These Gifts That You Have Given Me

by thearrogantemu

Summary

"We are not so foolish as to believe that evil is ended forever. But we do not place our hope in secrecy, but in strength. Strength is found in trust, and trust in openness. So be welcome among us, Annatar Aulendil."

The story of the meeting between Celebrimbor and Sauron, of the trust that grew between them and how it was broken.

Front cover and back cover, by the incomparable Sumeria.

Now available in audio read by the golden-voiced WolffyLuna.

Notes

Since this is a story primarily about Elves, everyone has at least as many names as they have hands, and usually more. Here’s a quick index – accurate to this story but an expansion on canon.
Celebrimbor is a Sindarin rendition of his Quenya mother-name Tyelperinquar, which means Silver-fist, or more accurately Silver-Hand-Closed-as-to-Grasp. His father-name is Curufinwe, like his father Curufin and grandfather Feanor. Narvi and some of the Brotherhood refer to him as III, a nickname Narvi gave him. Galadriel refers to him as Telperinquar, the Telerin pronunciation of his name. Tyelpe is the rarely-used diminutive. Annatar, meaning Lord of Gifts, is the primary name by which he introduces himself to the Brotherhood. He also goes by Aulendil, which means friend of Aule. In the previous Age he was known as Sauron, meaning The Abhorred, and Gorthaur, meaning The Cruel. In much, much earlier times, before he became Morgoth’s second-in-command, he was known as Mairon, meaning excellent, admirable, or precious. Galadriel was known as Artanis in her youth in Valinor. Celebrimbor calls her Aunt. Curufin is the Sindarinization of his father-name Curufinwe. His nickname is Curvo. Celegorm is the Sindarin version of his mother-name Tyelkormo, meaning hasty-riser. His father-name is Turkafinwe, and most of his family knows him as Turko. Finrod is also known as Felagund, meaning Hewer-of-caves, and Findarato, his name in Quenya. The Ainur are the Holy Ones, the Lords of the West, the gods. The Valar are the Powers, and the greater gods. The Maiar are the Beautiful Ones, and the lesser gods.
It was noon, but the sky was still dark; the blue-black clouds over the gray sea hung heavy with the promise of storm. The High King of the Noldor in Middle-Earth took his way carefully along the upper shores, noting where the cliffs had shorn away in landslides to leave the earth raw and torn beneath, calculating how much farther the land would be likely to retreat before its turmoil was over. The beach below was nearly impassable because of the quantity of tree-trunks washed up on it, some blackened and burned, others with roots and branches still clinging to them where the sea had not yet scoured them off. The air was cold and the wind colder. It was faintly gritty, as it always was when it blew from the north, smelling of sulphur and smoke. He lifted a corner of his scarf over his mouth and nose.

“Lord King.”

He turned. Someone was making his way toward him over the uneven ground. Eldar by his height, and Noldor by his voice. “Your steward told me I might find you here.”

The newcomer was wrapped against the cold in a worn travelling cloak. It might have been black once, or perhaps dark blue, but it was faded by travel and hard use to the same bruise-color as the sky. He pulled the hood back and stood facing the King.

“Be welcome, traveller. The Kindler’s light upon your path.” As he spoke the words of the greeting, Gil-Galad looked at him closely. His long dark hair was tied back for travel, and there was something familiar in his face, but perhaps even more familiar in his bearing: a contained, forthright energy, a hidden fire.

“And on yours,” returned the stranger, returning his gaze.

“I know you,” Gil-Galad said. “Or it seems to me that I should know you.” How many of the Eldar had passed before him over the course of his life, fleeing the ruin of their cities?

“We have met,” he replied, “though briefly, and the world was different then. The Isle of Balar, after the fall of Nargothrond—”

He knew the stranger’s face and bearing because it was his own: the dark hair and the grey eyes and the high pride of the House of Finwë. “Celebrimbor,” he said, a note of wonder in his voice. “Celebrimbor son of—” He stopped himself, and tried to turn the name into a cough.

A slight bitter smile crossed Celebrimbor’s face. “No, Lord King, that’s all right. Son of Curufin, son
of Fëanor, of the house of Finwë. Greetings, kinsman.” He touched his fingers to his heart and then to his lips, a greeting of such antiquity that Gil-Galad only knew it from his earliest youth in the house of Fingolfin.

“Kinsman!” The smile that broke on Gil-Galad’s features was broader and almost unshadowed. “Where have you been?”

Celebrimbor raised both eyebrows, then turned deliberately towards the unquiet ocean. “Fleeing.”

“Yes, well, that’s been true of almost all of our people as far back as I can remember,” Gil-Galad returned. “Certainly true of me. From haven to haven, and now to a haven again.” He gestured back inland, although the tents and the shelters and the wooden houses of Forlind were not visible from where they stood. “Every day more arriving. Sometimes I’m surprised by how many refused the chance to return to the Blessed Realm, seeing how little we have to offer them here but hunger and thirst, toil and cold and darkness. But still they come, out of the broken places. Sirion and Arvernien. Balar. Angband.” His eyes hardened. “Where have you been, kinsman?”

“Are you asking me if I was one of the thralls of Morgoth?”

“Were you?”

“I was not.” His voice was cold, but he did not speak in anger. Gil-Galad stepped closer to him, took his head in both his hands and looked closely into his face, studying the finely sculpted features and the sturdy jaw, the intense dark eyes that still gleamed with the lost light of Valinor. Celebrimbor met his scrutiny almost with amusement.

“If you could see in someone’s eyes,” he said, “whether they were a servant of Morgoth, the sorrows of the last war might have been less than they were.”

“Indeed.” Seemingly satisfied, Gil-Galad stepped back again. “But the survivors of Angband do not, generally, react well to being touched. Forgive me, kinsman; we must walk warily.”

“So you have many of them here, then? The Dark Power is gone; do you believe we still have something to fear from those whom it imprisoned?”

The King inclined his head; Celebrimbor could not tell which question that was intended to answer. “People fear them still, and the business with the Return of the Exiles has made things even more difficult. Most of the thralls freed from the dungeons and the slave-camps of the North went back to Aman, and may they find there the healing we could not give them here! But the whispers follow the ones who remain: why would they refuse the chance to leave the land that brought them such suffering? Have their deeds rendered them unfit for the company of the Holy Ones? Are they too marred for Aman? What did they do in Morgoth’s service?” He pulled back the cloth where the wind had whipped it over his face again. “Most will not speak of it. Some cannot.”

“There are many reasons someone might not return to Aman,” Celebrimbor said sharply.

“I know that, kinsman. As do you, evidently.” He looked at him with the question in his eyes. “I cannot imagine the way West was barred to you. You repudiated your House and their deeds.”

“And the Valar are notoriously ready to welcome those who abjure their past! No, that is why I have come to you, and not to them, Lord of the Noldor. I do not wish to hide who I am. I want to take up my name again.” And it seemed to Gil-Galad that even in the darkness of the day there was a brightness about him, that in this quiet, serious man before him there blazed the same fire that had given Fëanor his name.
“What makes you think you lost it?” he replied. “And what makes you think I have the authority to give it back to you?”

Celebrimbor had braced himself for reproof or for grave acquiescence, but had not been expecting the studied lightness of the reply. “Lost it?” he said. “I cast it off in Nargothrond before its fall.”

“Fëanor and Fëanor’s kin…” Gil-Galad spoke the words with almost the resonance of song. “Are you sure that’s a name you want to bear among your people here? It’s a name scarcely more beloved, to some, than that of Angband.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” The lightness was fading from his tone. “Did you see what was left of the Havens of Sirion after the Fëanorians were through with them? I did. I arrived too late, Celebrimbor, too late to defend my people from my people. I have stood in ruined cities before and since, comforted the wounded, marshalled survivors, but…” His hands clasped at his sides, opened again. “That particular horror, the damage done by your own kind. The precision. The ferocity. Knowing how well they know you. Morgoth’s forces never fought like that, single-minded pursuit of a singular goal; they fight to defile and obliterate. But the Fëanorians carved through the Havens with such focus and care you’d think it was art.”

Celebrimbor did not move, but spoke in a low voice. “I am the last of my house, High King, and I am not bound by the oath my father swore. I will not bow my head in defeat and depart the world we fought for. I will not say that we are done. Not the Eldar, not the Noldor, not my family. I am here, Gil-Galad, here, on these forsaken shores, that by my life and by the works of my hands there may yet be something more to the House of Fëanor than its legacy of blood.”

For a long moment neither spoke, while the sea groaned among the wreckage below and the wind stung their eyes with ash. Then Gil-Galad spoke.

“Very well! Take up your place in the house you renounced! Do you plan to take up the kingship of the Noldor as well?”

Celebrimbor physically recoiled at the words, twisting backward away from him. Gil-Galad laughed. “I’m not surprised! I asked your cousin Galadriel the same thing, and she also reacted as if she’d been slapped.” He sighed. “I can’t say I blame either of you; the High Kingship of the Noldor has meant little but the privilege of being first ignored, later slaughtered. Starting as far back as Finwë himself, I understand.”

The question hung between them: do you mean to swear me fealty? But Gil-Galad did not ask, and Celebrimbor did not answer. After a moment he went on.

“So here you are again a Fëanorian, Celebrimbor - that’s, what, Tyelperinquar in Quenya? – I suppose being of Aman you must have a father-name?”

“I do.” He dropped to one knee before him and spoke in the High Speech. “I am the third of my name, Curufinwë son of Curufinwë son of Curufinwë. Before you I take up again the name that I cast off. May I bear it to its healing!”

The High King lifted up his hands in the ancient gesture of blessing. “I, Gil-Galad son of-“ and he broke into a fit of coughing that really did sound genuine. “I, Gil-Galad, Scion of Kings,” he went on, “Lord of Lindon, High King of the Noldor in Middle-Earth, do hear your words and accept them. May it be as you have spoken.”
Celebrimbor got back to his feet, uncertain whether he was being made fun of and whether the allusion to the High King’s famously obscure parentage was deliberate. He met Gil-Galad’s eyes and saw the relief in them, and a small spark of merriment, and he remembered that despite his bearing and the age worn into his face, the High King was younger, by several centuries, than he was himself.

Despite the cold, the brief ceremony seemed to have lifted his heart as well as Celebrimbor’s own. “None of us have fathers here,” he said, and his tone was not grave though his words were sad enough. “We are orphans, Curufinwë III; the Noldor are all orphans now.”

Out over the sea, lightning was leaping between the roiling clouds, and the King paused, waiting to make certain the distant concussion of sound was thunder and not the rumbling of earth moving. The wind now bore scattered droplets of rain, the liquid almost black with ash where it spattered against them. He pulled his hood up.

“The Age of the Jewels is over,” he said. “The end of the war. The end of all we have known. And it seems to me, at times, that I look on the end of the world.”

The waters of the Lune, once the Blue River, flowed orange and black where it emptied into the new-formed bay, and the creatures fishers drew from the waters were abominations, misshapen eyeless things of scale and slime. Even when they were recognizable as fish, no one looked at them as being safe to eat. Day after day the sea tossed the fragments of a ruined world against the shore: mostly trees, but also bones, rusting armor, the occasional piece of wrought stone or ceramic from Beleriand’s lost cities, and sometimes among the tree-trunks, larger and paler than they, the hollow bones of dragons.

But Celebrimbor was not looking at the shore, but off into the West, as if he could see all the way to the land they had forsaken. “Do you remember,” he said, half-dreaming, “how the Noldor used to strew jewels on the shore for the Teleri?”

“In the sense that I’ve heard the story,” Gil-Galad began, but Celebrimbor went on. “I don’t. My mother told me of it, but that was before my time, even in Aman. In my days – and I was younger than your steward is now, at the Darkening - our workshops were more readily employed in making weapons than in making jewels.

“But it stayed with me, that image, the jewels on the shore. That is who we are, that is what we are meant for. To see the beauty in this world, and draw it forth, and give it back again, reflected and magnified and more beautiful still. Treasure not meant for the hoarding, but for the giving, scattered on the shore, gleaming from the waters.”

Gil-Galad looked at the shore below them, clotted with the flotsam of a drowned continent.

“The fine gifts of the Noldor,” he said softly. The lightning lit the clouds over the sea like sudden glimpses of dark mountains.

“Why did you stay?” Celebrimbor returned the King the question he had offered him. “If the way West was not closed to me, it cannot possibly have been closed to you. But you are here.”

“Of course I am. I am the High King of the Noldor in Middle-Earth; what have we to do with Aman? Besides, I the High King of the Noldor am myself a son of the twilight. Let the bright land in the West remain a haven for those hurts that cannot be healed, but as long as my people are here, and as long as there is life in my body, I will not forsake them.”

At his words Celebrimbor smiled, the first full smile that Gil-Galad had seen on his face. “Thank
“Curufinwë Tyelperinquar,” he said, clasping his hand in return. “Skilled Finwë of the silver hand – your parents apparently had very clear ideas where your talents lay.”

“Silver-grasp, more like. And that name at least was well-given. I do not intend to let go.” The motion of his head took in the land around them; there was ambition in his eyes and a fierce love, strange to see in that desolate place. When that country had been Ossiriand, the land of the Seven Rivers, it had been green and flourishing, a place of spreading elms and climbing vines. Only one river flowed through it now, carrying strange waters from the other side of the broken Blue Mountains to meet the newly arrived sea. The King sighed.

“And yet it may be slipping away from us anyway. The Herald of Valinor said something to me before they departed over the Great Ocean. Morgoth is gone, he said, but Morgoth’s will is written now into the world. There is a trace of his darkness in all things this side of the sea, and all will fade and come to night at last.”

“Morgoth’s will? I defy it.” Celebrimbor released his hand, but not his gaze. “And you defy it, King of the Noldor. Your people – our people - defy it. The Dwarves defy it in their mountains. Even the Men defy it, huddled by their fires in the woods.”

“They’re remarkable,” Gil-Galad broke in, “they really are. Between the drowning of Beleriand and the exodus for Numenor, you might have thought there were no Men left here at all, but I have seen them – from time to time – still holding on in spite of everything. They suffer cruelly from hunger, though, and the cold.” He held out his hand, letting the gritty raindrops blacken his palm. “Manwe’s winds still have not cleared the ash from the upper airs. It will be another year without a summer. Spring is half-gone even now, not that you can tell.”

Celebrimbor dropped to one knee again, this time looking not at the High King but at the earth beneath them. The grasses and the mosses of Ossiriand had long since died and left the ground barren. But by the shorelines, already new plants were beginning to grow: low tough beach-heather and cloudberry, the white flowers luminous under the dark sky. He touched his fingers to the bright petals.

“No,” he said, “the spring has come indeed. Lift up your head, King of the Noldor. The sky will clear. We will see this marred world shine.”

Gil-Galad felt the warmth of his words and the fire behind them, but met them with the caution that his office had blended into his nature. “Perhaps,” he said, “but until the world shines, we’ve got to start by living in it. You have seen the encampment, I suppose, since you said Elrond sent you to me?”

Celebrimbor nodded. “It will do well enough for a port, I think, in time. Do you plan to build here?”

“We may have farther to retreat. Cirdan’s settling his folk at the Eastern mouth of this bay. I think we need outposts on both sides of the bay, as far West as we can get. But the shore’s not stable.” There was yet little spirit for building among the people of the Northhaven camp, little sense of it as anything more than a place where the remnants of the Eldar of Beleriand washed up piecemeal, as the trees and the bones washed up on the shores. They were still mourning for their losses, their deep knowledge scattered, their treasures gone.

“The aftershocks will stop eventually,” Celebrimbor said. “We will build in stone again.” His eyes were alight now, scanning the shore, his hands moving as if sketching out fortifications, roads and
towers and gates. “Have we lost our tools? We will make more. Has our knowledge been lost? We shall learn again. The wide lands of Middle-Earth are before us. Aman has nothing that we need.”

“If sorrow is strength, and if bitter experience is wisdom, then we are stronger and wiser than we were when the Noldor were new-come from Valinor.” Celebrimbor could not tell if the King were speaking seriously; neither could Gil-Galad himself.

“Let the Lords of the West return to their peaceful shores, and we who remain, we who have chosen this world, will yet make of it a place that they will wonder to see. Yes, in the end they will come to us. This is no idle dream, that does not count the cost in years and blood and sorrow. Who knows that cost better than we? Let it be the labor of a thousand years, we will make this world whole. I say more: we will make it beautiful. Do you see it, Gil-Galad? I do.”

“I believe you do.” The King clapped him on the shoulder. “But will you come with me back to the camp?”

“For a time, at least! I want to see my – cousin? Aunt? The Lady Galadriel, at any rate; she’s also chosen Middle-Earth and I believe we will have much to say to each other. She’s on the other side of the bay, I believe? But travel takes a great deal of time with things in this state. Perhaps roads might be a good first priority once the camp is settled, though you might be focusing on docks -”

“I’ll have you talk to my secretary; she’s keeping track of everyone who is and isn’t in the camp. It’s all memory, of course – we haven’t even got paper anymore – but that’s how the Sindar have always done it anyway. She can tell you who’s here; the Weaver knows we have plenty of skilled hands…”

They talked of their resources and their people as they took their way over the broken ground. Celebrimbor disclaimed responsibility for organizing the recovery efforts. “You need an administrator for that and that’s not my gift. But joining my skills with others, yes, I believe I can be of service. And, Lord King,” he added as they walked, “if you have anyone freed from Morgoth’s service among you, send them to me. If they want to be part of the work, that is.”

The King winced. “Do you really think that anyone who was forced to labor in the forges of Angband will ever want to take up works of craft and skill again?”

Celebrimbor paused in his stride; “We are for the world,” he said, “it is the work that we are meant for. Working for good ends rather than for evil ones may bring more healing than centuries of rest. And you know, Lord King, why I have no grounds to scorn anyone of, well, dubious background.”

* * *

The great fires flared in the camp at night, guttering and smoky, built as much for warmth as for light and still not providing enough of either. The High King of the Noldor found his steward in his usual place in the tents of the healers, sitting on his heels by the herb-chests and restocking the stores. It was not common among the Eldar to serve as warrior and healer both, but his steward did, seeming to increase rather than to diminish in his skill, and to take no hurt to his soul by the practice of the two opposed arts. Perhaps it was the blood of the Edain in him that accounted for it, though he had elected the fate of the Eldar.

“So, Elrond, it would seem there is a living ember in the ashes of the House of Fëanor. Your cousin has come among us.”

“My – cousin?” He did not, at first, understand what he meant, but when he worked out the meaning behind the King’s words, a peculiar expression somewhere between rue and relief crossed his face.
“Yes, my cousin indeed – I wonder if I should have greeted him like that.” He set the medicine-jar down. “I cannot seem to say the right thing to him. I tried to tell him that he is welcome here, that it doesn’t matter who his family was. Look at me – I’m here, after all. But he went very cold, and I realized what it had sounded like.”

“Not one of those Fëanorians?” Gil-Galad asked, and was answered with the acute embarrassment on his steward’s face. Though he was hardened by a life spent in the turmoil of the War of the Jewels, and he was confident on the battlefield as he was in the tents of the healers, there was still something of the awkwardness of youth to Elrond when he spoke of his family.

He smiled, and took him by the hand to pull him to his feet. “You’ll set things right with him, Elrond, I know it. There will be time. We have all the world before us.”

Chapter End Notes

1. This is purely an authorial speculation on my part that Celebrimbor should share a father-name with his father and grandfather, although it is crucial to my understanding of his character.
2. Elrond and his twin brother Elros were raised by Maglor and Maedhros, and though Elrond’s own relationship to the Feanorians is almost as complex as Celebrimbor’s, he does regard them as his family.
Chapter Summary

In which Celebrimbor founds a city and the Brotherhood of the Jewel-Smiths receives an emissary of the Valar.

Chapter Notes

As always, this work owes not only its existence but its refinement to the inestimable Sumeria, skilled in word and hand. Look at her beautiful art for Annatar, Celebrimbor, and Gil-Galad!

ArgonApricot has drawn an amazing rendition of the final scene of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream.

-T. S. Eliot, Ash Wednesday

Artanaro called Gil-Galad Ereinion of the House of Finwê, Lord of Lindon, High King of the Noldor in Middle-Earth, to Cürufinwê III Tyelpêrînqar called Celebrimbor of the House of Fëanor, Master of the Gwaith-i-Mîrdain: greeting.

So, you can expect an emissary of the Valar to show up on your doorstep in the next few weeks. This letter will reach you before he does; he will be carrying the official introduction from me but I wanted you to have some sort of warning. It would seem that these shores are not, perhaps, as abandoned by the Lords of the West as they would appear. Well, if the mariners of Numenor cannot keep away from our coasts and our forests, I suppose it’s no real surprise that the Ainur should once again walk among us. What this one wants, and what he is offering (and if those are two separate things or not) is not entirely clear.

You will undoubtedly know him when you see him. He is hard to miss. Fair beyond the reach of mortal thought, speaks your inmost desires to you, uncomfortable way about him of looking at you like he can see exactly what you’re made of. May be promising you infinite power, although that
might just have been me. Calls himself Annatar Aulendil. Says he’s coming that this world might be repaired. Sounded like your line. Sounded like you, come to think of it. So I pointed out to him as politely as I could and as bluntly as I dared that if we’d wanted Aman’s help, we’d be in Aman now, wouldn’t we?

I suggested that he might find you a more congenial audience, knowing the Mírdain’s policy of open doors. You are, of course, not obliged to listen to anything he says – I cannot at this date credit even the high Lords of the West with full wisdom in their dealings with us of Middle-Earth – but you are of course lachend yourself, and may have a different perspective on the Valar and their projects. Also he claims to be a servant of Aulë the Maker, who I know of old was once a friend to your house.

Do let me know what you make of him – though really I am just as curious to know what he makes of you; if there’s anyone who can give the Powers as good as he gets, I dare say it’s you. With all respect, I remain –

There followed the High King’s informal signature, the double ango on a single stem. A post-script ran up the side of the paper; Celebrombor turned the letter and read in the margin:

PS: Elrond, who was there for part of the audience, thinks there is, and I quote, something that “doesn’t smell right” about him. For my part, I have enough to do without sniffing the Holy Ones, but judge for yourself.

He sat there at the great desk in his work-chamber for some time, pondering the paper. Then he rolled it up, stuck it shut with a piece of wax, and placed it, apparently at random, into one of the compartments on the shelves that covered two of the chamber walls from floor to ceiling. These shelves resembled nothing so much as a particularly messy dovecote inhabited by paper birds, save that in among the letters and documents, tables and lists, books and scrolls and sketches and design schematics, there were other stranger items filed: heaps of lenses, jars of cryptically labeled substances, a two-headed fish preserved in glass, a spare set of ceremonial robes. One of the Mírdain’s cats had also elected to file herself in Celebrimbor’s library, gazing out from the small compartment with great equanimity.

Celebrimbor himself navigated the apparent chaos of his personal work-quarters without the slightest difficulty; the only drawback of his idiosyncratic organizational system was that instructing an apprentice to fetch something from his library took fully as long as heading back from the forges or the Great Workshop and fetching it himself. The sunlight shone in through the long windows and the round skylight; it glinted in sparks of color through the glass beads on the intricate structure suspended from the hanging lamp. This item had begun as a model to show phase transition, but halfway through had transformed into something else of obscure purpose, but undeniable beauty, a three-dimensional representation of a higher-dimensional figure. Celebrimbor touched one corner of it and sent motion rippling all through the delicate structure. Rainbows danced across the walls, and the cat looked up with sudden attention.

The great house of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, the Brotherhood of the Jewelsmiths, already surpassed in knowledge and in craft the workshops of Nargothrond. He had heard from others that it rivalled Gondolin in the days when Enerdhil labored in its forges. “Ah, but is it greater than Formenos?” Galadriel had asked him once, laughing. “I do not know,” he had answered, and his tone had stilled her laughter. “The gates of Formenos were shut, as often as not; the doors of my grandfather’s workshop were closed.”

Galadriel lived outside the city, still, though its edges were beginning to reach the lands where she and Celeborn held their court. Their halls – once their winter court, before they had come to Eregion to stay, bringing a name to the land – had been one of the anchor points of the new city, another had
been the inns and the markets on the trade route running from the mountains to the sea. But the core of the city, the living heart of Ost-in-Edhil, was the ever-expanding complex of buildings that housed the Gwaith-i-Mírdain; his people, his home.

He had first come to Galadriel in the southern side of Lindon long ago, in the first proper summer of the Second Age. He had rounded the new-formed Gulf of Lune, taking a slow loop through Cirdan’s lands at the Havens, bearing news with him and gathering news to bring back: settlements, land features, plants and animals encountered on the way, information to correct the maps that were still being drawn of the reshaped world. It had been an enjoyable journey. He did not take the same pleasure that his uncles once had in ranging through uncharted lands, but travelling without fear or desperation, passing through strange places without more than a general sort of alertness to the surroundings, was its own quiet and ever-renewed delight.

Galadriel must have learned something of the arts of secrecy practiced by her old master Melian of Doriath, for he was accosted by two of her archers long before he knew he was approaching her lands. Her husband was out upon statecraft, travelling through the settlements of their Nandorin kindred, but Galadriel herself was in their dwelling at Harlindon.

When they brought him to the halls, she was drilling her guards in the yard. Laughter and cheering rang among the javelin-casts and the target-shooting; it seemed more like sport than like war. Galadriel had taken the field herself, and was sparring with five of her bodyguards in the center of the green. She wore her hair braided, and pinned like a crown around her head, and like a crown it shone in the summer sunlight, flashing like the glaive in her hands.

“And you’re dead,” she cried, knocking the blunt practice sword from the smarting hands of a guardswoman, “and you’re dead – keep your shield up, Isfin! – and you’re –”

She caught sight of Celebrimbor approaching and her voice died in her throat. She stepped out of the mock fray without so much as looking at her assailants, as if they had suddenly ceased to exist. Her polearm dropped from her grasp and one of her sparring partners caught it one-handed as she slowly advanced, step by step, to stand before him. He felt her taking his appearance in: the worn dark travelling clothes with the white star of Fëanor newly embroidered on the collar. He saw her tracing his father in his face, and his grandfather.

“Curufin’,” she breathed, the Telerin lilt to her speech making no distinction between the Quenya and the Sindarin forms of the name.

“My lady,” he replied, carefully neutral, but Galadriel went on, her voice low with wonder. “No. Telperinquar.”

He had not seen Galadriel since the earliest days around the shore of Lake Mithrim; she had vanished early into the shadows of Doriath where none of Fëanor’s house were suffered to enter. He remembered her best as she had been in Aman, Finrod’s high-hearted sister, champion of the race and the field. In the darkness of Tirion, he remembered her hair shining under the torches as she rallied the people that would become hers, speaking in defiance of Fëanor, in words that were almost Fëanor’s own: **Our land is darkened but our hearts are not. Here we have grown strong, now let us try our strength. Across the sea waits a world worthy of a free people.** She was still tall and proud but her eyes were shadowed by loss and hardened by suffering.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered. “I thought you were all dead.”

He opened his hands as much as to say ‘Here you see me.’

“You’re here, you stayed – oh, Telperinquar!” and before he quite knew what was happening, she
had flung her arms around him, and they found they understood each other very well.

Remembering her courtesy to a guest at last, she drew him aside into a bower built, after the manner of the Green-Elves, in the low branches of a sycamore. There she sat him down on the woven branches and poured out water for both of them into cups made of hollow gourd-shells. The fields were beginning to grow again, but wine was still years away, and glass was neither produced nor traded yet in Lindon.

He was surprised to find her addressing him in the language of their people, her Quenya fluent and formal and tinged with the ancient sea-tongue of her mother’s people. “I thought you had left that language behind long ago,” he said.

“I did leave it,” she said shortly, “and I left it too long. Too long I heard the word Noldor as a reproach, too long I let the shadow on my people block out their light.”

He heard, though she did not say, what that shadow had been: the deeds of his own family. There was an age’s worth of sorrow and memory between them, but all that they spoke of then was the future, the future that they had both chosen in refusing the Pardon of the Noldor.

“We are the last two remnants of the House of Finwë on these shores,” she said. “No, kinsman, I see what you would say – what of the young High King in the North and his herald? I mean that we are the last of Finwë’s house to have seen the light of Aman, and to have chosen these shores nonetheless, and to have renewed that choice here at the end of a world.”

“Yes!” The warmth of being understood suffused him. “But it is not the end, Lady, it will not be. We will build again, we will create again, and not in memory of what we have lost alone. No, the world remade will not be the world as it was, but we will build it stronger and more beautiful –” He caught himself. “Your pardon, Lady; I can go on about this as length, as Gil-Galad can tell you. But you, why did you stay?”

“Now, now of all times, when Morgoth is finally gone from the world,” she said, “now we should go home? What is there for me in Aman? Shame, grief, bitter memory, and the cold eyes of the ones I left forsaken? Shall I be a penitent in the land of the Valar, who could be a queen in the land they abandoned?”

She moved restlessly in her seat. “I came to these shores for two things: vengeance on our Enemy and a kingdom. Behold: our Enemy is gone, but where is my kingdom? The wide lands that we were promised still lie before us. I did not come to fight a long defeat.”

“I think I have never fought anything else,” Celeborn said with a rueful look at his hands. “I have fled from one falling stronghold to another, shedding friends and kindred and my own name. I will not run any more, and I will not fight, defeat or otherwise. I will build, Lady –” He shook himself. “And perhaps something may even endure! The Doom of the Noldor is lifted, I suppose, even for those of us who have not taken the Valar’s pardon.”

“Pardon?” She tossed her head. “The Valar have no idea what I need to be pardoned for. I am no kinslayer. I did not ask for their pardon, and I will not accept it.”

“No kinslayer,” he echoed, almost entirely succeeding at keeping the bitterness out of his voice. “But, Lady, you still speak of pardon for yourself?”

Her face twisted. “The pardon that I seek is not one the Valar can give. I have – there are things I am ashamed of, Telperinquar. But the way out of that shame does not lie Westward. No, until I can say in my own right that I have a realm and the power to hold it, a people and the power to protect them,
a land and the power to make it blossom, I will remain among the forsaken Noldor.”

“Forsaken, or forsaking?” Celebrimbor asked lightly, staring up through the green leaves to the sky. It had been a long time since he had juggled words with one of his disputatious kindred. “Noldor we may be, Lady, but now we are Avari as well, for we too have refused the Great Journey.”

She laughed, and closed her hand over his. “And so we have, I for my kingdom, you for your more beautiful world – I believe we will be seeing a great deal more of each other, kinsman.”

“Yes, my Lady.” He looked back at her, his smile widening into an outright grin. “But what shall I call you? Artanis you were to your father across the sea, and Nerwen to your mother. Galadriel you were named by your husband of leaf and shadow. I’ve even heard some of the Loremasters refer to you as Altariel, although I think that was nothing more than pure spite for Thingol.”

“Lady is too formal,” she answered, “now that we are comrades in this endeavour. Cousin? Aunt?”

“Aunt let it be. My house has... a poor record with cousins.”

The warmth died in her eyes. “An almost poetic understatement, nephew.”

She turned away from him. Celebrimbor felt the past sagging and twisting between them. If she had sought his father in his face, no less had he sought her brother in hers, the wisdom and the brightness of the fallen King of Nargothrond.

“You do know – you must know –” he began, “that my father didn’t hate your brother? He prized him, he admired him, yes, but more than that... For a while Finrod the Beloved brought some of his own light into the darkness that had fallen upon my house. I don’t think my father was ever as happy as he was in Nargothrond. It had been many years since I had seen him smile.”

“The songs do speak of your father’s smile.”

“I suppose I deserved that.” He looked into the waters of the cup. “Nothing those songs say is false, exactly. But this is true, too, Aunt: my father did love Finrod.” The darkening of Nargothrond was even more deeply scarred into his memory than the darkening of Valinor. They blurred into each other: confusion, suspicion, the slow poison of mistrust and the sudden vicious violence that made strangers of friends and enemies of kinsmen.

Galadriel turned to him, her eyes flashing. “Do you think that makes it better?”

“I know it makes it worse.” He met her eyes. “He would not have tried to hurt him so badly if he had not loved him so well.”

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The King had come to his father in the chambered workshops of Nargothrond; he must have seen the anger in Curufin’s face at seeing him bow before Barahir’s ring on Beren’s hand, he must have still believed there was something that he could say that would make it all right. Celebrimbor had remained in his place, head down, twisting link after link of metal into mail for a habergeon. The memory of his silence still burned at him, no less than the words that had filled that silence as the argument began in whispers and rose to a shout, echoing through the chambers.

“Do you think it’s a small thing to throw your life away?” came his father’s voice. “Do you think that we want to see you fall into the hands of the Dark Lord?”

“Curufin’,” the Telerin accent that Finrod insisted on maintaining, in honor of his mother’s people,
softened the edges of the name. “You of all people should know something of the obligations that
come with taking an oath.”

“Joking about oaths to a son of Fëanor, Felagund? That’s a new depth of poor taste even for you.
Unless – you cannot possibly mean you really are treating a promise to a mortal on the same level as
an oath?”

“Curufin’-” There was real disapproval in Finrod’s voice now.

“In that case,” his father continued, his tone mocking, but without pausing to admire the effect of the
blows he landed, “it’s an insult, not a joke. These are creatures no bond can hold! You do know that
all you have to do is wait, and in a few years – fifty at most – you won’t have this problem?”

“Yes, and if Barahir had waited a few years at the Fen of Serech, I wouldn’t have this problem
either. Would I.” Finrod did wait for this to sink in, and Celebrimbor heard a hiss that was either
someone drawing breath, or heavy cloth being dragged over stone. Then his father’s voice again, so
low he could hardly make out the words.

“There are few people on these shores I care for, Cousin, and fewer of those who are not doomed by
their oaths. I had thought that I could count you at least among their number.”

“Oh, Cousin.” And it was the golden King of Nargothrond, Finrod the Beloved, wise and just and
kind, carrying all his power in his voice, conjuring by main force of will a world that could be
endured. “My dear cousin. All may yet be well.”

“Lie to yourself if you must, Findarato,” Curufin snapped, “but not to me. The mortal doesn’t know
what he’s setting off – how can he? – but the same cannot be said for you, Nom the Wise. A Silmaril
for Thingol of Doriath? You know what those jewels carry with them. You know what you would
be calling down on us. Calling down on me. And you can look me in the face and say yes, this I will
do, this is worth it?”

“Cousin.” Now Finrod was speaking almost too softly to be heard. “Do you really think it will come
to that?” It was a statement, not a question.

Finrod had admitted the hopelessness of the quest, but Curufin seemed to take no satisfaction in the
concession; his voice was mocking, not happy. “So at least you will perish at Morgoth’s hand rather
than ours. Is that a comfort? I can’t decide.”

There was only a wordless murmur from Finrod then. Celebrimbor wondered if the King had moved
to reach out to his father, because the next thing he heard was a quick motion of feet, and the sound
of something being knocked over.

“Why would you do that to me?” Curufin hissed. “Why would you make me do this to you?”

“To me, Curufinwë?” The gentleness was gone from Finrod’s voice, he gave every syllable of his
father’s name its full weight.

“This is what you have chosen, Findarato. If you choose to forsake your kin and your people and
everything you have built; I cannot stop you – no, I will not stop you. Do as you please, Friend of
Men, and tell yourself you do as you must if it eases your last breaths in the dungeons of Angband.
But I will show you what it means to be forsaken.”

Curufin did not wait for a reply, for a moment later he came tearing into the workshop. Celebrimbor
did not know whether his father saw him or not; his eyes passed over him where he bent over the
worktable but they were blank and bitter and desolate. Curufin swept a stack of papers into his arms
and hurried on out of the chamber, calling for his brother. “Turko! Tulkas’ wisdom, Turko, where are you?”

Celebrimbor looked at his hands, at the fine metal links that he held in them. The mailwork he had made was flawless, but he had given the habergeon away as soon as he could.

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He did not put the High King’s letter out of his mind exactly, but he let it rest there, just under the surface of his thought, while his mind and his hand were turned to his usual work, and the life of the Brotherhood went on around him. He did not mention it to his fellow masters. The prospect of a visit from one of the Ainur would be an explosive topic of discussion among the Brotherhood, and eagerly welcomed for its explosiveness. If he had offered the news to them for dissection and reconstruction, their visitor would undoubtedly be welcomed on his arrival with protests, petitions, long poems and short plays on the theme of The Holy Ones in Middle-Earth. Not that such reactions wouldn’t be inevitable once he did arrive – devout Gaeron would probably prostrate himself at his feet, fierce Lindis might insist on putting him on trial for the wrongs done by the Valar to Middle-Earth – but Celebrimbor thought that whoever he was, this Annatar might as well be given the chance to speak for himself. So he left the letter among his papers, where it was eventually buried under a report on improved water purification techniques.

But it troubled him obscurely. Why would Gil-Galad send this visitor to him, and not to the Lord and Lady of Eregion, to Galadriel and her husband? So a few weeks later, on a bright cold morning in early Spring, he came down from the towers of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain and set out towards their court, on the other side of the city.

The Mírdain, as always, was alive with activity. Those working toward a place among the Masters went to and fro, on errands or between lectures, the apprentices distinguished by their black sashes and the journeymen by white. Reclining around the low square tables on the terraces of the Dining Hall, drinking endless cups of bitter holly tea warmed by the braziers burning on the tables, sat little knots of people in conversation. Though Elves predominated, and Noldor among the Elves, the residents of the Mírdain were of all kindreds of Middle-Earth: Elves, Dwarves, and Men, making no distinction between resident and guest.

