then turned to pursue those who had hunted the elf-rider. Soon only the returning scout was left to canter up to the great company, to the banners that showed where Elrond stood.

"My lord," he gasped, "We are shafted! Sauron has come before us, and Celeborn is pressed to despair. But half a league away they fight."

"How many, and what kinds?"

The rider said, "Ai, a very glamhoth, a seething sea of black, legions of Orcs, and many horsed mortals. Celeborn's force dismays them, for Sauron's forces have never fought Elves in their lives. They hold only by cunning, but the hedge is unbroken yet."

"We will join our force to his, forwards and fast!" Elrond turned about and roared his orders, and the elf-force swung about like a cloud at the wind's command. As they all flowed forward, he turned to the scout, on his lathered horse. "You must show us the way. The other scouts fell?"

Pengolod nodded, and Elrond cursed at that. "An ill war already for you loremasters."

"None better to scout, we who can speak with those we meet," said Pengolod, though white with grief and near-black with mud from a fall. It was no hour to mourn.

They went around the curving, brush-clad hills until they heard the shrieks and howls of the forces of Sauron. Then the heralds blew the horn-call of Lindon, and readied for the thrust. It was the force of Celeborn that they came upon from the west, tight against the endless holly-hedge. Beyond Eregion's varied livery, they saw the glamhoth, the din-horde. Elrond cursed, and cursed again, for their company, though it trebled the force still standing, was still outmanned by far.

But Sauron's commanders did not know the limit of Elrond's troops, and they took greater alarm than he anticipated. The glamhoth clambered back as Elrond's forces fell upon them. Celeborn was no craven, but retreat was all that

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could be salvaged for his twice-decimated troops. Soon he and Elrond, led to his banner by the scout, met in the midst of their forces. After the two greeted, Elrond scanned the confused host of darkness. "It is as I have heard, Lord Celeborn; in Eregion you do nothing by halves," and they laughed together bitterly.

"Lord Celeborn, none of the Mírdain ride with you?" asked Pengolod. "I see none in their livery."

"They stand with those who defend the city and the byres about – and their high hall," said Celeborn, grimly.

The glamhoth shrieked in triumph even as they retreated, and the two commanders turned to see what caused their glee. "Smoke?" said Celeborn. He looked up at the hedge they defended; its leaves were beginning to curl.

With a dragon's roar, uncanny fire swept from the East along the hedge, and the elf-troops jumped from it. The orcs of the glamhoth shrieked, and the Men roared. Half the dark troops swung out of retreat and stamped to the East, where the fire was kindled on the broken hedge. Their Master had given them their signal.

The other half turned towards the elf-troops again.

7. The Curse of Celebrimbor.

Sauron did not mind that his troops were screaming in chaos behind him. They knew their place in the order of things; that was the important part. At the midpoint between Ost-in-Edhil and the house of the Mírdain, Sauron used his keen vision to see the changes the Elves had made against him. Ost-in-Edhil was now walled and gated, and the house of the Mírdain was ringed with tall, thorn-guarding holly. It seemed that Celeborn and Celebrimbor had exchanged their crafts in each others' defence. He gestured towards the hall on the high hill, and his forces trampled forwards, yelling in eagerness, hammering at their shields, until they drew near. They fell silent when Sauron dismounted and strode up to the holly; it was eerie to be able to hear the click of his encasing black armour, and the whistling wind in the branches.

The hedge was broken once for an entry, and that was barred with felled holly trees, a road of thorns. Sauron lifted the hand that bore the Ring, his left hand, and gestured. The trees before him exploded into flames. The glamhoth renewed their din at that, and Sauron waded through, unscathed, as his fire spread to the ringing hedge. He emerged to the house of the Mírdain before him.

The golden doors reflected the fire, shimmering red. And on the red granite stairs, Celebrimbor himself stood, armoured to the teeth, sword flaming like copper, the stair's two guard-hounds baying and slavering at his side.

"Ill met, servant of darkness!" Celebrimbor cried. "Come forth and be defied, as your master was!"

Sauron removed his shielding helm, and smiled to see Celebrimbor's wrath double at recognizing him. His visage was brighter than the fire; revealed, he lit his armour like a bonfire in a furnace, his hair flowing like molten gold.

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Celebrimbor recovered. "Nay, ill met, my leman! You always did keep my bed warm, and now you look like to do the same for all my hall."

Sauron hissed at that, eyes glittering green, but saw the fey mood on Celebrimbor. His leman's wiles would serve him well in this hour.

"Yea, hotter than ever I burn," said Sauron, holding up the hand with the radiant Ring. "Come! I give you one last chance to best me. Show me that you can master me truly! Defeat me here and now, and this Ring is yours, and I don your collar again." The Ring taunted on one hand, worn proudly over an armoured glove, and his other hand threatened with a black mace of steel.

With a roar of fury, Celebrimbor leapt forth to meet him, and they fought. Sauron knew that they were watched by his troops and the few who stood the hopeless siege in the hall. The armour of each defied their blows, but Sauron knew the elf's limits better than anyone. So he feinted and parried, swaying with a lover's grace even in his black armour. He knew how long Celebrimbor could strive until he tired, and then he struck out, with his mace on one side and the fire of the Ring on the other. Celebrimbor's leap away from the flame brought him smack into the mace's strike. Sauron struck again, and the mace smote the elf-man to his knees.

As they fought, a ring of orcs had surrounded them, screaming and spitting for their master. At Sauron's gesture, hooked hands reached out to grapple downed Celebrimbor, ten orcs mauling at him. They turned him to watch as Sauron walked to stand before the stairs of the Mírdain. The hounds, faithful beyond terror, were crushed by swats from Sauron's mace. Then Sauron gestured with his Ring-wielding hand, and blasted the golden doors from their hinges.

In the silence that followed, he stepped into the hall, and gestured to his minions; heaving up struggling Celebrimbor, they followed.

Sauron walked through the house of the Mírdain at his leisure. He knew where everything was, except for the Rings of Power; the elves had not changed much in a hundred years. He used his Maia's senses to track the Rings, or so he thought; only the nine Rings of Men did he find, not in one of the treasuries, but buried in a sack of barleycorn, grain reaped each year like mortals' lives. They were the only ones he was able to sense in the area. As he had planned, it was time for his indulgence. Celebrimbor was waiting for him.

Sauron ignored the tools of ansereg that hung in places, the whips and the flails and the straps, the clips, the intimate rings and roundels, and all the other devices of the elves' refined torments. What he took up, gathering in one arm, were the tools of the jewel-smiths. He took the leather straps of the polishers, reels of fine golden wire, and tongs and pincers; and he took up the acids of the engravers.

Calmly, he went to the round hall of the Mírdain. Its air was polluted with smoke from Sauron's burning, pooling grey between the high walls. The shrieking orcs were there, and they had stripped Celebrimbor of his armour and its padding, leaving but his loincloth. They dropped silent with terror as their

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master entered. Sauron's metal-clad feet clicked on the tiles as he walked up to Celebrimbor, pinned and prone. Scuttling minions took his burdens from him, and he placed both hands on his hips.

"Where are my Rings?" Sauron asked.

Celebrimbor snarled in silent defiance, his glance the pure hatred of the heart-betrayed.

Sauron looked at the open roof. The steel span still hung across it, and the two silver chains dangled down, blackening as the smoke clung to them. "How convenient," he murmured.

Soon, Celebrimbor was forced to standing between the chains, with much amusement for Sauron as he ceaselessly tried to shake off the Orcs, and bound at ankles, wrists, and knees to the chains' length. A furnace-poker worked into the bonds spread Celebrimbor's legs. The polishers' leather straps drew tight as Celebrimbor struggled. Then the orcs lay the things Sauron had brought at their lord's feet, and withdrew, to ring the hall and watch their lord at his sport.

Celebrimbor ceased his writhing. He had known, when he stood forth at the Mírdain's gates, that he more than like went to his death, a feint to tempt Sauron's wrath away from Ost-in-Edhil. Sauron's challenge had given him desperate hope, and the defeat had smote him back into his despair. Now, the longer he endured, the longer he could stand Sauron's attentions, the less regard Sauron gave to his other forces, and the more chance others had. He lifted his hung head and glanced at Sauron, whose radiant glimmer had fallen into an evil brassy glow. With a crooked smile, he twisted his bound hands, and clasped the chains.

Sauron tilted back his beautiful head and laughed. "I wondered if you would enjoy this! Well do I remember when you asked me, more than once, if I would deal out your torments. Your hour is come. Unless you tell me where my Rings are, I will show you ansereg beyond your dreams."

"Ansereg is not torment," said Celebrimbor.

"Then how will it aid you now?" asked Sauron. Celebrimbor was silent; faced with true torment, he could not say.

Sauron took off his black steel gauntlets, and held up to Celebrimbor the Ring he had striven for, striven and failed, and ostentatiously replaced it on one finger. Then he lifted a coil of golden wire in one hand, and wire clippers in the other, and snipped off some long lengths. Celebrimbor braced as the clippers ran over his skin, then snipped at his loincloth's laces over his hips. The last of his modesty fell away, to the glamhoth's mocking cries. Worse was the dreadful, intimate touch of the one he had come to despise, handling his member, twining the wire around him there, binding and pinching.

"You betray me with your silence, Celebrimbor. What of the vaunted oath of the Mírdain? Thy works are my works, thy secrets are my secrets, and I am bound to thee." Sauron wired Celebrimbor's nipples, and the elf-man hissed as the flesh was wrapped as if with knives. "Now you are bejewelled as I once was. And I hated you then as much as you hate me now. Go on and hate me more," he

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urged. Sauron ran his Ring-bearing hand over him, and the wires twined around him seared like lightning. The metal Mírdan-collar around his neck blazed, a loop of pain. His entire body jolted back against the chains, and he voiced a beast's howl of suffering. Sauron repeated the gesture, and he dropped the chains, for the evil power coursed through that metal as well, scorching him.

"Where are the Rings? I have my Nine; where are my Seven?"

The lightning-pain jolted Celebrimbor again, and he felt his flesh go sickeningly dead for an instant. Then his body screamed once more, and he jerked at the undreamed-of agony, beyond any trial he had known. He sold his making for a moment's respite, hating himself as much as Sauron. "The deepest quarry," he moaned. They were hid there amongst the stones.

Sauron smiled sweetly. "And my Elven-Rings?" Celebrimbor forced himself to look at Sauron, radiant with triumph. He listened to the glamhoth's cackles, and realized that he hung in the very place he had stood to make those rings, where his Mírdain had poured themselves into him. "You never touched them; no matter what I did, they were never yours," he rasped, and turned his head to the side, biting one of the leather straps that hung from his bound hands.

Celebrimbor felt Sauron's malice as the tormentor stooped and took up a glass phial. He thought himself about to be ravished or violated, with the aid of some probing oil, and lifted his head proud to endure. Sauron perceived his thought and sneered. "Always your thoughts turn to lust, elf-man. Lust and care dissolved your torments into weak echoes, an illusion of mastery." He stepped achingly close to Celebrimbor, his warm armour brushing naked, sweat-stained skin. "I am purer than you at the arts of pain. For I need no other pleasure."