He crossed the courtyard beneath the central tower. The gates of the Mírdain, as always, stood open. A cunning system of pipes carried the water of the Sirannon, the Gate-Stream, up the archway and across the tops of the open doors themselves, where it cascaded down over the intricately worked bronze surfaces. The effect was that of a curtain of water drawn to either side of the archway, now revealing the shapes beneath it, now concealing them. Thus the gates of Khazad-dum and the Gwaith-i-Mírdain were linked by water as well as by craftsmanship; the Sirannon flowed from the snowy Silvertine past the Doors of Durin and along the high road to the heart of Eregion.

He rested his hand against the cold metal of the doors, letting the water splash over his fingers, watching the patterns as his hand divided the water into diverging streams over the worked surface of the gates. Those gates had been the first major collaboration between young Eregion and ancient Khazad-dum, though contact between their peoples had been cultivated early. Celebrimbor himself, before the founding of Ost-in-Edhil, had spent nearly a century, on and off, in the great Dwarven mansions under the Misty Mountains. He had worked with their miners and metallurgists, refining the art of mithril-smelting, but his greatest delight had been to work with the masons on the design of the halls. That was an almost unprecedented honor, and he was sensible of it. He had seen Khazad-dum grow from a place of power to a place of beauty, and knew that he had had a part in that flourishing. He knew as well that his labors for the Dwarves had had no small part in the birth of the trust between their peoples.
The commerce between the two centers – Ost-in-Edhil by the rivers and Khazad-dum in the mountains – had grown brisk, and Dwarvish traders had already established semi-permanent quarters in the city when Narvi, the first Dwarf to do so, marched up to the House of the Mírdain itself and demand admittance.

Celebrimbor had met him at the Mírdain’s archway, trying to remember whether he knew Narvi’s face from his time among the Dwarves. As he was concluding that the Dwarf at his gate was probably too young to be one of the dour stone-masters whose grudging respect he had earned in Khazad-dum, Narvi began to declaim, in accented but very correct Sindarin, what was obviously a prepared speech about how the fame of the Brotherhood of the Jewel-Smiths had reached the ears of the Dwarves of the Mountains.

“Even now among you are those who have benefitted from our knowledge of the earth and our skills in craft. As you have learned from us, so now I am come to learn from you. But I come not empty-handed!” He fumbled in his pack and brought forth a small shining object and placed it in Celebrimbor’s hands. It was a miniature model, in clear quartz and gold, showing the Jewellers’ Hall of Khazad-dum in minute detail, from the feather-vaulting on the ceiling to light-catching flaws in the crystal standing in for the sparks of the fires. Celebrimbor himself had assisted in the design of the hall beneath the mountains, and a great delight filled him to see his work returned to him again.

“Such is the skill of my hand,” Narvi went on, “and so will I labor for you, if one of my kindred may find welcome among yours –”

“Of course you may! Come in, Master Dwarf, and be welcome among the Brotherhood of the Jewel-Smiths! But none of this about laboring for us; we all labor for this Middle-Earth that we love, and if we labor together, our works will be the stronger and more beautiful.”

The young dwarf had approached with a great show of confidence, but for a moment even he seemed thrown off balance by the readiness of the welcome. But he swallowed his surprise, and accepted his acceptance with all apparent gravity, showing his delight with only a slight spring in his heavy step as he entered, and a brighter glint in his bright eyes.

“Very good! My thanks to you, Master Elf, and my compliments on the work that you have begun here already. Though you do need some doors,” he added, casting a critical eye at the archway.

“Do we?” Celebrimbor returned. “The Mírdain is open to all, as you have just this minute had the chance to observe.”

“That’s precisely why you need them. An archway merely establishes two sides. You on that side, me on this.” He waved his arm in illustration. “A door – an open door – establishes welcome. You may remain on that side, and I on this, but if the door stands open between us, I know that I am gladly received, you know that you have nothing to fear.”

Celebrimbor considered this for a long moment, saying nothing, his eyes flickering along the archway as if he were reading it. “You are entirely correct, Master Dwarf!” he said suddenly. “Will you begin your time among us by building them? We should speak with the rest of the Brotherhood, of course, and I’m sure that Alagos will have a good deal to say. He’s our stone-master and a dedicated contrarian. But if your skill is everything you say, then you’ll have nothing to fear from him, and I think it will do us good to have your work greeting those who come to our doors.”

Narvi had made himself at home among the Brotherhood almost immediately, through sheer force of will as much as through anything else, and he and Celebrimbor had spent a great deal of time together in the workshops. He was forthright and gruff and curious, and Celebrimbor had eagerly questioned him on his background among the stone-wrights and metal-wrights of Khazad-dum.
“It was your work – though of course I didn’t know it was yours, then – that first put the notion into my head that perhaps the Elves might have more to offer the Dwarves than bad bargains and sad songs. Your skill with stone and metal rivalled our own – we’re still using that cupellation technique you helped develop.”

“It’s hard to believe you weren’t even born then,” Celebrimbor said. “You comport yourself like a grandfather already. Sometimes, Narvi, you seem older than anyone I know.”

“Perhaps I am. Some of our people say that the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves, from time to time, awaken again among their people, and the Maker created them – so the story goes – while you Elves and Men were yet unformed.”

Celebrimbor laughed aloud. “I don’t remember a Narvi among the fathers of the Dwarves!”

“Who said that Narvi is the name that he bore? Narvi’s a use-name, but we have others, true and ancient names.” Even then Celebrimbor knew enough to recognize that this was a matter on which neither curiosity nor companionship would be able to draw him out. Narvi went on. “But even if there were another Narvi, to share a name is not to share a nature.”

“The Eldar do not generally use a name more than once,” Celebrimbor said. “I’m sure you can see why sharing names might be awkward among a people who do not die.”

“For a people who do not die, as you say, an awful lot of you seem to be dead,” said Narvi dryly. “At least so the songs tell us.”

“Well, there are exceptions to that rule. I am one, as it happens. I’m the third Curufinwë – which is ‘skilled Finwë’. Finwë is – was – my great-grandfather, the lord of my House, Eldest and First. I suppose when he began having children everyone thought ‘Look! A Finwë!’ Half the people of my House are Finwës of one kind or another, but my father and my grandfather were both Curufinwë as well.”

“Wait, wait, Curu… No, that’s your old Elf-tongue, isn’t it?” Narvi’s interests did not extend to linguistics, but his Sindarin was fluent, and he recognized the name as foreign. “And that’s not what they call you here, either, that’s –”

“Celebrimbor.”

“Yes, yes.” Narvi sniffed. “Celebrimbor, what kind of a name is that? It sounds like a stew-pot about to boil over.” He parsed the Sindarin roots. “Silver…”

“Hah. It’s the translation of my mother-name. So in the old Elf-tongue, as you call it, Curufinwë Tyelperinquar.”

Narvi considered. “Now what shall we call you among the Dwarves? Kurfi III Silverfist, a proper use-name for one of dwarf-kindred. Ask Mahal to send you a beard, and we could pass you off as an overgrown son of Durin.” He cocked his bristly head on one side, studying him across the worktable. “No, probably an overgrown daughter of Durin.”

Celebrimbor ignored this, seizing instead on the translation. “I don’t know about fist, that sounds like I’m some sort of boxer. Quare – that’s our word in Quenya – is a hand closed to grasp something. A tool, as it might be.”

“Or the hand of a friend?” Narvi reached across the table, took Celebrimbor’s hand in his hard square one, and pressed it heartily. “I’ll call you III, less confusion all around.”
“Three?”

“It had taken longer than Celebrimbor cared to admit before he noticed the slight hand gesture that accompanied the word, turning it from a number into an ordinal after the custom of the Dwarves.

“That’s almost my uncle’s name,” he had returned at the time. “It seems I cannot avoid the names of my family, no matter where I turn!”

But in truth, he had been deeply delighted to have had a name bestowed on him by a friend; it was the sort of gift that the Eldar cherished. Some of the Brotherhood also adopted it, and when Narvi left to return to his people for a time - he split his time between the Mirdain and the mountains - Celebrimbor had taken to signing his letters to his friend with three tick-marks.

Their collaboration had continued when Narvi invited him back to Khazad-dum itself, where in an echo of their first project together, they completed the Western Gate, or the Friendship Gate, opening on the high road to Ost-in-Edhil. And he had smiled as he saw the star of Fëanor glitter on the doors in the moonlight, though his eyes stung with tears.

They remained in close partnership as the years passed, with the only effect of age on his friend the slow graying of Narvi’s beard. Though other Dwarves followed Narvi’s example and came to study in Ost-in-Edhil as the Brotherhood grew and flourished, and though they established a pattern of unprecedented openness and friendship between their peoples, Narvi remained the closest friend that Celebrimbor had among them.

For one of the Dwarves, Narvi was unusually free with his assistance and his opinions in the company of the Brotherhood. In his thirst for learning, his odd placelessness, Celebrimbor felt a great deal of kinship with him. But for all their closeness, they did not agree on everything, and the divergence in their ambitions occasionally shone forth clearly.

“It is not enough to open the door, Narvi, we must walk through it!” he had protested once, in one of their forgeside debates.

“You still grasp for what is beyond your reach, III,” said Narvi, shaking his head. “I am not like you; I want to shape earth, not Middle-Earth. I came to this city because, unlike some of my people that I could name – and some of yours that I dare say you could – I do not quail at the idea of wisdom found in unexpected places! I wanted to become the greatest maker that I possibly could, and so I am doing, and so I am content. But you?” He laughed. “And there’s another reason I’m older than you’ll ever be, III: I know what it is to come to my limits.”

It was easy to forget, at times, just how the difference in their history was. Narvi had been born in Khazad-dum but he was not of Durin’s line; he was a child of the people of the Broadbeams of lost Belegost for whom the crossing of the Blue Mountains had already faded into the broad outlines of legend and song. Once when they were speaking of their earliest ventures into forgecraft, and Celebrimbor was recounting a particularly memorable foray into with his father into the forges of Aulë beneath the mountains. Narvi stopped him in astonishment. “You have seen the Maker?”

“Yes. He was... a friend of my family’s, once. My grandmother’s people served him.”

“Hm!” Narvi did not seem to know what to make of this. “What... how did he appear to you?”

Celebrimbor considered. The memory was distant, separated from him by the expanse of two vanished worlds, but it still shone clear: the Vala of Earth and of Creation, wrapped in a form like one of their own; the sense of power that beat against his being like the heat from the forges beat against his face.
“He looked like – well, like one of us. Like one of my grandmother’s people. But you wouldn’t ever mistake him for one of us; it wasn’t how in how he looked, but in what he was –” His hands came up before him as if to sketch out a shape, dropped back to the table. “Our brothers who never saw Aman call us flame-eyed? He had eyes like molten metal, like you could see straight into the force that shapes matter, and it was Fire, Fire Itself, such as makes our earthly fires seem like chill shadows…”

“I have seen him too,” Narvi said after a moment. “In the ore-dream that comes to the smiths of our people to show them what their work is to be.”

“What?” Celebrimbor sat forward, startled. “What did he look like?”

“I may not tell you. Look at my works, and you will see how he appeared to me. But I know what you saw, when you speak of Fire Itself.”

When he arrived at Thamas Eregion, the halls of the Lord and Lady and the seat of power in the area, Galadriel did not seem exactly surprised at his news, but neither did she seem to know quite what to make of it.

“The Holy Ones? Here?” She was walking at his side through the beech groves that formed the outer courts of their hall. The slender coppery buds were just beginning to show on the silver branches, and the leaf-lined ground was damp and springy with the thaw.

“And one of Aulë’s people! That is stranger still. I know there are lesser gods that remain on these shores, hallowing woods and waters and stranger places.” Celebrimbor looked at her in surprise. “Why, yes; wild Maiar whose natures honor the Earthqueen or the Hunter, but who took little part in the wars of the gods. Not all the Powers chose Aman! But they do not, as a rule, take much of an interest in the speaking peoples.”

She frowned. “Perhaps the Valar have sent someone out of Aman to aid us in our long strife with the Darkness. That would be a change of policy indeed!”

“What, not waiting until things reach a crisis that cannot be resolved save by cracking the world in two?” They caught each other’s eyes; they did not have precisely the same reasons for ambivalence toward the Powers, but both were in their own way jealous of what they had built in Eregion.

“Strife with the Darkness…” Celebrimbor turned the thought over in his mind. “I don’t know if you meant it this way, Aunt, still less if the Powers do, but we are still groping in the dark. Even after a thousand years, this world is still broken. Our knowledge and skill doesn’t approach that which we lost with Aman and Beleriand.” The Elves were always given to mourning their lost glory, but in Celebrimbor the knowledge of loss was a fire within him and not a grief. Even in the skilled company of the Brotherhood, there was no peace in his heart.

Where Men flung themselves at the world in urgency and haste, the Eldar did not know impatience. Even after learning the sharp lessons of scarcity during times of war, of hunger and cold and wandering, the Elves could not be said to fear insufficiency of time or of material. But on the very edges of Celebrimbor’s mind sat the fear that he might be approaching his own limits, that he had nothing to give to the world to effect real healing or lasting change, but only a certain skill with matter and mind.

He shook himself; if the Valar had taken thought for Middle-Earth it would not be for his private goals and his private fears, no matter how lofty the one and how low the other. “Strife with the
“Darkness,” he repeated. “Do you suppose it has anything to do with the shadow in the East that Gil-Galad spoke of?”

Centuries ago, in Lindon, they had gathered in council with the High King as they made ready to move permanently beyond the Blue Mountains. Celebrimbor and Galadriel already had halls established at Lake Evendim, where they had lived before the war, but this migration would represent the founding of a new realm altogether. Galadriel still longed for a kingdom to call her own, and Celebrimbor intended to come with them. Half of the people that had gathered around him in the smithies on the shores of Lindon could be gone for decades at a time in search of the metals of the Misty Mountains, and he knew that they too were impatient for a place of their own, close to the knowledge and the craft of the mountains, away from their increasingly cramped quarters by the coast.

There had been months of discussion in which Celebrimbor had taken little part, Celeborn laying out the intricacies of diplomacy among his kindred of the area, the High King and his steward sketching the potential future movements of the Numenoreans who had already begun to master the art of sailing upriver and were establishing trade-posts deep in the interior. But when they were almost ready to depart, Gil-Galad had spoken of less certain matters: the whispers and rumors from the uncharted lands beyond the Misty Mountains.

“There is something of a shadow in the East,” he had said, “where rumor comes of the followers of someone called the Lord of War, or the Shining One.” He frowned. “If it weren’t for the references to light, I’d guess it was no more than a leftover Morgoth-cult. As it is, I suspect it’s another specimen of their endless parade of tyrants, charismatic and bloody-handed. It might be a half-preserved memory of Eonwe in the War of Wrath, to be honest. We have no formal relations with the Men of the East, but from such reports as do reach me, this group seems unusually well-organized.”

“Enough to cross the mountains?” Celeborn asked “Is this shadow you speak of something that we must mount defenses against?”

“Nothing nearly so definite,” Gil-Galad replied, “and nothing yet worth spending your resources to pursue. I suspect it will take care of itself in a generation or so; most mortal concerns do.” Celeborn had dismissed it then, disclaiming responsibility from meddling in the affairs of Men, but Galadriel, daughter of far-sighted Arafinwë, had been troubled and silent.

“I did see it, then,” she said, the image of their last conference in Lindon rising in her mind as in her nephew’s. “Faint and distant, a darkness without shape. But now…” She lifted her eyes to the skies. “Across this land is only a tangle of shadow and light, like clouds passing over the mountains.”

“The world is not safe,” Celebrimbor put in. “The world has never been safe. But we have been at peace for ages; the darkness that we strive against is…”

“Are you going to say that within ourselves?”

“Well, I had better,” he said with a rueful look, “since I don’t have your husband to say it for me!” There was no outright hostility between Galadriel’s husband and her nephew; they both cared for their land, respected their people, even honoured each other, but a lingering coolness and wariness still hung between them. Celebrimbor had not met Celebrimbor with the open suspicion and scorn that some in Lindon showed him – Fëanorian, Kinslayer, Accursed and Dispossessed – but the past was a scar between them, if not an open wound.

“Shall the son of Curufin find welcome under the roof of Thingol’s kinsman of Doriath?” was all he had said when Celebrimbor spoke to him of accompanying their removal to Eregion. The words
were cold but not barbed; he was being asked for justification not rejected outright.

“I don’t know, Celeborn, shall he?” He thought, but did not say *I think I can restrain myself from murder if you promise to restrain yourself from theft.* Aloud he said, “I am not my father. My father is dead.”

“I know. A mishap in the course of massacring my kin, as I recall.”

Celebrimbor had looked him straight in his dark eyes, neither rising in outrage nor sinking in apology. “My father fell into darkness long before Doriath, Celeborn.”

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The darkness had grown in Nargothrond, behind the artful lights of the gilded caverns. The darkness of fear on the faces of the people who had welcomed them once, who had shouted to greet them as Fëanor’s fierce-hearted sons came flying from the fires of the North, bearing with them in their tattered train their kindred rescued from the rout at Tol Sirion. The darkness in his father’s eyes, as his bright words drew down despair, the shadow of Morgoth blending with the shadow of civil strife until the terror of one could not be distinguished from the horror of the other, and both were lodged like poisoned arrows in the people who had once been Finrod’s.

Curufin had joined him in the workshop later that night. His father carried himself as if nothing had happened, save that he labored in silence. But Celebrimbor’s eyes ached with the unseen and his ears rang with the sound of gold against stone, of a crown dashed to the earth. His head was bent, as if to work, but his hands were still. At last it seemed that the silence grated on his father, and he demanded to know what had him so preoccupied.

“My lord Father.” He did not raise his head. “I’m trying to work something out. Whether that was in fact the worst thing you’ve ever done.”

“Oh, save your sanctimony, little Kinslayer. The worst thing I’ve done? I’ve done Finrod better service this day than ever before, and I thought that you might have the wit to see it.”

“You broke his lordship and I think you broke his heart with it. He cast off the crown.”

“No…” he said, not answering his father’s demand, “it’s a different puzzle I’m working out now. Whether you actually believe anything that you say, or if you’ve just gotten so good at finding
reasons for the worst things that you’ve done that you don’t even need to anymore.”

His father’s voice was cold enough to crack steel. “Let the songs say what they will of us, no son of Fëanor was ever a liar.”

He pushed his stool back and stood up, calm and controlled and still, though he knew his hands would be shaking if he let go the table-edge. “Then I will be very interested to hear how you answer this: What did you want to accomplish besides hurting Finrod as badly as you possibly could?”

His father held his gaze for a moment without speaking, his expression cold and set. Celebrimbor studied his face, the face that he had loved and honoured, the features that his own were said to mirror. And then, unforgiveably, his father smiled. Celebrimbor heard his own breath catch in his throat, felt the twist deep in his chest that might have been anger or might have been disgust or might have been simply pain; he could not bear to examine it too closely. He released the edge of the table and walked away.

He turned in the doorway. “You have become petty, Father, and vicious. Still skilled, I suppose, in a mean sort of way.” But his father was still standing by the table, facing the spot where he had been, and he gave no sign that he had heard.

It had gone on and on, the fall of Nargothrond, like a fever-dream slipping into nightmare. The worst of the horror was the way that things kept going, music and laughter and court gossip sliding smoothly around the truth that could not be spoken. And his father kept going as well, working beside him, critiquing his armor-building, asking for his opinion on silver alloys. He was deep into a disquisition on lighting design when Celebrimbor burst out:

“Finrod is dying now, Father, don’t tell me you can’t feel it. He’s fallen into the hands of the Dark Power, he’s suffering and dying and none of us will go to his aid.”

Curufin did not look up from his prototypes.

“You don’t think a city knows when its lord falls?” Celebrimbor continued. “The very stones of Nargothrond are aching with it, the walls are bleeding. There is a darkness in these caverns that no light can now drive away, and in the shadows out of the corner of my eye I see the glitter of eyes and of teeth –”

“Probably Huan skulking about. He does seem to be spending a lot of time with that Doriathrin princess.”

Celebrimbor did not respond to his father’s flippancy.

“Oh, we’ll know when Finrod falls,” his father went on, low and vicious. “Because we’ll have Sauron’s full forces striking at our once-hidden gates, Sauron’s poisons poured down our ventilation shafts – who knows, Morgoth might even grace us with one of his dragons to smoke us out like a rabbit warren, all because Finrod the Wise thought it would be a brilliant idea to stroll into the domain of the Master of Torment carrying in his head the most complete knowledge anyone in Beleriand has of the defenses of Nargothrond.”

There was silence between them for a long time.

“You know,” Celebrimbor said at last, as if picking up a thread of his earlier thought, “I think I’ve figured it out.” Most of Nargothrond thought of Curufin’s son as comparatively harmless, but like his father, he could drop his air of abstraction in an instant, the unfolding shapes in his thought revealed
to be knife-edged and deadly. “What you did to Finrod, that isn’t the worst thing you’ve ever done. What you did to Nargothrond is. You’ve un-kinged an entire people. Not just taken away their leader, but their capacity to be led. Even Morgoth, when he thralls the will of his captives, does so one at a time. But you’ve poisoned an entire city.”

“You’ve been talking to – to Luthien.”

“To your prisoner, you mean?” It was not like Curufin to stumble over a word, and Celebrimbor seized on it. “And why should I not? Am I not your prisoner too? Am I not bound to you, father, bound to this darkness?” He was on his feet again. He did not remember standing up. “It’s you, Father, how have I not seen it before now? The darkness in Nargothrond isn’t the Dark Power, it’s you-“

Moving steadily and with great deliberation, Curufin got up and walked to his son. Celebrimbor stood half a head taller than his father, but Curufin reached up and tucked one of his braids behind his ear, a tender childhood gesture. “My well-wrought child,” he said, “My perfect son. Some day you will find the doorstep worth dying on. Whether it’s your family’s, like grandsire Finwë, or Morgoth’s, like uncle Nolofinwë – or Sauron’s, like cousin Finrod has apparently settled on... But consider well if you want it to be Orodreth’s.”

Celebrimbor’s eyes did not soften. “You have broken the courage of a city. It is not so easy to mend such things once broken.”

“The courage of Nargothrond?” Contempt was a faint shimmer along the edge of Curufin’s voice. “Yes, a high valor, and one in which I would certainly put my trust. I think you’ll find that things so easily broken aren’t real.”

“I don’t think I can actually bear to know if you really believe that.” He tried to turn away, but he could not. “Don’t you see, they will never raise their heads again, never find the will to face our Enemy in open war? They will sink to a people of shadow and stealth, clinging to what they have even as it slips away from them. I see it. I see it.”

“You see it, do you? Has your love for the house of far-sighted Arafinwë bestowed their art upon you? I thought you were of the skilled house of Fëanor, but you seem determined to prove me wrong.”

Celebrimbor considered this for a minute, and then turned away as if it were the easiest thing he had ever done. Methodically he began to clear up his space in the workshop, returning tools to their drawers, stacking papers, dismantling works in progress. He moved slowly, his fingers stiff and cold. When he had finished and his corner of the workshop was as clear and neat as Curufin’s own, he spoke. “I cannot say whether Fëanor would be ashamed to be your father. But I am ashamed to be your son.”

Someone should have cried out then; something should have changed, the darkness in the corners of his eyes should have risen to cover them. But Curufin only shrugged. “No bond holds you. Be what you will, now you are mine no more! What about a Telerin silversmith, come to Endore in the train of the Arafinwëans? Your mother-name will do well enough for it, since you have no father-name that I can think of. In fact, say that you were never at Alqualonde; build yourself an innocence, a better family to have been from. It will not suffice to get you back to Aman, of course, but perhaps one day the Valar will relent, seeing how willing you are to be unmade.”

It was over then, although the end had still been delayed for a few more agonizing months, a lost game being played out to the bloody finish. It was an aching formality when Orodreth cast Fëanor’s sons out of the city, holding back the wrath of the crowd who sought to ease their own guilt by
calling for their blood. It was only the speaking aloud, at last, of the truth that everyone knew.

His father turned to him one last time at the gates of Nargothrond. He was bringing up the rear of the departing train. The remaining Fëanorian followers had already vanished before him into the woods led by Celegorm, with Huan padding sadly at his side. Curufin looked at Celebrimbor as if he were a stranger, someone with whom he had happened to fall into conversation during a chance meeting on the road.

“What will the songs say of me?” he asked. “Crafty Curufin of the House of Fëanor, mighty son of a mightier father. He left the Darkened Realm to find freedom and war in the wide lands of Middle-Earth, and he held the front lines against the Black Foe of the World. He was skilled with word and hand, strong in battle and subtle in council. He never wavered in his duty to his kin and to his oath. They could have called him fortunate among the doomed Noldor, save that he had no son.”

Celebrimbor found that his voice did not waver in the slightest. “For your sake, Curufinwë, I hope the songs will say just that. But I doubt they will be so kind to either of us.”

Curufin pulled himself up onto his horse, and paused a last moment, looking back at him, dark against the clouded sky, his face fair and cold and familiar. And he smiled.

He had returned to the workshop that night. It was clean, well-organized and untouched. Curufin had taken none of his tools with him, none of his notes or reference works. More than anything that had gone before, this impressed upon him that his father was gone beyond recall.

He did not know how long he sat at the table, dry-eyed and unmoving; there was neither day nor night beneath the earth. At last he caught a flicker of motion in the corner by the forges; someone trying to pass unseen or someone hidden making themselves known. It was the sort of thing he should have leapt at, but instead he only raised his eyes, weary and bitter and uncurious. A glint of answering eyes in the corner, and Celegorm slipped from the shadows.

“I thought that you had left,” Celebrimbor said. Cruel, clever little codas – the sort of thing Curufin would add – rose before his mind and faded again. He had loved his uncle once, his wild grace, his rough kindness and his savage piety.

Celegorm made a small scornful noise. “It is not so difficult to give the slip to the guards Orodreth can muster. Even with your woodcraft, nephew, you could get past.”

“A swift, silent motion – Celegorm could move almost too quickly for the eye to follow, when he took a mind to – and his uncle was perched on the table beside him, looking down at him. “He didn’t mean half the things he said to you, you know,” he said, after a moment. “He’ll realize it soon if he doesn’t know it already. Not that he’ll ever come back to say anything about it.”

An expression crossed his uncle’s face; a slight curl of the lip that anyone might take for pride. But in spite of himself, Celebrimbor knew him well enough to know that look was pity. “I left him weeping. It’s the second time I’ve seen him cry like that on the shores of Middle-Earth, and I believe it will be the last.”

“Neither tears nor threats will move me, Uncle.”

“Of course not – you are still his son, whatever you may call yourself.” Celegorm swung his legs off the edge of the table, dropped soundlessly to the floor. “Your father’s weeping as much for relief as
anything else.”

He paused, already halfway invisible again in the shadows by the wall. “Try not to think too harshly of him,” he said quietly. “There never was an escape for us. We will sink lower, and be worse, and he knows it. And now you are gone, the best of himself is free.”

And with that, he was gone. But that time Huan had not yet left him altogether, and so he could speak very grandly of freedom and relief. Celebrimbor never saw nor spoke with any of his family again.

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The workshops Celebrimbor had designed for the Gwaith-i-Mírdain were nothing like Nargothrond’s underground chambers: their windows were tall and open, the air moved through them freely without need for elaborate systems of ventilation. Built in the central tower of the House of the Mírdain, the Great Workshop was large enough to accommodate nearly all of the Brotherhood working at once, equipped with sources of water and sources of heat and filled with work-tables with tool drawers built into their bases. A spiral stair in the corner led up through a series of store-rooms up to the tower roof.

The roof was one of his favoured spots for quiet thought, or for the abstraction required for working out some knotty problem. He was accustomed to pass long hours there; looking down he could watch the unfolding movements of the busy life of the Mírdain below, or lying on his back the clouds merging and pulling apart again in endless intricate patterns, showing forth the otherwise invisible movements of heat and water and wind in the upper air.

He took to the rooftop to ponder Galadriel’s counsel. Not all the Powers chose Aman. She should know, who had been Melian’s student in the peace of the Hidden Kingdom. His family had spoken harshly of the Valar when they spoke of them at all, in their encampments on the front lines of the war against Morgoth. Let them cower behind their holy mountains; we shall dare what they shall not. But those lines had broken, and his ties to his family cut, and when he had wandered, an exile among refugees, through the settlements on the shoreline, he had heard the Valar invoked otherwise; in honor and in duty, in bitter reverence and finally, in hopeless petition.

Gaeron, his brother of the Mírdain, still believed that their rebellion made them unworthy to stand before the Valar. A scholar of Aman who had left the Blessed Realm in Fingolfin’s train, he had become loremaster and library-steward for the Brotherhood. Now at last he called himself Gaeron of the Mírdain more often than Gaeron of Gondolin, but Celebrimbor saw the guilt under his elegant scholarly speech, and knew that for him, at least, laboring for Middle-Earth was a sort of penitence.

His solitary thoughts were beginning to trouble him, and he went back down the stairs to seek conversation in place of contemplation. Narvi laughed at his fondness for rooftops, and though he labored or lectured gladly enough in the sunlit workshops, categorically refused to join him there.

“I don’t know why it bothers you; there are halls in the Dwarrodelf that are twelve times the height of the Mírdain,” Celebrimbor said.

“If I’m going to be balanced under the roofless sky,” Narvi retorted, “waiting for some eagle to pick me off like a rock badger, I’m going to be in the mountains, where I might at least find some new vein of ore or glimpse some of the secrets of the Earth. And besides, what do you need to perch on a rooftop for? As if you weren’t tall enough already!”

So it was usually in the forges or the workrooms that Celebrimbor and Narvi conversed, though as Narvi’s age increased he found that he preferred to recline in the dining hall, sipping tea and
proffering his judgement on the opinions and handiworks of the more junior members of the Mírdain. He was old now, his chestnut hair and beard turned snow-white, and his stocky compact frame grown very stout.

“You are very nearly a perfect cube,” said Celebrimbor, setting down a cushion beside the low table and taking a seat at his side, “were you planning to use yourself as an example in your lectures on regular solids?”

Narvi patted his bristly head. “A judicious haircut and I’ll be a truncated cube, and you can use me in your lectures on transformational geometry. Now do me guest-courtesy and find some charcoal to rekindle the table fire, or the tea will cool and my brains with it.” Celebrimbor reached into one of his sleeves and tossed a packet of grey powder into the brazier. Flames suddenly leaped up around the teapot in long tongues of blue and white. Narvi jerked back. “Mahal’s mighty hammer, III! I said rekindle not burn the place down!”

One of Aulë’s people? Stranger still. Galadriel’s words echoed in his mind. The Noldor themselves had once been beloved of Aulë the Maker, the Craft-Lord, the Power of Matter and of Shape. But that ancient friendship had been broken, first by the violence at Alqualonde then finally by the fires at Losgar, when his family and their following had lifted their hands to destroy the hearts’ labor of their kindred of the sea, and the white ships had burned on the shore. From the other Lords of the West word had come at times to the Exiles – and indeed more than words: the light of the stars of Varda, the eagles of Manwe her husband, the terror and mercy of Ulmo of the Waters. But from Aulë, who had cherished the Noldor and taught them, and defended Fëanor from the devouring need of his kindred at the Darkening, neither word nor sign. Surely it was unlike Aulë, for whom trust, once broken, could not be mended, to come seeking his people again when they had twice rejected him?

Looking at the Dwarf across the table, it occurred to him that he already counted one of Aulë’s people among his closest colleagues. The Dwarves were famously close-mouthed on the matters of their religion, but Narvi was of an unusually open disposition, and trusted him and the Brotherhood besides.

“I’ve been thinking about the Maker, Narvi” he began.

“What, because I cursed you by his hammer? Have no fear of that, Elf, if I cursed you properly, you’d know!”

“No, I’m quite serious.” He considered how to frame the question. “My people, the Noldor, were once his friends, but we lost the right to that friendship. And you of the Dwarves, you call yourselves his people, but the story of your creation - Aule offered to destroy you, would have destroyed you, if he hadn’t been stopped.”

“Yes,” Narvi rumbled, “that story. Even among my own people, we cannot agree on its meaning. The Blacklocks of the East say that it is nothing more than another of the slanders that the Elves speak, in malice, or in ignorance, like the idea that we turn to stone at our deaths. Really, have you woods-dwellers never seen a tomb? But of that story, they say the truth is far otherwise.”

Celebrimbor looked at him curiously, but Narvi shook his head. “As you have to be an initiate in their brotherhood to know what that truth is, I certainly couldn’t tell you any more about it.”

“Yes,” Narvi grumbled, “that story. Even among my own people, we cannot agree on its meaning. The Blacklocks of the East say that it is nothing more than another of the slanders that the Elves speak, in malice, or in ignorance, like the idea that we turn to stone at our deaths. Really, have you woods-dwellers never seen a tomb? But of that story, they say the truth is far otherwise.”

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“No that you could tell me even if you were an initiate, I dare say. I’ve never known such a people for hoarding secrets!”

Narvi cocked his head in acknowledgement of the point. “Leaving them aside. The general view, the orthodox you might say, if you could get the sages of Gundabad to talk to you – which I doubt you ever could –”
“What, do you doubt my charm?” Celebrimbor refilled Narvi’s globular cup with the steaming black brew. “The beauty of the Eldar? Our silver tongues?”

Narvi gave him a very sceptical look from under his bushy white eyebrows. “And what need talk to them, when you can talk to me? As I was saying, the general view that you’ll find of the Maker and the Fathers is this: it’s an exemplar of faith. The Maker would not withhold even his mightiest and dearest creations from the One who is above all powers, and because he was willing to lose them, in that act he received them back again. There are all kinds of moral lessons to be drawn here about unattachment, and about willingness to sacrifice and about submission to rightful authority. I’ve seen such lessons drawn well, and I’ve seen them drawn ill.” He took a long pull from the cup, and stared into the glowing coals at the table center.

“Do you agree with them, though?” Celebrimbor pressed him. “What is your view?”

“Mine? Oh, I am an old heretic, III, and if you listen to my opinions you will undoubtedly wind up spreading more lying Elvish tales, and I shall be taken back to Khazad-dum and have my thumbs broken for having brought shame upon my people.”

“What?”

Narvi laughed heartily. “You see? You really would believe anything we told you about ourselves.” His voice became more serious. “But I don’t think it’s a story about faith. I think it’s a story about a failure of trust, and how it was redeemed. Firstly, it is the story of the Maker’s own failure to trust his creations. And so it is a lesson for you, and for me, and for everyone who creates: trust your works. They will tell you if they are worthy to live.”

“The work is its own judge.” Celebrimbor echoed the Dwarvish proverb.

“And secondly, it is the story of the refusal of the Dwarves to be cast aside, to yield their lives back to their Maker, because that gift was never his at all. And so it is a lesson for you, and for me, and for everyone who is a creation – as all of us are, truly. Don’t let your creator get away with destroying you; I don’t care what you owe him.”

Celebrimbor considered this for a long time before he spoke again. “If he meant to destroy you, as you say, why do you reverence him? That seems more like the way of Men than of the Stone-Lords. I cannot imagine you bowing in fear.”

“Indeed you should not! It’s not for fear that we reverence him. It’s for love.”

“Love? That’s even harder to understand; he tried to kill you.”

Narvi made no answer for a while, and Celebrimbor thought that he might have pushed the dwarf too far. But at last he spoke, in a voice like the opening of stone doors.

“Mahal knows what he owes us,” he said, “as much as we know what we owe him. Because of us, what might have been impatience and pride was accepted as love and generosity. Because of us, the world is more beloved and more beautiful. Because of us, he has children rather than slaves.” His eyes were very bright. “And because of us, he remains the Maker rather than the Destroyer. He spared us. We saved him. Even the greater gods, III, can have trouble distinguishing people from things.”

Not long afterwards, on a cloudy mid-Spring morning, Celebrimbor was alone in his work-quarters, grinding a series of achromatic doublet lenses and lost in concentration over the precise, careful steps
of the task. Whatever his father had once said to him, he had no more of the Sight than was common
to all of the Eldar, neither foresight nor insight. But even a Man would have felt the approach of the
power in the doorway behind him; a stone would have felt it. He raised his head, and it seemed that
all before him was shining, as if in a strong light. The rods and wires of the mobile quivered and
blazed, the small pieces of glass strung on it glinted and spun, diffracting the radiance into its
spectrum of colors and sending them dancing in fragments over every surface in the room.

He turned. The figure in the doorway was man-shaped, but no one would mistake him for a man.
Power radiated from him in a corona almost visible, a disturbance in perception, intoxicating as
twice-distilled wine, fierce enough to make Celebrimbor's eyes water. He drew the eye and the
attention, he bent the whole space to himself, as if he were a lodestone and all the world were so
much iron dust. He was robed in white, and his hair, silver touched with gold, fell loose down his
back. There was beauty in his face, and wisdom, and there was promise in his golden eyes,
whispering to him this is power, power such as you yourself could wield. What could you not do,
with me at your side?

“Tyelperinquar Curufinwë,” he said. “You know who I am.”

Celebrimbor blinked to clear his eyes, and sat back down at the worktable. “Yes, I believe Gil-Galad
did mention something about you. Annatar, is it? Can I help you?”

If he was taken aback at Celebrimbor’s conspicuous failure to be impressed, the emissary of the
Valar did not show it. Celebrimbor did note, though, a diminishment of the sense of the power that
reverberated in his mind and in his bones, as if Annatar were deliberately dimming the glory that he
wore.

“Yes,” he said, his voice low and rich and resonant with purpose. He spoke as if he knew each word
intimately, had considered it and chosen it and relished the choice. “In the tongue of the Eldar I am
called Annatar, which is lord of gifts, and Aulendil for my service of old to the Maker. Other names I
have borne, and others shall yet bear, but Annatar let me be to you, for I am come to bestow great
gifts upon this world.”

“Indeed? What brings you to me?”