Then Sauron opened the phial; the stopper was attached to a wand of glass. The jeweller on the chains of torture froze in recognition at the fluid's smell. He understood his torturer's sadism, and despaired. Sauron stepped back and stroked the glass softly against Celebrimbor's belly as he hung. And the elf-man shrieked as the phial's acid burned him.

Sauron stroked the frail glass wand against him, again and again, engraving even lines into his skin. Before each stroke, he repeated his question, and gave three heart-beats for a reply before the acid-glistening glass touched. Only once did Celebrimbor peer down in horror at Sauron's work on his body. As Sauron knew him, he knew Sauron. Not even this was disorderly; after Sauron had painted nine lines, he set himself to a row of seven. There would be an acid-stroke for each Ring. He screwed his eyes shut to scream further, twisting helpless on the chains, rearing back from his own flesh smoking beneath the acid.

Sauron painted a last line against Celebrimbor's heart, painted it twice. As Celebrimbor hung, and screamed himself raw, the crystal insight of pain came upon him. He embraced it as a friend, known from the lesser torments he had endured in daring before. It was like finding a road beneath his feet again, and he clasped his twisted hands around the chains once more. He spoke without

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thinking, in the howl of a riven oracle. "Curse you, Sauron, and your betrayal of our long art! May you fall by the very things you feigned to betray us!"

Sauron sneered. "What, by the foolishness of one who kneels in your circles of watered-down torment?"

"No. By trust. Endurance. Strength. Mercy. Yea, mercy for those as the weak and crawling, compared to you, as you feigned for the Children of Arda."

"Mercy does not down power. You Elves will not conquer with it!" He struck Celebrimbor across the face, hard, and snarled to see him roll with the pain. "For the last time, answer me! Or I will torment you to your death."

Celebrimbor, breath sawing hard, tears of agony seeping from his eyes, said nothing.

"Your silence is my answer. For I know you. You always sent the fairest things you made away, to be admired by others, and spread your fame about." Sauron snapped his fingers for his gauntlets, and a minion handed them up; he donned them again, stroking the razor-claws at their tips. "I can guess who you hope to spare; your High King. I am glad to see you turn to order at last, at the end." Celebrimbor's face opened in an expression of ruin, and Sauron's laugh rang out, hollow and fell.

Sauron spread out the clawed fingers of the hand that bore the Ring on Celebrimbor's chest, below the collar-bones, where he bore two faint scars. With the gauntlet claws, very slowly, Sauron opened up the scars again so that the red blood ran, then hooked one claw under the skin. "How long will you hold onto your chains for me?"



In Lorinánd, Galadriel knelt, bowed double, one hand cupping the Elessar she wore upon her breast. The gem had suddenly burned hot upon her skin. When she touched it with her hand, the fragment of Celebrimbor inside it had been shrilling with agony. She had let the pain slide into her; it must be an evil torment, for her to feel this, when its maker's pleasures and pain had left the jewel shimmering calm before. There was no way to know what was happening to him from the gem's spark, and she staggered up, trying to collect herself enough to scry, not knowing how long she had knelt.

As she stood, the gem went cool. The pain was gone. Nothing of it was left but the tears sheeting down her face. She undid the Elessar's clasp and looked at it. Perhaps it was her tear-blurred vision, but it seemed that, though the gem bore its enchantment still, there were fewer bars of light in its heart.

Feet softly shook the ladder of the tree-house where she stood, and her daughter's silver head peered up through the entry. "Celebrían. What news of the troops?"

"They should be midway through Khazad-dûm, mustering with the Dwarves. The same as this morning, mama. What have you seen?"

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Galadriel clenched the white ring she wore on a chain, to strengthen herself for the words. "Celebrimbor is perished."

"What about Father?" her daughter cried.

"We shall find out. The hour of my wards is past! Gather a company of horse. We will ride through the pass of Caradhras – you and I shall lead them." With a shout, Celebrían rattled down the ladder. Galadriel lifted the Elessar again, and wiped her tears away. "I have lost he who made you; by what is in you, do not let me lose him for whom I wielded you." Then she snapped the brooch's clasp shut, and turned to war.

8. Mírdan and Mortal.

Aranwë was stoic about his role in war. When you were amongst the tallest of the Eldar, with a blacksmith's build, and clad in full mail and half-plate armour, you were sent forth to risks. His sword had been sent away from the suicidal stand at the Mírdain's hall to the city's defence, and he was the one who went up to the balustrade of Ost-in-Edhil's new wall to peer out at the clamour of Sauron's besieging forces.

"How bad is it?" one of the other defenders called up to him. He did not reply immediately, silenced by the sight.

Amidst that black host, a cluster of red banners were brought up to the walls, a stained white banner borne in the centre, it seemed. But it was no banner, Aranwë saw. It was a body pierced with arrows, hung from a high pole. He was nauseated to see that the corpse was gelded and much marred, and tried to distinguish the face of the fallen. The dead elf's head drooped forward, dark, matted hair distinguished by a silver forelock. Celebrimbor.

As he looked in horror, he heard the ringing of the city towers' bells; the signal that the wall was breached. Feeling slain already after the sight, Aranwë scrambled down, and his news gave keener edges to the defenders' swords. But their wrath availed them little. In the city's streets, war changed from the charges and defences many of them were familiar with to a game of hunter and hunted.

Long hours later, the news had trickled through that Celeborn and Elrond were in retreat, and the defence should pull out westwards and seek to join them. When that news came to Aranwë, he was still in the east of the city. He turned to look at the nearest fighter. "Think we'd make it out, Erester?" he asked.

Erester leaned against the city's wall, his spear in one hand, a short sword in the other. The loremaster was one of those who rattled on, spilling words when nervous. "Manwë only knows until we try. Do you know, a lot of the mortals in Sauron's ranks are the ones who lived outside Eregion, the Dunlendings? I can tell by their dialects. They'll know the country about, make it hard to pass. We Elves think that we are the only ones with woodcraft and soft feet, but mortals have their ways, too."

"What? Why do they betray us?" asked Aranwë, aghast.

"They hate us, it seems; we just never paid much heed."

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“But the Rings—“

“They care little for the rumour of the Rings; it doesn’t put bread on their tables. We might have given them other aid, if we cared beyond our pride, they say.” Erester’s voice was thin with weariness, and he leaned on his spear. “The thing is, they are right. Too late, now; their choice is made. All too late.”

Erester tilted his head. “What are they doing outside? Listen to the din. The more that are out there, the less there are in here, but also more waiting for us later.” He closed his eyes and moaned his perished wife’s name.

Aranwë looked at Erester, not the best companion for that hour, half-mad with grief. Still, Erester was Pengolod’s guild-mate, and that thought made him determined to get them both out alive. He clambered up the nearest set of stairs for a last look over the wall before they fled. Erester guarded the stairs’ entrance, for the good that would do.

This time, what Aranwë saw made his heart leap. Behind the black horde were ordered forces like wide lines of steel, marching without flag or herald. He turned to call to Erester. “Baruk Khazad! The Dwarves are come to our defence!” He turned back to watch as the orcs flew against the Dwarves like black ravens, leaping in the battle-madness orcs lived for, and were smote back like flies. Behind the Dwarves, he saw a few airy banners; he peered to see if it was the elves of Lorinánd. Erester called to him, his yell lost in the renewed roar of battle. He shouted back, “Wait a moment! I think—“

His words were strangled short as a chain flung around his neck staggered him, and he ducked, dropping his sword to clutch his throat. As he swayed lower, the chain’s pressure painful, a strike to the back of his helm dazed him and cast him to his knees. No knife or spear could pierce the mail gorget of the Mírdain, but the choking chain might be the death of him anyway. By the voices of those he grappled with, he realized some mortal fighters must have lain in wait upon the wall, and one stepped in front of him as he gasped. Another behind him dragged Aranwë’s helmet off, so his vision was clear.

Sauron’s mortal soldier was not drunk on battle-madness like the orcs. He looked underfed and tired, but his eyes were sharp. And there was an arrow tipped in black steel nocked to his bow.

They stared at each other for a moment, the noble warrior of the Eldar and the hardscrabble mortal. He said something to his unseen comrades, and Aranwë felt one hand pull at his cloak, another reach for his jewelled Mírdan’s collar: their leader stopped them and they tightened the chain. Had they been orcs, this would have been the prelude to hours of torment. Instead the mortals were quiet and deadly, following orders to the letter. A hand held Aranwë’s head cruelly still, and the man efficiently shot the arrow into the elf’s right eye.

Aranwë’s last act was to clench his Mírdan’s collar in one hand, holding it against their looting as long as he had life in him.

9. In the Valley of the Riven Dell.

In the grey evening, Pengolod stood on sentry duty outside the valley of the riven dell. The troops of Elrond and Celeborn had been blocked from the aid of Ost-in-Edhil and forced back yet again, at least with a few remnants and refugees joining them. After their bitter flight, they had taken refuge in this deep-cloven valley, which had plenty of water, and only one pathway down, a fortress of nature.

Pengolod scanned the half-open country around, fretting. Three or four other sentries that week had been met by more refugees fleeing through the country. Sauron's larger forces would follow, they said, once they were done sacking Eregion. The valley would be under siege. As he looked out, he saw some movement to the south; large enough to be a company. He peered through the dusk.

As the riding drew closer, Pengolod saw that there was a white glimmer to it, and drifting silken banners, tattered but still proud. Through the twilight there came to him a silvery horn's call, the haunting notes of Lorinánd. Relieved, he took up his own horn and sent back the call of Lindon. The call repeated, and the riding slowly turned towards the valley.

By the time they arrived, the commanders from the valley had come up to meet them. Pengolod watched them trail by; horses and knights, more shield-maidens than usual amongst them, ringed about foot soldiers, a handful of sturdy Dwarves, and more survivors of Eregion. Pengolod saw a face he recognized amidst them, and left his post, shouting. "Erestor! Erestor! Over here!"

Before Pengolod could greet Erestor, he saw the shattered expression on Erestor's face. He reached into his most secure pocket and handed over his flask of miruvor. Erestor was collected enough to not drop the entire thing, taking just three mouthfuls. "Never thought I'd taste that again. Thanks." Erestor handed it back. "My wife is dead," he said, voice dull.

Pengolod clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry." As Pengolod replaced the flask in his pocket, he brushed up against the other precious thing he carried, one of his metal pens. "Do you know if any of the Mírdain...?"

Erestor shook his head. "Your friend Aranwë – he had bad luck."

Pengolod, hand still in his pocket, realized that the pen's tip had become separated from its handle. He took the two pieces out and connected them, then wrapped the pen back in its piece of chamois and tucked it away. Hand lingering over his pocket, he spoke gently to his guild-mate. "Let's get you to a fireside; the valley's safe for now. Come along, this way." The loremasters looked up as two white horses thundered by. Shaken as they were, both bowed to the herald and leader of the riding. The herald lifted the tattered banner and a reddened lance, saluting them in return.

The riders drew up in front of the commanders, waiting regally in their armour. The exuberant herald leapt down to fling mailed arms around an astonished Celeborn. "Papa! You're alive!" Elrond was jolted by the musical voice

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that revealed the herald as a woman, and turned in less surprise to the leader, who dismounted gracefully, steel mail and white robes flowing.