“You doors were open, Lord of Eregion.”

“Lord of Eregion? No; that name belongs to Celeborn, if it belongs to anyone. If you are looking for
a Lord, Annatar, you are looking in the wrong place; I am neither ruler nor ruled.”

Annatar smiled slowly and stepped into the room. Set against his brightness, it suddenly seemed a
poor and shabby thing, and all of the secrets, all the hard-won knowledge set down in the lore of the
Mírdain, only broken fragments of a lost, greater whole. What were all their labors, beside the power
and the knowledge of one of those mighty beings who had sung the world into existence before the
count of time?

But the reflection did not fill Celebrimbor with shame, but with a fierce love. He looked his guest in
his molten-metal eyes, and though he felt his power lapping at the corners of his mind, he spoke
clearly, courteously, and with a defiance that his family would have known for their own.

“Have you come back, then, to this world the gods have abandoned?”

“Abandoned?”

“Would you call it otherwise?” The thoughts that had been long turning in his mind resolved
themselves into words, falling into place as clearly and easily as the steps of a geometrical proof. “When the hosts of the West had gotten what they came for, they left for Aman, taking with them anyone who did not have the heart or the stomach to mend what was left broken on these shores. They sank the continent. Like your master once, they raised their hand against their own creation, and destroyed what they had made. No one stayed their hand.”

If Aulë’s servant took offense at this, he gave no sign. Rather, his interest seemed to be sparked. “Go on.”

“But we chose this world, marred though it is and weakened though we may be. What we have done, here in Eregion, among the Brotherhood… Our labor has been long and more labor still, much more, remains before us, but it is our own. I must be clear about this: if we wanted to bend the knee to any of the Powers – that way lies the Sea.” He put both hands on the table. “What is it you propose to offer us, Annatar Aulendil? What have you come to say?”

The brilliance was still slowly dimming around him, leaving something closer to ordinary warmth. In astonishment, he found Annatar meeting the fire of his words with acceptance, even welcome. “You greet me with suspicion, heir of Fëanor. Perhaps you are right to do so. Gil-Galad on the shores, your own Galadriel, did no more. But I have not come to set my power above yours. May I sit down?”

Celebrimbor waved at the other chair by the worktable. “Certainly. You’ll have to move the cat.”

There was a shimmer and a disturbance in the air, but the power of the Holy Ones did not suffice, evidently, to impress the creature. Annatar had to pick the cat up with both hands and lift her off the chair in order to sit down.

“You have indeed labored much here,” Annatar began, with a smooth gesture that took in the workroom and all that lay beyond it. The cat, evidently intrigued by the motion, leaped lightly into his lap. “Yes, the Lords of the West have dealt roughly with this Middle-Earth, leaving it in great disorder, laid waste, left broken. Your complaint against my kindred is just.”

Celebrimbor gave a slight rueful shrug. “Well, I have no right to hold the deeds of anyone’s kin against them.”

“You see it, then. You see why I have come to you.” He leaned closer. “You say you have chosen these shores. I have chosen them too, Tyelperinquar; this is the labor to which I have set my hand. I do not think that all wisdom and beauty and power need to be held beyond the Sea. Indeed, I do not think they are.”

He was gathering power into his voice again, but it was now modulated to a lower pitch, bent on entreaty, almost supplication. “Your Brotherhood grows to greatness. The People of the Jewelsmiths, foremost among all on these shores, have turned their skill and their thought to raising Middle-Earth from the darkness that lies upon it. I have not come to you in sovereignty, but from my friendship you may have much profit. Will you have me?”

“Of course.” Celebrimbor bent back over the lens and added the next grade of abrasive. “Go where you like in Ost-in-Edhil. Stay as long as you wish.”

“Do you grant me, then, your blessing?”

“What? No need. These doors are open to anyone of good will.”

There seemed to be an actual flicker in the smooth confidence of that still, beautiful face. “Open? That hardly seems in keeping with your kindred.”
“Still less with yours!” Celebrimbor pushed his chair back, the better to face his guest. “Doriath may have been guarded, Gondolin hidden, but I don’t believe any of the Eldar ever went so far as to drown those who came to them as supplicants.” He caught himself. “But forgive me; I said I wouldn’t hold the deeds of your kin against you. That age is over and done.”

Annatar raised an eyebrow. “Over indeed, if the Elves have abandoned the secrecy in which they put their trust.”

“It was the great fallacy of the last Age, Annatar, to believe that secrecy was safety. Half the people here have seen the fall of one of the great kingdoms that put their trust in hiding and defense. But there is no secret hid too deep for treason, no wall that can be raised against mistrust. We cannot hide from the world; it is the world that we were meant for.”

“If it is indeed as you say, then what of the secrets of your Brotherhood? Here in the heart of Elvish craft, surely there is lore not meant for the eyes of the unworthy.” Annatar turned his gaze on him, cool and curious and knowing, and at once Celebrimbor saw what Gil-Galad had meant by as if he can see exactly what you’re made of. The cat slunk away under the table.

“No,” Celebrimbor replied, surprised at the dryness in his throat, “there is great knowledge here, but there are no secrets. You may come to learn of us; all we ask is that we may learn from you in return. No one rules here. We do not deal in power, we of the Mírdain. It’s skill we prize, and knowledge.”

“Do you then believe that you need no defenses?” Again the slow smile, in equal parts pleased and frustrated. “I had heard it said that the Noldor were proud. I believe it now.”

“Enemies may arise. We are not so foolish as to believe that evil is ended forever. But we do not place our hope in secrecy, but in strength. Strength is found in trust, and trust in openness. So be welcome among us, Annatar Aulendil.”

He rose to his feet and held out his hand to his guest. Annatar studied him for a moment, his face unreadable, then reached out in return and clasped Celebrimbor’s hand in his.

It was all Celebrimbor could do to repress the impulse to snatch his hand away. The shock of the touch was immediate; like brushing against something very hot, where the skin answered to the touch of fire before the mind, and the body recoiled before consciousness had so much as registered heat.

But he was forge-trained from his earliest youth, and had learned to manage his own reflexes through long practice. His father’s words came into his mind at that fiery touch, his father who had shown him how to pick up a half-cooled casting to move to the finishing table. “Handle it swiftly and with care,” Curufin had said to him, “Mistrust your mistrust. The metal will not burn you.” And he had suppressed his fear then, suppressed the sudden panicked instinct to pull away when he picked the metal up. It had not burned him.

Neither did Annatar’s touch. After that first sudden instinctive shock, his hand was merely flesh and blood, cool and strong against his own.

“But of course—” Annatar released his hand after the clasp of greeting had lasted just slightly longer than Celebrimbor had expected. “This is—” He looked at the lens in the grinding cap. “This is not meant to be used alone.”

The sudden turn of attention to his work did not surprise him at the time. Later – for every moment of that first meeting stayed with him, precise and vivid and detailed as a scene in one of the Brotherhood’s illustrated manuscripts – he would wonder if it should have. “Indeed not,” he replied,
picking up its partner lens and holding it beside the first to illustrate his point. “It’s a different glass – higher refraction index, higher dispersion – to reunite the colors split by this lens.” He gestured to the stack of lenses on the table. “As it is, each color through these lenses comes to a slightly different focus point, and that means there’s a, a fringe around bright objects, a halo of color at the edges. Not unlike the way you looked not five minutes ago, come to think of it – ” He cocked his head on one side, making quick calculations about the possible refractive index of the Ainur. “Anyway, the two lenses in combination – the figures are on the wall behind you – ought to be able to bring the light back into unity.”

“For two wavelengths.” Annatar plucked the first lens from his fingers and tilted it back and forth. “You’re trying to focus, what, just red and blue? That’s not unity, that’s an approximation.”

“Theoretically we could add a third lens.” Celebrimbor reached for a pressed-charcoal pencil and added a rough sketch to the equations on the wall, its lines unpolished but still elegant. “But we’d need a glass with an index beyond any we’ve made yet.”

“Why use glass at all? You know you need to meet these parameters –” He took the pencil from Celebrimbor’s hand and added a quick series of calculations underneath the drawing. “What about using a liquid?”

Celebrimbor thought of an objection, answered it as he formulated it, thought of another. “But you need a very specific refractive index, one that answers both this and this –” He tapped his hand against the wall, indicating one formula with his thumb and one with his forefinger. “You can’t grind a liquid.”

“Tune it. Pressure. Song. Both.”

Celebrimbor saw it as Annatar spoke, and by the end of his sentence was already rummaging in his shelves and handing jars back to him. “Water, distilled water, starlight water of winter, starlight water of summer, fixed oil, oil of stone; if your theory works it’ll work on at least one of these. Let’s get started.”

Some days later, it occurred to the Masters of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain that no one had seen Celebrimbor at the last few departmental meetings. While it was entirely typical for members to withdraw for weeks or indeed months at a time when absorbed in a project, Celebrimbor had not announced the start of a new endeavour in research or in craft, nor did he have any apprentices working with him who might run his errands or account for his movements. And so the last item on the agenda (after “Updates from work-circle on forge fuel improvements”) was “Check on III; bring food if necessary.”

So it was that most of the senior members of the Brotherhood came crowding into Celebrimbor’s doorway, curious to see what had so compelled his attention. He was busy at work, table covered in models and walls covered with diagrams, as they had expected, but he was not alone.

“Gaeron! Damros! You’ll be interested in this – you too, Naugwen.” He came forward eagerly, a long metal tube in his hands. “We’ve gotten up to a magnification factor of 500; the aberration problem is solved, now what we need is to increase the light, but that’s simple in comparison. This –” he waved a hand at the person behind him, “is Annatar. Annatar, this is the Brotherhood. Where’s Elistar? Rukh, you’ve been working with him, haven’t you? This can be used for astronomy too, we only have to modify –”

Gaeron, who had the deepest sense of propriety of any in the Brotherhood – he was the one in
charge of running the meetings – sighed deeply. “The leaves unfurl at our meeting, Annatar,” he pronounced solemnly, cutting off Celebrimbor’s discursion. “You are welcome within the gates of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain. Earon Penlodhion I am named in the tongue of the West, and –”

But Annatar met his eyes with a grave courtesy, and the Master’s voice died in his throat as he looked into that tumult of fire and gold, the eyes of Aulë the Maker, the eyes of Aman. A mutter of recognition and shock went through the Brotherhood in the doorway, but Gaeron bowed his head and sank to his knees.

“Lord of the West –”

“Rise, Master of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, rise, lest you make a liar of your brother!” Annatar slipped around Celebrimbor and offered his hand to Gaeron where he knelt. “Tyelperinquar here made very clear to me the Mírdain owes no allegiance to no Lord, be he never so mighty –”

“Thank you!” came Lindis’s voice from the back of the group, faint with shock but still sharp; she had always been even more critical of the Valar than Celebrimbor himself.

“I am not the Maker, though I am of his kind, and Aulendil am I named for his sake. Annatar I will be among you, and I crave your leave to labor at your side, to enrich your knowledge and to raise your skill, that the light you kindle here may one day illuminate all of Middle-Earth. Truly it is not in Aman alone that light and beauty dwell.” He bowed before them in his turn, a studied graceful motion, the folds of his white robes whispering against the floor.

The murmuring among the Brotherhood was now unrestrained, but the people in the doorway parted as Naugwen pushed her wheeled chair forward to get a better look at their guest.

“Well, you’re not the strangest guest-lecturer we’ve had,” she said after a moment. “Nor the ugliest. What do you know about the elements of matter, the species of metal and stone?”

“I saw them at their making,” said Annatar mildly, straightening. “I sang them into being. What would you know of them, Master of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain?”

“Oh, we’ll get to that.” But Naugwen could not repress a smile now, for she loved all the substances of the earth and their study was her heart’s labor.

“Now come in, instead of crowding in the doorway like that.” Celebrimbor waved a hand in distraction. The Brotherhood filled the work-quarters, some looking over the calculations on the walls, others passing the metal tube from hand to hand.

“What’s this good for?” demanded Tirnion, Alagos’s disciple and ever the contrarian. He peered through it at a chip of mica. “Observing the composition of the elements? We know what they’re made of; it’s the first naming-song we learn.” He hummed a few bars.

“Yes, but now we can see it!” Unmingled delight shone on Celebrimbor’s face. “Don’t think that won’t make a difference, to see with the eyes what before we had to infer.” Behind him, two more of the Brotherhood were making additions to the calculations on the wall.

“Consider what this might tell us about the growing world, the olvar and the kelvar,” added Sildreth, whose great interest was in living things though she made her home among the scholars and craftsmen of the Mírdain. “We might be able to see the hidden armies that march against the health and soundness of the trees, or even of the flesh, and seeing them understand them.”

“And understanding vanquish,” said Annatar softly, at her elbow. “Unhealth is unhealth, yet not every sickness is the same. If you know the shapes of the sickness, you may be better able to find the
way to guide them back to be whole and sound.” Sildreth turned to him, gratified, and began eagerly questioning him on the preparation of preservation solutions.

By the time that the Brotherhood dispersed again, some to their various projects, others to their waiting students, there was no question of Annatar’s welcome among them. Naugwen had demanded his presence in the materials store-rooms, Sildreth had commissioned Celebrimbor to make five of his new devices at different magnification powers and take them down to the infirmary and the greenhouses, and Celebrimbor himself had engaged to teach a handful of journeymen the art of using liquid to focus light.

Several days went by before it occurred to Gaeron that no guest-quarters had been prepared for their guest. Though he wore a form like theirs, he did not appear to need to eat or to sleep, so he did not suffer by this neglect. Still, although the Elves were not bound nearly as closely as mortals to the needs of the body, it was considered courtesy at least to provide for them. Chambers were found for Annatar in the guest-halls, though he spent more time out of them than in; he turned up at lectures and in the forges, he sat smiling among the debates in the dining hall, he paced alone through the cloisters around the inner courtyard of the Mírdain, running his long white fingers along the stone as if he were reading it. And as often than not, he could be found standing at Celebrimbor’s side, watching him at work.

After that first blazing moment in Celebrimbor’s doorway, Annatar wore the glory of his nature dimmed, like a curtain drawn over a window or a cloud over the face of the sun, and save for his eyes and the surpassing beauty of his person might almost have been mistaken for one of the Eldar. He went about quietly and spoke rarely, but always to the purpose, always revealing a new and surprising side to the matter under discussion and spurring those who listened to deeper understanding. He showed an interest in all the Brotherhood’s dealings, from Veanne’s experiments alloying metal to Gaeron’s indexing of their research texts, and once the first few had gathered the courage to ask his opinion on their works, his critiques were merciless but profoundly productive. Revelation blossomed around him, he trailed insights in his wake, and Celebrimbor found himself curiously reluctant to be out of his company. But he spoke little of himself or of his mission, and Celebrimbor could not shake the impression that he, and all the Brotherhood, were being observed and evaluated.

Among Annatar’s disquieting habits was his tendency to assume – never quite in so many words – that the Mírdain was somehow Celebrimbor’s own. “I am a Master of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, not the master,” he said, answering the subtle emphasis in Annatar’s words. “We labor together; no one rules here.”

“Is not Ost-in-Edhil your work?” They were walking together through the outer court, Celebrimbor describing the operations of the pipes that kept water circulating through the halls of the Brotherhood and the larger city. Annatar swept an arm out, encompassing the towers of the Mírdain, the courtyard, the city beyond. “This is yours, is it not?”

“This citadel is not mine,” he replied, “or not wholly. The central tower is my design, and the curtain wall, but the Great Hall is Alagos’s with Tirkion’s design-work on the dome and the pillars, the gates are Narvi’s, the entire forge-complex is Noroth’s. But even that doesn’t get at it. Take the forges. I said they’re Noroth’s work, but Skirfir and Virfir brought us Khazad-dum’s air control systems, Veanne’s refining the furnace designs... It’s a harmony. We each listen for the theme the others carry; we answer it, we reflect it, we join our voices with theirs. Only it’s not in music, but in fire and water and stone, in knowledge and language and craft.”
He had stopped in his pacing and Annatar had stopped beside him, studying him, his face unreadable. “It is beautiful, Tyelperinquar.” He smiled then, slow and sure and satisfied. Celebrimbor found he was already smiling in answer, unconsciously mirroring his guest, his heart rising within him.

“Ost-in-Edhil.” Annatar lingered, amused, over the Sindarin name; he appeared to be fluent in all the languages of Eregion but among the Brotherhood spoke their own High-Elven Quenya. “‘Fortress of the Elves’… It can’t have been you that named it. Why should the Elves call something ‘of the elves’? And this is hardly a fortress.”

Compared to the intensively fortified Elvish cities of the First Age, it was not. Indeed, in respect to its fortifications it bore more resemblance to the cities of Aman. The exposed situation of Ost-in-Edhil had been the matter of some debate at its founding. “Is this really where you want your settlement?” Gil-Galad had asked him, when Celebrimbor showed him his city plans laid out over a map of Eregion. “Two rivers, bridged and forded, open plains, high roads to Khazad-dum and the Vinyalonde… It’s practically indefensible.”

“So was Himring, once,” returned Celebrimbor.

“So was Himring, finally,” Gil-Galad corrected him, and looked out of the council chamber toward the coast, where the barren island that had been Maedhros’s cold fortress stood distant and lonely on the horizon, as it had stood, exposed, against the full force of Morgoth’s malice for centuries.

“True, a city here cannot be hidden,” Celebrimbor agreed, “But those very routes you mention mean a place of meeting, a place where knowledge and craft can join, and mingle, and flow freely out again, to cover all the world.” He saw Galadriel following his words with thoughtful attention. “Yes, it would be a poor place to hold in a siege, but who will besiege us? The time for secrecy is over. Where is the Hidden Kingdom now? Where are Gondolin and Nargothrond?”

“I wonder at you, Celebrimbor.” Celeborn spoke coolly. “You may correct my misapprehension, but as I recall, Nargothrond fell not because of its secrecy, but because it abandoned secrecy.”

He felt the grip of the past, cold and clinging under the hope of the present, saw the lost lands off the western edge of the map of the reshaped world. “Nargothrond was fallen long before Glaurung set foot in it, before Turin ever laid eyes on it.”

“You speak of your father’s words to the people –”

“Once my grandfather kindled a fire in the hearts of the Noldor.” He drew a breath. “My father put it out.”

The evenness of his tone and the bluntness of his words made an impression on Celeborn. Perhaps he had not been expecting to hear him speak so of his kin. But Celebrimbor had no interest in denying the deeds of his family; he had accepted the truth long ago. He was only unwilling to accept that their story was finished in anguish and disgrace.

So the new city of the Noldor had been built directly on a trade route traversed by Dwarves and Men. It was they who had begun referring to the new settlement as Ost-in-Edhil, for though it was no fortress by the standards of an age at war, still they had never seen in those lands a city of Elves at all, still less a city built in stone. That was the name that had stuck, though Celebrimbor still sometimes referred to it in his private notes as Caras Edrennyn, the City of Open Doors.
Annatar had only recently come among the Brotherhood, but Celebrimbor had already grown accustomed to his presence. It was a rainy day in mid-Spring and he was at work in his quarters, absorbed in the intricacies of his calculations, and giving only passing thought to the guest watching him.

“What are you?” said a voice in his ear.

Celebrimbor jerked in surprise. He had known Annatar was in the room – he burned like a white flame in the corner of his vision – but he was surprised to find him so close to his side. He could never quite judge how far away Annatar was from him; he resolved to add depth perception to his list of investigative topics about the optical properties of the Ainur.

He was sketching out a proof relating to complex polyhedra, translating the shapes into functions, the functions into numbers, the numbers into shapes again. Annatar had been following his work, intent and interested and saying nothing, until that strange question. Either a non sequitur, Celebrimbor decided, or the beginning of some obscure argument.

“Is that a philosophical question, Annatar? You’d do better to address it to Alagos than to me if it’s debate you’re looking for.”

“I mean you,” said Annatar, running a finger over the lines on the paper. “What are you, the Brotherhood? Mírdain, jewelers, but this is not gem-craft.”

“Indeed it’s not, it’s what we humble finite beings call mathematics, which is the study of such properties as extension, quantity, structure, pattern, and change.”

A low sound in Annatar’s throat, the merest hint of laughter.

“But if you really want something to admire, you should take a look at Damros’s work. He’s working on what he calls the axiomatic treatment of groups, and it’s entirely changed the way I look at the topology of infinite spaces.”

“Tyelperinquar.” Annatar always pronounced his name like some sort of invocation, savoring the full four-and-a-half syllables. “You are avoiding my question.”

He turned in his chair to face Annatar head-on. “What are we? We are as you see us, Annatar, a place of learning. We’re not all jewelers in the Gwaith-i-Mírdain, any more than we’re all Elves in Ost-in-Edhil.”

Annatar was not, after all, the strangest guest to have walked through the gates of his city. The foundations of the Mírdain had scarcely been laid at the time of the first incident: a stranger suddenly dropping to his knees before him, offering him his sword-hilt, and pledging him his loyalty and his life.

“What on earth do you mean by this?” Celebrimbor had demanded. “And who are you? Get up!”

The man got up. He was clearly Noldor and clearly of Aman. Though his clothes were plain and his face worn, he carried command in his bearing, and it seemed to Celebrimbor that he knew him from somewhere.

“I mean,” he said, “to offer you my service and my sword, lord of my lost House. Curufinwē Tyelperinquar, do you not know me?”
Celebrimbor searched his memory for a person to correspond to the one before him, erasing his battle-scars, lifting the shadow on his spirit, picturing him under the light of the Trees in the long robes of his office –

“Why, Bruithwir.”

“The same, my lord.” A faint smile lit his grave features.

“You – you were general of the March of Maedhros.”

Bruithwir was looking back farther into the past. “I was Finwë’s seneschal, once. Do you remember, Curufinwë, when you were no more than a child, how your great-grandfather the King loved you? Do you remember visiting his halls in Tirion?”

Celebrimbor smiled inadvertently at the memory. “Yes! And that was you, wasn’t it, who – goodness, who cleaned it up after I took it into my head to pull out all of the fireflowers in the gardens? I think I meant to make my great-grandfather a crown and they were the brightest things I could reach.”

“You were such a serious boy, curious like both of your namesakes, but gentler than your father at your age. You were the treasure of Finwë’s heart, you and little Itarille, because the strife that was growing between his son and the sons of Indis had not touched you yet.” His smile faded, worn away under the weight of the years that had fallen on both of them.

“I followed my lord to Formenos, as I had followed him to Aman,” Bruithwir went on. “I served his son when Finwë fell, and his son after him. Until he sent me away.”

“Served – Bruithwir, the songs of Beleriand ring with the deeds of Maedhros’s armies under your command.”

It was true, but Bruithwir took no pleasure in being reminded of it. “And that is not all they ring with.” He had gone from proud leader of the armies of the Noldor to ragged desperado without complaint, and it had been through no will of his own that he had parted with his lord at the end, when Maedhros and the last of his brothers raised their swords against the host of Aman.

“But – you must understand, Bruithwir, I am no lord of yours. I cannot accept your fealty – not yours, not anyone’s. I am not the ruler here.”

“As you command.” Bruithwir made him a very formal bow, an old Amanyar gesture of respect. “But take thought. You are building a city, you are wearing your right name, and I am not the only one who looks for the rise of the House of Fëanor from the ashes.”

“Do you mean there are others – others who served my family?”

“More than you might guess. There were seven of you, after all, and all commanded the sort of loyalty the blackest deeds could not break.”

The prospect of the old servants of the House of Fëanor coming out of the woods and laying their bloody swords at his feet was downright alarming. “Then I must be absolutely clear: if you must pledge your sword and your service to someone, the High King of the Noldor is in Lindon. If you would serve the rulers of this new realm, Galadriel and Celeborn are – oh, around here somewhere. My domain is the Gwaith-i-Mírdain; we are scholars and craftsmen. You are welcome as a brother, but not as a servant.”

Bruithwir had settled, to all appearances quietly, in Ost-in-Edhil itself. He had become one of his
trusted advisors, though Celebrimbor was never entirely at ease around him; he felt the pressure of the war-leader’s loyalty held in abeyance, and in his presence he heard his own voice echo with his father’s accents, and his grandfather’s. It was an entirely different sort of discomfort than that he had become accustomed to in Lindon – Fëanorian, Kinslayer, Accursed and Dispossessed – but he was as adamantly about refusing to embrace his family as he had been about refusing to repudiate them.

Maedhros’s old commander had been right about his presence in the new city drawing the remnants of Fëanor’s people to him. Many simply attached themselves to the Mírdain in one capacity or another; some, like Sildreth, joined the Brotherhood itself. She at least had not been what he had expected of the Fëanorians – she was not even Noldor, but one of the Sindar of Gelion, who had lived under the ward of Maglor.

One of the more alarming arrivals had simply appeared in front of him as he walked outside the gate. It was entirely possible, he thought later, that she had dropped down from one of the trees. She was dressed in wolf-hides and green paint, her dark hair cropped around her ears, her teeth filed to points, and her jewelry incorporating distressingly recognizable orc vertebrae.

“I’m the only one left,” she said without preamble. “The last of the Dogs of War.”

He knew her at once. The Dogs of War had been his uncle’s people, although originally they had been a troupe of huntresses in Valinor who had forsworn marriage to ride in Orome’s train. They cared little for craft and less for cities, but Fëanor’s promise of the wide lands and sweet waters of Middle-Earth had kindled a fire within them to be gone from the Blessed Realm. Their whole wild rout had been in the vanguard of the flight of the Noldor.

Once arrived in Middle-Earth they had, unsurprisingly, attached themselves to Celegorm, and had earned their name in the valleys of Sirion and the uplands of Aglon, striking by night, and making themselves the scourge of the fell beasts that came up from the dreadful shadows of Nan Dungortheb or down from the Mountains of Terror.

Their numbers had diminished after the battle of the Sudden Flame and Celegorm’s retreat to the caves of Nargothrond with his brother and their people. “We are not grubs, to rot in ease beneath the earth!” one had declared, before leading more than a dozen of her sisters away after her, to range the forests while they still grew green. There were no hard feelings on either side at the parting. Celegorm had always treated them more like a band of hunting creatures – falcons, or the dogs that were their namesakes – than like soldiers. But inevitably the ones that remained grew more soldierly.

“I was with him to the end,” she said. “The fall of Aglon, the rout at Tol Sirion, the exile from Nargothrond. Ha! We painted our shoulder-guards with eyes at the back, we had become so good at retreat. Then Doriath, then the Havens, and by the time the gods returned, there was only me. I roamed the forests calling for my sisters, but there was no answer, and then there were no forests, and I dragged myself up on the beach more like a drowned rat than a war-hound.” She tossed her head and blew a quick breath out through her nostrils. “But here I am.” She seemed to be expecting him to say something.

“You are Fëanor’s heir?” she demanded.

“Well –” he began.

“Are you, ah, quite sure I’m the one you’re looking for?” Celebrimbor asked, as diplomatically as he could. “The Lady Galadriel and the Lord Celeborn, in their halls outside the city, may be more to your –” He suddenly remembered the import of her words – then Doriath, then the Havens – and abruptly stopped himself midsentence. She paid him little heed.

“You are Fëanor’s heir?” she demanded.

“Well –” he began.
“It’s right there on the doors.” She jerked her head toward the star glinting under the cascading water on the surface of the gates.

“I am of Fëanor’s house, it’s true. But—’’ He hastened to finish the sentence, seeing her start to speak, “but I must tell you what I told Maedhros’s people, and Maglor’s, and Cu- and my father’s. I am not your lord. I am not anyone’s lord.”

“That’s fine.” One side of her mouth twisted up, showing her sharpened teeth. “Don’t care much for lords.”

“You are certainly welcome to stay here as long as you want. But—’’ He gestured over the workshops and libraries of the Mírdain, “I really don’t know if you’ll be comfortable here; you’re going to find that we’re much more occupied with research and development than, well, hunting.”

She added the other half to her sharp-edged smile. “Oh, I’m sure I’ll find something to occupy myself.” With a glance over her shoulder at him, she wandered off into the city, leaving Celebrimbor bemused. She did turn up again from time to time – her name, he learned at some point, was Yarrisse – at the Mírdain’s festivals, leading dances at the full moon or leaving a fresh-killed deer on the doorstep of the kitchens, and though it was not always the most comfortable thing, he had never had cause to regret welcoming the remnants of the Fëanorians to his city.

“But you cannot mean that every door is open to everyone,” Annatar pressed him. He was everywhere Celebrimbor looked now – in the back of the classes he led, waiting for him in the dining hall, closeted with Naugwen when he came to refill his stocks of mineral acids. He even shone behind his eyes when he closed them, like an afterimage left by strong light. The spring was wearing on, and he had been at the Mírdain for several weeks. It was scarcely an eye-blink, as the Elves reckoned time but already Celebrimbor had difficulty picturing the Brotherhood without his presence. They were descending the main staircase from the Great Workshop, returning together from a seminar that Celebrimbor had been leading for the apprentices on binding Words into cast metal – a process already refined by Annatar’s quiet suggestions. “Even the most generous keep closely what is precious, not suffering it to be lost,” he went on. “And surely you grant that some knowledge, given to the wrong people or at the wrong time, can be ruinous.”

“Well, yes, of course some knowledge is dangerous. For instance, you have to be a journeyman before you’re allowed free access to the materials storeroom, which means you have to know everything that we currently know about which substances in combination are likely to poison you, say, or to explode. And some materials are much harder to obtain than others, so they cannot be used indiscriminately. But in the end, the work is its own judge: if you run through the Mírdain’s entire stock of mithril or of covert kingsilver, the beauty or the power of the work you create with it will be the recompense for the long labor of replenishing our stores.”

He looked sidelong at Annatar. “Speaking of the store-rooms, has Naugwen won you yet to her language reforms? You seem to be spending a great deal of time there!” The keys of the materials storeroom were kept by Naugwen, whose knowledge and love of the substances of the world surpassed even Celebrimbor’s own. Her avocation had once drawn comment – an analytical interest in metals and minerals and all substances of the earth that neither grow nor perish seemed more typical for one of the Noldor of Aman than one of the Green-Elves of Northern Beleriand. But in the Mírdain, which made no account whatever of kindred, the comments that she drew were principally about her perennial and controversial project of reforming elemental nomenclature.

“Won me?” Annatar laughed. “She has made a fair beginning, in her way; she seems to recognize
that you cannot improve your knowledge on any subject without improving the language you use to speak of it.” Annatar’s eye caught his. “Come with me, Tyelperinquar, I am bound for her storerooms now.”

Annatar evidently did take a keen interest in the matter-language Naugwen was building, and hearing the tone of his voice as he addressed her question after question, it came into Celebrimbor’s mind that Aulë himself had been a maker of languages.

“Yes, I believe that we can build a Tengwar of matter,” Naugwen was saying, spreading out her charts on the table before them. “A true language of the elements, giving simple substances simple terms, and allowing them in to be combined in consistent, rational ways. It will mean giving up the old names – no more earthy liver of sulphur or Kindler’s saltflower but a temporary sacrifice of poetry will make the language stronger, suppler, more precise-”

But Annatar needed no persuasion. “Arrange a language well, and our thoughts cannot help but be clearly arranged.”

She flushed with pleasure at his words. “Here’s the test of it, though: my tables say that there should be a prime element here, in this tyelle, but I’ve never been able to isolate it. Am I wrong? Or have I just not found it yet?”

Annatar ran his finger along the third rank of the table, lingering in the empty space. “There is a sand,” he said, “on the beaches of the south, whose stone is called in their tongue tvarad. Heat that in a vessel with magnesium powder, add acid of salt, and you shall have your answer. I do not think revisions will be called for. Mind your eyebrows when you add the acid.”

A smile danced around her eyes, but she kept her voice as grave as befitted a Master of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain. “I’ll ask Eorach to see if he can’t trade for some the next time the Numenoreans come through.”

As she did not have the use of her legs, Naugwen could not easily travel over long distances or difficult country, and she prized Ost-in-Edhil’s central location that brought strange jewels from the Numenorean coastal trade, or rare minerals from the Dwarves in their mountains, to the doorsteps of the Mírdain. Though the towers of the Mírdain were built high, she had no difficulty in navigating them. They had all been built with the passage of wheeled conveyances in mind, and accommodated her lightweight construction of steel and cloth as easily as cartfuls of ingots or dressed stone. On the rare occasions that she needed to get somewhere unusually inaccessible or unusually quickly, Noroth carried her, her slight frame dwarfed by his hulking build. There was an unspoken compact between them, engineer and chemist. From time to time he brought her new wheels with improved bearings or braided-wire tread designs, which Naugwen received with grave, critical pleasure.

When he was first introduced to her, in his earliest days among the Brotherhood, Narvi had recognized the Sindarin elements in her name, but could hardly believe he was pronouncing them right. “Stunted... maiden? Who would give you a name like that?”

“The mother who bore me?” She twitched the folds of her robe aside. Both legs were withered, bowed and twisted, and one ended in a tangle of flesh just below the knee. “It’s only truth. Do you think there should be more shame in it than if I had been named for the color of my hair or the strength of my arms?” She let the robes fall back. “It was more than fire burned the plains of the Gaspeng Dust, when the Morgoth broke the leaguer that held him long ago. My mother was heavy with me as she fled. No mortal woman who escaped that blasted land bore living child again, nor any of the beasts. My mother did her best, but she could not keep the poison at work within her from marring me as I was formed.
“She did not dwell on her grief for it, nor did she permit me to. ‘Ill-made does not mean ill-making.’ I
would never be one to range the woods or the grasslands, but most of them had been set on fire by
that point anyway; I turned to the Dwarves of Gabil-gathol and to the arts of the skilled hand and the
skilled mind.”

“Why did you not go over the Sea?” Tirnion was sitting beside her in the group gathered in the
courtyard, following her conversation with interest. “They say there is healing of all hurts in Aman.”

She shrugged. “I’m not done with Middle-Earth. This world made me, this world marred me, this
world shall heal me – or consume me.”

After a short silence, Narvi spoke; he was at the time still new among the Brotherhood and speaking
of the stories of his people was a matter of some gravity. “There is a story among my kin of the
East,” he said, “that when the Maker took up his hammer to destroy us, his first stroke fell just as the
One whose name cannot be spoken raised up his hand to stop him, and crushed the leg of Harr, the
father of the Stonefoots. And when he saw what he had done, he wept bitterly, and yet he could not
mend what he had marred, for the Dwarves were now flesh and not stone. So it was that he gave to
Harr Stonefoot a skill in the forge surpassing all others, and so when the Maker appears to the seers
of the Stonefoots, he comes to them lame.”

“Lame?” put in Tirnion; he had been at the fall of Doriath and held little trust for the stories of
Dwarves. “Are you sure you’re not thinking of Morgoth?”

“It’s probably a legend to explain why someone who can’t fight might still have value.” Caibrannon,
who was studying with them at the time, was the latest in a string of Numenorean venturers who
came to pass a year or a decade among the Elvish wonders of Ost-in-Edhil. He still had the tendency,
common to a certain sort of new traveler, to invent satisfying explanations for the strange and
barbarous customs he encountered. Narvi, who had no patience at all for such things, responded only
by turning on him a glare of deep contempt.

It was late in the spring now, the ground was fully thawed and the green shoots were rising in the
fields, the days were lengthening, and the building season was in full bloom. Out in the city new
houses were rising; within the Mírdain roofs and courtyards were being retiled and a new wing
added to the guest-halls.

“So there are Men among you,” Annatar said, his tone balanced somewhere between question and
statement. Celebrimbor could not tell if he were pleased or displeased. “I suppose you did speak of
strange guests, Tyelperinquar.”

Celebrimbor was not sure whether he had actually spoken to Annatar of strange guests, or merely
thought so in his presence. Still, he did not trouble to conceal his mind from his guest and was, in any
case, not entirely certain whether such concealment would be possible, if one of the Holy Ones took
a desire to gaze into the contents of his thought.

“Men.” Annatar looked down into the courtyard. Celebrimbor had been taking him on a tour of the
planned summer construction work, and now the two were standing on the loggia that linked the
lodging halls to the Great Hall, looking down into the courtyard, where Tassilo, a stocky, whiskery,
decidedly mortal artisan wearing journeymen’s white was directing six or seven apprentices in laying
down an intricately tiled pavement. “This is their world too, so they say. Yet they’re so lightly tied to
it. Easily swayed, some might say.”

“What, have you made a study of Men?”
“I have passed some time among them,” Annatar said, and Celeborn looked hard at him. It was another glimpse of his life before the Mírdain – before he had come to Gil-Galad with his obscure promises. Had he made the same offer to mortal kings? he wondered. But who would he have chosen? He had come first to Gil-Galad and then to Galadriel, always seeking the greatest power in the area, and indeed it was still a source of wonder to Celeborn that his choice should then have lighted on the Brotherhood.

While there were always Men in the Mírdain – “Our guest lecturers,” as Gaeron called them – there were no Men ranked among the Masters themselves at the moment, for the time required to attain the knowledge that qualified one to wear the red cord of the Masters generally surpassed the mortal lifespan. Generally, but not invariably; Men had occupied the highest ranks among them before, and their loss was a surprise and a grief renewed as regularly – though thankfully not as frequently – as winter after harvest.

“I think it does us good to have Men among us,” Celeborn replied. “Beyond their skill and their wisdom. There is an urgency to them – the fact that they will leave the world altogether before they have a chance to know it forces them to learn to…” He sought for the word. “To learn to communicate if they want anything to endure beyond their blink of a lifespan. Look at what they prioritize, at the things which they devise: tools that let anyone perform the feats of those who are stronger or wiser or more practiced.

“By some lights,” he added with a pointed look at Annatar, “you could say that they are more cunning or more skilled than we are. They have to make tools to effect those changes to the world that those of greater order can simply exude by their nature. They have to deal with the world as it is _–_

“And see if it can be bent to their will?” A flicker in the fires of his eyes – interest, or judgement, or merely a trick of the light.

“What? No, to see if they can learn to co-operate with it.”

“That kind of cooperation, I think, is the sort of thing that only the Eldar have time for,” volunteered Túrin, who was passing along the loggia and invited himself into the conversation. Túrin, on principle, refused no pleasure, and the pleasures of debate were always appealing.

“But we are none of us mortal,” said Celeborn, suspecting that Túrin would be happy to engage Annatar in constructing ever more recondite arguments without the slightest reference to their topic, “and we have plenty of them here at hand; why not ask one of them for their opinion?”

“Mireth!” Túrin called down from the loggia to a young woman sitting on the fountain’s edge watching the tiling progress. “Join our colloquy, sister! The question is of mortality and –”

“Power,” said Annatar.

“Priorities,” said Celeborn at the same time.

Mireth looked back up at them, shading her eyes against the sun. She was short and strongly built, and her frame as much as her clothing marked her as one of the folk of the Minhiriath rather than one of the Numenoreans from over the sea. She was a good student, from what Celeborn knew of her. Appallingly young, as almost all mortals seemed to be, but with a sturdy willingness to work and refusal to be overawed.

“Am I coming up to you, or are you coming down here?” she returned, “or are we shouting across the space between us?”
“I’m sure Tirion would find that poetically appropriate –” Celebrimbor went on without a pause, to prevent Tirion from expounding on just how poetically appropriate it would be, “but we’ll come to you.” Descending the stairs at the end of the loggia and joining her by the fountain, Celebrimbor sketched out the shape of the discussion for her.

“You’ve been among us for a while,” he said, gesturing at the black sash that marked her as one of the Mîrdain’s apprentices, “what do you think? You know what we’re all working toward, you’ve helped us work toward it… Is there a sort of understanding that Men have, by virtue of who and what they are?”

“Well,” began Mireth, pleased to be asked and with the cheerful willingness common to apprentices to offer definitive opinions on a subject, “I think it’s very wise of you to admit people – Men, I mean – here in the Brotherhood. When I first walked in, and saw how willing you all were to teach, I thought I would learn everything there was to know, but I’m just now starting to realize that even if I spent a lifetime here I couldn’t learn it all, I couldn’t even make a start at it. But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing, does it? I learn what I can and pass it on, so does the next person and the next and each mind takes what was offered and shapes it and changes it and adds a little bit.

“But that wasn’t your question, was it? You want to know if there’s some sort of wisdom we mortals can offer you… We’re good at finding uses for things, don’t you think? But everything moves so slowly, with the Elves!” Then, looking at the three of them, her face clouded. “I’ve been studying here – how long has it been?”

Celebrimbor cast his mind back to the day she had come through the gates, wide-eyed with wonder and with an eagerness to learn that practically colored the air around her. “Come Midsummer, it will be seven years.”

“Seven years?” she cried in alarm. “No, no, it cannot have been that long – I must return to my people!” She sprang up from the fountain’s edge and for a moment it appeared as if she might dash off then and there. But she mastered herself, though she kept glancing around the majestic buildings in an agitation strange to see amidst their peace.

“Your people?” Annatar’s voice was not his usual cool curiosity, but seemed now to carry something like compassion. “Will you tell me of them?”

She put her hands to her head. “My people – the tribesmen of the riverlands – but how can I go back to them? My language does not have words for the wonders that I have seen here. They would call me a sorcerer.”

“Would that be so bad?” Annatar inquired gently, and added something in words Celebrimbor only partly recognized, repeating the question in Mireth’s own language.

She sank back to her seat on the fountain. “Have I been dreaming, here in this Elvish city? Seven years! Seven – perhaps they do not even still hold their lands, maybe some plague has swept them away or Felweg’s clan has finally driven them off. They don’t even have steel…” Her hands twisted around each other. “They need so much.”

None of them pressed their original point, but Annatar caught Celebrimbor’s eye, and it seemed that he had his answer. For his part, Celebrimbor was abashed. He had read scorn for Men, even contempt, in Annatar’s first questions, but the gentleness of his manner and the genuine interest which he had shown in Mireth made him ashamed of his suspicion.
If Annatar were offended by Celebrimbor’s suspicion, it certainly did not show in his manner towards him, and indeed, he seemed to seek out Celebrimbor’s company more often than before. He sat beside him for hours in his quarters, quiet and unobtrusive, watching him at work and wearing the same satisfied expression as the cat.

Celebrimbor had never thought he would call the presence of one of the Ainur comfortable, and even now that was the wrong word for it. But he liked having Annatar there, liked having that bright interested presence resting against his mind, into which his ideas either vanished without a trace or were reflected back to him changed and brightened.

It became their custom to converse in flashes and scraps – questions and observations without context or introduction - as well as in the eloquent and considered dialogues the Mírdain cultivated.

“Pass me a five-grain glass capillary, they’re filed both with the items that are narrower than a finger and with the items that can be melted in common fire.”

“You call this an organized system?” But Annatar was already handing him the delicate tube.

Without looking up from the optical experiment spread out across the work-table. “Light – is it a sort of body?”

The response was slow this time; he almost believed that Annatar had dismissed the question as too absurd to merit consideration. Then: “If it were, could it be converted into other sorts of bodies? Are you asking if light can be transmuted into matter?”

Later, in the middle of completing a table on the errors of reflecting convex lenses: “What is there in places without matter?”

Not an answer this time, but an image. Darkness, directionality, the shuddering impossibility of sight without light. He felt himself falling – no, not falling, but wheeling, drawn across the space between the stars, and in his ears was the sound of distant music. He raised his head, shaken, to look at Annatar in the ordinary light of the lamp that hung over his table. He was looking back at him, pleased. You did ask, Tyelperinquar.

Though Men marveled at the art of osanwe as practiced by the Eldar, the advantage of sharing thought among the artists and theoreticians of the Mírdain was less than might be expected. “Half the point of thinking is to make an idea communicable,” Naugwen complained, “and trying to touch a mind at work is like sticking your hand into a whirring centrifuge.” But Celebrimbor found that if he tossed fragments of thought to his guest, isolated images, and half-formed figures, Annatar sent them back clarified and edited and enhanced.

There were those among the Brotherhood for whom learning and study were entirely sufficient. Young Damros – Celebrimbor privately expected him to bear the name young for the next thousand years, as he had ascended to the rank of Master at an unprecedentedly early age – was never happier than when exploring new theoretical frontiers of mathematics, and leaving to his fellows the question of worldly applications. He had been born in Ost-in-Edhil itself scarcely half a century ago, and already wore the Masters’ red. At first the Brotherhood had laughed at him for his haste, which seemed more akin to the Secondborn than the First, but after he had proven a theorem that had been widely regarded as unproveable even by Amanyar mathematicians, the laughter stopped and he was admitted without question as among the foremost of them. His interests were some of the most abstract of the Mírdain, and there were matters on which even Celebrimbor had difficulty following his reasoning.

Though Celebrimbor did spend a good deal of his time lost in the intricacies of pure thought, still his
greatest joy was not in understanding but in creation: laboring with body and mind in unity, his hand translating his thought into matter.

He was with Veanne and a few apprentices in the forges one day in early summer, before the weather had grown hot. It was deceptively simple work: the crafting of tools for the Mírdain’s own supply and for trade and gifts to the people of the mountains and the river. The stock of water-hardening alloy steel had been already been blended with Words of skill and strength, but as Celebrimbor drew out a glowing length of it on the anvil, shaping the edges for the head of a rounding hammer, the forces that he called into it were patience and resilience. It would sit lightly and strike true; it would bear mistakes without denting and not weary its wielder. It would serve well as a beginner’s tool, a tool that would carry its owner from the first clumsy strikes to mastery, a tool that was itself a teacher.

Lost in the song of metal against metal, he did not notice when Annatar first appeared at the doors of the forge. Eventually, when the metal cooled past the working point and he raised his eyes from his labor, he caught a glimpse of white in the corner of his eye and turned to find their guest standing in the doorway, as motionless and as beautiful as a work carved from marble or from alabaster, watching the work with his customary evaluative interest. Celebrimbor set down his tongs, wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and grinned at him.

“Do you want to join us in these earthly forges, Servant of Aulë? Check the hooks by the door, I’m sure we can find you something more practical than that.” He waved his elbow at the heavy shimmering robes.

Annatar did come in, but made no move to change into forge-clothes. Instead he moved slowly through the workshop, inspecting the tools where they hung by the wall, occasionally running a finger along the edge of a chisel or hefting a hammer in his hand. Celebrimbor watched him, his work cooling on the anvil.

“You have opened many secrets to us already,” he went on, “but I have not seen you make anything. Will you not give us a taste of your quality, will you not show us the skill of your hand?”

If he had been hoping to provoke a response, it did not work. Annatar only looked back at him, amused, and continued his inspection of the workshop, turning his attention from the tools and materials to the people within, and to Veanne in particular.

Where Celebrimbor had exchanged his customary dusty black robes for plain close-fitting forge clothes, Veanne had unlaced both her sleeves from the shoulders and was working bare-armed. She might at first have been taken for a mortal, her dark hair streaked with iron-gray, her face lined and stern. Her forge-toned arms were hatched with vicious scars, and on her forearm, raised and blackened, an old indelible burn in the shape of a crude bisected triangle. Feeling Annatar’s attention on her, she turned to look at him.

“That’s one of the brands of Angband,” he observed, his voice neutral.

Veanne set down the hammer. “Indeed it is: the Broken Mountain, Orkhant we called in our slave-tongue. We labored there for iron, and for copper, and for other ores whose names I do not know in a clean language.”

Behind her, Celebrimbor had left his work and moved toward her. He had been expecting an encounter like this almost since Annatar’s arrival. The presence of those who had once been Morgoth’s thralls had long ceased to draw comment in the city, but he did not know how one of the servants of the Valar would react to the scars left by their brother-enemy’s work. Would you rather have seen us sunk like Beleriand, would nothing but drowning wash us clean? But Annatar’s face
showed neither judgement nor distress, only that same bright, focused attention.

“We were fortunate,” Veanne went on, firm, clipped, without expression. “I never saw Angband itself, only the slave-camps and the mines. We were taken when Hithlum was overrun, and by that point they knew how useful the Noldor were. Because of our strength, because of how long we could go with little food, because we could work with poisons that would kill mortals in a month, and above all, because of –” Her mouth twisted. “Because of our skill and our knowledge. Oh, they had it all out of us... our lore concerning the earth and her riches, the delicate arts of transformation of matter.” She stopped talking abruptly.

Celebrimbor knew how her story went on, having gleaned it in pieces and fragments over their long years of collaboration, having read it in the scars on her body and her spirit, and he knew why she would speak no more about it. No one who survived Angband made it out with clean hands. Veanne had not only seen her knowledge and skill as a metallurgist turned to making weapons of war against her own people, but she had sold that knowledge and skill to buy better treatment for herself and for her people; she had been something of a line overseer in the Orkhant camp.

In the end none of the people she had tried to protect at that bitter cost remained with her. Some had died in their chains, their spirits unable to bear the misuse of their art; others had faded after the liberation, their spirits so broken to their terrible work that they could not face the world in freedom again. Still others had taken the longer road West, but Veanne had remained on the shores of Lindon. “Aman is not for the likes of me,” she had said when asked about it. He knew, though she had no need to say, that she feared the faces of those she had commanded in doing Morgoth’s work, that even now she still saw them in dreams.

“Not everything,” said Annatar quietly.

“What?” Veanne was already turning back to her work, picking up the hammer-head to take back to the fire.

“They did not have everything from you in the slave-camps of Angband.” He was beside her now, careless of sparks. “They did not have all your knowledge and your skill. Look at this.” He picked up one of the waiting pieces of unformed alloy steel. “What you’re creating with this is beyond anything Angband ever did. This is, what –” A brief moment of concentration with his fingertips pressed to the metal. “Carbon, manganese, chromium, gondrong,$^{13}$ but you’ve blended eagerness and responsiveness into it. It can answer to the lightest touch of the wielder’s will.” He tossed the piece and caught it again. “Someone could do a lot of damage with this.”

Celebrimbor felt rather than saw something crack in the walls around Veanne’s spirit. Yet it was not a crumbling, but rather like a door being pushed ajar, a glimpse of an opening where light might shine through. “Well yes,” she said tartly, plucking the unformed steel block from Annatar’s hands. “This is what we call master-steel; you have to know exactly what you’re doing when you use a tool made from this, but if you do it’ll produce work finer than you knew you had in you. III here is working with student-steel – show him, III. That’ll forgive mistakes; it answers the hand quicker than the will…”

He felt a rush of gratitude toward his guest; that had been just the right thing to say. For he knew as well that it was not only fear that kept Veanne on the near side of the sea, and not only guilt, but a stubborn refusal to be driven from her art, to let the slave-camps of Angband be the last word on the labor of her heart. “There is, after all, a difference in work done by the free souls of the free,” Narvi had said, the first time her metallurgical researches had yielded an early version of master-steel. But Narvi knew Angband only through the stories and scars of the Elves of Beleriand, and she had thought, though not said, easy for you to say.
He went to find Annatar again that evening, after the light had faded from the sky and the main forge-fires were cooled for the night. He passed Gaeron and his apprentices going about the Mírdain, calling the evening’s illumination into the crystal lamps. The art of binding undying light into stone had been lost along with so much of the knowledge of the Noldor, and now only weak bonds kept light linked to matter. Lighting the lamps of the Mírdain depended very much on the power of the individual calling the light into them, and even the brightest light would fade after a time.

He cast his thought over the Brotherhood, feeling the life and motion in the halls he had built flowing through them like water: debate in the dining hall, song in the courtyards, contemplation in the libraries and the workshops. Then, somewhere above them, like a star low in the sky, that glimmer of opaque white brightness that was Annatar’s presence, and he knew where he would find him.

When he climbed to the roof, Annatar was standing in his own favored vantage point by the parapet, looking down over the city as the lights were kindled. He greeted him without turning around, and coming to his side Celebrimbor saw him smile, as if at some private and pleasant reflection. They spoke of the day’s work in the forges, and Celebrimbor thanked him for what he had said to Veanne. “It meant a great deal to her, coming from one of the Holy Ones. In truth, I did not know what to expect from you; Aulë was never known for his willingness to accept those who…”

“I was Aulë’s servant, not Aulë himself,” Annatar said, picking up as he trailed off. “But it’s not only people you’ve salvaged from the old realm in the North.”

“What do you mean?”

“That gas-forge she was using.” Annatar was frowning. “Unless I am much mistaken, that’s a variant on a model from Angband.”

Celebrimbor exhaled, running both his hands backward through his hair in an unconscious motion. They tangled immediately in his braids, for he still had his hair bound up for fire-work. “So the pollution of Morgoth’s touch is still visible to the eyes of Aman,” he said, bitterness heavy in his voice.

Annatar said nothing, but watched him closely, bright and opaque and intent.

“There wasn’t much that Angband did well; it consumed and plundered and despoiled, burning through lives and lands alike and leaving them poisoned and laid waste. But those things that you could say it did well were mostly outside the cast of our thought: burning fuel hotter and more efficiently, moving heavier things farther and more quickly. Yes, we have learned even from Angband. I will not say to anyone who came out of Morgoth’s slavery that they cannot bend that graceless knowledge to serve the cause of grace, to heal the world it once ravaged…” He looked down over the Mírdain, at the faint glow from the forges where someone was doing night-work.

The forges had mostly been designed by Noroth, another survivor of Morgoth’s hospitality. Celebrimbor had found him living among the Dwarves of Khazad-dum; what wanderings had brought him to their doors he would never learn. But he had come back with him to the newly-built city of Ost-in-Edhil, and found home and family among the Brotherhood of the Jewelsmiths.

Noroth was tall even for one of the Eldar, and built like an ox. His bulk and girth would have been exaggerated even in the sturdiest of Men, and was shocking and unnatural in one of the Elves. His strength was beyond even his appearance, he was by far the strongest of any in the Mírdain. On the back of his neck was the brand of the Iron Crown: Angband itself.
Noroth never spoke of his experiences. He could not speak, for he had left Morgoth’s service without his tongue. Who he had been and where he had made his home before Angband were an utter blank; even his name was unknown. Noroth was an epesse meaning The Giant. His silence went beyond his maiming: even in his thought, when he opened his mind to his brothers of the Mírdain, there were no words. He was the Mírdain’s master of engineering, turning Morgoth’s tools to gentler uses, and Celebrimbor sometimes found him contemplating some work of surpassing beauty and delicacy with a look of frightening triumph on his face.

Still, he was not a figure of terror to even the newest of his students, once they had grown accustomed to his silence, and to learning through close attention rather than through explanation. At one point, when Damros had been no more than an apprentice, he had exclaimed over Noroth carrying a solid drill press that should have taken five men to move. “What was Morgoth feeding you?” The appalled looks that had greeted his joke had struck him into a silence of such shame that he had not been able to utter another word around Noroth for several months.

But no one held Damros’s ill-advised quip against him; he had been born in the city of the Mírdain after a thousand years of peace. He had never seen the horrors of the North. It was an ever-renewed source of wonder to Celebrimbor and to others of Beleriand and Aman that among their people were those to whom Morgoth was no more than a legend. “It’s enough to make you envy Men,” Veanne had said once to Lindis, who she normally chaffed for her fascination with the Edain. “Can you imagine, a whole generation free of Morgoth? A whole people free of Morgoth? People whose grandmothers’ grandmothers never knew a world with Morgoth in it?”

Celebrimbor lifted his head; Annatar was still beside him on the parapet and still seemed to be expecting something from him. “You don’t think that Angband’s art taints yours?” Annatar asked him softly. “Your grandfather would have none of the knowledge that Melkor offered him in Aman, even when his brothers profited by it.”

All at once Celebrimbor felt the futility of attempting to explain to one of the Ainur the compromise that was the choice of life in Middle-Earth, the endless struggle to reclaim something beautiful and enduring out of waste and shame. “What do you know of Angband?” he said, turning away.

Annatar reached out to him then, and caught him by the hand. “Enough.”

Again that shock, as at the touch of red-hot metal, and again he suppressed the instinct to pull away. Instead he turned back toward him, looking sharply into his face.

“You see me, Annatar. You know who I am, you know the legacy of blood on my name. It’s not just the survivors of Morgoth’s slave-camps, none of us are what we were. None of our hands are clean. And yet we will raise them to the light, Annatar; we will see this marred world shine.”

Annatar spoke little of his own past, though the occasional references he dropped to the curious customs of Men in the East and the South made it plain that he had travelled widely, and the knowledge he displayed of the geography of drowned Beleriand seemed to indicate that he had been in Middle-Earth much longer than they had initially guessed. When Celebrimbor asked him how long he had been on the Hither Shores, he only laughed. “My time is not your time. I do not reckon the years as you do – any of you, Elves, Dwarves, or Men. But you would call it a long while.”

“If you did not come to us direct from Aman, then where have you come from?”

“Why, from going to and fro in Middle-Earth, and walking up and down on it.”
He had indeed spent some time in the East and in the South, if his tastes were any indication. He refused to drink the strong bitter holly tea so favored by the Brotherhood without adding immoderate amounts of candied peels of lemon or orange to the brew. Damros, whose interest in cooking was nearly as strong as his interest in higher mathematics, laughingly railed at him for depleting the kitchens’ stock of citrus as he reclined in the dining hall among the Brotherhood.

“You must have come fresh from Aman, if you think these grow on trees!” He brandished a lemon in mock-threat.

“But-“ began Lindis.

“These grow on a tree, one singular tree, in Sildreth’s greenhouse, and if you carry on like this, you are going to have to be the one to coax the Sea-Edain to secure you a few more tons of the stuff next time they visit the groves of Anfalas.”

“You are a tyrant as well as a prodigy, Damros,” said Annatar, nonetheless heaping the chunks of candied lemon peel into his tea bowl. “You really should consider the possibilities of a career among mortals.”

Though he had already gained a general acceptance among the Brotherhood, who had come to enjoy his company for his subtle wit and his startling insights, still Annatar listened more than he spoke, and still Celebrimbor could not be entirely sure what he was looking for among them. One evening he could be talking about the care and tending of languages with Gaeron and Naugwen, the next critiquing architectural plans with Alagos and his latest mortal apprentice, the next joining the Brotherhood in the night-gardens for contests in collaborative verse, and if it had not been for the fire that Celebrimbor had glimpsed in him, he might have believed that Aulë’s servant was sojourning on the Hither Shores simply to enjoy himself.

And yet he had already come to prize Annatar’s opinion as highly as that of any of his colleagues. Finishing a draft of a design or the execution of a particularly experimental piece of work, his first impulse was to seek out his guest and ask for his thoughts. Sometimes Annatar would merely shrug, and those efforts he would tuck back away into his library. But often Annatar would take a closer look, and offer detailed opinions and though he could not be sure, Celebrimbor suspected that on several occasions he had genuinely managed to surprise him. He privately cherished the thought as a great source of satisfaction.

He was working late in the Great Workshop one night, the conclusion of several days of delicate labor. Jewelsmiths the Mírdain were named, and though they practiced many other arts, the creation of gemstones was unique to them. Celebrimbor was finishing the creation of a large chrysoberyl, a long, complicated, painstaking process that required as much skill of hand as of mind, from the formulation of the solution that would crystallize around the seed at end of the pull rod to the minute, intuitive adjustments of angle and rotation speed as the jewel was formed.

As he let the rotation rate taper to a stop and raised the crystal from the crucible, he felt someone else come into the workshop. Annatar moved noiselessly, but his presence was unmistakeable.

“Good timing. I’ve just finished this.” Celebrimbor never bothered with greetings when absorbed in his work. “Have a look.”

He passed him the pull rod with the chrysoberyl dangling from the end, the raw crystal waiting to be cut and faceted. Annatar tilted it in his hand, watching the color of the stone shift from red under the light of the workshop lamps to a yellowish green under the moonlight from the windows.

“You’ve kept the interstitial oxygen absolutely even from one end to the other…” he said, half to
himself. “Iron and, what is that, chromium in the lattice; you can tune it to music or to light. This is exceptional, Tyelperinquar.”

At his words a bright warmth of joy spread through him, he looked at his own work gleaming with the reflected light of Annatar’s praise. It was work as fine as he had ever done, he was proud of it, and prouder to hear that it met with the admiration of Aulë’s servant of Aman -

But at that reflection, sudden cold anger spiked through him, and the words of praise soured in his thought.

“Don’t flatter me, Annatar. This is not exceptional. We know how much we have lost since Aman, since Beleriand. We are still mending the holes in our earth-lore, leaning on memory where once we might have had clear knowledge. Even our lights fade. This – yes, it’s made with skill, but it’s limited.” My own limits, he thought bitterly, the best that I can do. “We used to make these so that they didn’t just answer light but called it forth; you could see the hidden colors in everything after you looked at one of these, you could use these as tools to shape metal with light itself.”

He looked bitterly at the chrysoberyl shining in his hand. “You’re of Aman, Annatar, we both know you’ve seen better. Better is probably still scattered on the shores of Alqualonde and the streets of Tirion.”

Annatar’s face, as usual, showed nothing of his thought, but Celebrimbor thought that he sensed surprise beneath the calm of his exterior. “It is good, considering –”

“I do not want good considering.” There was real distress in his voice. “I do not want your satisfaction at my own limits, and I thought you would know that. Good considering! Don’t lie to us, Annatar, even if you think we’ll like it. That’s no gift at all.”

Annatar set the chrysoberyl on the table. Its color, from where Celebrimbor stood, shone halfway between red and green. “Very well. Do you want the truth, Tyelperinquar, the absolute truth? You and the Brotherhood are nothing compared to what you might be.”

Relief rose within him, but he said nothing, waiting for him to go on.

“You speak of what you have lost, but I tell you to raise your eyes higher. I have seen the shapes in your thought, Tyelperinquar, and I know what there is – what there might be – in you. You can exceed the ancient arts of your people.” Annatar was standing so close to him that he half-expected him to take his hand, but he did not move, only spoke on, low and clear and earnest. “You can exceed the arts of mine. It will not be easy and it will not be quick and if you want honesty from me, I cannot tell you in truth whether you will or will not prove capable of it. But I would see you make the attempt.”

He saw the Mírdain then as it might be: the winds playing about the towers, the waters flowing through its gardens, the fires glowing in its forges, and he knew that everything moved with purpose, everything answered to his will, that the very elements served them and delighted in their service, and he did not know whether the image proceeded from his own thought or from his guest.

“That is not the counsel I expected, friend of Aulë.” He drew himself back to Annatar’s presence before him, to the gemstone lying forgotten on the table. “I expected to hear you say something about loving not too well the work of our hands and the devices of our hearts.”

Annatar’s lip half-curled, with what might have been amusement or might have been contempt. “Not all the Powers speak with one voice,” he said. “And I will never counsel you to love something less.”
The days wore away and Celebrimbor hardly marked them, the nights grew shorter, there was something strange in the air. At times it seemed that the world was gathering itself in anticipation of some great event or cataclysmic change, at times that the summer was beginning in earnest, a summer that would never end. It was not his habit to be so jumpy at the change of seasons. He longed vaguely for some kind of counsel, but had no clear idea where he ought to seek it. Perhaps Arafirne’s far-sighted daughter sensed his unease, for Galadriel came and knocked on his doorway early one afternoon.

“Aunt!” Celebrimbor sprang up from the papers at his worktable, and hurried to embrace her where she stood in the doorway. The Lord and Lady of Eregion both came from time to time to the Mírdain, Galadriel more often than her husband, for she took an interest in the Brotherhood’s art and even herself occasionally turned her hand to the creation of objects of beauty and worth. “We shall make a Noldo of you yet, Aunt!” Celebrimbor had teased her as she finished the crafting of a belt of linked silver leaves, a gift for her husband. But she had not returned his smile, and had been quiet and troubled for some time afterwards.

No such shadow was on her now; she returned his embrace with good will. Celebrimbor drew her out of his work-quarters and down to the grounds, talking as they went of their various projects and all that had passed since they had last spoken. “But you’ve been so busy in Thamas Eregion,” he said, “I didn’t think we’d see you here before Midsummer!

“You won’t see us then either, I’m afraid – we’re crossing the mountains to spend the summer with Celeborn’s old friend Amdir in Lorinand. Do you know, Telperinquar, Lorinand’s people are already hailing him King? As if he had nothing other to do than show up with a smattering of Doriath’s knowledge and statecraft!”

It was a glorious day in early summer. The flowers had fallen and the trees showed their new leaves in smooth raw greens; the last of the chill had left the air. Celebrimbor following her lead, the two of them walked out of the Mírdain and down along the banks of the Sirannon. The snowmelt from the Blue Mountains had swelled the river to a torrent: deep, fast, and cold, sparkling under the sunlight.

“But you are not saying all that is on your heart,” she said, as her nephew finished a somewhat rambling account of his optical experiments and the work that he proposed to write, which was now tentatively titled *An Enquiry Concerning the Nature and Operation of Light* but whose scope had expanded to nearly unmanageable levels. “What of the god that now dwells with you, what of this generous and helpful stranger, what of your guest?”

“Yes, I’ve been wanting to ask you about him – well, of course you’d know that.” He was not in the habit of concealing his thought from anyone, least of all from his kinswoman. “It’s his fault that the Enquiry isn’t getting written; just when I think I’ve got an idea solid enough to be going on with he asks me a question or makes some observation and everything changes, I have to go back and start again from the beginning. I could almost say he enjoys making me work-”

“Yes, but it’s not his research principles you want to ask me about,” Galadriel put in.

“No. True.” Celebrimbor sobered, his smile fading. “I wanted to know what you make of him. He mentioned – you have seen him, he came first to you, even though Gil-Galad sent him to me.”

She nodded, keeping both face and voice neutral. “Gil-Galad doesn’t trust him.”

“Gil-Galad’s the High King,” Celebrimbor returned. “It’s his business not to trust people. And his steward and that business about *not smelling right* – I’m not surprised he wouldn’t call it trioxygen,
but I would have thought he’d recognize the scent of a lightning strike—"

“Celeborn doesn’t trust him,” Galadriel went on, “but that’s because Celeborn doesn’t trust you. You know I mean no ill in saying that,” she added quickly.

“That’s no secret, Aunt, and no cause for quarrel between us. My approach to the world is not his, and it’s asking a great deal of anyone to live in peace with the kin of their family’s murderer. If I were going to let all those who hold my father’s deeds against me eat at my heart, I would be a twisted and embittered thing.”


“Telperinquar...” she began, and then broke off, stopping in her steps and turning her eyes to the distant mountains. He felt her gathering her thoughts together, assembling them, sorting them, drawing out patterns. The river rushed before them, loud and joyful, but when she spoke, there were darker rivers and other mountains in her thought.

“Telperinquar,” she said at last, speaking with a note he had only rarely heard in her voice, a note of uncertainty. “You weren’t there when the hosts of Aman threw down Thangorodrim. I was.”

Shock rippled through him, shifting his understanding of the world. She had never spoken of this in all the long years of their renewed friendship in Lindon and Eregion. “I thought that you and Celeborn were gone by then, over the mountains.”

She flashed on him a look of cold reproof. “My father was in the vanguard, Telperinquar. Should Arafínwë’s daughter refuse to stand beside him against Morgoth? Nothing could have kept me from that last march of the Noldor, not distance, not danger, not all the hell-hordes of Angband.” Her eyes shone with the remembered deadly light of battle, but Celebrimbor saw that they were also bright with tears. “My father, standing upon these shores at last. My brother... it might have been a dream where you see the faces of the dead, of your lost ones returning to you, and yet wake alone.”

He reached out to her, seeing the anguish of her thought, a tangle of dark memory in a spirit usually so forceful and clear. She took his hand, and after a moment she raised her head. The images faded: forests blazing and mountains burning, Eonwe’s brother-Maiar shedding their forms for battle, black wings blotting out the whole sky, Finrod’s face, fierce and gentle and untouchably remote.

Then she was with him again, standing on the banks of the river and speaking of their guest. “That one. Your guest. He carries with him something of the air of Angband.”

“What do you mean by that?” It was Celebrimbor’s turn to speak with careful neutrality.

“It’s nothing definite. A shadow. A breeze. A passing vapor, a trick of the light. But...” She searched for the words. “He calls himself Aulendil, but I never saw him among Aulë’s Maiar in Aman. It may be nothing. It probably is. He saw Beleriand before its sinking and yet did not return with the returning hosts of Valinor. It may be nothing. It probably is. But again—he hasn’t told you what he did in the war, has he?”

This was entirely the wrong thing to say, and she knew it as soon as she had spoken, for Celebrimbor’s eyes hardened.

“The air of Angband?” he said in a low, dangerous voice. “The air of Angband, Aunt? Do you know who else has the air of Angband? Anyone who’d been kept there as a prisoner—my friends, Aunt, my colleagues, my people. Anyone who’d escaped or been cast out of the slave-camps, set by
Morgoth to spread fear and mistrust because of that *air of Angband*. Do you know what he did?"

"Of course I know –"

Celebrimbor was walking forward again, setting a fierce driving pace that she found herself struggling to match. "Some he let free in body with their minds enslaved, and those, soon or late, would draw sword or set fire within the camp. Others he let free altogether, for the pleasure of knowing that they could never again persuade their people to trust them, never again trust themselves, and not for anything they had done but only for what had been done to them. And these people, Aunt, they have the air of Angband. But do you know what else has the air of Angband?

"Telperinquar –"

"Middle-Earth. There is nothing here that has not been tainted by the Enemy. But if we are going to give up on things because they’ve been touched by the Shadow, we might as well have gone back to Aman!"

He found himself nearly shouting; he lowered his voice and slowed his steps but spoke no less passionately: "Morgoth and his cursed lieutenant are gone. And yes, they left scars – including on the people that were pulled out of Morgoth’s mines."

"Telperinquar." She laid a hand on his arm. "*I was there.*"

He drew a breath. "Yes, Aunt. I believe I see what you mean to say."

"The War of Wrath went on for a long time," she said softly. "And it was fought on levels that even I couldn’t imagine."

"So the Enemy may have had Maiar among his thralls as well… I can believe it. He was named Foe to the gods, after all, not just our great Foe. But Aunt, the war is done. All of that is done. And now, if mistrust and dissension spring up among us here, in the world that we have built for ourselves, it will be because we allowed them to grow." His thoughts went back, to Nargothrond and then farther back to Tirion, to the endless bitter recriminations of his childhood, the anger that lit his grandfather’s face and darkened his father’s, the creeping sense that everything had gone badly wrong and was only getting worse.

"Morgoth did this to us once," he said quietly. "Now we are alone, and it is up to us. We need to be better than that."

Their walk had carried them almost out of sight of the city. He paused, looked at her, and turned back toward the towers of the Mírdain, reversing their track along the river. "The War of Wrath was a victory," he said. "We need to make that victory count for something. We can’t do that by writing off everything and everyone Morgoth touched. Who would be left? No one here is whole. No one here is unmarred. And if we’re going to let that stop us from lifting up our hearts and our hands to the healing of this world – well, then Morgoth’s defeat was for nothing, because his will is still at work within us."

Galadriel walked beside him in silence for a minute, matching her steps to his, the fire of his spirit a warmth as tangible as that of the sun on her shoulders. "This is about much more than your guest, I see."

"Perhaps it is." He was calmer now, once again her serious nephew with guarded wit and skilful hands and a mind full of beautiful unfolding shapes.

"I still think you are taking a risk."
“Of course I am taking a risk. That’s why it’s called trust; if there weren’t risk it would be called knowledge, and that’s something else.” He spoke tartly, as if he were debating his brothers of the Mírdain, but she saw the force of his will behind the words, a choice shaped over centuries of loss. “I don’t mean to be foolish, Aunt,” he went on. “And you know how I need your counsel. But I choose to trust Annatar; it is for him now to choose to trust me. He can tell me what happened in the war when he’s ready. And until then – well, the work is its own judge, as the Dwarves say!”

“What work has he done among you? From what you say, he’s done more watching than working; he’s gotten more knowledge from the Mírdain than you have from him.”

“Oh, but that’s not it at all! A word here, a question there, and he changes our work altogether. Sometimes building it up, sometimes knocking it back down to its foundations, but always making it stronger, sounder, better… And besides,” he added, “I am comfortable with him. No, that’s the wrong word – exactly the wrong word. He makes me uncomfortable, because he kindles my thought, he sets me in motion.”

He turned to her, smiling. “And we do not need to fear sharing our knowledge, like the hidden cities of old. After all, who is there left to betray us to?”

He groaned when he saw she did not return his smile. “Oh no, Aunt, I walked right into that one, you’re going to quote me to myself and say to the darkness within ourselves –”

Since he had said it, Galadriel had no need to repeat it. She lifted her chin. “He spoke my own thoughts to me, Telperinquar. I did not like it.”

There was nothing so very strange in that; she had studied under Melian and she told herself that she knew the ways of the Holy Ones. And she had recognized one of Melian’s kindred in Annatar when he presented himself before her in her halls: that same bright opacity of spirit, that same sense of power passing the limits of imagination, leashed and controlled and partially translated to her finite eyes, that same beauty of person that could prompt mortals to worship and immortals to change the course of Fate.

And, like Melian, he had looked through her and into her, and spoken to her the thoughts she had believed secret. But what had most disturbed her was the way that she could not tell whether those thoughts had risen at her guest’s prompting or from the shadows of her own inmost desires.

“So this is she who might have been Queen of the Noldor,” Annatar had said. “I wondered at such a choice when I first heard the tale, but seeing you I wonder no more.” A bow as graceful and as regal as Melian’s own. “Truly, Star-Queen, that title would have been too poor.”

No, now she looked back on his words, there was nothing in them to arouse suspicion, nothing out of place, save that his silver-tongued epithet belonged more properly to Varda herself. It was her own thoughts, then, that troubled her. How quickly she had seized upon those words! Too poor indeed! What were the Noldor now but a tattered remnant of a people, flotsam on the shores of Middle-Earth, pining after a lost glory and the days that will not return? Looking back was not her way. But the world was wide before her, its peoples strange and numerous, waiting for someone to lift them out of their darkness and raise them to the light. Had not Celeborn’s people already prospered under her wisdom, had not the woodland kindreds of Eregion and Lorinand bowed to her?

Why should it be Queen of the Noldor when it might be Queen of the Eldar – when it might be Queen of Middle-Earth, sailing to Aman at last not as a penitent refugee but as a power among powers? None of the others have the strength to grasp for this, not the young King clinging to the shore, not Telperinquar holed up in his workshop. But someone with the boldness of heart and the firmness of will to grasp power when it is offered –
“Well,” she said, recalling herself to the present and to her nephew’s searching look. “I don’t know how much he’s said to you about what I said to him, but I doubt he will look kindly on me for a long time yet!”

Celebrimbor was uncharacteristically quiet throughout the department meeting later that month, the last before the high festivities of summer. His silence was not like his usual abstraction; the more alert among the Brotherhood noted how he followed the reports closely but without investment, as if they were all pieces in some larger puzzle he was attempting to work out. He leaned back in his chair, his fingers knotted in front of him and his eyes moving from face to face.

“New business,” Gaeron announced, coming to the end of the meeting agenda. “Does anyone have anything else that we all should be aware of?”

Celebrimbor sat forward and untangled his fingers. “Well, yes. Annatar told me something rather interesting yesterday.”

“Interesting? How?” There had already been extensive debate of the meaning and intentions of their guest; ‘presence of Annatar: metaphysical implications’ had been the fourth discussion item in the minutes.