“Celebrían, what have I said about jamming your spear in the dirt like that?”

“Sorry, Mama.” The herald gave her father a kiss, then looked back and forth between her parents. She pulled her spear out of the ground and turned to Elrond. “You must be the Lord Peredhil. Can you and the esquires show me – we’ve got a lot of people here, as you can see, and...” The two of them went off together with the lords’ esquires, Celebrían glancing back.

Celeborn looked after his daughter, smiling at her rough tact. “Why is Celebrían wearing the Elessar?”

“Celebrimbor is dead, “ Galadriel said. “I gave it to her that she might have a keepsake of her kinsman’s work.”

Celeborn bowed his head. “His death was terrible, I heard.”

“I know.” Galadriel took off her helm, and her golden hair tumbled down.

“After all the treasures they heaped on us, all the fair things you had, now you have nothing that he made,” said Celeborn. “It is all lost.”

“You still live; I ask no other treasure than that.” she whispered. “And he gave me this.” From beneath her mail, Galadriel drew out a ring on a silver chain.

Celeborn nodded. “He told me. We had found our peace, Celebrimbor and I.” Grieving, they embraced.

Epilogue

Year 1702

The siege of the valley of the riven dell, now named Imladris, was broken. Sauron's forces had been driven back by the fighters of Lindon and the great hosts of the Númenoreans. The first White Council had met; Gil-Galad, Celeborn, Elrond, Galadriel, and Celebrían. They had exchanged many sombre words. Most glad had been the bestowing of the blue Ring, Vilya, to Elrond; most painful had been the decision that shattered Eregion would not be renewed. Instead, Imladris would stay manned as an elvish stronghold, a refuge at need for wandering folk, and to hold part of the pathway to Khazad-dûm and Lorinánd secure. Nobody envied Elrond his post there in the lonely wilds, despite the buildings the surviving crafters of Eregion had raised.

Elrond lightly touched the ring he wore on a chain around his neck. The room was very peaceful, as if time had slowed and sweetened. "Even unworn, I still feel its power," Elrond said.

"As lost Celebrimbor had promised," Galadriel said.

Gil-Galad fingered the ring Narya that he bore. "You say that as long as Sauron is strong, we dare not don these rings to use them fully."

"To do so is to be in bond to Sauron, through their link to him. Yet through that link, if Sauron falls, these rings will then have no more power than an empty snail's shell," said Galadriel. "An irony it is, that we endure without fading, as long as Sauron does."

And the high ones of the council looked away as Galadriel said, "We are bound to him. Bound..."



Pengolod and Erester sat at a table in the new halls of Imladris. During the long siege, the bored crafters who had survived the sack of Eregion had been ordered to create shelter. The results far exceeded the need, halls and pavilions that were almost defiant follies, high-timbered and airy, ornamented with statues, images of the lost elves of Eregion.

The two loremasters had started up a chronicle of the siege, writing on paper they made from the reeds of the valley's river. A greater task awaited them, describing the fall of Eregion. "These are all the notes I have for that tale," said Pengolod, handing over a few sheets of paper. "Strange, isn't it? After the fall of Gondolin, I wrote reams and reams, many a verse and many a word. But this time, words failed me." He looked at the notes dismissively. "Not a very good start." The fall of Eregion had a face for him, a private loss that made the memories bitter to bear.

Erester browsed the sheets. "Something is better than nothing, and I have not written much more myself. Will you write more in Lindon?" Pengolod was leaving with the rest of Gil-Galad's forces.

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"I am not staying in Lindon. I am going over Sea," Pengolod said. He raised his hand against the protests Erester began. "My works are done here, and the ground has no pull beneath my feet. I am the last of the Lambengolmor. This war slew those of us who did not leave. And I am near to the last of the Gondolindrim." He grew sad and silent at that.

Erester looked out one of the wide-open arches. "Myself, I cannot leave the memories that Middle-Earth holds for me, yet. My lost wife loved the season's turns, and as I watch them, I remember her..."

Pengolod sighed, thinking of his own long lingering in Middle-Earth. "I understand what it is to be held by memory." In memory's very arms, he thought.

"And by vengeance," Erester added. "I shall stay here and fight. Elrond will have my spear." He turned to the papers with the scanty notes about Eregion. "I shall sort this out one of these days. When I have the heart to think about it properly."

Year 3262

The great camp of the Númenoreans spread its tents of blue and gold around the rich pavilions of the sea-lords. In the centre of the camp, a host of their leaders and allies gathered to watch in awe as Sauron surrendered himself to their King, Ar-Pharazon the Golden. They had not expected that their foe would be so fair of face and body, more beautiful even than an Elf, behind the branching black armour.

Sauron knelt before the tall king clad only in a tight tunic and leggings of leather, with bare feet. As the first sign of his complaisance, he had shed his armour. When he had taken the measure of the men from the Sea, he decided that they were both strong enough to be a problem and proud enough to be vulnerable. He had bidden his forces to go to ground, sending news to the Númenoreans that they were fled for fear, and that Sauron himself came to surrender to them.

Everyone leaned in to hear his soft words of submission. "Your army has humbled me, King of Middle-Earth, and I kneel before you. Never have I seen one greater than you! I know when I am bested." With that, he knelt and kissed Ar-Pharazon's gilded, armoured foot. He lingered at his homage, then drew back serene.

The king of Men looked down at him astonished, then roared out for chains to bind his prisoner. As they waited, Ar-Pharazon never looked away, fascinated by the seductive being obedient before him.