“Not about who he is or why he’s here – or not exactly, although I suppose -” He tried to marshal his thoughts into a clear and communicable order. “Do you mind if I get the board? It’ll be easier to explain if I can write this out as well.” He saw Naugwen leaning forward with interest, her expression oddly closed.

“Is this about your light-enquiry, III?” put in Elistar the astronomer, “because I’ve been working on a counter-proof on why you can’t treat light and matter as though they were interchangeable, but it’s nowhere near ready-”

“It’s not exactly that either, though its implications will -” He broke off. “I’m going to try to explain to you something Annatar explained to me.” Rolling the smooth blank drawing-board out of the corner where it was stored, he began to sketch out the outlines of the technique that Annatar had outlined to him concerning the bonding of the immaterial to the material.

“As all creation does,” Annatar had said to him, standing in his work-chambers, his voice low and his diction as smooth and precise as if he were reading from a text, or giving a lecture he had given many times before. “Giving form to matter; stamping your thought into the stuff of creation. You do it, the gods do it, even the beasts do it after a fashion. A dog scrabbling a hole, a Dwarf sinking a mine-shaft, it’s all the same principle, the difference is understanding. Your understanding of matter changes what you can do with it. What you can call out of it, what you can impose upon it.”

A sudden sharp doubt, as he stood there before his brothers of the Mírdain, doubt that he could explain in his own words the world-altering truth that he had glimpsed, a darker doubt that any of them would know what to do with that truth even if he could explain it. He set the charcoal to the board’s surface.

“Keep up, Tyelperinquar,” Annatar had said, sparing him a quick glance, seeing the labor of his thought. “Your language has no words to speak of this directly; you must approach this sidelong.” Annatar did not pause as he switched the entire paradigm in which he was speaking; he was triangulating the truth through metaphor after metaphor, assuming that Celebrimbor could follow. He could, but only just; his hands unconsciously moved as Annatar spoke.
His fingers cold, Celebrimbor retraced what Annatar had told him in image and in speech before the Brotherhood. Their murmurs grew sharper and louder as the importance of what he was saying became apparent; he heard the scratching of pencils, low gasps of recognition, once a swallowed cry of indignation. He did not turn around.

The words had ceased, but not the images in his thought. All the substances of Middle-Earth answering to his will, a dry land blossoming, mountains yielding their hidden riches in light and gold and fire, the earth itself drawn up into heights that staggered the sense. He looked again and it was not a mountain but an impossible tower of diamond and steel, wall upon wall, arch within arch, rising to the heavens –

Annatar’s eye was fixed on him. He was back in the work-chambers of the Mírdain, the light burning low above the table.

“You do see it.” Real pleasure hummed in Annatar’s voice and - was that wonder, wonder great as his own?

He gathered himself. It felt strange to shape something as ordinary as speech. “What I saw,” he said, and he knew he had no need to explain. “Was that you?”

“You saw what might be our work together. The knowledge was mine. The beauty, yours.”

It was perfectly communicable after all, though his words were not those of the gods. His voice rose, the charcoal flew, he drew them all after him farther into the intricacies of creation, where metal might speak and stone might sing and light itself be wrought like clay.

“You understand how dangerous this knowledge can be, Tyelperinquar,” Annatar had said, very nearly in his ear, as his mind raced over the implications of what he had learned. “Not just persuading matter to co-operate with you, but changing its nature – you know the sort of power that will give you. It’s not everyone I would trust with this knowledge. But I do trust you.”

The murmurs from the Brotherhood grew louder still in his ears, questions and exclamations, people talking over each other. “So does it work?” came Veanne’s voice rising over the uproar.

“I haven’t tested this yet.” He thought his hand might be shaking, but it was perfectly steady, after all. “I wanted to talk it over with you first. And Annatar, he – he seemed to think this was a potentially dangerous matter-“

“Did he say not to share this knowledge with us?” Lindis seemed to know exactly what he was trying to say.

“Well, not in those very words. There was a lot about secrets and danger, and ‘this knowledge is for you alone.’ I told him flat out that there are no secrets in the Brotherhood, that what one of us knows we all know.” Celebrimbor pulled his chair out and sat back down as Lindis rose, ready to denounce the arrogance of the Ainur.

“He told me the same thing,” young Damros said suddenly. The hush at his words was instant, and Damros flinched at the sudden weight of the Brotherhood’s attention trained on him. “Well, not the same thing – he taught me an entirely different set of formulas and I’ll show you them in a minute – but he got me alone and said a lot of things about potential and coming up with a unified theory for mathematical expression of systems not governed by the distributive property… He didn’t talk about the applications at all, but it completely changes the way we’d understand light, among other things. I’ve been trying to work out the formulations ever since. But he – he spoke so strangely. It wasn’t just his words, you know, but in what those words did once they got into my thought. The idea that
with this, I could – that what he was telling me was beyond the understanding of – well, of the rest of you, I suppose.” He flushed.

“I – I did honestly think about keeping it to myself, and I’m sorry for that, I thought I was better than that. But in combination with what you’re telling us, III, about altering matter, I think I can see some of the applications now, and it-“ He sprang up and began scribbling a series of axioms down the side of the board.

As if this were a signal, all of his fellows began talking at once, some voicing indignation and suspicion, some demanding explanation of the system that Damros was outlining, some already attempting to find contradictions between it and Celebirmbor’s knowledge. Celebirmbor himself got back up and started sketching out potential connections between the two systems. He was less surprised than he thought he would be at Damros’s revelation; on reflection nothing Annatar had said to him implied that he might not have come to others of the Brotherhood with his quiet words and his burning knowledge, nothing that implied others might not have seen their own visions of power and beauty.

Gaeron tried to call the Brotherhood back to order. “Peace! Patience! There’s time for everything! All right,” he said, as the noise died down, “is there anyone else here with secret knowledge imparted to them by Annatar Aulendir?”

A slight motion of Naugwen’s head, and the Brotherhood spun to look at her. “Matter. It started from our talks on the language of matter, and what constitutes an elementary particle.” She wheeled her chair up to the board. “He came to me and showed me a way of talking about matter as a collection of forces-” She did not speak of what warnings Annatar might have given to keep this knowledge to herself, but Celebirmbor thought he could already hear them. “You hold the keys to the materials of the Mírdain, now you hold the keys to material itself. I have no need to tell you what harm the use of the earth’s elements can do…” Naugwen caught his eye as she wrote, and nodded slightly.

Gaeron now no longer made even the slightest pretense of keeping order among the Brotherhood; the departmental meeting had become something else altogether. At first it was a tangle of questions and objections, but soon a harmony emerged from the chaos, as the three branches of knowledge overlapped and blended.

“They’re not separate.” Tirnion was the first to say aloud what the group was coming to realize. “Put them together, and…”

“Lampstones. Light captured in stone. The lost art of Fëanor. To begin with.” Celebirmbor stood back, looking at the board. Damros seized on this immediately.

“It doesn’t even have to be stone!” he said excitedly, words tumbling over themselves. “It could work for – for any matter that’s reasonably transparent; it could work for glass, it could work for water –”

“Water?” Bruri interrupted him. “What happens when it spills? Does the light soak into the earth?”

“Very good then,” said Gaeron, as Damros made a how-should-I-know face at the Dwarf. “Pull together a working-circle and see if you can’t build some prototypes.”

The feverish heat of discovery sank back to a slower fire as the Gwaith-i-Mírdain sorted themselves out, appointing tasks. They turned to discussing the practicalities, and the troubling source from which this knowledge had come to them.

“Why you three?” Alagos asked, frowning.
“Is he trying to set us against each other?” Lindis’s voice was sharp. “I say Galadriel was right, and we throw him out from among us. Emissary from Valinor or otherwise, we have no need of anyone who treats us as game-pieces for his own amusement. And wasn’t that Morgoth’s own trick, to set the Eldar at each other’s throats?”

Murmurs of agreement and disagreement welled up across the table, but Gaeron spoke over them all so as to be heard by the entire room. “No. I think this was a test. To see if we truly trust each other as we say we do, or if the chance for secret knowledge will break the bonds between us.” He saw Celebrimbor looking hard at him. “Honesty, given your background, Celebrimbor, well, you can’t wonder why he would do that, now can you?”

“Come, Gaeron, if you do trust me, speak plainly. Fëanor allowed mistrust to rule him, Fëanor withheld knowledge and beauty from his people, and we suffer for it to this day.”

Gaeron gave an apologetic half-cough, but did not deny his meaning.

“So we pass the test that he failed,” Damros put in, hoping to forestall confrontation. “We will keep nothing from each other, not this knowledge, not the fruits of this knowledge.”

Those fruits were not long in coming. Though the theoretical side of this new mode of understanding promised to be a matter of discussion and research for centuries to come, the first practical applications were finished within days, and Celebrimbor had them ready to hand when Annatar came sweeping through his doorway.

He had just come from the workshops. “Tyelperinquar, that was a gift for you alone. Now you have set it loose throughout the Brotherhood? It is in the hands of Dwarves now. Of mortals.” His voice was clipped and his eyes were blazing, but Celebrimbor saw, or thought he saw, something that might have been satisfaction.

“Are you angry?” he returned, a challenge in answer to Annatar’s challenge. “I have never been anything less than completely honest with you. I made it perfectly clear that we of the Brotherhood do not keep secrets from each other. Our wealth is not to hoard. And besides, Lord of Gifts, anything you give me is mine to give away.”

He had had time to reflect on Annatar’s behavior. It had burned in him at first, it had burned from the minute that Damros had lifted his voice in the departmental meeting and he had seen that there was, after all, nothing so very special in the favor that Annatar had showed him, nothing unique in the meeting of their thought. But he had mastered himself, setting his own feelings and his guest’s motivations at an equally impartial distance. Caution? Duplicity? Test? Experiment? In the end, he realized, it did not matter. What mattered was his response, and the response of the Brotherhood. He refused to feel betrayed, and refused to entertain suspicion. The work judges itself.

He drew an egg-sized stone out of the depths of his sleeve, hung in a mesh of silver links. It shone with a bright, pale fire, like a star in the daylight.

“Here it is, Annatar, the first of our undying lights, the fusion of that knowledge you have given us. It is yours, keep it! Use it to light your chambers by night – you have most need of it, after all, since you don’t sleep.” He spoke in his customary crisp bantering way, but within he was alight with joy in the certainty that whatever the test had been, he had passed it – a knowledge that flared up to certainty as Annatar plucked the lampstone from his hand and he saw the flash of victory in his eyes.
Belatedly, that week, it occurred to him that in his preoccupation he might have been neglecting his friend, and he sought Narvi out in his favored nook in the dining hall. Narvi, grown very old indeed, his beard snow-white, was beginning to rumble about leaving Ost-in-Edhil again. “I shall stay till Midsummer,” he said, “and then it will be time for me to go back to my people in the mountains.”

“Must you?” asked Celebimbor lightly. “I can’t come with you this time, not with the work we’ve begun on light-capture. Make it next Midsummer; stay to see the harvest!”

Narvi shook his head. “I do not think there are many more Midsummers left to me, III, and if I go I shall not return.”

This struck home. As the centuries circled, Celebrimbor had grown accustomed to the way that mortals arrived and departed; had trained families through generations in the smithies. But perhaps because Narvi had always carried himself like a grandfather, he had not felt the approach of age in him. He took his knotty hand in his own. “If you are bound to leave anyway, brother, will you not stay with us a little longer? Stay and see our new work; surely death can find you here as well in the mountains.”

Narvi patted his hand. “I feel the need of the wisdom of my people. Yes, yes, I know there are my people here, and even Men, but you can’t hide the fact that at its heart Ost-in-Edhil is an Elf-city. You don’t know how to die, III, and I won’t be the one to teach you.”

“Are you so much older than I am, that you know more of death than one who crawled out of the wreckage of the First Age?” He spoke in jest, but with sorrow under his words.

“Why, so I do, for I am coming to my end in peace, not being driven to it with blood and sorrow. I open my hand and set down my tools and leave my works for others.”

“But not yet, surely not yet! It’s not just new work we’re doing now, we’re opening up whole new fields. Haven’t you talked to Annatar?”

“Who?”

Celebrimbor was surprised. “You haven’t seen him about the Mírdain? White robes, silver-gold hair, beautiful beyond the highest dreams of the earthly mind? I suppose it hasn’t been all that long he’s been here – only a matter of weeks – but it feels much longer, and I thought he’d gotten just about everywhere-“

“You still haven’t told me who he is and what he wants,” grumbled Narvi, “and I warn you, I can’t be bothered to memorize many more names.”

“Why, he is a messenger from the Powers, Narvi, and names himself Aulendil, a friend of the Maker himself.”

Narvi only glowered through his beard. “Hm. I have not heard it said that the Maker was fortunate in his friends.”

It was an unusually grand feast the Mírdain held that year to celebrate the Gates of Summer, the great festival marking midsummer’s eve. It seemed as if the whole city crowded onto the grounds of the Mírdain for the festivities. The longest day and the shortest night of the year held great significance to all the peoples of Eriador, and so the festivities of the Mírdain were a hodgepodge of ceremony and song, feasting and dance.
By the end of the day nearly everyone was wearing at least one wreath of flowers. Originally a custom of the Sindar, it had been adopted, and in part transformed, by the people of Ost-in-Edhil, and more than one person that day put their hand to their head to realize that they were wearing crowns not woven from the fading flowers of field and garden, but skilfully worked in wire and gemstones.

And when the sun sank at last, leaving the sky glowing in purples and blues, they left the bonfires burning in the courtyards and turned to the Great Hall for a feast. There was fish fresh from the river, and ocean fish pickled with mustard and dill, the first of the strawberries and the first of the new potatoes, sweet melons with the salty sheep’s-cheese made by the Men of the uplands, rye bread and barley bread and elderflower cakes. The kitchens threw open their store-rooms, tapping their casks of green wine shipped from the South and barrels of black beer from the mountains, as well as copious amounts of twice-distilled fruit brandy, whose coveted production technique had been an entirely accidental byproduct of early elemental refining experiments.

Singers entertained them while they dined. First, a quintet of Dwarves led by the Mírdain’s own Bruri intoned a chant in floor-rumbling harmony that seemed far too momentous to be – as they assured them it was – simply in praise of the food. Then a bard of Galadriel’s court rose, and recounted the story of the first meeting between the Elves and the Edain. He was a good singer, strong-voiced and with great force of thought, and the feasters in the hall saw that long-ago encounter now with Finrod’s eyes, now with those of the Fathers of Men, and each felt anew that ancient wonder and love that something so strange and new and fair should have appeared before them in the darkness of Middle-Earth.

“I can’t believe this was their choice of song tonight!” Lindis whispered to her friend Sildreth as the chanting rose, telling over the lineages of the heroes descended from Finrod’s first friends among Men. “Finrod’s record among Men was incredibly dubious, surely the last thing we want to be affirming is that way their culture was overwhelmed by ours?”

“It’s a gesture of friendship, I suppose?” offered Sildreth, who did not put very much thought into the existential complexities of relations between the First and Secondborn. “And besides, if they wanted one of the happy songs it’s this or Leithian, and we’d have to skip the whole section about –” She tilted her head toward Celebrimbor where he sat near the center of the high table. The Masters of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain were seated at the table that occupied half the dais at one end of the hall. The other half of the dais was occupied by musicians, a mixed consort of string and wind instruments. Some of the musicians were part of the music-circle of the Brotherhood itself, but others had been drawn in throughout the day, and they were now comfortable enough reading each other that they could improvise endlessly in various combinations.

When the feasting was done, the hour had grown very late. The tables were pushed back to leave the central floor clear in the middle of the Great Hall, beneath the leaded glass dome. Good will and good wine done much to erase even the semblance of gravity, and the dancing began before the floor had even been entirely cleared.

“Truly the world is changed,” Gaeron lamented. “In Gondolin that was, no voice was raised in that shining city from midnight until daybreak, and when the first light touched the Eastern sky our voices rang out like silver trumpets-”

“Gondolin!” said Lindis, from where she sat beside him, firmly but without scorn consigning it to the past. “It is a new world we live in, brother. Different, perhaps. Wider, stranger, more open. But not lesser. Look, now we have Men dancing among us, to show us how they too honor the summer.”

“I suppose so.” He sighed. “But I find them so hard to keep track of, here one minute and gone the
next and always getting worked up about the most unpredictable things. Why, this morning a mortal
was railing to me about the Nandorin footraces. I thought they were complaining about the oak-
leaves they wear for the race, and so I thought that perhaps the oak was some sort of taboo for their
people, but then I realized it wasn’t the oak-leaves bothering them, it was the fact that they weren’t
wearing anything besides the oak-leaves, and, well, what do you do with that? Also a mortal – a
different one – handed me this.” He pulled out a stem of flowering kingswort. “You wouldn’t
happen to know what this means?”

“They want to marry you,” Lindis explained. “Or, well, they may not consider it marriage -” But it
occurred to her that attempting to explain the distinction the Edain were in the habit of making would
only cause Gaeron needless perturbation, and she directed his attention instead to the dance floor. A
group out of Doriath was teaching one of their summer dances, an intricate pattern of circles that they
traced with light steps, bells tied to their ankles with ribbons. The other Eldar picked up the figure
without difficulty, and even the Edain joined in.

They danced late into the night as the moon rose, shining through the glass of the dome and casting
intricate patterns on the floor, old dances of fallen Nargothrond and Gondolin, and the line dances of
the shore-folk of Lindon. The round dances drew nearly everyone onto the floor: Knot-in-the-Chain
and Dusk to Dawn, Springqueen’s Wheel, Rings and Stars. Camlend, the master of the revels,
cajoled even the sour mortal Tassilo into leading one of the dances of the Gwathuirim, and a crew of
traders from the remote Northlands overturned two braziers in the center of the hall and danced
barefoot upon the coals, to the uproarious applause of the mortals and the ill-concealed astonishment
of the Eldar.

The dwarves, however, categorically refused to dance any of their mountain dances, despite
Celebrimbor’s earnest requests. “We will sing for the Brotherhood until the Sun chases the stars from
the heavens,” Narvi said gruffly, “but our dances are for war alone. It would be an ill omen on such a
night as this, for if you see us dance, then you must bear arms beside us, or fall before us. Ah! Then
our feet ring like hammers, and our voices raised are like the falling of boulders.” He slapped out a
warlike rhythm on the tabletop. “May you never see the dwarves of the mountains dancing!”

“What are you laughing at?” Celebrimbor demanded, seeing his eyes crinkle with merriment.

“Oh, I just pictured you of the Eldar attempting one of our dances. A fine series of bobbing
beanpoles you would be! The jest of the sight might almost make the blasphemy worth it!”

The Midsummer feast was a display of skill of a very different sort than the Brotherhood’s usual
works, but Celebrimbor was nonetheless proud of it, and could not keep from glancing frequently
down toward the end of the table where Annatar sat. More than once over the course of the evening
he had caught Annatar looking back at him, and heard his thought sounding in his mind like a voice
in his ear. Cheese with melon? Your Damros takes strange approaches in the kitchen as well as in
post-numerical theory. Yes of course I can eat; I just don’t have to. Some of the apprentices appear
to have placed lit candles in Alagos’s flower-crown, do you suppose he’s noticed? It was
conversation more lighthearted than he had come to expect from Annatar, and more intimate; he
spent most of the evening smiling to himself.

Now he glanced down to the table-end again, where Tirmion, very drunk, at the end of the table, was
importuning their guest. “Sing us one of the songs of Aman!” His flower-crown was slipping down
over one ear, and he was half-supported by his friend, who was scarcely more sober than he.

“Song?” cried his friend, with the perfervid clarity of intoxication. He waved the hand that was not
flung around Tirmion’s shoulders at the moonlight-dappled floor, where the dancers were tracing out
the final figures of ‘Gulls on the Strand’. “No, a dance! Lord of Gifts, will you not give us a dance?
One of the dances of the Blessed Realm!”

Tirnion seized upon this idea. The wine, evidently, had made him maudlin. “O Valinor!” he exclaimed, dropping into the most formal Quenya he could muster. “Fair land beyond the seas, where endless peace drops slowly from the fair fingers of… of…”

Damros caught the fire. “Do the fleet feet of Nessa the Ever-Young still fly over the green fields of Aman?”

Oh please, thought Celebrimbor impatiently, you have never even seen the green fields of Aman. He caught Annatar’s eye, and saw his own thought mirrored in him. But like a mirror tilted to catch the sun, and turning the clear image all to searing light, the mention of Aman closed something off in the mind of his guest, and he spoke no more to him. Celebrimbor looked hard at him from the middle of the table, troubled in a way that he could not put a name to.

But as if this had been some kind of signal, the Brotherhood were now pressing the envoy of the Valar for news of the Blessed Realm. The ones who had been born in Middle-Earth, to whom it was only a story, the ones who had left it so long ago that their memories of it had begun to blur, until they could no longer distinguish their own memories from those of others, recollection from story. Even the Men, still uncertain of whether this land in the West was a real place or merely a piece of Elvish poetry, were crowding around Annatar. The dancers left the floor to gather before him, and the musicians fell silent as their clamor rose.

“Valinor! Is that really where you are from?”

“Egalmoth’s folk, the House of the Heavenly Arch, did you see any of them there? Have any of them left Namo’s halls? You have returned to us – might they return one day as well?”

“Is it true that no one who sets foot on those holy shores can die?”

“Do the gods still walk among the people there as they once did?”

“You mean the Blessed Realm is real?”

“What is it like?”

At last Annatar rose and walked to the edge of the dais, and the crowd was hushed.

“What it is like? It is beautiful, yes. It is holy. It is blessed. But it is the duller for that it has never echoed to the songs of the Edain, the poorer without the craft of the Stone-Lords, the dimmer without the art of the Elves of the Twilight, or the might of the banished Noldor.” He looked out on them, across the hall, and as he spoke, each of his hearers felt his regard as if it landed on them alone, knowing their hearts. He turned slightly, looking back across the Brotherhood, and met Celebrimbor’s eyes.

“And I tell you that Aman itself is not so fair tonight, is not so blissful, is not so blessed, as this hall is and as these shores will be.”

Across the hall rippled a sound like the indrawing of breath, as if to cry out. He had them. But not giving them even a moment to react, he leapt like a flame onto the dark stone floor of the hall, and without music, without so much as the beat of a drum, began to dance.

He began slowly, in the center of the hall, moving through the shifting patterns of light and shade beneath the moonlit dome. His motions were at once fluid and precise, the edges of his robes trailing after him as the dance grew faster and as he swept more of the space into the compass of his dance.
Like the rest of the hall, Celebrimbor was frozen, unable to turn away. And he began to see the patterns Annatar traced in his motion, figures extending through space, like the projected expression of a greater pattern being mapped onto the visible world. So Luthien must have danced, he thought, the last time that light had triumphed over the darkness, and beauty over strength. So she must have woven her enchantment that had bent even the mightiest of the Powers to her will.

But Annatar’s dance did not lull the watchers to sleep, it woke them up. It pulsed with their veins, it beat with the beat of their own hearts. They heard him as if he were speaking to them, not as a voice speaking to their thought, but as a body speaking to their very matter and being. In his dancing he spoke of power, of the earth and its strength, of the world made beautiful, of the perfect order underlying the created world. Of the dance of the stars in the sky and the blood in the body, of the waters on the shore and the fires under the earth, and the subtle dance of the atoms too small to see, the elements combining and recombining.

He spoke of Middle-Earth itself, he spoke of all of them watching and he showed them taken up into that great interweaving of power and purpose and beauty. There was something martial in it, Celebrimbor realized suddenly, some of the ferocious sweeping movements were directly drawn from the traditional forms of a Noldorin school of swordsmanship. He even thought he recognized elements of the empty-handed fighting style of the Gwathuirim, Edain of the coast – the sudden startling inversions of position, the high graceful foot-strikes – and he could not tell whether it was meant to entice or to challenge.

No music was playing, but there was music implicit in every motion. The silent song echoing in his ears and in his bones, ecstatic and fierce and beautiful, Celebrimbor wondered distantly if they all heard one music as they watched their unfathomable guest, or if the melody called forth within each of them was different. They were all enspelled. The musicians watched in silent wonder, instruments fallen from their nerveless hands. Gaeron was trembling beside him, and at the other end of the table Veanne wept freely.

Something in the unheard music slowed, and Annatar drew to a pause before the dais. He was breathing hard with effort, and he bowed before them, but there was nothing of surrender in the lines of his posture or the set of his body.

Without realizing it, Celebrimbor was mirroring him, his own head bowed and his breath coming in gasps.

Neither ruler nor ruled he had named himself in pride, and he knew in that moment that he had to do something, something, or he would be lost. He could not possibly afford to find out what he would say if Annatar were to turn those golden eyes on him.

I am yours, and this world will be ours.

Pressing through the weight of everything bending him toward accepting his place in that overwhelming vision, he rose.

"The dances of Aman are fair indeed," he said, his voice sounding strange, harsh and unlovely. There were a few hoarse murmurs in the hall. That was no dance of Aman. Everyone knew it, even those who had never set foot in the Blessed Realm. Grasping for the energy that the dance had invoked to claim it for his own, Celebrimbor made his way from behind the high table to face him in the center of the hall.

"But is this a dance for one alone?"

The pause before Annatar replied was long enough to make everyone uncomfortable.

"It need not be."
He pressed his advantage. “You dance without music, but our steps falter without it. What shall I bid the musicians play?”

A sharp glance. Anger? Amusement? But Annatar stepped to the dais where the musicians were. And if the measures that he gave were not a rhythm but an algorithm, a series of instructions for building patterns off of patterns, then the musicians rejoiced to meet the challenge, for they were awake now, all of them; not a soul in that hall did not rise to the call, did not long to have great things asked of it. The music rose, bright and rippling and complex; it was not exactly what he had heard (seen? apprehended?) in the spiralling patterns Annatar had traced into the space of the Mîrdain, but Annatar sprang lightly back up and he had no more time to reflect, but only to act, matching him step for step and motion for motion.

It was not, after all, the same dance with two people, but it was not diminished in its power or its complexity. It was as difficult a thing as he had ever done, calling on all his faculties, but there was joy in the difficulty. He spun across the floor, keeping his eyes fixed on Annatar, concentrating on his partner in motion with the same timeless lucidity that he sometimes found in the act of creation, the sort of concentration that could draw him into the work for days at a time without rest or food.

He caught Annatar’s eye. *Are we fighting?*

Annatar caught his hand, closed the space between them. *Are we?*

Not enough, then, to keep up. Not enough to be able to read the designs Annatar was mapping onto the space; he had to add his own patterns to them. He saw to his wonder that Annatar answered his steps as well.

He laughed aloud, caught Annatar’s other hand, cast himself backwards – a variation on the central couple’s figure in the circle-dance that Camlend had led before the Mîrdain earlier that evening.

Somewhere far away, the musicians caught the theme and added the tune of Rings-and-Stars to their medley. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw motion behind the high table, and then he was no longer alone in the center of the hall, but the whole Brotherhood coming to his aid, linking their arms and dropping them again, circling around them in the driving, intricate rhythm.

Suddenly all of the hall was dancing, circle after circle forming around them, spiralling as if they never meant to stop, carried by the wild elation of doing something wholeheartedly, doing something very difficult, doing it together, and doing it well. The Dwarves drummed on the table, the singers lifted up their voices in wordless song, and the first rays of Midsummer’s day shone through the dome to find them dancing still.

Celebrimbor steadied himself against Annatar as the circles began to slow at last, and he felt that a great victory had been won, although he could not exactly say over what, or even by whom.

“Do you see it?” Naugwen asked, reverence in her voice, watching the perfect, impossible coordination of the Brotherhood. “This is the beginning of our greatness.”

“Hm.” Narvi looked grave where he sat beside her, the only two left at the high table. “To me it feels like the summer is coming to an end already.”
Footnotes:
1: "Flame-eyed"; the Sindarin term for the Noldor of Aman, who bore the reflected light of the Two Trees in their eyes.
2: "Anga" is the name for the third letter in the second tyelle of the tengwar, the voiced stops - but simply put, a G.
3: This is the Telerin form of Celebrimbor's name.
4: Altariel being a Quenya back-formation of the Sindarin name Galadriel that her husband bestowed on her. Thingol’s notorious ban on Quenya in Beleriand was not well-received by the Noldor of Aman.
5: Maedhros, the firstborn son of Fëanor, bore the father-name “Nelyafinwë” – Third Finwë – and the nickname Nelyo.
6: Following a draft of the story (Annals of Aman) in which Celegorm and Curufin rescue Orodreth from Sauron's capture of Tol Sirion.
7: Yttrium, one of what we know as the rare earth metals, shares most of the properties of the lanthanides. Not found in nature on its own (thus Greek lanthano, to be hidden, and covert in the Mírdain’s still un-reformed terminology) it can be refined from various oxides, and can be used in the production of synthetic garnets for lasers and acoustic transmitters, as well as an additive in metal alloys and glass composition.
8: The first is an actual pre-Lavoisier term for potassium sulfide, which is used for oxidizing silver, copper, and bronze; the second is speculation on a possible name for potassium sodium tartrate, a substance with some interesting electromechanical properties (it generates electricity under pressure) and uses as a reagent.
9: Tyelle – rank, grade, step.
10: Alert readers may have deduced that the element Naugwen is looking for is silicon. Annatar is being a bit of a jerk in sending her after specialty sand: ordinary sand would have worked almost as well and Naugwen will realize this after she succeeds in isolating it.
11: The communication of thought – mindspeech or telepathy. There is an extremely interesting discussion of this (which is included as a footnote to some of Pengolodh’s discusions on grammar, because Noldor) in the Osanwe-kenta, published in Vinyar Tengwar 39 and available here: http://fanmodules.free.fr/Our%20Resources/Magazine%20articles/VT%2039%20and%2041%20-%200Osanwe-kenta.pdf. Really the whole thing is worth a read.
12: If there is any further information on Molanoldorin, the language of the enslaved Noldor, other than a note attesting its existence, I have never heard of it. This is formed from Quenya oro, mountain, and the root hat, to break asunder.
13: Literally strong-stone, ie tungsten.
14: There is nothing in canon to suggest that Finrod ever returned to Middle-Earth. However, lines in the Tale of Beren and Luthien state that he did return to life, and in much shorter order than the rest of the Noldor. If he walks with Fínarfin his father beneath the trees in Eldamar, I imagine that he would have ridden at his father’s side in the final assault on Morgoth.
Chapter Summary

In which Celebrimbor and his friend embark on a project of world-altering scope.

Chapter Notes

Credit and thanks, as ever, go to my second person Sumeria, who made this stronger and more beautiful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If ever any beauty I did see
Which I desired and got, twas but a dream of thee.

- John Donne, *The Good-Morrow*

“Proper safety gear in the workshop, Annatar Aulendil, Maia or otherwise.” Celebrimbor advanced on him with a length of twine. “I don’t care where you were when the universe was created. Hair up and back, unless you want it to catch –”

Annatar gave him a contemptuous look, and began to arrange the white-hot coals in the forge with his bare hands.

“Flammability is not a concern of mine, Tyelperinquar.”

“Oh now you’re just showing off,” he grumbled, making one last token effort to secure the other’s hair. Annatar flicked it away from him with a toss of his head, and nestled a crucible in amongst the glowing embers.

“Had I known this was all it would take to impress you, I might have spared myself a great deal of trouble when I showed up on your doorstep.”

“You wouldn’t have though,” Celebrimbor retorted. “Turn down an excuse to dazzle? You?” But he watched his friend at work with ill-concealed delight: the concentration in his face, the steady grace of his hands, the slow translation of form from thought to matter.

Shortly after Midsummer, as if in response to some signal, Annatar had begun to pace about the
workshops with a different air. He was energetic, purposeful, engaged, at once both more and less unreadable than in those early days of quiet observation. He had started sketching out designs of his own as well as making modifications and corrections to those of others, and Celebrimbor found him one day in the Great Workshop going through the tool stocks, testing the edges of files, hefting bench hammers in his hand.

“So you do make things!” he exclaimed, with the startled, satisfied air of a scholar who has just made the observation that confirms a pet theory. “Real physical things, I mean; I was honestly beginning to wonder whether yours was an art entirely of asking awkward questions and watching us fall all over ourselves trying to answer them; all nolme and no kurwe.¹”

“Patience, Tyelperinquar! Everything in its time.” He tested the spring of a set of pliers and frowned.

“What is it you’re planning to make?”

Annatar did not in fact know himself what he intended, a strange state of affairs but not entirely unpleasant, and so he returned the question. “What would you see me make?”

Celebrimbor seemed first surprised and then pleased to be asked. “Why, whatever is in your thought. Find some material you like and celebrate it, some idea you like and bring it forth. Make something for the joy of it!”

“Well. Do you still have that chrysoberyl I saw you make?” He returned the pliers to their drawer beneath the table.

“What? Oh – yes, I haven’t done anything with it; it’s yours.” Celebrimbor was, in truth, absurdly gratified to hear that he had remembered the jewel at all.

“Surely you had some plan for it, though. Why else would you have made it?”

“I felt like making it, that’s all. It came into my mind, and I wanted to try my hand against the image I saw. The use comes in time.” He grinned at Annatar. “Now who’s impatient? Perhaps it would have been some of Lindis’s students making a jeweled breastplate for their lord back home, perhaps Tirnion would have taken it into his head to grind it up and use it as a pigment for one of his murals, perhaps I would have tried to use it in my optical experiments even though it holds no special light-virtue of its own. But if something you wish to make with it has come into your heart, it is yours, and gladly.”

“You are generous, heir of Fëanor.”

“You are not the only giver of gifts here, Annatar.” The bantering tone faded from his voice. “We – this is how we work, this is why we work, this is what we do and what we are. We withhold nothing from each other, and so we rejoice in gift. Not just in the generosity of the giver, not just in the richness of the gift, but to see great gifts received. The same way we’d rejoice to see a tree blossoming, or a gemstone cut so as to bring out the light.”

“Yes,” he said softly, “that is as it should be. But you no longer dwell in the innocence of Aman. Do you not fear that this joy is only as strong as the trust that upholds it?”

“Of course it is! But why should we be afraid? We have worked at that trust over long years, we work at it in all we do. And I think you have some reason to know that it cannot be lightly shaken.” He gave Annatar a sharp look. “Besides, ‘innocence of Aman’? I don’t know at what point you left the Blessed Realm, but you obviously know my family’s history, and so you know perfectly well that Aman was not innocent – not of loss, not of guilt, not of the breaking of trust.”
This struck home. “Not innocent, no,” Annatar replied, half to himself, “no matter how high the mighty Lords of the West raised their mountains…” For a few minutes he sat silent. “The joy of creation,” he said at last. “Well. Have you the stone?”

“Yes – not here, it’s in my workroom in the drafts section, filed with the things that are complete but associated with unfinished—”

“I know where it is.” Annatar stepped down off the stool and set off for Celebrimbor’s workroom in the tower. Over the next several weeks that summer, on and off, he worked on his private project. If in that time he also formed a work-circle with Noroth and Alagos and a handful of promising journeymen to harness the waters of the Sirannon for a hydraulic system that could be used to drive grinding wheels, presses, and drills in the Great Workshop, it only made Celebrimbor more curious to see what it was he was making.

When Annatar finished his project, he raised his head from work at a table in the Great Workshop, to find Celebrimbor flat on his back under the pipes by the wall, making adjustments to the new water-power system. He lifted the glittering object in his hand, and Celebrimbor hastily pulled himself upright and came over to take a look. He had cut the stones small and set them in a burnished metal that looked slightly too dark to be gold, forming a dappled pattern of light and shadow. It was too abstract to be anything definite, but under daylight when the stones shone green it suggested sun on the leaves, by lamplight red embers among the coals. Celebrimbor took it from him and tilted it back and forth to catch the two lights, the colors shifting.

“That’s beautiful.”

“Yes.” Annatar was looking at it, or perhaps at the hand that held it, with an odd expression. “It has been a long time since I made such things.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Do with it? Give it to the Brotherhood, I suppose. Add it to your treasure-house. Or, here.” Annatar took it back from him, fingers brushing against his own. Without any apparent effort, he twisted two of the tendrils of metal at its edges round to the back. “Now you can use it to keep your hair out of your face, since I know how scrupulous you are about workplace safety.”

Celebrimbor already secured his work-braids with heavy bronze ornaments of Dwarvish make, tokens of his earliest collaboration with Narvi. He looked at the small beautiful object, which its divine creator had evidently just designated a hairclip.

“This is... not going to revolutionize my entire understanding of how hair is kept up?”

“No.”

“It’s not going to alter the very nature of hair itself?”

“No. It has no power. Beauty, perhaps, but no more.”

“It’s not a mighty hairclip of the gods themselves –”

“Well, if you don’t want it,” said Annatar crisply, “I’m going to go give it to Bruri; at least the Dwarves seem to have a proper appreciation of—”

“I did not say that.” Celebrimbor plucked the ornament from his hand and set about threading two of
Annatar laughed softly, almost to himself. “No, this was an exercise. When I make something as a gift for you, it will be yours indeed, befitting you. You should bear adornments suited to your nature and to your own excellence, not just to keep your hair out of your work.”

It was a glorious summer, all long bright days and mild dark nights. Even the thunderstorms that punctuated the summer months seemed festive, although after a particularly heavy rain, a minor flood in the city’s drainage network filled a little-used terraced walk outside the curtain wall with mud and debris. Celebrimbor, who was always quick to sense an imbalance in the systems that supported the life of the city, assembled both cleaning and plumbing supplies and began setting the muddied walk to rights again. He was on his hands and knees with his hair tied back, cleaning out the drains, when he felt that bright pressure against his mind that signaled Annatar’s presence.