Sauron dropped his head so that his long golden hair veiled his smug smile, and joined his hands together, to conceal the simple ring that was his only ornament. What he had done before, he could do again, seducing, corrupting, turning his enemies into his tools.

And it looked like it would take far fewer years, this time.

*** THE END ***

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Story Notes

Notes By Chapter

The Fairest

- This story takes place around Second Age 750. Sauron's "stirring," noted in *The Silmarillion*, I am interpreting as his mind recovering from his great defeat and feeling out the realms and ways of changed Middle-Earth.
- **A nameless mountain in a nameless land** = At the time of this story, Sauron has not yet established the realm of Mordor, nor has Mount Doom/Orodruin been named.
- **Beren and Luthien** = From *The Silmarillion*, Luthien was the loveliest woman ever, and she defied Sauron with powerful song to save her fiancée (lover?) the human Beren.

The Elessar

- **Date** = Second Age 1252.
- **A hundred leagues** = 300 miles. Not close, three to four weeks' riding if nothing goes wrong.
- **Illúvatar** = The elves' name for The Supreme Being, above the Valar.
- The stone described here will eventually be received by Aragorn in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Fellowship of the Jewel-Smiths

- Readers familiar with canon will see that we are going with the complicated version of the history of Eregion as noted in "The History of Galadriel and Celeborn" in *Unfinished Tales*.
- The loremaster Pengolod and his time among the Dwarves are canon and detailed in "Quendi and Eldar," *The War of the Jewels*, History of Middle-Earth series.
- **Gwaith-i-Mírdain** = Fellowship of the Jewel-Smiths. **Mírdan** = singular for jewel-smith. **Lambengolmor** = Loremaster of Tongues (Languages). **Gondolindrim** = Of the people of Gondolin. All words in which Tolkien's Welsh inspiration for Sindarin comes through.

Coupled Power

- Story is set in the year 1253, Second Age.
- **Learned of a mortal wise woman** = "The Debate of Finrod and Andreth," a Tolkien story of a conversation between an elf (Finrod, Galadriel's brother) and a mortal, includes a legend of Men that a spirit of gifts came among them and told them how evil Death was. Sourced from the book *Morgoth's Ring*.

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- **To wed a kinsman so close** = Celebrimbor is Galadriel's half-cousin. Based on "The Laws and Customs of the Eldar," in the book *Morgoth's Ring*, she might marry him, but this is the closest possible marriage between kin allowed.
- **Warrior-turned** = An expression meaning "preferring sexual relationships with/turned towards males," used here as an equivalent of homosexual/gay. If there's an Elvish word for sadomasochism, there'd be one for this.
- **Wise man indeed** = Pengolod's name in Sindarin is formally supposed to mean *penn* + *golodh*, Noldor/wise one. There is an ironic second translation, *pen* + *golodh*, "no-wisdom."
- **The gift exchange** between elf-men as an Elvish custom, noted twice in this story, is based on a comment about Fingon and Maedhros exchanging presents in friendship, mentioned in "Narn i Hin Hurin," *Unfinished Tales*.

The Center Cannot Hold

- Story is set in the year 1402, Second Age.
- **I, Narvi, made them** = As noted in the Fellowship of the Ring book; these magical doors were shown in the movie.
- **Sacred bread** = There are several notes in Tolkien that among elves making bread was both a) a task of women and b) highly revered, sacred to the Valar. "Of Lembas" in *Peoples of Middle-Earth* and "Laws and Customs of the Eldar", *Morgoth's Ring*.
- **The music of the Ainur** = Some of the highest, most elemental magic in the Tolkien universe, as per *The Silmarillion*. There is another reference to Sauron's powerful song in his duel with Felagund.

One Ring to Bring Them All:

- Story is set in the year 1598, Second Age. The Elves' New Year falls on April 6th.
- **The quarters of many of the Mírdain** = Based on a 9th-century layout of a monastic community's goldsmithing and blacksmithing workshops.
- **We Lambengolmor** = Literal translation "masters of tongues."
- **Eichto-ni, hecilo** = Literal translation from Quenya "Pierce me, outlaw." The word "eichtha" means to pierce or prick; it also means to insult or goad. Used as the Gondolin gutter-talk equivalent of "Do me, you bastard."
- **An enslaved Mearas** = A horse of the same breed as the surpassingly swift Shadowfax.

They Knew Themselves Betrayed and the Epilogue

- Many of the events in "Of Galadriel and Celeborn" are fleshed out here; whatever reconciliation was between Celeborn and Celebrimbor so

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that they were united in the defence of Eregion, Celebrimbor's counsel with Galadriel, the distribution of the Rings, Celebrimbor's torment and what is done to his body, are all noted in that essay.

- **Gondolindhri** = Person of Gondolin.
- **The climactic battles** take place in 1697 Second Age.
- **Glamhoth** = A Sindarin word meaning, literally, "din-horde," used to refer to a host of Orcs.
- **I shall sort this out one of these days** = The fall of Eregion is described in "The Council of Elrond" in *LOTR* seems to be noted almost exclusively in oral elvish tradition. Hard-core Tolkien fans are persistently unhappy about the very little information about Eregion and the Rings' making in Tolkien's notes.
- **Sauron's submission** by choice as a hostage to the men of Númenor is noted in "Alkallabeth", *The Silmarillion*, and in the Tale of Years in *ROTK*. After he surrendered to them, he was taken as prisoner to Númenor and it is noted: "Years 3262-3310 – Sauron seduces the King and corrupts the Númenoreans."

General Story Notes

About Eregion and Elvish Flaws

Where and when did Eregion exist in Middle-Earth? Eregion, or Hollin, was a realm of the High Elves or Noldor. In Tolkien's universe, Eregion existed between 750 and 1697 of the Second Age of Middle-Earth. It was southwest of Rivendell, on the edge of the Misty Mountains beside the entrance to Moria.

What did Tolkien write about Eregion? Did it appear in the LOTR movie? Most *LOTR* book readers will recognize Eregion/Hollin as a country the Fellowship journeys through in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In the *LOTR* movie sequence when they are journeying across wild lands after leaving Rivendell, the Fellowship walks past a ruined building with curved lines to it, set in stony highlands. You can interpret this as a glimpse of the ruin of Eregion.

The history of the Second Age of Middle-Earth and of Eregion was never finalized by Tolkien. One of the seeds of this fanfic story was Tolkien's vague yet intriguing description of Eregion in the Second Age in "The History of Galadriel and Celeborn" in *Unfinished Tales*. They ran the place for a while, despite some complex dynamics with Celebrimbor. Then Sauron showed up, got in with the jewel-smiths, and all sorts of changes ensued. The climax of their association was that the Rings of Power were made. Then there is the timeline of the Second Age in *Return of the King*, with its contrasting statement that Celebrimbor was in charge the whole time, and its very vague dates. The situation is also described, albeit briefly, in *The Silmarillion*, assembled by Christopher Tolkien from his father's notes. I have chosen the most interesting parts from what I have read and used the dateline in *ROTK*.

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In *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, he referred several times to Eregion and how the elves who lived there exemplified certain elvish flaws. “But at Eregion great work began – and the Elves came their nearest to falling to “magic” and machinery,” (letter 131). He speaks about the Elves enjoying being a superior caste in Middle-Earth (letter 154), rejecting change in favour of what they knew and nostalgia. “The Elvish weakness is...to become unwilling to face change; as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favourite chapter. Hence they fell in a measure to Sauron’s deceits; they desired some “power” over things as they are...to arrest change, and keep things always fresh and fair,” (letter 181). This was the urge behind the creation of the Rings of Power. And Middle-Earth’s troubles began anew.

About Craft and Science

All the craft, science, geology, gemology, smithwork, and jewellery-making depicted in this series is as accurate as I can make it. I have a geology degree, worked for a gemologically astute jeweller at one point, and have visited active volcanic sites and interviewed a blacksmith at his forge. All these things come together in this series.

About the Sex and BDSM Activity

All the sex and consensual BDSM activity has been (ahem) researched and, while sometimes extreme, is based on reality. Sauron’s endurance is intended to parallel that of a particularly durable individual of the author’s acquaintance. Still, this story is a fantasy. If you do BDSM, play safely and consensually. If you have sex, safe sex is recommended. May I recommend Patrick Califia’s book “Sensuous Magic” for further reading? Activities mentioned in this series, but not recommended without specific tutelage include: *Part Zero*: Cutting. *Part 1*: Use of a single-tailed whip. *Part 2*: Use of a dressage whip and fisting.

How on earth can BDSM fit into Tolkien canon? With a touch of imagination, as can be seen in the following short piece, “Of the Laws of Ansereg.”

Appendix: Of the Laws of Ansereg

An explanation of ansereg, the consensual BDSM described in this story, in the authorial voice of the elvish loremaster Pengolod speaking to his human friend Aelfwine.

Canon Notes: Ansereg is an AU concept, created by the author. It is not based on Tolkien canon.

I have told you of the laws and customs of the Eldar in marriage, my mortal friend. And, loremaster that you are, my answering one question has given rise to more from you. Are Elves doomed to be loveless for our long lives if we wed not? And what means this word *ansereg* that I let slip speaking of elvish warriors and their consolations? Truly, I do not know if I am right to answer you fully. But I

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will tell the tale of the strange ways in love of the High Elves, and of the custom of ansereg. Tales may be shared, when deeds may not be.

The loves of the Elves began at the mere of Cuivenen, where our people first arose. Before our laws were strong, it is said, Elves loved given spouses and friends alike while new words were made. When we divided into clans and houses, we made our laws, and we followed them dwelling in Middle-Earth and in the lands across the Sundering Seas. Then came the exile of the Noldor. A fury of change fell upon the Elves when the Noldor returned to Middle-Earth and the War of the Jewels began. As our language changed at that time, so too did our customs.

For the High Elves, exile was a time of strife, of Sunderings and widowings. More elf-men than elf-women went to exile, and by our laws, the Noldor do not wed again even when bereaved. Yet we still feel passion and care, and so we turn to one another. To keep our laws while easing hearts, friends of the same kind turned lovers, men with men and women with women. Mortals have no words for such loves as we do, so I speak simply.

For this reason as well we speak little to mortal men of ansereg. Prepare to listen, but first swear to me that you will keep secret what I say.

The word ansereg refers to rituals created to strengthen warriors against the pain and duress of battle, and to harden them against torment if captured. This custom came about after Maedhros son of Feanor endured a great torment in Thangorodrim. Maedhros was saved at the price of losing a hand, and the tales say that the shadow of the pain stayed in his heart. He conceived ansereg that he might master that shadow in himself, and fear torment no more. Thus Maedhros was the first to submit in its circles.

In the Quenya of the High Elves, the term began as *angserce*, which means iron-blood. In Sindarin, the word of the same meaning was *ansereg*, and this became more greatly used. For a time these customs were also called Maedhros' Way, but that name fell out of favour after Maedhros' rape of a Silmaril and his death.

The practice of ansereg spread among the warriors of the High Elves, especially those who served the sons of Feanor. They were surpassing proud, and would not be excelled in any art of passion or endurance. It may seem strange to you that this became seen as art, but for many years the High Elves who besieged Morgoth had the luxury of time and thought. Do not forget that Elves endure and feel differently from Men. We may bear much pain and wounding, and heal in a day what may take a mortal a month to repair. Yet I have heard that this changes as Men grow to their prime and strength, and Elves fade.