He sat back on his heels, and it occurred to him, with a leaping warmth in his chest, that Annatar must have come looking for him specifically, since he was not in any of the customary places he might have been expected. He nodded to him where he stood on the terrace above, watching him at his menial task of municipal maintenance, with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“I believe you do love this city,” Annatar said at last.

“And I believe you can give me a hand.” Celebrimbor tossed him a sponge from the bucket beside him.

“And so you care for it in even the smallest particulars.” But Annatar did come down the steps, stoop and begin to wash away the dirt on the close-set white stones. How he managed to kneel on a muddy surface without even a speck on his robes Celebrimbor could not be entirely certain, though he stole several glances trying to figure it out. In the meantime, Annatar went on, in a tone which suggested he was even now figuring this out for the first time. “You love this city, and so you would see it made great. Stronger. More beautiful.”

“Fewer drain-clogs,” Celebrimbor agreed, at last locating the obstruction in the pipe and dispelling it with a few Words of dispersal; there was a rushing and gurgling of water under the ground.

“Even so I would see this world made great,” said Annatar. “So I would see the Brotherhood. So I would see you.”

“Did you just compare me to a drainage system, and should I be insulted?” The drain cleared, Celebrimbor replaced the cap on the pipe. “Well, I’m not. Insulted, I mean. It’s a splendid drainage system. I designed it myself when we built this city.” He turned to the task of vigorously scrubbing the stones. “Though we’re probably going to have to increase its capacity before too many more years go by. The new water power apparatus we’re using in the workshop now is putting a strain on the existing pipes and we’re only going to see more floods like this.”

Annatar wrung out his sponge. “You have water running all through this city as a source of nourishment, a source of cleansing —”

“And of fountains for Gaeron to mope by and sing of the memories of fair lost Gondolin,” Celebrimbor put in, “don’t forget that.”

“But it’s a source of power too, you know.”

“Indeed; one of the mightiest in Ea! I’m not complaining about the new hydraulics – don’t think I
am, they’re magnificent. But they have consequences for the whole city’s water system, which we’ll have to figure out and adjust for. Incidentally,” he added, “speaking of water and systemic consequences, if there’s any metal alloying work you urgently want to get done, now would be the time to do it. Next year we’re going to stop most smelting activities for a few decades to give our water purification systems a chance to recover.”

Now it was Annatar’s turn to sit back and look surprised. “Really?”

“Surely you didn’t think we’d show such disrespect to the river as to burden it with more than it can manage, in terms of acid from the copper-works, alkaline drainage leached from the steel slag and the waste rocks? Unlike some people, we may not have helped to create this world, but we are at least part of it; we too labor for its healing.”

“I do see that.” Annatar took to his scrubbing again. “But do you really plan to set aside the works you’ve set your hands to?”

Celebrimbor blinked at him. “You’re as immortal as we are – more so, by some theologies. Is that impatience? What, are we going to run out of time?”

“It’s only that it seems a surrender, and why should you surrender? The river should be clean, strong, and sound, that’s true, and your people should be at work, that’s true too. If it’s only the want of power that keeps you from having both, why isn’t power the question you’re addressing? Wouldn’t it be better if you just – commanded the elements to separate themselves, with no waste, no contamination?”

Celebrimbor laughed. “First you give us too little credit, now too much! If you find yourself capable of persuading the covert substances of earth to yield themselves each according to their kind – which I have no doubt whatever that you can – you are welcome to do so! But not all of us are divine beings whom matter itself delights to serve.” He paused, looking at Annatar. “Wait a minute. Why are you down here in the mud cleaning the floor? Surely you could – I don’t know, speak but a single word and scour this whole place clean?”

“Of course I could.” Annatar ran the sponge along the mosaic at the edge of the terrace, and the colored tesserae gleamed. “But aren’t you making some sort of larger point about setting the world in good order? My power does not yet suffice to do that with a word; not even my Master could have done so, in the morning of the world. And since you apparently consider cleaning the drains to be a fitting use of the mastery and art of those skilled hands, heir of Fëanor, joining you in the mud appears to be the price of your company.”

“A high price indeed!” Celebrimbor snorted. “Look at you, you might as well be reclining at the High Table for all the effect the mud has on you. It’s an open question among the Brotherhood,” he added, “are those actual robes, or are they just part of your fana?2 If they are merely an extension of your thought, that would certainly explain why how you never get them so much as smudged.”

Annatar had blithely ignored his directives about proper workplace clothing as well, and wore his invariable flowing white everywhere. Usually the first time a burning glede caught in the folds of a garment was enough to teach an apprentice to value practicality over vanity, but Annatar had yet to meet with any sort of mishap, and his clothes appeared to demonstrate the same imperviousness to fire as his person.

“Are you asking me if I’m capable of removing my clothes?” Annatar’s face was a study of innocent perplexity, so entirely uncharacteristic of him that Celebrimbor was nearly certain he was being mocked.

“What do you think I am,” he returned, “one of the Edain? I assure you, the question was purely –
well, primarily –” he corrected himself, feeling Annatar’s evaluative, uncomfortably perceptive, attention on him, “metaphysical.”

Annatar looked at him sidelong and held out a fold of the rich bright fabric. Celebimbor hastily scrubbed his own hands off in the bucket and took it between his fingers; it certainly felt like cloth.

“I know where I am in the world at all times, Tyelperinquar, and as a result I don’t get it smeared on me,” said Annatar dryly. “I thought that your people also knew how to move through Arda without besmirching themselves. Clearly this is another of the arts they have lost,” he added, “judging by the state of your sleeves.”

It seemed like the summer begun that year would never end, that while the seasons of the world rose and fell around them, the Mírdain had begun a time of flourishing that only increased in strength and fruitfulness, unfolding and unfolding, a fractal of progress. Works of the hand begun in that time had an unusual beauty and brilliance, and works of the mind a surpassing incisiveness and clarity. Thought sparked, ideas caught fire, and it seemed no one could leave a discussion without glimpsed greater realms of understanding extending out all around them. The journeymen sang at their work and the arts of the Brotherhood, in the form of knowledge and in the form of well-wrought treasures, flowed out across Eregion and beyond. Celebimbor himself, swept up in the joy of creation, completed dozens of works and began dozens more, across such a breadth of disciplines that the name Fëanor began to be once again spoken in the context of Art rather than of War.

Annatar was everywhere, working and teaching – Damros even persuaded him to guest-lecture a class full of apprentices – but most particularly he was in Celebimbor’s company. They shared, it seemed, a certain kinship of thought, and the Brotherhood marveled equally at one of Fëanor’s line associating himself so closely with one of the Ainur as at the reverse.

“Have you changed toward us?” Celebimbor asked him suddenly one day, as they worked side by side in the forges.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Only that now it seems you’re more often to be found at work beside us than stalking about looking down upon us, for all the world as if you were making notes for a pass-examination we didn’t know we were taking.”

“Perhaps you know me better now,” said Annatar mildly. “Or perhaps I know you better.”

Celebimbor did not pause in his work, but he looked up, while his hands kept the rhythm of blows on the heated metal. “Come now, none of your enigmas. I think you’ve thrown your lot in with us.”

“Perhaps I have. What a waste it would be not to!” But there was a note of severity in his voice, though he spoke lightly. He struck his own piece on the anvil, the blows sharp and brisk and steady. “The task before us, after all, is not about you and the Brotherhood, or even about me – delightful as the Mírdain is and happy as I might be to spend the next few centuries lounging in your dining hall, so long as I could be assured of a consistent supply of lemons. We have greater deeds before us.”

“Now I think you speak nearer the truth.” His hammer sped up, the hot metal sparked and rang beneath it. “I have seen what is in your heart, the image of my own.”

“Middle-Earth restored–”

“Stronger, more beautiful –”
“As fair even as Aman.” The two rhythms joined and merged and intertwined, weaving in and around each other.

While surely not all of the renaissance of the Mírdain could be attributable to the presence of one of the Holy Ones among them, it was widely agreed that Annatar certainly contributed. “If nothing else,” said Tírion, sitting with a small knot of Masters at a sparsely-attended departmental meeting in Sildreth’s greenhouse, “he completes the set, and now we can say truly that all the kindreds of Middle-Earth are represented in the Union of the Mírdain!”

“All the kindreds?” asked Alagos, staring at the ceiling. “You must forgive me, Tírion, because I am Noldor and hence sadly ignorant of the lore of these shores. Are the orcs said to be a kindred, or are they some other kind of thing?”

“Come off it, Alagos,” returned Tírion, “I mean all the fair kindreds, or all the free kindreds, or – precisely whatever you would like me to mean,” he added hastily, seeing Alagos draw breath for another question. “You know I would say anything to please you.”

“How can that be true, Tírion, when nothing would please me better than that you should take no heed of what I think, but would speak only the truth as you see it?”

Lindis refused to let the conversation be drawn off the topic of Annatar and onto the topic of the state of the soul of Tírion of Doriath. “I don’t know that I like the particular notice he takes of Celebrimbor,” she said. “The last time one of the Holy Ones bent the full force of their attention on one of the Children of Ilúvatar, he forsook the light of Aman itself and lost his folk in the gray woods of Eglador.”

Veanne shook her head. “I have no fears for III; there’s nothing can turn his heart from the works of his hands.”

“The last time one of the Holy Ones joined with us,” Tírion put in, with unusual seriousness, pulling himself back to the argument at hand, “they built a kingdom that withstood Morgoth himself.”

The Brotherhood agreed it would be premature to view Annatar’s commitment to the Mírdain as comparable to Melian’s to Doriath – though Tírion maintained that it was only a matter of time rather than of qualitative difference, and that, reluctant as he was to admit it, Celebrimbor should consider himself no less worthy of the love of the Holy Ones than Thingol was of old.

“Worthiness is hardly the question,” said Lindis, refraining from taking up their longstanding debate about whether Thingol of Doriath, long ago Tírion’s own lord, should be considered a meritorious ruler. “The question is what exactly Aulë’s servant means by the particular attention he pays Celebrimbor –”

“Is that in doubt for anyone here?” Tírion made an exaggerated display of surprise, more through force of debating habit that through anything else. “If I may be permitted the argument-from-experience, which as the scholar Angolwen says in her Of the Art of Measured Speech, is not the weakest form of –”

“Get on with it!”

“I have seen what it looks like for one of the gods to love one of the Eldar.”

“Are you really saying that’s what Annatar’s behavior looks like to you?”
A languid, expressive shrug. “There’s more abstract mathematics and fewer nightingales, but otherwise, I wouldn’t say I saw a difference.”

Though not all of the Mírdain could agree on the significance of his intentions or on his effects, Annatar was prized among them, and beyond them. A song was heard across Eregion that among the Wise in Ost-in-Edhil dwelt one with the secret knowledge of Aman, the fathomless might of the ancient Powers, and a face like Dior the Beautiful.

“Wait, who?” demanded Annatar, when Celebrimbor, laughing, reported his praises to him as they sat at opposite end of Celebrimbor’s worktable. “Really? That – mortal?”

“Apparently a very good-looking mortal?”

Annatar, when he was at work, sank into a sort of tranquil storm, at once stillness and furious activity, like the motion of clouds in the sky or of the stars in the heavens, which Celebrimbor never tired of watching. At the moment he was writing with one hand in his precise, fluid script, and sketching with the other.

Celebrimbor looked over at his drawing. It was a motif he had seen in Annatar’s sketches before – indeed, Annatar had left partial schematics of it in the margins of some of his own papers on his work table. It was something like a fortress and something like a city and something like a mountain, an unreal edifice of power and structure on a scale that skirted the boundaries of comprehension.

He stood up and came to stand over his shoulder, watching the tower rise across the paper. “You can’t build those walls like that,” he said after a minute, “not unless you want them to collapse under their own weight.”

“And how if they were not built at all, not as you think of walls, but rather mantled, draped like curtains around a frame of steel?” Annatar picked up another paper, and, disregarding the figures already on it, began sketching a cutaway view of one of the upper stories. “But you are right. Barad-Daer, the Great Tower, is still only a dream, an unsolved problem. The material for the foundations might yet be devised, the question of wind shear answered, the seismic load balanced. But where would we find the amount of steel that we would need, and the fuel for the foundries? The laborers to build it and the food to feed them?” He glanced up, amused at the puzzlement on Celebrimbor’s face. “Why, craftsman, surely you did not think that mighty works can be accomplished by the increase of knowledge alone? Many problems, truly, but one solution and that is power.”

Celebrimbor looked at the cutaway sketch of the upper section of the tower, and then back to the full-scale drawing on the other paper. One of the Mírdain’s cats had walked across it, leaving smudged ink-stains, which Annatar had turned into clouds around the midpoint of the tower to give some idea of scale.

“They say that the Valar raised the Mountains of Defense higher still, after we left,” he said, slow and thoughtful. “Is this something from Aman?”

Annatar laughed to himself. “This is nothing of Aman.”

He had come to them to deal in knowledge and in power, but Annatar found himself at home in the Mírdain. An informal society had sprung up within the Brotherhood, based around an insatiable love for debate and discussion. They clustered in the summer gardens on fine nights, and in the dining hall on chill or rainy ones, turning a question or a topic over and over among them. It was Gaeron who dubbed them the Tehtar, since, as he said, they were forever changing the meanings of words, and
the truly wise had no need for them at all. They adopted this designation with wholehearted merriment. Annatar joined them on occasion, at first in order to evaluate the arts of persuasion as practiced among the Elves but somewhere, imperceptibly, his interest had shifted and he began to enjoy the discussions themselves, the intricate interplay of thought against thought.

They were sitting around a lit brazier in the dining hall one autumn evening, turning over the question of power and duty, and whether the increase of the Brotherhood’s knowledge and skill changed their obligations toward Middle-Earth. Annatar was reclining in his usual place among them when Celebrimbor and three assistants came in, almost staggering with weariness from seven straight days of labor in the forge and the workshop. His assistants – journeymen who were assisting in his researches into the practical applications of Annatar’s theories on the transmutation of matter – headed straight on through the hall toward the dormitories, but Celebrimbor, seeing him, took his place at his side. He flashed him a sardonic smile, and silently pushed a bowl of steaming black tea toward him.

One of Naugwen’s assistants was holding forth on the benefits that Elvish knowledge would bring to other kindreds. “Our art will serve the cities of Men –”

“Cities?” interrupted Tirnion. “Of Men?”

“It’s not so absurd as it sounds. From what we hear, there are cities in Numenor already.”

Aracir nodded, indignant. He was a Numenorean captain stationed at the Vinyalonde colony, who had led a small company of students and traders up the river to spend a year at the Mírdain. “In Numenor? Of course there are! Our ports in Middle-Earth are nothing to the mighty cities of Andunie and Armenelos across the sea. But let a voyager tell you: there are cities of men on these shores too, in distant Rhun, and Far Harad.”

Annatar considered the Numenorean carefully, picking through the confused shapes of his unguarded memory. No, he had never seen those cities, never seen the markets of Teliz or the stone-mounds of Qara Qurun, but he had traded with those who had. The reach of the ship-builders of the West was growing.

“Yes,” said young Dalis of the Gwaithuirim, who had come to the Mírdain from a forest tribe tracing its origin to lost Beleriand, “Cities of men, to be sure, in places where our people do not have to deal with the Wars of the Powers knocking them back to the Age of the Stars.”

“Oh please,” put in Tirnion waspishly, “your people never saw the Age of the Stars.”

“It’s happening again,” said Lindis, frowning. “The same thing that happened in Beleriand to the Fathers of Men, the same thing that happened in Aman to us, the same thing that will happen any time there’s an imbalance like this, where one group holds power that the other does not. You may speak of spreading knowledge, of serving Men, but, don’t you see, you cannot help but rule them?”

There was some indignant outcry at this, and then debate over whether the increasing Sindarin literacy rates among the peoples of Eregion meant the loss of their own lore and languages, and objection from the Numenoreans at the idea that the Mírdain exerted any sort of power, implicit or otherwise, over them. Annatar looked over at Celebrimbor, who was expressing no opinion at all. He curled one of his work-braids around a finger and began to undo it. His friend noticed nothing, but stared abstracted into the tea in his bowl.

“But you can’t mean that we should withhold our knowledge, hoard our arts for ourselves,” protested Damros. “No, if we are lords, we shall be lords of gifts alone.”
“What need to speak for the mortals when we have so many of them right here?” Alagos waved an arm vaguely at the gathering around the table; nearly a quarter were Men.

“Indeed! They’ve seen this city, seen our works. And goodness knows what they make of Annatar — what do you make of Annatar, Aracir?”

Aracir met Annatar’s eyes across the table, and Annatar returned his gaze coolly, combing his fingers through the unbound strands of his friend’s hair. The Captain raised his eyebrows, crinkling the blue wave-tattoos on either side of his temples. “I think if we had one such among us in Numenor, we should make better use of his wisdom than you do here on Middle-Earth.”

“Really?”

“Do you know for how many centuries we have looked to the forbidden West in longing, knowing that just beyond our reach lies all the power, beauty, wisdom, and wealth of creation? That though we have all the world beside, we can never have that? But you have one of the Lords of the West in your company, a servant of the Earth-Master himself–!” He shook his head. “If you were in Numenor, Holy One, we should have you enthroned in a temple, not reclining at table drinking tea.”

Annatar was amused, but this last was evidently too close to sacrilege for the others at the table and one of his men hastened to modify the Captain’s terms. “He means only we should do you fitting honor, if you chose to bring your wisdom among us. We know that you Holy Ones serve also.”

“We have Holy Ones too,” offered Tel-Eithar, a Man of the native river-peoples who had come to the Mírdain in his old age, to spend his final years amid the wonders of the Elvish city. “Our Holy Ones are not powers, but men like us.”

There was a murmur, both from the Elves and from the Men of Westernesse, at this blasphemy, but Lindis, who had made more of a study of regional customs than anyone there, stepped in. “Do you mean people who are exceptionally good?

“Not good, necessarily,” Tel-Eithar blinked his rheumy eyes at her. “Exceptional, yes. We also call them the Eaten Ones.”

“You have spoken well, Tel-Eithar,” said Annatar, speaking for the first time that evening, “and your people’s wisdom is deeper than that of many whose lives are longer. To fully submit yourself to greatness is to be consumed by it.” The table hushed directly, all eyes turned towards him.

“Ah! I can think of no one better to instruct me than a servant of the Powers,” said Alagos, visibly delighted that Annatar had chosen to speak up at last. “Surely you can tell me, Aulendil, what is the duty of one who holds power?”

“Let me define my terms,” said Annatar, smiling, “for I know you are waiting to pounce if I do not, and you spare neither god nor man.” He circled his hand though the steam from his tea bowl; the steam followed his gesture, took shape, dispersed. “Power is not power until it is directed. Until then it is only – potential.”

“Do you mean, then, that it is the duty of those who hold to power to guide and direct those who do not?” asked Damros.

“That would certainly explain why an emissary of the Valar has come to us,” someone said into their tea bowl. Celebrimbor heard the sounds of interest around the table, but could not be bothered to disentangle them.

He was half-dozing beside Annatar, for he had just finished a week of physically and mentally taxing
work in the forges. Clear and strong among the blurred murmur of voices, Annatar was constructing an edifice of argument whose import appeared to be that the greater had no obligation whatever to the lesser. The duty of power, he was saying, is to its own nature. The great must do things befitting their strength, the lesser must serve the greater, so far as they are able.

“Everyone looks up,” he said, and devotion reverberated in his voice. “To find strength worthy of their service, or to find service worthy of their strength.” There was a hush when he had finished speaking, as if the hearers had caught something of his own reverence.

Celebrimbor could make no proper reply; in his exhaustion Annatar’s words and the ideas they evoked rested in his thought as strange mathematical knots, more image than argument. He pulled himself up straight. “This is too deep for me,” he said with a yawn, “and the tea isn’t helping; resolve the nature of the universe among yourselves and tell me about it in the morning.” As he rose to leave the table, he felt an unfamiliar looseness of hair about his ears. He put up a hand to find his hair partly unbound; so deftly he had hardly noticed him at work Annatar had undone all the forge-braids on one side and had started on the other.

“What?” said Annatar, unrepentant, as he turned to glare at him. “The working day is over. Besides, if you expect me to lend my thought to these matters, I need something to keep from becoming distracted; this habit you finite beings have of doing only a single thing at a time is not one I feel inclined to adopt.”

“Well, I suppose this is better than you drawing buttressed core diagrams down my arm like you were doing during Naugwen’s mass-conservation demonstration.”

“There was no paper to hand,” Annatar pointed out, “and there you were beside me. And, as I recall, you came up with some very interesting commentary on the provision of water in tall structures.”

“Yes, when I was scrubbing it off!”

In attempted revenge the next day he ambushed Annatar as he sat at the work-table, and tried to braid one of the simplest forge-styles into his hair. Annatar raised one eyebrow at him and then proceeded to ignore him entirely while his efforts, one after the other, simply slipped out, and he was obliged to concede that his hair was apparently as resistant to braiding as his garments to dirt and fire. Since Annatar showed no inclination to stop taking his own hair down every time he suspected him of being distracted enough not to notice, Celebrimbor quietly started braiding it in ever more complex knots, threading it like a rope puzzle through the heavy bronze Dwarvish ornaments that Narvi had given him. Annatar accepted the unspoken challenge, and took to punctuating particularly intense debates by handing him the ornaments he had managed to remove.

The ornaments were for Celebrimbor a cherished reminder of Narvi’s sturdy and plainspoken presence, though he was now long gone from among them. He had left the Mírdain, as he had promised, after that notable Midsummer, and a few years later word had come from Khazad-dum of his death. The Brotherhood gave him a kingly funeral, but he was buried among his people in the mountains.

“I am sorry he never saw us as we are now,” he said, turning over the ornament that Annatar had just dropped into his hand and looking thoughtfully at it, where they stood in his work-quarters. “The machines that we’re building, the work we’re doing with fluid dynamics, the gems we can make now, light in stone itself... But I know I speak more for myself than for him; he attained, I believe, exactly what he wished.”

Annatar made a small dismissive noise that was not quite contempt, but neither was it so far from contempt as Celebrimbor would have liked. “You, I hope, are not so easily satisfied.”
“Never, gift-lord.” He twisted his hair back up and grinned at him. “Now, come with me to the Great Workshop; I have a lens to grind.”

“Back to your optical experiments?” Annatar asked him as they took their way up the stairs.

“No, a demonstration lens for the apprentices.” He pulled the raw glass in a soft pouch out of his sleeve. “Simple magnification. They’ll be making a dozen of these for Aracir to take back with him when he returns to Numenor. The mortal mariners have a real use for them; they can’t see as far as we can.”

Annatar hefted the glass in his hand. “Hm. You have noticed an increase in the number of Numenoreans at the Mírdain, haven’t you? The name of Ost-in-Edhil rings out even across the sea, and the ship-peoples have taken note.”

“Increase? I suppose they have increased; I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Really? For someone with your understanding of the subtle systems of the world,” said Annatar, “you can be extraordinarily blind to some of them, Tyelperinquar.”

Celebrimbor shifted his shoulders as if to slip free of something. “I leave diplomacy to Gil-Galad first and then to the Lord and the Lady. I mean, if you wish to take a few decades to map the intricacies of who owes loyalty to whom and who prioritizes what, I’m not going to stop you! But for my part, I’m still pursuing the service of the world as a whole.”

As he held the workshop door open for him, a black shadow slipped from beneath the table and came twining about Annatar’s feet. Normally employed in the libraries for the protection of the manuscripts, this cat had decided that she found the warmth of the forges and the surpassing breakability of the retorts and alembics in the workshop more congenial, and before long had adopted Annatar for particular attention.

She was black with a white blaze on her chest and two uneven white spots on her face. There was dispute, afterwards, about who had first come up with the idea, but there was soon an informal competition among the apprentices to see who could come up with the name most likely to make staid Elistar gasp and pious Gaeron rail. *Iron-Crown* and *Unlight* were both proposed, to general hilarity, and Tîrnion’s entry *Miaulkor* would have been the obvious winner if it did not make even the apprentices uncomfortable. But after the cat had thoroughly entangled the workshop stools with a ball of string, Annatar himself had dubbed her *Ungoleg*, or Little Spider, which was generally accepted as an admirable threading of the needle between blasphemy and amusement.

“Certainly explains her affinity for the treasures of the Mírdain,” said Celebrimbor with as straight a face as he could muster, when Annatar had introduced the creature purring in his lap as Spider. “Still, as long as she restricts herself to knocking them off shelves rather than devouring them, I can’t see why we’d have any complaints.”

Spider was not the only one who appreciated the treasures of the Mírdain. Works of art, gold and silver and precious stones, bearing the artist-marks of the Brotherhood, were prized in kings’ treasure-houses from the woodland halls of Lorinand to the distant ports of Andunie beyond the sea: Tîrnion’s crown of ivy, Naugwen’s stylized grid, Celebrimbor’s own eight-pointed Fëanorian star.

The comparisons to his legendary grandfather were inevitable, but Annatar appeared to be actively encouraging them. Almost universally when speaking of him behind his back, and occasionally to his face, Annatar referred to him as *Fëanor’s heir*, and Celebrimbor was still not entirely certain that he was not, for some private purpose of his own, making a game of him. It bothered him; the fact he was bothered infuriated him, and realizing what power Annatar’s opinions – serious or not – had
over him, had begun to be a matter of serious concern.

“Fëanor’s heir?” he said abruptly one afternoon, interrupting Annatar’s lengthy critique of one of his recent efforts in the field of crystalline geometry. “I wish you would stop calling me that.”

Annatar looked at him very seriously for a minute, and then burst into laughter. “You’re a terrible liar.”

Irritated, he searched for a new phrase. “Fine, I don’t like it when you call me that.”

“Tyelperinquar, you are still lying to my face, and I begin to wonder if I should be insulted.”

Celebrimbor started to say something and stopped himself, but Annatar, in the pleased tone of someone working out the final steps of a proof, went on:

“Yes, and that’s why you’re not telling me to stop, why you won’t even ask me to stop, because you’re afraid that I would.” A smile slowly unfurled across his lips. “Why, you subtle-minded jeweler, you want to be your grandfather’s heir – and why shouldn’t you? – you just don’t want to have to admit it.”

Celebrimbor’s hands were stilled at their work, and he glared at him so fiercely that for a moment it seemed that his next word must be a curse, his next move a blow. Then suddenly he laughed. “If I were truly Fëanor’s heir, you would have to look to yourself for speaking to me so, Annatar, demigod though you be! But no, I do not have my grandfather’s fire.” He picked up the thin piece of wire he had been working with, and looked ruefully at the model he was building to diagram crystalline lattice translation vectors. “In more ways than one, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, now you are speaking the truth.” Annatar settled softly beside him on the workbench. “Afraid... though you speak so bravely of regaining your lost arts. Aman has nothing we need, you said, but your grandfather’s fire no longer dwells in Aman. How should it? Not even Aulë knew how to protect what was his.”

Celebrimbor looked back at him, almost taken aback to realize there was no mockery in his tone.

“Yes, afraid. You know there is no way back, but you fear there is no way forward, that the strength and the beauty are gone forever from the world...” Annatar was looking not at the model, but somewhere past it, into the distance. He hardly seemed to be speaking to him at all.

When he was sure that Annatar was going to say nothing further, Celebrimbor spoke, with some effort. “I know that there was more to him – to my grandfather – than the anger and the suspicion, and that – that light, that hard-edged brilliance. But that’s all I can remember.” He sighed. “It’s hard to tell, now, the truth from the legends. Spirit of Fire, they say... Of course anyone who works in the forges for long builds up some tolerance to heat, but they say he was like you, handling liquid steel as if it were water, looking through the innermost structures of matter as plainly as if he could see them with the naked eye.”

He turned toward him on the bench. “And the things he must have seen, Annatar! To have created as he did... The Silmarils were his heart’s labor; he poured his very soul into them. Passing that light through your very self, through your body and mind, and giving it back to the world again –”

There was reverence in his tone, and Annatar looked sharply at him, hearing in his voice the echo of his own.

“I should have liked to meet him,” he said at last. “Your grandfather.”
“So you never did?”

Annatar shook his head slightly; the lamplight glimmered in his hair. “My Master was a great admirer of your grandfather’s work. But no, I never met him, save only, perhaps, through his creations, through his legacy.”

“And all Middle-Earth can say the same.” Celebrimbor looked up toward the skylight, as if seeking the evening star. “For good and for ill.”

He turned his attention back to the model on the table, lifted it and rotated it by half a turn. “Being the scion of legends is a dubious distinction, after all, even if they were fairer legends than those that follow my family. My – someone mocked me once, telling me to build myself a better family to have been from. And I –”

“And so you are doing?”

Celebrimbor twisted a wire into place on the model. “Not to make them better than they were, but to see that what survives of them is – is worth it. Is what was worthy to survive. To see Fëanorian become more than a curse.”

He disentangled the wire and removed it, dissatisfied. "That’s why it bothers me, Annatar – and you know perfectly well that it does bother me. I can strive against Fëanór’s faults when I see them in myself; that’s the easy part. Don’t hoard my work, don’t mistrust my friends, don’t draw sword on my brother, don’t lead my people to destruction – all that I can do! But how can I live up to his heights? Fëanór’s heir? How can that comparison be anything other than a mockery?”

Annatar took his hand – no, took the wire, though he lingered with his hand on his. “I do not mock you, brother.”

He straightened the thin metal back out, running it between his strong fingers, and laughed to himself. “Besides, are you going to stop calling me emissary of the Valar any time soon?”

He pulled the model toward himself and began to interweave the wire, its surface now tarnished to a contrasting darkness, at an angle to the lines traced by the model, outlining a plane through the lattice.

“What are you doing?” Celebrimbor tilted his head on one side, following the interlaced shapes.

“You don’t recognize it? It’s the same thing we’ve been working on for the last century or so: the joining of the immaterial to the material. Now, if you take this shape to represent the quality you are embedding in the structure – keenness, say, or subtlety –”

The conversation passed to other topics, but the strangeness of Annatar’s final remark lodged in the back of Celebrimbor’s mind, and returned from time to time to trouble his thoughts. What did Annatar intend to convey by that reference to emissary of the Valar? A warmer reflection curled beside his doubts: the Mírdain all addressed each other in fraternal terms, but this was the first time that Annatar had called him brother, and the weight in his voice, like the warmth in the brief touch of his hand, seemed to carry with it a significance greater than the word or the gesture alone could bear.

“Steady. You’re weaving it through – forward – down –” Annatar was standing directly behind him, his hand on his as he threaded the reinforcing filament through the inner structure of the material. It was too fine to be seen with the naked eye even by the Eldar; Celebrimbor was working through a high-powered magnification lamp held just above the surface of the meshwork. Annatar was not, but
it was still an open question whether his mode of perception could be accurately described as *sight*. In any case he had no difficulty whatever in guiding Celebrimbor through the precise, intricate steps. “And – there.”

He released his hand and they regarded their work together, with the mingled wonder and exhaustion of having finished something difficult. Celebrimbor was looking at the enriched material, but Annatar was looking at him.

“You don’t flinch at my touch any more, I see.” He seemed pleased, or perhaps mocking.

Celebrimbor pushed the magnification lamp out of the way and gave him a rueful look. “Oh, you noticed that, did you? And I thought I was being so careful to suppress it.”

“I’m sure you were.”

“I was proud of it, even; took your hand without so much as a blink despite the fact that on some supraphysical level you appear to be white-hot.”

Annatar laughed. “One of your kind, I don’t doubt, wouldn’t even have noticed. But I saw it, flicking along your nerves: *pull back!*”

“Well, you can’t possibly be ignorant of the effect you have on people.”

“It’s the fires of my old master, I think, that you sense from far off.” Annatar looked at him, cool and curious. “But you don’t even think about pulling back any more. Why?”

Celebrimbor shrugged. “I suppose because I’ve learned you won’t actually burn me.” He thought, but did not say, that he could remember every single time Annatar had touched him; bright illuminated spots that stood out against the field of his memory like stars.

Annatar paused, not the empty quiet that indicated loss of interest, or the warm humming quiet of satisfaction, but as if he were working something out. Then, seeming to come to a decision, he reached into the intricate folds of cloth behind his waistband (he had never assumed the red sash of the Masters though they had offered him a place among them) and drew something out.

“Here. Take a look at this.” He tossed him a small shining object.

Celebrimbor turned it over in his hand. It was heavier than it had any right to be, a gold ring with a simple line pattern etched around the edge. It was very beautiful and clearly reverberant with significance, and he had not the least idea what Annatar meant by handing it to him.

Annatar watched him, expectant.

“Lindis has told me,” he said lightly, “about a people of Men somewhere over the mountains who have a custom where, after a triumph or some great feat, their leader gives rings to his thanes or to those that have pleased him, and for this reason their word for lord can also be translated *ring-giver.*”

“Can it now.” Annatar was clearly unimpressed by his linguistic digression.

“I think, though, that they don’t distinguish between arm-rings, what we’d call bracelets, and rings for the hands, like this one –”

“Tyelperinquar.”

“Oh, very well.” He looked at it closely, tracing the line of the ornamentation with the very edge of
his finger. “It... it’s not just jewelry, is it? It clearly does something; I can practically hear its song.” He attempted a few equations to describe it; none of them fit. “What does it do?” he asked at last.

“It magnifies. Like your lenses.”

“Magnifies what?”

Annatar stepped close behind him again, leaning over his shoulder, reaching forward to set his hand under his. “Look at its nature, Tyelperinquar. Really look at it.”

Annatar’s voice low in his ear, Celebrimbor looked at it, with the mind more than the eyes. He saw the ring, and he saw the world through the ring, made clearer, sharper, more tangible. He felt the absences in its nature, and what they called forth from him, and how they converged with it and through it –

“...Power,” he said softly, turning his head, raising his eyes to Annatar’s. “It doesn’t do anything, not as such, it just focuses the wearer’s will.”

Annatar’s smile turned to an outright grin.

“How did you do that? Pure potential – that shouldn’t be possible, even the most powerful of our artifacts have always been power for something – beauty or strength or endurance or whatnot – I can’t even picture what you must have done to make something this, this – universal!”

“Would you like me to show you?”

“Would I – Annatar, if you don’t show me how you made that, I shall be forced to conclude that you never had any regard for me, that this last century has been the run-up to a joke in very poor taste.”

“Very well.” His eyes were inches from his own; he could feel his breath against his face. “Watch carefully; keep up.”

In the images (sound? sense?) that unfurled in his mind there was something in the beginning that he recognized as the shining arrangements characteristic of Greater Working, part music, part matter, part math. But the harmonies of the shapes became strange and their surfaces unreal and he lost the thread that had made them comprehensible; the light in his mind became intolerable and his consciousness recoiled, overwhelmed.

“Ow,” he said, and glared at him.

“You did ask,” said Annatar, smug.

“Clarity of language is a virtue, Annatar, I believe you’re the one who’s always telling me that. Now show me again, in the world this time; I don’t care how long it takes.” He rolled the ring between his fingers, thinking back over the aching bright spot in his mind and trying to pick out the bits he understood. “You began with the metal itself, correct? We’ll start there.”

The schematics, graceful lines and precise measurements in silverpoint on a sheet of clay-prepared paper, covered most of the drawing board. “Rings...” Celebrimbor said, raising the scribe-compass to check the arc he had traced. “An awful lot like oaths for my taste, really. Can’t it be some other object? Crowns or scepters or even jewels, that would work, surely?”

“No,” replied Annatar, across the table without lifting his head from his work mixing refractory
plaster in a large bowl, Spider watching him from a high shelf and flicking her tail, “it must be rings. I understand that among your people a ring signifies a bond, a promise of one sort or another, but consider also: a ring is worn on the hand, which is the instrument by which the will is enacted upon the world. And circularity is crucial to the Working,” he added, “we couldn’t dispense with that in any case.” He handed a stick of wax to Celebrimbor. “Now work up the model, and be sure you do not alter the proportions here by even a hair, by even a grain.”

At first Annatar had insisted that he replicate all points of his design exactly, but as the long work of preparation went on – diagrams and drafting, compounding metals, devising a water-powered vacuum bell jar for removing the air from the investment plaster, he found himself incorporating Celebrimbor’s suggestions or at least beginning an extensive file of potential modifications for further exploration once he could be assured that Celebrimbor was capable of recreating his original model.

Celebrimbor, meanwhile, was developing the suspicion that Annatar was experimenting with the technique at the same time he was teaching it to him.

“Of course I am!” he said when Celebrimbor, half-joking, half annoyed, pointed out that the equation he was finishing was certainly not the equation he had started, and that he appeared to be making significant refinements and alterations to his ideas in the process of explaining them. “What, do you think that knowledge is something unalterable, fixed and perfect like the stars? Knowledge is like a skill, something that is always being made more perfect.”

He took the wax model from Celebrimbor’s hand. It was the latest in a series whose predecessors had all been rejected – they had stopped keeping track around sixty-five – and smoothed away an invisible imperfection with the corner of the nail of his index finger.

“The concept is something I’ve been working on for a long time,” he went on, holding the wax ring up to his eye level and turning it slowly, “how to get to pure power, power without limits – or whose only limits are the will of the wielder. But it wasn’t until I started working with you on your optical experiments that I saw my way clear to the execution. Sprue this,” he added, handing the model back to Celebrimbor.

For an instant he didn’t grasp the implication – that they were ready to move to the next step in the ring-making process and build the channels through which the molten metal would flow as the ring was formed. When he realized what Annatar had said, that this model was finally worth casting, he laughed aloud with pleasure and relief, and Annatar looked over at him, amused.

“Don’t get excited yet, Tyelperinquar, we’re still going to have to set it up. The diagrams for the sprues and the gating equations are – wherever you’ve filed them, probably somewhere nonsensical like next to your lunch or under the cat.”

It did turn out to be too early for celebration. Annatar made him discard his efforts at stage after stage, citing metaphysical complications ranging from ‘inadequately detailed historical reference’ to ‘placement without comprehension’. Celebrimbor gritted his teeth and made notes and attempted to translated his objections into replicable terms. “You do know we will have a method of measuring each of these by the time we cast the next one?” But by the end he found that he was able to anticipate Annatar’s criticisms: finishing his sentences as he was still drawing breath to speak, or exchanging judgements with no more than a look passing between them. When the final mould at last was in the kiln burning off the wax, Celebrimbor stepped back from the fire-bricks, weary and gratified.

“I’m curious, Annatar,” he said, grabbing a corner of his companion’s sleeve and mopping his forehead, “why this? I mean,” he said, seeing him narrow his eyes, “do these rings have any effect on you? I can certainly how useful they’d be to someone like – well, like me, like us, we finite
creatures.”

He sat down on the stool behind him, Annatar’s sleeve still twisted around his hand. “It’s a very
mortal thing in some ways, isn’t it, being able to do things, better, faster, more... But why is power
something you’re interested in? You seem, and believe me that I am not flattering you when I say
this, like you have all the power you need."

“That’s a good question, Tyelperinquar.” Annatar twitched his sleeve away from him. “Surprising as
it may be to you, my power is not fact infinite. I have known those whose power is only limited by
their will, but I myself...” He trailed off, though with him it never seemed like a thought left hanging,
but more like a pause in a piece of music.

“And so,” he said, “like the mortals I must devise tools to effect those changes to the world that those
of greater order can simply exude by their nature. And who knows, perhaps by the time we are
finished working on this, we will have perfected a ring that surpasses this –” he spun the prototype
between his fingers, “in kind and in degree as much as the lenses you make to see the hidden
structures of the elements surpass the reading glasses you grind for the Dwarves!”

“If you reinforced the strength of the metal itself,” said Celebrimbor, his thought already sparked by
his words, “What about working on the metal while it’s solid, what about forging the rings rather
than casting them? You’d lose some complexity but you’d gain in integrity; you could layer the
Workings in the grain of the material –”

Annatar took in his speech with enjoyment, the warmth of his interest as glowing and tangible as the
heat from the kiln.

“I’ll try that. We’ll try that. If it turns out you can do this at all,” he added. “But really, Tyelperinquar,
have you forgotten who I am? True –” and he handed the prototype to Celebrimbor, pressing it into
his palm and folding his fingers closed around it, “this ring cannot be said to make me stronger. But
there is great power in bestowing power. These rings are not for me; they are for all of Middle-Earth.
For you. I want to raise you up beside me.” He tightened his fingers around Celebrimbor’s, pressing
the cool metal of the first Ring into the flesh of his hand.

The latest version of the casting flask withstood the heating and the curing and the cooling and the
heating again, and at last Celebrimbor was cranking the casting centrifuge to its highest tension while
Annatar melted the enriched metal in a crucible. He dipped his finger in the molten gold and brought
it to his lips, for all the world like a cook assessing the quality of a sauce.

“I will never get used to you doing that.” Wearing heavy leather gloves, Celebrimbor fit the glowing
casting flask into the centrifuge. He found his thoughts turning back to another workshop and other
fires, to the days when he was a child, crouching in the corner of his father’s smithy, watching him
pour molten bronze into casts, filling the clay cups with liquid fire.

‘What are you thinking, Tyelpe?’ his father had asked, noting the intensity of his interest.

‘It’s beautiful,’ he had said, the red and golden light glimmering in his eyes. ‘It looks as if you could
drink it.’

‘And if you tried it,’ his father had retorted sharply, ‘you would burn your lips off, burn your tongue
out, burn your throat up, turn your flesh to scorched meat and your blood to steam, and you would
shortly die, though not nearly so shortly as you wished.’

“Hm,” he said, watching Annatar lift the glowing crucible out of the flames.
“What are you thinking?” he asked, seeing his abstraction. Celebrimbor recounted the memory, and his father’s words, and Annatar laughed heartily as he fixed the crucible into the centrifuge.

“Do you know there are tribes in the South who do just that? Treat molten metal as a drink, that is. It’s their punishment for liars, I hear, and for traitors.” He stepped back from the centrifuge and nodded to him. “Men really are the most extraordinary creatures, Tyelperinquar. Let go.”

Celebrimbor released the spring on the centrifuge and it spun into shuddering action, the thick liquid metal forced by the whirling motion deep into the spaces of the mould. The two of them stood together, watching the fiery circles traced by the bright gold in the crucible and the dull red of the casting flask, the shifting shapes as one gave way to the other and the rotation rate began to slow.

“Come with me,” Annatar said suddenly. “I want to show you something.”

Celebrimbor looked up from polishing the ring they had made together. It was heavy, heavier than it should be by its size and composition, but it had none of the resonance he sensed in the prototype Annatar had given him. That prototype he was now wearing on his left hand, despite his usual rules about jewelry and workplace safety. He was in his office, anyway; he told himself that he would take it off if he were in the forges.

“At this point there’s nothing more you can do to its...” Annatar considered which word provided the best approximation of his meaning, and settled on, “...body. All the work on the Ring to this point has been in making the right kind of material. Think of that –” he tapped the ring Celebrimbor was polishing, “like a lens blank. Now it’s a matter of grinding that lens so the light is focused through it.”

He was now walking swiftly through the halls, his footsteps soft and firm on the stone floor. “Only it’s not light it will focus, but the wielder’s will, and you’re polishing it not with grit and sapphire dust but with your own understanding. Fortunately you have a master copy on your hand there, so you can use that as a reference.”

Celebrimbor hurried after him up the stairs to the Great Workshop, the edges of his robes flying, clutching the ring he had made.

“But we’ve been working on all that for weeks. I’ve had to invent an entirely new branch of mathematics just to describe what you’ve been telling me about the way that this ring can focus the will. Spread functions and encircled energy, degrees of coherence and angle of deconvolution – you know I’m going to run all this past Damros to see if he doesn’t have a more elegant way of putting it.”

“He won’t,” Annatar put in, “but yes, you know what needs to be done. I’m about to show you how. That was the knowledge. This is the art.”

The Great Workshop was almost empty, with no classes or ongoing projects set up among its worktables and heavy equipment. A team of apprentices were conducting some sort of experiment in one corner that involved a lot of explosions, colored smoke, and uproarious laughter. One glance at the two of them and they swept their equipment into a box and hastily scattered, leaving them alone.

Annatar, unwontedly agitated, circled the workshop two or three times before settling on a spot beneath one of the tall windows, looking out toward the mountains in the east.

“Here?”
“Yes. Good light. Stand just there.”

It might have been Annatar’s prototype ring on his finger, or it might have been something else, but a sort of dreamlike alertness had settled upon him, like the hush that settles over a crowd when the singer rises to begin, or over an army when the enemy is glimpsed in the distance.

Annatar took up a place standing close behind him, one hand on his shoulder, one hand curled around his, as if he were completing a circuit, making of him a circle within a circle.

“Open your hand, Tyelperinquar.”

The ring glittered on his palm, heavy and golden and innocuous.

“Look at its nature,” Annatar murmured in his ear. “You know it; now understand it. Look at it, really look at it –”

He saw it. It slipped into his consciousness as easily and gracefully as if it had always been there. And it meant — His thought went back to a Vanyarin shrine he had seen in Valmar long ago, whose dome was inlaid with calligraphy. He remembered standing beneath it and looking up in wonder at the design: his grandfather’s letters transformed into geometric tracery so abstract he had not at first realized the unfolding pattern was a hymn as well as a tessellation. And he remembered the shock of recognition and joy as the intricate interwoven shapes resolved themselves into letters, the letters into words, the words into meaning. He could read everything the ring had to say.

“You see it.”

“But it’s simple,” he said, or thought he said, for he could not tell if there were sound or not behind his words. It was simple, ordered and beautiful, almost inevitable, like the steps to a dance. He stood at once in the Seen and the Unseen and Annatar stood with him. He could feel his breath, the clean ozone scent of his skin, the stable warmth of his hand around his.

“Now you can touch it. Lightly. Take your time. This process should be gentle and prolonged. Your thought against the structure of the Ring, mind against matter, you should hardly feel it catch.”

He reached toward it in thought and felt it spinning under his touch, a sort of frozen motion in his mind, a physical representation of the equations he had labored over for weeks. As it passed beneath the pressure of his understanding, he felt its substance buckle and blur, and wondered if he had damaged it. He could not break his concentration so far as to turn to Annatar but he started toward a question, a sudden doubt for which he had no words.

“No, that’s fine,” Annatar’s voice went on, steady and quiet without a break. “That’s exactly it. Do it again, more deeply in its structure, but more delicately this time, then more delicately still, just as if you were polishing it. Each step erases the damage of the previous step. Test it as you go; test it against your own knowledge and against the master copy. Feel the will passing through it, measure the defects in the focus and return to keep shaping it —”

He saw the whole thing so clearly: the Ring and its power, growing ever more brilliant under his touch. He saw the whirling dance between substance and thought, the stillness at the center where the two met. His creation called to him and he replied, strengthening and building it up, layer upon layer, refining and reinforcing the empty matter with the fullness of his own thought, pouring himself into it without stint.

He heard someone speaking sharp words in his ear, but he did not heed them. The metal in his hand looked almost liquid, though it had lost nothing of its form. It seemed like flames danced over his
hand, a painless fire. This was touching the heart of creation itself; it asked great things of him and he
rejoiced to answer, his eyes for an instant flashing as golden as Annatar’s own.

Sound faded, thought and memory evaporated, and through the brilliance of the light he felt
everything spiraling away from him, and then nothing more.

Someone was there; it was all right. The order was gone – that perfect, transcendent order – but he
didn't feel the loss. He felt hardly anything at all. After a while it occurred to him that he was lying
on a cold hard surface, and that if he opened his eyes perhaps he might see where he was. There was
a period of struggle while he attempted to remember where his eyes were and how to uncover them,
so many troublesome little muscles and nerves. He was briefly proud of the success and then
wondered at himself: was opening his eyes usually such a project? It hadn't made so very much
difference anyway. He blinked, and slowly focus started to come, the blurs of light and darkness
around him resolving themselves into shapes.

The high ceiling of the workshop, bluish in the diffuse afternoon sun. Off to the side, a shimmering
shape like a pillar of light, which after a few minutes formed itself into Annatar, his arms folded,
looking down at him.

“Well, Tyelperinquar Curufinwë. You can hear me now, I take it? Good. You do still have a soul,
evidently. ”

His eyes were still the only thing he could move, but they were becoming easier to control. He found
Annatar's face, his eyes bright with scorn and his lip curled, somewhere between amusement and
disapproval.

“If that wasn't the stupidest thing you’ve ever done, I’m not sure I want to hear what was. You’re
immortal, you know, not infinite.”

His face felt stiff and unfamiliar; he could hardly move his lips. Each breath was a considered effort;
not painful exactly, but exacting a degree of concentration and difficulty not usually required by the
untiring labor of the lungs. After a few soundless attempts at speech, during which Annatar watched
him coolly, he managed a wordless groan, an inarticulate jumble of breath and voice. The contrast
with the power and harmony in which he had just been enveloped struck him as ridiculous, and he
would have laughed, but he could hardly even manage a smile.

Annatar did not seem to be amused. He glared down at him. “You know that being Fëanor’s heir
doesn’t make you Fëanor himself.”

“I’m not –” he croaked.

“Well certainly not the way you’re going. Did you listen to a word I said?”

Words were coming back to him. “Are you going to stand there lecturing me, or are you going to
help me up off this floor?” He tried to sit up, but he could not feel his limbs; his awareness of his
body shaded off into grayness and a sort of blank weight.

“Perhaps there will come a day, Tyelperinquar,” Annatar went on, ignoring him, “when you come to
your great work. When you create something that is worth spending your soul on, something you
can look upon and say if I make nothing greater than this, still I will count it all worthwhile. But
today is not that day. At least it had better not be,” he added, stepping closer to Celebrimbor’s line of
vision, “because if it is, that is your heart’s labor, your very self that appears to be, well, fused to the
ceiling."

He looked up. Something like a black scorch mark marred the white stones of the arched ceiling. But his eyes still would not focus properly; it kept growing larger and smaller, changing shape as he looked at it. He thought distantly that given the evident spectacular failure of their efforts and his resulting incapacitation, he ought to be alarmed, frightened, or dazed. All he felt, though, was a muted exhilaration, a blunted wonder, a singing eagerness to try again.

“What a cruel and unfeeling master you are, Annatar. Have you no pity for my reduced state?” He tried to look particularly pitiful, but his face was still too numb for much in the way of expression.

Annatar, still unamused, showed no inclination to stop lecturing. “Suppose you hadn’t lost control when you did, what then? Then we’d be left with a Ring containing your soul, and a fine lot of use that would be! You’re supposed to be using your self, your own power and understanding, to shape the focus of the Ring, not as the – the raw material! You’re forming it, not bonding to it, you –” He hissed with annoyance. “You weren’t ready for this; of course you take it into your head to try and improve on a technique you barely understand in the first place, you, you jewelsmith, I should never have proposed anything more complex than a shiny piece of jewelry–”

"Worked out, though," Celebrimbor pointed out from the floor. "In the end. Well, not worked exactly, but think of what we've learned!"

Annatar began pacing about, and the motion left coronas of fractured color trailing in his wake. “I told you once, when you were in no frame of mind to listen, about knowledge that is dangerous to possess and still more dangerous to exercise. Now, perhaps, you see what I was talking about?”

“Mm.” He found that he could move his head slightly. Annatar frowned.

“And you’re still planning on teaching this to the entire Brotherhood, aren’t you.”

“Just as soon as I can figure out how to do it myself without, well, this happening.”

“You really are impossible.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen until I get off this floor,” he offered, "so any time you’re –”

“You’re not making me any more inclined to help you up, you know.”

“I’d laugh, but I’m not entirely sure I have the lung capacity right now.” He made the experiment and produced only a soft wheeze. This seemed terribly funny to him, but Annatar's expression tightened and he began another lecture on things that would make an unimpressive legacy, behaviors that constitute a bad use of resources, and shining examples of poor decisions, all drawing exclusively from Celebrimbor's own recent activities.

Once Annatar was entirely satisfied that he had conveyed his disapproval, he took advantage of his immobility to lecture him on the proper application of the focusing technique and to quiz him on exactly what he had done wrong. He showed every intention of continuing his harangue until Celebrimbor could get up or until he could precisely replicate in speech what he had done, why he had done it, and what steps he would take to avoid doing it again, whichever came last. He even dragged over one of the rolling boards for the purposes of drawing diagrams, which he obliged Celebrimbor to describe in detail since he was capable neither of sitting up nor of holding anything in his hands. The sun was rising by the time feeling came back to his limbs, and well in the sky before he could stand unaided.

"Well." Annatar cast an evaluative eye on him as he let go the table–edge, swaying but upright.
"That took you long enough. Eat something. Drink something. Go to bed. Do what you incarnates do; you’re no good to anyone broken."

"You are the impossible one," he said, "you do know that, don't you?" But Annatar was already calling down the stairs for assistance, and soon secured a couple of wide-eyed apprentices to take him back to his chambers with instructions to bring him tea and food and to keep him away from anything involving Rings.

Nothing about the experience had dampened his spirits, not even Annatar's lecturing. Sitting in his office wrapped in blankets poached from around the Mírdain – his bed was entirely obstructed by a large-scale architectural model – he thought back over the unaccustomed vehemence of his companion's reaction. Had it been concern he had glimpsed in those golden eyes, before it was smoothed over by scorn and amused distance? Flatteringly, he decided that it had been.

His muscles were dreadfully cramped, as with serious exertion or mild seizure, but later, it occurred to him that if he had fallen straight to the floor, there should have been more bruises on his person, and the thought of what that implied – that Annatar should have caught him as he fell – was more gratifying than he could admit even to himself. In spite of the long labor all to begin again, he counted his first foray into ringmaking a thorough success.

“Yes,” said Annatar, inspecting the ring with the sort of critical look that Celebrimbor was now entirely certain pierced through substance to the spirit. “That will do.”

“Do?” he retorted. “Annatar, this is work as fine as yours or finer; don’t play the grave and grudging master with me!”

“Well, then, perhaps it is.” Smiling, Annatar passed it back to him, heavy and shining and resonant it lay on the palm of his hand like a small sun. They stood side by side, the late afternoon light from the workshop windows slanting across the jewelers’ table. Celebrimbor had seen this moment in his thought so often, the moment of success. He had thought that he might leap or sing or cry aloud, go running down the hall in disarray shouting ‘Yé! utúvienyes!’ like some Vanyarin math-mystic who had glimpsed the exponential growth constant. But now the time was here, he felt only calm, settled and confident. It was more like opening a door than reaching a mountain-top: cool air in his face, bright sun, all the world before him, his friend at his side.

“And now we’re quite sure that its making isn’t some unfathomable divine secret, it’s time to show this to the Brotherhood. Goodness knows they’ve been wondering what we’ve been up to, shut up together for so long.” It was his turn to take a critical look at the Ring. “This one may not be the labor of my soul,” he said, “but it’s a start, brother, a start!”

He ran his finger around its circumference, as if he expected it to make a sound. “I am sorry my father will never see this. I think it would have eased his heart, to know that I –”

He broke off.

“That you...?” prompted Annatar after a moment.

“That I could still create, after all. That I was free. That he had not, in the end, dragged me down after him into the darkness of my family’s fate.”

Annatar paused before he spoke. “This is the first time I’ve heard you speak so of your father.” After all this time, in what should be a moment of triumph, that he should break that silence was a gesture
either of unusual distress or unusual trust, and Annatar did not miss its importance.

“Yes, it’s not exactly courtesy to speak of one’s ambivalence toward one’s father in the presence of people whose relatives he murdered! Even my aunt, the Lady of Eregion, I wouldn’t ask that of her. I know how she loved her brother, and my father betrayed him to his death.”

He sighed and shifted his shoulders. “Among others.”

Annatar turned, leaning back against the table so he could look him in the face. “Your father – Curufin, yes, as he’s known to the songs?”

Celebrimbor nodded, not looking at him. “He was the only one of the brothers, you know, to go by the name his father gave him. His own name, Curufinwë... It’s not our custom to use a name more than once, but Fëanor did, and so did my father.” He slipped the Ring into his sleeve, but went on staring at his empty hands. “They said of him once that he was Fëanor’s very image, in face and hand and mood, and I don’t think there was anything you could have said of him that would have pleased him better.”

He sighed, and his face darkened. “No one compared him to Fëanor by the end. They were asking how they could even have seen a resemblance between them. They still ask. How was it possible that the cherished son of the greatest craftsman of our people should leave no great and enduring work within the world, how all that should remain of Fëanor’s image was treason and violence, murder attempted and achieved, failure and a thin smile. I asked that myself once, but after – after Doriath, I knew the answer.” He raised his eyes to Annatar’s; as if he found after all, a kind of relief speaking of it. “He had no labor of his soul; the Oath left him no self to spare. In the end, it hardly left him a self at all.”

Annatar held his gaze; he had noted that he was speaking to him as he would to no one else, even to Galadriel, and he responded to that knowledge, glowing pleased and attentive and oddly hungry to hear more. “The Oath?” he asked, his voice hardly more than a low clear sound of focused compassion.

“I saw lesser bonds – every lesser bond – crumble before it.” He spoke with unusual difficulty, words stopping and starting like lines in a rough sketch. “I’m not – not trying to excuse him, you understand. But he was bound to it, and I believe he knew it, knew enough to see what he was becoming. At least at first. And I have always wondered whether I gave up too easily on my father.” He gathered himself, straightened, pushed behind his ear the last remaining braid his friend had not undone. “But that is an old wound.”

“Easily? Tyelperinquar, you do not strike me as someone who gives up easily on anything.” Annatar did not cite corroborating evidence – he was, after all, listening to a friend’s confidences not constructing an argument – but he brought the weight of his thought into his words: the dark waters surging over ruined Beleriand, the bones on the shore, Aman has nothing we need.

Celebrimbor laughed, or it might have been a sigh, a quick breath without sound behind it. “Well, it didn’t feel easy at the time of course. I believed the best thing I could do, in respect to my family, was to reject them. Perhaps that’s true; certainly I think anyone you asked would say it is. But the things we said – we were both trying to hurt each other, more than anything else, and that was all that we were left with, in the end.”

A restless, unhappy gesture, like a struggle with an unseen enemy. “You are right, Annatar, of course you are. I refused to give up on Middle-Earth. Was my father so much more marred than the world itself? After Doriath, I longed to see him again, to tell him I was sorry. But now I would tell him more: I would tell him that I forgive him.”
Annatar put a hand on his shoulder. He still projected, almost automatically, the air he had adopted with the Mírdain, that of a wise and generous lord concerned for the good of all. But underneath and alongside it, sharper, fiercer, and less controlled, burned an increasing interest in Celebrimbor himself. It was much curiosity as compassion, and as much desire as either. Celebrimbor did not mark it; his face was turned away.

“I do not know if I ever will see him again. In the very best case, the gulf of death and the Great Ocean lie between us. In the worst....”

He turned back to him, his usually expressive features still and desolate. “They swore themselves to the Everlasting Darkness. No one knew what that meant, no one knows now. But I saw the shadow falling over my father, falling over each of them, eating them away into nothing. Do they remain in the world at all? I don’t know, Annatar, I don’t know.”

“Is it so terrible to turn aside from someone rather than following them to destruction? Fëanor’s wife did, or so they say. Your mother did the same thing, did she not?

This pulled Celebrimbor back directly from the darkness of his thought. “No! Stars and spiders, how it would burn her to know that’s what most people think!”

“But she did not come with you to Middle-Earth.”

“Indeed not. But you must remember, Annatar, Morgoth wasn’t the only one who took Elvish lives – not even the only one of the Valar. After Alqualonde, in the storms of Uinen’s rage and grief – the Teleri ships that didn’t burn were wrecked, and those aboard them drowned.”

“Your mother?”

Celebrimbor nodded. “She had ridden in the front of Fëanor’s host, for her people had long been friends to the Teleri. Perhaps she thought they would not deny us, seeing our need, perhaps she thought that she could persuade them to help us, perhaps she was only acting according to her conscience, as she always did. The battle – none of us knew anything about fighting, I don’t think anyone could really believe that our friends would do this to us, let alone that we would do this to them, and yet somehow, suddenly, there you are, and you’ve done what nothing else on earth could do: you’ve ended someone’s life.

“It was such chaos. In the storms, as we fled, I called for her, but there was no answer, I reached out for her in thought but I could not find her. I thought at first it was – it was something I had done, that because I had shed blood I was now cut off from my people...”

He shook himself. “Well. We all had a great deal still to learn about death at that point.”

“Tirnion?” Celebrimbor looked up into the spreading branches of the tree, where, based on the rippling notes of the ganeladen, the flat nineteen-stringed instrument favored by the people of Doriath, his fellow member of the Brotherhood was amusing himself. “Are you up there?”

Tirnion must have replaced the instrument in the branches of the tree itself, for he was empty-handed when slipped down to the ground, poised as always, not a fold of his green and gray robes out of place.

“Why, my lord of the House of Fëanor, have you come to me for counsel? Surely you cannot fail to be aware that I have been voted by the entire department as the worst possible source of wisdom, and am to be kept away from apprentices and Edain?”
“What? When did we decide that? Not that I disagree.” Celebrimbor laughed and settled himself on the bench by the courtyard wall.

“Oh, Gaeron runs out of things to fill the meeting agenda with from time to time.” Tirnion was very nearly constitutionally incapable of dropping his flippant manner; he took a seat on the bench beside him. “But you have come to me, and not for a design question, you’re not carrying papers and you’re not dragging that Maia with you. Why, you have come to me for counsel on matters of the heart.”

“Well, yes.” Celebrimbor saw no point in pretending to subtlety. “You also – you chose someone who prizes you as a partner, who cherishes you as a companion, but who will not and cannot love you as you do him.”

The tale of Alagos and Tirnion had assumed the status of legend; there were even songs about it, at least one of which had been traced back to Tirnion himself. Alagos had come from Aman in the train of the Arafinwëans, a stonemason who had labored with Finrod in the building of Nargothrond. An inveterate contrarian and lover of debate, he had the unfortunate tendency to act upon his arguments, which was not a habit designed to lead to a life of peace.

When Beren’s demand summoned the King of Nargothrond, Alagos had loudly questioned the justice of Finrod asking his people to accompany him on a mission to steal someone else’s treasure, and when that mission ended in catastrophe on the Isle of Werewolves, he went about questioning the hypocrisy of the sudden turn against the Fëanorians. It was strongly suggested, backed with the strong suggestion of spears, that he leave when they did, but he approved of the deeds of Celegorm and Curufin no more than he did of the people of Nargothrond, and so a similar strong suggestion from the Fëanorian camp had sent him at last to the edge of Doriath, which was where Tirnion had first seen him, wandering the woods with twigs and spider-webs caught in his hair and an expression of bemused curiosity on his round face.

They made an odd pair: the proud, elegant warrior-poet of Melian’s court, and the scruffy Noldorin exile, stonemason and chronic antagonist of the powerful. Someone whose avocation was the asking of awkward questions was never going to last long in Thingol’s court, and though Thingol had initially welcomed him as a member of the unstained house of Finarfin, once Alagos began presenting pointed arguments that the Arafinwëans could not be considered innocent of the Kinslaying, Thingol happily took the opportunity to cast him out from Doriath.

“What could I do? Leave him to get eaten by spiders?” Tirnion always took great pleasure in recounting this portion of the story. “I went after him, I offered him the strength of my arm and the skill of my hand to guard him from the dangers of the way. I also offered him my body and soul as long as the earth should last, because my heart had chosen him.

“He was very civil about it, of course, expressed his appreciation for both offers, but he was promised to someone in Aman, which he considered quite as binding as if he were actually wed. Despite the not inconsiderable attractions of my person, and my intricately reasoned arguments demonstrating why a promise given in a land to which there can be no returning in this life could be considered no promise at all, he would not be swayed. But he did allow me to follow him. ‘I like your company!’ he said to me, ‘and if you wish to bear mine, under such conditions, I am certainly not the one to tell you you cannot!’

“He could give me no promises of love returned, but at least he did promise never to accidentally gut me having mistaken me for an orc, which already renders me more fortunate than some of my countrymen.”

He pulled his attention back to Celebrimbor. “I know there are some here who consider my choice unwise; we’ve debated it many times over tea and over wine and occasionally over both. There are
some who say that it poisons the heart, to love where it cannot be returned. There are others, of course, who say that love is good, and therefore does good, and that besides it’s good practice for loving things like beauty or virtue which can’t love you back regardless.

“But for me?” His eyes softened; he was as serious as Celebimbor had ever seen him. “To be allowed to follow the one whom my heart has chosen – how could I be anything other than content?”

“So you don’t regret –”

“Alas!” He gave an exaggerated sigh and leaned back against the stone wall of the courtyard, spreading out his arms along the back of the bench. “Great Weaver, if you must condemn me to have my heart’s choice light upon one of the Noldor, why it couldn’t it have been Finwë, endued with that peculiar grace to love more than once in his life?”

“I do not think anyone could take Finwë as someone who was fortunate in love,” Celebimbor put in, too amused to be insulted. “Still, I’m glad to hear you say it – not about Finwë, that’s manifest nonsense – but that it is worth it, after all.”

He sat back against the stone wall. “If this is all I ever get – still I will count myself fortunate.”

Tirnion laughed outright. “No you won’t, and you know you won’t! Are you trying to tell me, heir of Fëanor, that there is something you count as beyond your grasp? Wait!” He sat up. “Do you mean to say you were asking about your own case? I thought you just interested in hearing me talk about myself, which goodness knows you certainly should be. No, if it’s Annatar you’re talking about, be assured you need to draw no lessons from my case.”

“I am… flattered,” said Celebimbor carefully, “but I do not think you quite appreciate the gravity of the situation. I cannot afford to be wrong about this; presume too much on his intentions, say the wrong word, and I might drive him away from us.”

“You cannot possibly have failed to note his interest.”

“Interest, yes. He’s interested in a lot of things. He’s one of the Holy Ones, Tirnion, they do not see as we do. Who knows if, in his eyes, there is any difference between me and a particularly intricate set of equations?”

Tirnion composed his features into a studied incredulity. “Give this a few minutes thought, O Esteemed Colleague. He’s at your right hand day and night; he follows you all over the city. He follows you into the baths, for goodness sake, but have you ever seen him bathe?”

The baths were one of the wonders of Ost-in-Edhil. From the initial discovery of a few mineral springs, year by year over the centuries the bathing facilities and the springs that fed them had been carefully tended and judiciously expanded, until they filled a whole complex of buildings behind the Mírdain, and were as beloved by visitors seeking refreshment and restoration as they were by the Brotherhood looking to wash away soot and weariness at the end of a day of labor.

In the arched stone halls of the baths indoor space flowed into the outdoors; around a corner and down a series of rough stone steps were the open-air pools, which steamed invitingly even in the winter when their edges were lined with snow. In the main room was a pool nearly large enough to be considered a small lake, deep enough to dive into, and in its center, a fountain, tuned to harmonize with the channels that bore the flowing waters away through the filtration gardens before ultimately
draining into the river. Around its edges, set in grottos and terraces, were a series of smaller pools of varying temperature, one cloudy with minerals, one effervescent with dissolved limestone, one filled with water-plants that were regarded as having a restorative effect, as well as the chambers of wood and clay and charcoal that housed the steam-baths and the dry-heat rooms.

Celebrimbor liked to cite the baths as a shining example of collaboration in artistic endeavor. While the Elves took delight in the clear cold waters of the springs even on winter mornings, Men had introduced them to the pleasures of soaking in hot water, and so the hot baths had been designed according to mortal specifications and heated with waste heat from the forges. The saunas were entirely Dwarvish in origin and design, but it was the Elves of Eregion who introduced the custom of using bundles of fresh leaves for scrubbing and massages, and the clean pungent scent of the aromatic birch oils in the steam drifted all through the bathing halls.

The bathing facilities made no distinction by sex, which the Men of the Mírdain tended to regard as a conclusive proof of the degeneracy of Elvish civilization, whereas for their part the Elves struggled to understand their objection.

“Do you mean to say that among you bathing is an art practiced only by women?” Alagos the stone-mason had asked, when his mortal student Tassilo recoiled from his invitation to join him and his apprentices, demanding in horror where the women’s baths were.

“That would explain a lot,” said one of the apprentices, barely under her breath, stripping off her dust-caked work clothes and tossing them into a basket.

“No,” put in another, “I think he’s saying that bathing is one thing among mortal women, and another among mortal men.”

“Well that’s just absurd,” said the first, dashing a bucket of water over herself. “Cleanliness, like virtue, is one thing rather than many, don’t you think, Tassilo, or would you say something different?”

“Poor Tassilo never did get over that.” Celebrimbor was taking the waters in one of the smaller hot pools, with an assortment of companions from the Brotherhood, recounting various anecdotes from the baths’ construction and use to Annatar, who sat watching them on the edge of a carved stone bench. “Men think we are frightfully debauched – don’t you, Numa?”

Numa, a Man of the South who had made the years-long journey to join the Mírdain and who had recently celebrated his investiture among them as a journeyman, waved his hand in demur from where he sat on the other side of the pool. “I have seen many customs among many kindreds,” he said, neutral and gracious, “I am sure our ways would seem just as peculiar to you.”

“Which is another way of saying yes, you are,” Lindis laughed, pulling herself up out of the water, “but really, Numa, the only one of us who’s arguably completely debauched is Tirnion, who never got over the way Alagos turned him down.” She turned and dove straight down into the deep cold pool that was next in the circuit and surfaced a few seconds later, reddened and gasping, to hear Tirnion objecting loudly to this designation.

“No, Master Tirnion,” she said, over his protestations, “you’ve got to stop corrupting the mortals before you show up in any more ballads about elf knights stealing kings’ daughters and cause any more diplomatic crises.”

“Corrupting? Me? Oh, you’re talking about what happened at the Midwinter’s Masque? All I did was ask that mortal princess a few questions.” Tirnion turned, propping himself up out of the water on his elbows, the picture of wounded innocence. “I’m just fascinated by the – the malleability of
mortal bonds, that’s all. I mean, if your nature allows for multiple unions, whatever would stop you from simply joining with anyone you want, with everyone you want, whenever you might desire?”

Numa laughed behind his hand, and Lindis launched into an exasperated (and clearly often-rehearsed) explanation of the diversity of mortal marriage customs, but Alagos turned to Annatar, who was still wrapped in his flowing robes and sitting on the stone bench.

“What you are doing here, Annatar,” he inquired, “if you never mean to get in the water?” Their brother of the Maiar (and they did think of him as their brother now, rather than their guest) kept himself fastidiously clean but had never been seen to bathe in all the time that had passed since he first appeared among them.

“I think our Aulendil must bathe himself like those cats he favors,” drawled Tirnion, taking the opportunity to distract himself from Lindis’s disquisition. This image was greeted with groans from his peers and a raised eyebrow from Annatar, which raised still further when Elistar began loudly theorizing that since Annatar was a being of the same kind – “though lesser degree,” he added dutifully – as his master Aulë, his very nature was fundamentally opposed to that of water.

“For do we not see,” concluded Elistar, who had a tendency to speak at all times as if he were presenting a paper before the Brotherhood, “that the elements of Water and of Fire are antithetical, the one being cold, heavy, wet, and tending always to sink, and the other hot, light, dry, and tending always to rise? Neither can they coexist for long, but the one must drive out the other, whether the water quench the fire and drive it back into the earth, or the fire drive the water into the sky.”

“Are you saying I’ll melt if I touch this water?” Annatar was keeping his voice as grave as befitted a serious philosophical inquiry, but Celebrimbor at least knew him well enough to hear the laughter behind his words. “What an alarming prospect. Still, we must dare all in pursuit of knowledge.”

He got up off the bench and came toward them, and for an instant Celebrimbor wondered if he were going to set aside his robes and join them in the water at last. But he merely folded the white cloth to the side and sat down at the edge of the pool, just behind his shoulder. He leaned forward and scooped up a handful of water, then opened his fingers and let it trickle over Celebrimbor’s back.

“I fear you must discard your hypothesis, Elistar.”

“Not so,” protested the staid astronomer, “for can it truly be said that you touch this water, when it is only your fana, this body with which you veil your divine nature, that makes contact? And do the scholars not tell us that among you of the Holy Ones, a body is neither more nor less than clothing is for us, and while we may remain here in the flesh without our clothing, were you to shed the veil that you wear –”

Elistar went on, but Annatar did not appear to be listening. He had turned his attention to Celebrimbor’s back, running one hand along the lines of his shoulders, as light and intrigued as if he were making a study of it.

Before he could stop himself Celebrimbor looked across the water to Tirnion, who seemed to regard himself as having just scored a significant point. He kept his voice as light as possible, addressing Annatar behind him.

“Why is it I am never quite sure with you, Annatar, of whether your interest in me is that of an affectionate colleague, or that of someone who’s planning to vivisect me for a lecture demonstration?”

But Annatar paid his words no more attention than he had paid Elistar’s. With the ends of his fingers
he traced the texture of skin, the spring and give of flesh. Then, with a firmer touch, the deep interwoven patterns of muscle beneath the skin and bone beneath that. He paused, sustaining pressure with one finger in the center of a small muscle along the inner corner of the shoulder blade.

The pressure was not particularly hard, but it sent a burning sensation straight through to the front of the shoulder and shooting down his arm, setting his fingers tingling. Involuntarily Celebrimbor leaned forward slightly, pulling away from him, stirring the water. He felt rather than heard Annatar registering the motion, so he mastered himself and leaned back into his touch, turning a grimace on him so he would know that he was making no attempt to conceal his discomfort. Annatar met his look with quiet focus, holding his gaze until, gentle and controlled, he eased the pressure at the edge of his shoulder. A sudden cool sense of freedom and release ran through and around the joint; he shifted his shoulders experimentally and smiled back at Annatar, enjoying the ease of motion.

“I’m surprised one of Aulë’s servants knows the composition of the body so well.” Elistar had abandoned his earlier discourse to observe the two of them.

“No you’re not.” Lindis, now sufficiently chilled, slipped back into the hot pool. “What were you just this minute saying about the way the Holy Ones veil themselves? Annatar had to build that body for himself, didn’t he? Of course he’d know what goes into making it up.”

Their discussion turned to the nature of art, and of whether something that looked like a body and acted like a body could be considered a body in all respects, but Annatar was still running his hand over Celebrimbor’s bare shoulders, absorbed in his own thoughts. “What’s it like?” he asked him, after a minute, leaning closer to him. “Being embedded in something so destructible?”

Celebrimbor drew his eyebrows together. “What, you mean *having a body*?”

“Being an incarnate creature.” He rested his hand against the hollow of his neck, feeling the steady pulse in the throat. “Having your body be not just what you wear, but who you are; being poured into matter, infused with it, bound to it. And you, you don’t seem to see that as a defect in your nature. What could possibly be worth that?”

Celebrimbor gave serious thought to the question, saying nothing for a long moment, while the fountain sang in the central pool, and the quiet voices of other bathers echoed from the corners of the halls. “You’re right, brother, I do not consider it a defect — that unity, flesh and spirit, body and soul, *hroa* and *feä*.č” Annatar’s hand was still resting lightly against the side of his neck; he knew he could feel his voice through his fingers, and he was suddenly aware of the motion of his own blood. “Our memory is not just of the mind, but of the body. There are many sorts of knowledge, and over the long years it has been slowly worked into our very flesh.” He raised his hands dripping from the water. “My hands know more than my thought, at times.”