Ansereg being a practice of the Noldor, Thingol, king of the Sindar Elves, banned its practice from Doriath when word of it came to his court. And since that time the customs of ansereg have differed as the dwellings and languages of our people have. Of the Sindar elves, many disapprove of ansereg. Other Sindar take it to them deeply, although they criticize the Noldor for wringing out

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torments too great, and bringing ansereg into the practices of their guilds and houses. In turn, the Noldor often frown on the Sindar ways of ansereg, not holding it meet that they should wreak so much of power or rank in the practice of ansereg, nor demand that honour should overlap with servitude. The Silvan wood-elves know little of ansereg but are often rough and thrawn in their own ways. Elvish speech that sounds fair to a mortal's ears may have harsh meaning.

You ask if ansereg is practiced only by elf-men. It is done by elf-women too, for many torments await women, and not only shield-maidens. It takes terrible courage, a great will to survive ill-use and force, instead of letting the spirit fly from the flesh. Yet it is very rare and secret. I know little of it, save that the women array for the ritual in garments of white and silver, instead of black and silver as do the men.

What are the laws of ansereg? Its practitioners are bound by the laws of the Eldar, as in other intimate matters of the body. It is not engaged in with close kin, nor with mortals – or if it is, none have spoken of it to me. It is not spoken of lightly. A time when ansereg is done between two is called a trial; the standing one does the work of torment, and the kneeling one bears it. At times there is a watcher, to make sure that all bides honourably, in respect of the trust that is given. It is when this trust is betrayed that ansereg is darkened. And I have seen this turned astray. It is very evil to see how it breaks the spirit.

To return to the matter of a trial. The pains of trials do not damage beyond wounds that may heal, yet hours of torment may be wrought thereby, and blood may be loosed. We do not bind or use gyves, unless this is the focus of the trial; a useful one, yet surpassing dull. Rather, the sufferer must remain still by their own courage. There have been cunning devices made to inflict the torments of ansereg, but because metal and leather are luxuries, they are rare. More often items to hand, plants and tools, are adapted. Inventiveness in this matter is considered a sign of skill at ansereg.

I knew that you would query how all this suffering falls in the same realm as matters of lust. It sounds cold to describe the mere laws of ansereg. They do not bring the enchantment of such trials to the mind. Dream instead that you yourself kneel within the drawn circle of ansereg, watching someone tall and stern pace a circle about you thrice before the first strike. Your flesh will scream, but also sing with heat and coolness. Gentle touches may fall on you as well, so that the heat of arousal will fuel your endurance. You will fear, and yet rejoice in your courage, and yearn to celebrate it with the one who helped you find it. Conversely, place yourself standing in the circle of ansereg, with a fair elf lightly clad kneeling before you, bound by honour to try and endure whatever you give to his body. Such power can intoxicate you as you stand. Might you not long to possess as much as you can of that beauty and honour, or to console the brave for their suffering afterwards? Once a formal trial is ended, and any watchers depart, passions may be fulfilled if both parties have free hearts. When a trial is entirely private, suffering may be bound up with lusts evoked to fulfilment – or to a hungry abstinence. Desire raised in trials is not always fulfilled.

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The most common claim against ansereg is a simple one; that it does not accomplish its purpose of hardening warriors. Can this ever be said in sooth? Who left the dungeons, after entering and withstanding the tortures of Morgoth and Sauron? Who was slain when they would not betray? Those who failed were the ones who crept forth again as evil's spies and thralls.

What is certain of ansereg is that it creates fellowship, even passion, between those who practice it. I would dare to hold that it has value in this, and also that one might gain strength and knowledge of the spirit from enduring its trials. By this I hold it meet, even that it has beauty. It may seem strange to you, but I have witnessed trials more graceful than dancers, and heard cries of withstanding that moved me more than minstrels' song.

Few indeed abide by the ways of ansereg today, compared to the extent of old. Its last high hours were in Lindon and in Eregion, that elf-realm now fallen. Alas for Eregion, and for Celebrimbor the Silver-Fisted! I hear that there are some cabals of ansereg among the wood-elves of the East, and it is true that a few of those who knew this way of old still dwell in Imladris and at the Havens. But ansereg is becoming forgotten and strange in Middle-Earth, just as Elves wed less and bear fewer children as the time of our fading draws near.

Now you ask me to tell you tales of things that you claim you would not dare venture. Yet the act of speaking them would place too much power upon me in your eyes. So I will say no more of these matters. Do not be angry at my silence, or think that I merit you less, wise and good among Men. Sometimes such a quiet is meet between friends.

Of the Laws of Ansereg Notes

- **The shadow of the pain stayed in his heart** – “His body recovered from his torment and became hale, but the shadow of his pain was in his heart; and he lived to wield his sword with left hand more deadly than his right had been.” Of the Return of the Noldor, *The Silmarillion*.
- **We may take much pain** – “...(elves) healed rapidly and completely after injuries that would have proved fatal to Men; and they could endure great physical pain for long periods.” The Debate of Finrod and Andreth, note 5, *Morgoth's Ring*, HME series.
- **Thingol banned it from Doriath** – Thingol banned the use of the High Elves' language from Doriath. This is an extrapolation based on that Tolkien canon fact. Of the Noldor in Beleriand, *The Silmarillion*.
- **The characters Pengolod and Aelfwine** are canon and noted in the *History of Middle-Earth* books. Pengolod describes other aspects of elvish lives, especially marriage, to Aelfwine in the essay “Of the Laws and Customs of the Eldar.”