There were some approving murmurs from the others in the pool who considered Celebrimbor to have spoken well on behalf of the Incarnates. Annatar reached for one of his upraised hands and took it in his own, considering the strong expressive fingers, the calluses along the edges of the palm where the sheen of the water broke over the roughened skin.

“I will concede there are certain advantages — certain sorts of understanding, at least — that come with being born to a form, rather than putting one on.”

Celebrimbor closed his hand around Annatar’s and used it to steady himself as he rose to get out of the water. “Indeed, I have dwelt in this body since before the First Age, and I have the scars to prove it!” Standing, his body silently corroborated his point; a deep vicious scar, nearly black in the diffuse light of the bath-halls, ran from just under his ribs to the edge of his hip. “Depending on when you assumed that form, Annatar, I may well be older than you!”
“Yes!” Tirnion saw his opportunity to join the threads of their conversation. “If our Aulendil’s body is no more than a garment to him, perhaps he sheds it at night and flies around like a bat, a flittering bodiless spirit! Do you?” He leaned his head back against the stone rim of the pool and blinked up at Annatar, the picture of innocent curiosity. Though the others groaned again at the image, Annatar paid him no attention whatever. He was still absorbed in his conversation with Celebrimbor, who had gotten out of the hot pool and was padding across the rough stone floor to the cold waters.

“What?” he asked, answering Annatar’s attention to the seamed dark line across his body. “Everyone here has scars, some more obvious than others.” The motion of his head encompassed the entire bath-hall: the apprentices swimming laps in the central pool, the masters they had just left soaking in the heated waters. By the artificial waterfall in the far corner, Noroth was lifting Naugwen out of the mineral pool and helping her with her robes; the mineral springs eased the ache in her withered legs. If Noroth felt pain from his own scars, if the unnaturally enlarged bones and the unnaturally enhanced muscles ever protested against their forced alteration, he never let on.

Annatar brushed his fingers along the line of the scar where it curled around the edge of the hip. “And what gave you this, then?”

Celebrimbor paused at the edge of the cold pool. It was narrow, round, and deep, almost like a well. “That I got at the rout of Tol Sirion. Holding the retreat for Orodreth’s people against the unclean things marshaled by that foul lieutenant of Morgoth’s.” His mind went back to those days, the fall of Finrod’s beautiful watchtower guarding the pass of Sirion, how his father’s people and his uncle’s had come fleeing the utter ruin of the East only to find terror and war in the forests of the West.

“Forest-trolls someone had taught to fight like balrogs,” he said, “armed with clubs and whips of braided spider-silk, inoculated with their venom – or the venom of some unholy creature that lived in the debatable lands. Tangle and crush, you understand.” He gestured, a slashing motion along the scar. “One of them caught me from behind in the confusion – we were nearly surrounded, you see, fighting to clear a path for the defenders to run for it.”

“And you weren’t wearing armor?” Annatar demanded, his tone making clear what he thought of coming to battle unprepared to fight.

“Reinforced leather,” Celebrimbor returned tartly. “Cut right through, if you’ll believe it; that’s why it didn’t gut me then and there. It actually wasn’t a particularly dangerous injury – it hurt, of course, but it was quite shallow. I could walk, they didn’t even count me with the wounded at first. But it – well, festered isn’t the word, but the poison in it started to work. I wasn’t the only one, either; anyone else who’d been caught by one of those whips... That’s one of the reasons we determined later that it might have been something derived from spiders – it damaged the spirit before the body, so by the time anyone noticed anything was wrong, especially in the confusion of the retreat, it had become very serious indeed.”

He sat down on the pool’s edge and pushed himself forward, slipping into the cold water and drawing a sharp breath at the bracing change of temperature. Annatar stood looking down at him then after a moment sat down on the floor to be closer to his level.

“Then you did not walk all the way from Tol Sirion to Nargothrond, I take it.”

“Indeed not. My life was despaired of, in fact; they were singing the parting-song for me, to guide my spirit West.” He ducked his head under the water and came up breathing hard.

“At least that was what my uncle told me,” he admitted, pulling himself up and bracing his arms on the smooth rim of the pool at Annatar’s side. “What I remember – it’s still confused, I never did find out how much of it was a story that I told myself. But it seemed to me that I never stopped walking,
but after a long time I looked up and found that I was alone, and lost in a dark wood. There were things moving in the shadows. Somewhere behind me – back the way I had come, I thought, though I was so lost – there was a light, even though I couldn’t see it. No, that doesn’t make sense, does it? Perhaps it was music, not light. It made such promises to me, that if only I could reach it I would be safe. But I knew that Tol Sirion was dangerous – I couldn’t remember why, only that I’d been running away from it.

“There was another voice, and it spoke my name, even though there was no sound. It was an order, a summons, but I couldn’t see how to heed it, it was so dark, and there were – there were things in the darkness, chittering things with too many legs...” He shuddered, more at the memory than at the cold, drew a breath, and let himself sink down into the clear healing depths of the water. Annatar’s image wavered above him, bright and distant, leaning out over the water as if he were trying to call him back.

Celegorm had told him everything later: how he had stumbled and fallen in their march, and they had raised him up like one dead, how the healers had labored to call his spirit back, until at last, pressed by time and necessity, they numbered him among those who could not be saved. How his father had silenced the singers with a terrible cry, taken his son’s cold slack hands in his, and flung his spirit after him, into the waste places and the dangerous shadows.

‘He stayed by you a day and a night,’ his uncle said to him, afterwards, ‘while the troops moved on ahead, not moving, not answering to my voice or my touch. He was cold and still as you were. We thought that we might end by losing you both.’

Still weak from his recovery, he had nodded and said nothing, but his thoughts had gone back to that place that was no place. The deadly light in the distance, the summons in the darkness, and how he had remained, frozen, unable to go back or to go on, until at last, faint and far and desperate, he had heard a familiar voice calling: Where are you? Where are you? Come back to me.

He felt the want of breath, there at the bottom, of the pool, so he pushed off the smooth white stone of the bottom and shot toward the surface. Annatar was waiting for him, his mind still on his story. “Such poisons linger in the spirit,” he said. They had been so close not two minutes ago: unsettlingly, promisingly close. But Celebrimbor had slipped away into the depths of his own past, into the losses that he still did not quite have words for.

“Yes, I had nightmares for a long time, until there were darker shadows in my thought.” He meant Nargothrond, but that had left no visible scars. “But after that, we lost no more people on the retreat from Tol Sirion, though we were fighting our way through a dangerous country and though the enemy was now holding a base of command at the best strategic location in the whole area.”

He laughed, with more sadness than humor. “The Sons of Fëanor were always good at retreats. We play the losing game, but we play it to remember.”

“Tyelperinquar.”

Celebrimbor made a non-committal noise; there was nothing in Annatar’s voice that indicated he had anything to contribute important enough to be worth breaking his concentration for. He was plotting a stress-strain curve for the cold-drawn copper he was proposing to use for the next series of Rings and was stuck over the constant in the extension ratio.

“Tyelperinquar.”
In all probability Annatar was merely bored; Celebrimbor could tell by the looseness around his ears that he had already been at his hair. Indeed, from the noises and motion at his side over the past hour or so, he suspected his companion of having amused himself by dangling one of his braids for Spider to chase. She must have wandered away by this point, but he was not going to get up until he had completed his calculations.

Annatar did not call him again, but there was a motion at his side, and then a shadow as Annatar leaned over him, setting his hand between him and the papers until he was obliged to look up

“Annatar, get out of – I’m trying to work!”

“That? I’ve already solved it.” Annatar plucked the pen from his hand, crossed out a section of his notes, and labeled the constant beside the plot of the strain test results.

“You are insufferable, you know that? You are worse than the cat.” But he was laughing as he rolled up the paper. “How long were you sitting there watching me sweat over that?”

“I like watching you work.” Annatar was unperturbed. “And when I was done with that, I told you, so I don’t see what you’re complaining about.”

“All right.” Celebrimbor pushed the bench away from the table and stood up. “If it’s my attention you want, you have it.

Annatar handed him a small wooden chest. “I have something for you.”

Celebrimbor looked up at him in sudden doubt, puzzled and pleased in equal measure. Annatar always favored more jewelry than was strictly advisable in the workshop, but this evening he was unusually richly adorned, even for him. He glittered like sun on the clouds, the sunset through the windows catching the rings on his hands, accenting each graceful motion with light.

“Are you going to stare at me, or are you going to open that?”

He lifted the lid off and set it on the table. The first thing he saw of the contents was the shining of metal, an assembly of intricate objects, but as he reached in and sorted through them, their purpose suddenly leaped into focus: goldsmithing tools, sets of gravers and pliers and files folded into soft cloth.

“You’ll find these, I think, even more precise than the ones you’re using now.” The purr of satisfaction in Annatar’s voice as he watched him marvel over them was unfeigned and unconcealed. “Don’t you remember how I told you that when I made a gift for you it would be an adornment suited to your nature? What,” he added, seeing Celebrimbor open his mouth to say something and then shut it again, “were you expecting jewelry?”

Unconsciously he put up his hand to where the hair-clip would been if Annatar had not removed it at some point earlier in the evening. Annatar caught his hand – was it his own flattering imagination, or had Annatar lately been taking every possible excuse to touch him? – and laughed.

“Yet it is adornment, if not in the way that you’re thinking. You are most beautiful when you are at work.”

Now he was even more unsure of how to respond. “You seem determined to keep me off balance, Annatar,” he said, keeping his tone steady and light. “What’s this for?”

“If I need to explain that,” Annatar replied with just slightly too much alarm to be taken seriously, “then I’m afraid I really have misjudged you and I’d better have just gone with a bracelet after all –”
"The occasion, you impossible creature, why now?"

"Do I need an occasion?" But Annatar leaned across the table and tapped the rolled-up paper. "It’s to celebrate the next stage of our collaboration, Tyelperinquar. Don’t tell me you haven’t seen it; these new Rings aren’t just a refinement of the earlier designs, they’re a new sort of thing altogether, they’ll –" He laughed again, softly but without his customary control. A strange humor, touched with wildness, seemed to be on him, and he spun away from him, heading toward the spiral stairs in the corner.

"But no more work tonight, brother, come with me."

"Annatar, what’s gotten into you?"

"Come with me." He was already halfway across the workshop. Celebrimbor set the tools down and followed after.

As they emerged onto the roof of the Mírdain, the last fires of sunset were blazing off the distant peaks of the Misty Mountains, turning them gold and scarlet against the deep slate sky in the east. His heart lifted, as it always did when he came up there, though now he could no longer tell whether it was the familiar joy of his favorite vantage point, or the newer and stronger joy having his companion by his side. He went to the parapet and leaned against the rough stone of the wall, and this time Annatar followed him.

If Annatar had a purpose in bringing him up here, he seemed to have forgotten it, and for a long time they simply stood together as the light wind turned cool, the oranges and purples of the sky deepening to a dark brilliant blue through which the star opened like eyes. Below them, the answering lights of the city were kindled, and the sounds of the evening rose from the houses and streets. Wind chimes and clock bells tracing the invisible movements of time and the air, snatches of star-hymns sung by groups in gardens and courtyards, and weaving around them, with hardly less beauty, the ripple of distant conversations, the ringing of hammers and the turning of wheels. Farther on, out beyond the city, came the song of the river, and borne on the winds from the mountains, the night-breath of the land itself.

After a while Celebrimbor spoke, and it did not feel like breaking a silence, but of adding his voice to a vast chorus, carrying his own theme in the midst. "I don’t know if it’s the Rings themselves, or if it’s the work we’ve been doing in making them –"

"I don’t know if there’s any sense in treating those two as separate concepts,” put in Annatar. “At least not for you, or for me.”

"But I see it, I see everything, with more than sight. It sometimes seems to me as if the whole city were my body, that I breathed with its breath. I feel the water flowing through it, I know the strength of its walls and all the forces that act on them – but more, Annatar, I see the patterns of thought and ideas in the Brotherhood taking shape.”

He gripped the edge of the parapet. “And then I think of the cities that I’ve outlived. Nargothrond was no less beautiful than this –”

A noise of dissent from Annatar, a quick glance of luminous contempt.

"But it was poisoned by fear, ravaged by the dragon, drowned by the gods, nothing left but the name and the memory...” He had outlived worlds, not just cities: Aman darkened, Beleriand foundered, but he could say no more. It was the Elvish way to speak of beauty and loss in one breath, but it seemed wrong to him, almost disloyal, to be giving voice to sorrow on the eve of their great work.
He would not have spoken so before any other, and Annatar seemed to realize it. He spoke softly but clearly, almost in his ear. “No more, my second person, never again. What we build will endure forever, Tyelperinquar, beyond betrayal, beyond loss, beyond the gnawing jaws of time. The Valar themselves will look upon it with envy; Aulë the Maker will set down his hammer in wonder.”

Celebrimbor lifted his eyes to him.

“Yes,” he said quietly, “yes, Annatar. We have more than memory; marred once isn’t lost forever.” He had spoken so often before, putting heart into himself or to others, but there beneath the opening stars it seemed at last a statement of fact rather than a lone defiant choice. He drew a breath, it caught in a soundless laugh. “We’re here, aren’t we?”

But Annatar was gazing not at him, but out past the lights of the city, toward the dark forests and the mountains beyond. “You asked me once what I meant when I bridled at being called an emissary of the Valar,” he said, and with a deep thrill Celebrimbor realized that the slowness in his speech was entirely unlike his usual deliberately-paced, half-mocking tone; he was saying something at last that he seemed to have some hesitation in expressing. Perhaps this was the other side of his strange agitation earlier.

“Did I ask you that, or did I just think it?” he responded. “I think that even so recently I was not so sure of you that I would ask you to your face.”

“And now?”

“Now I am so sure of you that I know you will tell me without my needing to ask.”

A quick bright smile, lighting his face like a sunbeam slanting through a windowpane. It faded just as quickly, leaving its place something unreadable. “Think about it. This interest in Middle-Earth – it is not something that the Lords of the West take to heart, is it?”

“You speak as if you were alone in this.”

“I believed I was.” He set his hand over his, edging his fingers apart to slide his own between. “I do not think so now.”

Neither looked at the other. The silence that fell between them then was full and rich, a living and flourishing thing.

“We shall look out over the world together from greater heights than these,” Annatar said quietly.

“You mean your Great Tower?” Celebrimbor dragged his thought back to practical matters, if Annatar’s ongoing fantastical thought experiment could be called practical. “I was thinking about it the other day, actually, and not just because you were doodling schematics for it all over my lecture notes. Have you thought about what something like the new Rings might be able to do for the foundations? I mean, you basically need a continuous infusion of power to give them the structural integrity to resist the lateral shear, but in principle this new Ring design should allow you to do just that. The early Rings just magnified the strength of the wearer’s will, but with our new design, the wearer can directly affect matter itself—”

“Our new design?” There was only the lightest emphasis on the first word.

He looked at him over his shoulder. “To be honest, I can no longer tell what’s my work, and what’s yours.”

Annatar met his gaze. The starlight caught in his hair, and in the gold depths of his eyes shone the
light of perfect understanding. He seemed about to speak, but Celebrimbor had caught something familiar in that reflected starlight and fallen silent, turning his gaze up to the skies. Annatar turned to follow his eyes and there in the Western sky shone the Evening Star, the last fragment of the holy light that had lived before the sun and moon.

The silence fell again between them, but there was a distance in it now. Celebrimbor was tracing the history that had set that gem in the heavens and his own part in it. Beside him he felt sure that Annatar was doing the same; his thought was closed to him but his hand was warm against his own. He knew he had been right when Annatar spoke, his hand tightening on his: “To set a new star in the heavens – we shall do no less, you and I.”

“What we’re beginning with these...” Great Rings he had been calling them in his thought; the name would do as well as any other, “will shape the fate of Middle-Earth.” It was no boast, in that moment he knew it for no more than simple truth.

“Yes!” That edge of wildness was back in Annatar’s voice. “And let us pledge ourselves: each to each, and both to this work. I swear to you, Tyelperinquar, by the hidden fire that the greatest sought in vain, I swear to you by my own name –”

“Annatar.” His words had gone through him like a blow without pain, a hope without words. “I have nothing I can swear by.”

“No by the thrones of the jealous Valar? Very well! Swear by the world, by the world that is, by the more beautiful world to come. Swear by yourself. What surety else do I need?”

“I assure you–” It was his turn to speak with difficulty. “I am dedicated to – to this endeavor with heart and soul and all that I am, but I do not swear.”

He had tried to, once, on the shore of Lake Mithrim in the darkness none of them believed would ever end. They had just received the news: his father’s oldest brother – his beloved uncle, grave and kind and proud – not just struck down by the Enemy but taken alive to his fortress.

The remaining sons of Fëanor drew together, their faces pale and set, and without another word began again to speak the oath they had renewed at their father’s death. He had risen, shaking, to join his voice with theirs: Be he friend or foe, be he foul or clean –

Curufin hit him full across the face, knocking him to the floor. It was the only time in his life that his father had ever struck him.

“No oaths! Sooner should your tongue be split than speak an oath, sooner should your heart crack than you should bind it irrevocably to any purpose.” There was white fire in his eyes and a note in his voice that Celebrimbor had never heard before. He had blinked up at him, stunned.

“You are my son.” His father’s normally clear, sharp voice was ragged at the edge. “And I love you. And I would see you dead rather than bound to this.”

Curufin had never spoken any more about the matter, nor did he ever give any other sign that his heart was anything less than fully and utterly given to the course that he had set himself on. But no word of promise ever passed Celebrimbor’s lips, not just for the sake of the horrors he had seen follow from the Oath, but for the terror he had heard in his father’s voice that day.

The stone of the parapet was cold under his hands, and he was suddenly aware of metal against skin, the rings on Annatar’s fingers cold and smooth and pressing into his own. He was suddenly afraid that he had given offense, had met his friend with coldness when at last he had shown him something...
of his inmost thought. But Annatar was leaning forward to him, trying to look him in the face, to call him back from wherever he had sunk in the reaches of his own past.

“Of course, heir of Fëanor,” he said gently. “No oaths.”

He released his hand and walked away toward the stairs. “Come down, then. It’s growing cold, and there’s work to be done.”

It was a fine stone for the new series of rings. He turned it in his fingers, scanning it in both the Seen and the Unseen. It was a conduit, a middle-piece, it implied both the Ring that it would be anchored to and the wielder that it would draw from. It was entirely automatic with him, now, to look for Celebrimbor, to show him the gem and hear what it drew forth from that keen and eager mind: questions, praise, new ideas.

He closed his hand around the stone and swept up the tower stairs towards the Mathwrights’ Workshop. He always knew where to find Celebrimbor in the heart of his city. The small workshop itself was silent now, the lampstone hanging over the table shedding a silvery light like enriched moonlight. All of the boards and part of the wall were covered with configuration space diagrams, shining softly in the light. He recognized the system instantly as an attempt to map the force possibilities of the nine-series Rings, another piece of the knowledge needed to bring them into existence. Undistracted, he added the discovery to his own understanding, but his interest was all on its discoverer.

He was sitting on one of the workshop benches, leaning against the wall with his head tilted back, the chalk in his lap, and his hands open and slack at his sides. This was not how he wanted him, sunk in the shifting depths of unconsciousness, the fire of his thought banked.

“Tyelperinquar! Wake up and pay attention!” He gave one of his work-braids a brisk tug, and Celebrimbor opened one eye and glared at him, his hands twitching closed.

“Annatar,” he said reproachfully, “I was sleeping.”

“Yes.” Annatar gave him a disapproving glare. “On a bench in the workshop, evidently, though I’m sure I don’t know why that should surprise me at this point. You sleep in disorder; you sleep promiscuously, you sleep on your papers at your desk, you sleep in the window-seats of the library, you sleep on the roof and that will get you into trouble one of these times.”

Celebrimbor laughed, now fully awake. “I get some of my best thinking done in dreams,” he said. He waved one arm at the shimmering silver diagrams around them. “It’s only another mode of thought, really, of imagination – When I’m stuck over something, preoccupied with it, I sleep on it, and sometimes I emerge with the insights I need...” He straightened and stretched his shoulders, looking up at Annatar. “What do you do when you’re stuck over something? And don’t even try to imply that that doesn’t happen; I know you now! Maia or not, you work as hard as any of us, here on the edges of knowledge.”

“That’s what I have you for,” Annatar said, softening the look of disapproval, adding a half-smile. It was another piece of the truth he was offering, but he knew what effect it would have. He waited for the bright flare of satisfaction as Celebrimbor registered his words, understood his own place in the greater design, but Celebrimbor went on.

“Do you know, Annatar, in all these years I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you sleep? While you wear a body, surely you must make some concessions to its nature. Sleep to refresh the body, dreams to
refresh the mind?” He reached up and took his hand, still closed around the new-crafted stone, and pulled him down beside him onto the bench.

“I do not dream.”

“You don’t dream? Well, have one of mine then.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“You spend enough time looking at my thoughts; why not look at my dreams as well? And then I can get back to the sleep you interrupted; I’m exhausted anyway over the nine-series calculations.” And without further preamble, he settled himself against him, leaning his head against his shoulder, brushing his thought with his own as much as to say here I am; follow me.

It was startling how quickly he slipped back down into sleep: breath slowing, body cooling, the pressure and motion of the blood beneath his skin dropping into quieter patterns. His head grew heavy against Annatar’s shoulder; his hands relaxed in his lap, but the stillness of sleep settling over those strong features did not speak of peace, but of grief.

He did not like that, the stillness and the sorrow. Celebrimbor should be in motion, in body and in mind, and he almost woke him again, if only to chase that motionlessness from his face. But Celebrimbor would undoubtedly badger him about dreams, and so he turned his gaze inward, looking toward the mind that rested against his own as his head rested against his shoulder.

He felt the familiar outer contours of his friend’s thought, looked deeper, and saw the doors of his mind standing open.

That image – the doors of the mind – was Celebrimbor’s own, not Annatar’s. Annatar did not have the need of the Eldar to understand everything in metaphor. There was no reason he could see that the mind should not be like the mind, doors like doors, palaces like palaces, but that habit of linking one thing to another did occasionally produce moments of startling beauty. He looked deeper, moved in further, he saw his friend dreaming.

He dreamed in images, strange melancholy geometries, impossible shapes unfolding in a brilliant light of mingled silver and gold. At first, watching, Annatar tried to infer the rules by which the complex, intricate patterns formed and transformed, but the imaginary mathematics of the inside of Celebrimbor’s imagination were their own rules, beautiful words spoken in a language he could not – quite – understand. It frustrated him, it compelled him, and he could not look away. He stayed like that, submerged in his dreams, until the colors lightened and faded and the patterns dropped away altogether, and there Celebrimbor was, blinking at him as the morning light filled the small workshop.

Celebrimbor did not lift his head from his shoulder as he woke, but looked at him, unembarrassed, as if there were nowhere he could be better pleased to be than explaining the nature of dreams to one of the Maiar.

“Well, that’s a dream, Annatar! Now do you see why I prize sleep?” He stretched, his body shifting against him, still sleep-heavy but now with all the strength of refreshment. “At times it is a relief to think of things without having to figure out how to say them, and in dreams I can make connections that I could make nowhere else. In what other language could I express, oh, say, moonlight, and endurance, and the melting point of mithril, and that conversation the Tehtar are always having about love, and what I can remember of Aman before the Darkening and how it compares to how I think of Ost-in-Edhil now, in commensurable terms, that allow them all to operate on and influence each other?”
“Was that what you were dreaming of?”

“More or less.” He cast his eyes over the calculations on the walls around him, now plain white in the bright light of morning. “I was trying to solve the configuration space problem for the nine-series, and clearly I needed all those concepts to do it.” He stretched his shoulders once again and then sprang to his feet, as full of his keen energy as ever. “Make me some tea, would you, while I finish this? I think I’ve got it now.”

For a long time Annatar had taken an interest in the inmost thoughts of thinking creatures, in their secrets and self-deceptions, their crude concealments from themselves and from others, that innermost tangle of fear and desire they called the self and erroneously believed to be impregnable. But he had never expected to find himself with one of the Eldar napping on his shoulder, freely opening to him the intricate workings of the mind. He found it curiously soothing, and made a point of remaining in Celebrimbor’s company when he drowsed. Celebrimbor laughed at him, but made not even a token effort to conceal the pleasure that he took in Annatar’s presence; he wanted to show him his dreams.

After a while he began to discern certain recurring patterns in the kaleidoscopic shapes, and even to recognize particular ideas or people, in the luminous ever-shifting models that were Celebrimbor’s private wordless language. There were the fractals of the Brotherhood, the pearl-sheened evolute of an ellipse that appeared for Galadriel and her works, one strange shadowed rotation matrix he was certain must signify Celebrimbor’s father. He began to wonder whether he himself appeared in the dreams, and several times was on the point of asking Celebrimbor straight out. But the thought of Celebrimbor’s reaction stayed him, every time. It would be giving him too much, to give him that.

He did work it out, at last, in the darkness of one early morning as the new rings cooled in their moulds and Celebrimbor slept, his head on his arms, his mind open and scintillant with brilliantly lit images. Sitting beside him, statue-still, he realized, with the clarity and certainty of dream-knowledge, that he did appear in Celebrimbor’s dreams, that he had been in every one of them. He was the light source.

He never spoke while watching his friend’s dreams, never intruded his own thoughts into the pattern, for fear of disrupting the strange and beautiful transformations. But it seemed that Celebrimbor, sleeping, sensed something of the wordless satisfaction that suffused him, for the light grew brighter yet, and the patterns changed to a hyperbolic three-manifold, through which the light passed, wrapping into impossible closed loops, now focused into fire surpassing the sun, now splintered into endless fragments of color. Tenderness filled him, and a fierce joy hardly distinguishable from hunger. He opened his eyes – the eyes of his body – and looked at his friend, sleeping, while in his thought those powerful, impossible patterns continued to shift and grow.

“You are mine,” he said to him, almost too softly to be heard, and Celebrimbor murmured in his sleep. “You are mine, and this world will be ours.”

“You would think,” Damros remarked to some of the Tehtar one morning, as the Mírdain’s wordwrights gathered in the kitchen-garden to sample of his most recent culinary innovations, “that it ought to stop surprising us at some point. How many times can we reach un-dreamed-of heights before we start, well, expecting to reach them?” He passed his tray around to his reclining companions; it was filled with spun-sugar butterflies alighting on brilliantly colored stylized flowers.

“So how would you map our rise?” Naugwen, smiling, helped herself to one of the dainty confections. “How would you model our growth?”
“Logarithmic-linear, obviously,” put in Feredhel, a native of Ost-in-Edhil and the newest apprentice to Damros – who, as Celebrimbor had predicted, had never shed his epithet ‘young’ despite having seen several centuries pass since his admission to the masters’ rank. “Knowledge builds on knowledge builds on knowledge; each new discovery enables a dozen more. I don’t know what wonders I’ll see tomorrow, let alone in the time to come.” She picked up the delicate sugar structure and placed it in her mouth; it dissolved almost instantly, leaving only the impression of a subtle sweetness and a tingling lightness.

“So what are we approaching?” Her friend Andir leaned forward off the low stone garden bench, sketching the curve Feredhel described in the dark garden soil with a twig. “Infinity? Aman?”

“To hear Annatar talk, you’d think that’s exactly the idea.”

“Where is he, anyway?” Damros scanned the courtyard. “I would have expected him to have turned up for this at least.” He gestured to his creations; the sun glinted through the sweet transparent wings.

“Oh, shut up somewhere with III.” The slight angle of Naugwen’s eyebrows was the extent of her editorializing on the amount of time the two of them had been spending together. “That’s Master Celebrimbor to you,” she added for Feredhel’s benefit. “They’ve got some new project in mind, some refinement of the Ring theory; there’ll be no sense to be had out of either of them till they’ve got at least a prototype.”

She pushed herself forward, looking at the graph Andir was idly elaborating in the garden soil, labeling the linear axis time and the logarithmic axis art. “I see what you mean about the exponential growth, though. III nearly killed himself to make that first Ring, at least to hear Andir tell it—” Andir flushed with pride; he had been one of the apprentices Annatar had pressed into service to escort their weakened master back to his chambers on that day so many years ago. “And now – you could make a stronger Ring yourself, Feredhel, or you certainly will before you leave your apprenticeship.”

She looked back up toward the windows of the Great Workshop, her eyebrows now visibly drawn together. “And of course they keep on moving ahead, they can’t rest, either of them.”

The comparisons to Valinor were made more and more freely now. Some in Ost-in-Edhil had never been comfortable with that language, Gaeron chief among them. “To declare anything upon the Hither Shore as fair as Aman is to invite the wrath of the Powers,” he had said once, reproving a song praising the beauty of Eregion and the wonders of the Mírdain that some of the apprentices had been heard singing. “To set our hearts to achieve the beauty that by rights dwells only in the pure light of unstained Valinor is pride, fatal pride, and we know from history that such pride has fearsome punishment.”

“Punishment?” Lindis had snapped. “If the Valar would truly punish us for following the highest call of our nature – to heal and preserve this world whose being we share – then they are none that we need answer to.”

“In truth, the Powers have forgotten Middle-Earth.” Timion, as always, spoke in his mock-serious tone that made it difficult to tell what was merely designed to provoke a reaction, but his friends knew him well enough to recognize that he spoke from the heart.

“Say not forgotten, but rather entrusted to us.” Sildreth rarely entered on the philosophical debates of her fellows, preferring to let her arts in the greenhouse speak for her. Still, she was known to honor the Earthqueen in the works of her hand and the words of her lips; she shared Gaeron’s piety but not his lingering sense of guilt before the Valar.

Gaeron had been unpersuaded then, and remained disquieted by the Brotherhood’s increasingly explicit aspirations toward the strength and beauty of Valinor. But the presence of Annatar reassured
him, and since the Maia had joined their company, he was much easier in his mind about the rightness of their ambitions.

“Now we know the Powers smile upon us!” he declared, reverence blending with satisfaction. “If Manwë himself had sent an Eagle, we could have no clearer sign!”

“A fine lot of use an Eagle would be in the forges,” Lindis muttered under her breath. With her grievance against the Valar, she had been slower to accept Annatar’s presence among them, but finding his own ambitions for Middle-Earth matched and indeed surpassed the dreams of the Mírdain themselves, she had come to respect and even to honor him. His generosity – unfolding his own knowledge without stint, if with occasional sarcasm – had also done much to earn her trust.

Sildreth frowned. “He speaks so oddly of the Lords of the West, even of his own Master. At times he seems to surpass any of us in devotion, at other times to veer upon blasphemy that would make even the most free of our freethinkers blench.” She looked pointedly over at Lindis, who tossed her head.

“What else would you expect?” Alagos spoke up. The short, dusty stonemason carried himself with none of the melancholy or the remote dignity that was already associated with the High Elves, but the authority in his voice recalled suddenly to the group that he as well had dwelt in Aman, in the presence of the Powers. “He’s one of them; of course he’s going to be both nearer to them and farther from than we are. Who are the Maiar? They are the Beautiful Ones, the Lesser Gods, the Holy and the Fair, and it is said – by the poets anyway – that they continually pour themselves out into Arda, delighting to glorify the mighty Powers they serve. Well, I don’t know anything about that, but I would say of our Annatar...” He considered. “He has a nature inclined to worship. He knows what reverence is, I think.”

It was a cool day in high autumn. The beeches were in their full fiery glory of oranges and reds and flame-yellows, but the holly leaves were, as always, dark green and edged with spines. Celebrimbor was in his office working on design schematics, Annatar across the table from him writing, papers stacked high on all sides. They were caught up in one of their long conversations – the sort that would start from some design question or topological problem and end up ranging through the whole compass of creation – when they were interrupted by the piteous shrieks of a small animal. Spider had caught a mouse exploring Celebrimbor’s files, and had it pinned with one paw on its tail while its legs drummed at the polished floor in desperate attempt to escape. As they watched, she lifted the weight off the struggling creature, and let it run a few feet before pouncing on it again.

Annatar made to speak a Word, but Celebrimbor laid a hand on his arm. “Let her be, brother. She needs to eat, the same as any of us.”

“She’s eaten plenty. If any more of the apprentices leave her scraps, she’ll get too fat to reach the high shelves.”

“Well then, but let her be nonetheless.” Spider was now rolling on her back, tossing the mouse between her paws and flinging it up in the air, catching it gently between her teeth with evident delight. “She’s only following her nature, and it’s no crime in her.” The mouse managed to slip away from its tormentor and scurry under the table; in one fluid flash Spider righted herself and dove after it.

Annatar looked at him with a cool and curious regard. “So be it, brother. I will leave you to explain that to her prey.”

Celebrimbor paused before answering, soft wet crunching noises clearly audible from under the
worktable.

“She’s doing a fine job of that herself. I can’t think I would have anything to add.”

There was a hurry of feet coming up the stairs, and an answering scuffle under the table as Spider took herself and her prey off to some more secure location. Celebrimbor pushed his chair around to find an apprentice, running up to him to tell him that the Lady of Eregion was waiting for him at the gate.

For a moment he considered putting her off. Tell her I’ll be with her when I’m done with this. But as soon as the thought was formed, he was surprised at himself, and he set down his pen.

“No, go and see her.” Annatar spoke from his end of the table. “I’ll finish up here, and the work can wait.”

He set his tea-bowl down on top of the papers to mark his place, and hurried down to see his aunt.

“Telperinquar!” The smile bloomed over Galadriel’s face was steady, somehow settled. She looked him up and down before making the old Amanyar gesture of respectful greeting: touching her fingers to her heart and then her lips.

“Aunt! How long has it been since you were last here?” He pulled her into a warm embrace. “What brings you to our humble halls today?”

“Why, do I need an excuse to visit you now?” He could not be sure whether that was real reproof in her voice.

“My dear kinswoman, you know you need neither excuse nor introduction, and yet here you are waiting at the gate like a Numenorean ambassador! Clearly you need to visit the Mírdain more often, if you’ve grown so formal with me. It’s been – what, months? years? – since you joined us in the workshop or at table!”

“And you haven’t been to Thamas Eregion in how long?” she returned.

He opened his hand, granting the point. “Fair, Aunt, fair. I haven’t so much as raised my eyes from the work we’ve been doing – and once you see it, you’ll see why – but I have missed your company no less than your wisdom. So I owe you thanks today for remedying my own negligence.” He bowed over her hand, mock-formal but quite earnest in his intention.

Galadriel looked at him with deep affection and with something else that he couldn’t place.

“What is it, Aunt?”

“Mending the world seems to agree with you,” she said. “You smile more than you were wont to.” Something must have changed in his face, because she added in her quiet, decisive way, “You look nothing like your father when you smile.”

She turned away from the gates. “Will you not come for a walk with me? Out along the river?” The Sirannon was flowing deep and swift, and Galadriel paused to listen to it. He looked at her questioningly.

“You can’t hear it? Even the river sings your praises now.”

“Well, it’s a partner in our work, after all.” He gestured up the river’s course to the intake and
outflow pipes set into the banks, their locations indicated by beautifully cast metal covering grates.

They took their way along the river’s edge, watching the yellow leaves in the clear dark water, speaking of the news both great and trivial in their respective realms, and remembering how much they did enjoy each other’s company.

“I’m sorry I haven’t seen more of you lately, Aunt,” he said, “but I suppose you wouldn’t have very much use for our works these days, and we do move in very different domains, after all.”

“There’s a lot we share, Telperinquar, and I don’t mean just in where we’ve come from or even in who we are. For instance –” she looked him straight in the eye, “we are both seeking power.”

He stepped back. “That’s just not true. I don’t want a kingdom. I wouldn’t rule if the crown was handed to me.”

“You want a great deal more than a kingdom. You want the world.”

He drew breath to protest, but instead paused, letting her words sink in, considering what she might mean by them.

“And you shall have it, if you go on as you are... No, do not think I am flattering you, Telperinquar. They would rally to your banner. They already do. It’s not to our halls that the embassies come from Numenor anymore.”

“It’s not that I want to deal with them,” Celerimbor said, waving one hand in irritation. “And I send them to you whenever they do show up with all their talk of alliance and collaboration, but I can’t help if they persist in misunderstanding what exactly it is that the Mírdain does!”

“They know perfectly well where the real power in Eregion dwells. They call it The Land of the Ring-Lords, did you know that?”

He did know that, he reflected; the phrase was too familiar to jar, so it must have been spoken somewhere in his hearing. “No matter what the songs say, my course is not my grandfather’s.”

“No,” she said, “You don’t have your grandfather’s flaws. Possession? Mistrust?”

“I have been at a great deal of trouble to scour them from me.” Celebrimbor put in, his voice hardening.

She nodded. “But there are other faults than Fëanor’s in the world.”

“Aunt –” He paused. “Is there something that troubles you?”

She gave his words consideration as serious as he had given hers. “It’s hard to say,” she said at last. “Trouble – that may not be the word for it. The patterns of the world are shifting, but I do not know if for good or for ill. And it doesn’t take the Sight to know that there are great works being wrought, great changes in the Mírdain itself.”

“Oh?”

She looked at him sidelong. “People are talking about you and that gift-lord of yours.”

“People like to talk,” he said, wry and careful. “People talk about you and me, you know.”

She looked hard at him for a minute, then decided not to press the point. “I assume that by people here you mean mortals,” she said, picking up his own wry tone, “who love to imagine the affairs of
others to be as prolific and as indiscriminate as their own. You should hear what some of them say about your father and Finrod! Coupling for them is like conversation for the Quendi: they use it to order all of their affairs. Still, what can you expect from creatures whom no bond can hold for longer than a century or so?”

He laughed. “Oh Aunt, you know I love you, though you turned to Celeborn of the Trees. Celeborn! I haven’t seen him for ages – it seems he spends more time out of Eregion than in it, these days, though he comes to visit even less often than you do!” They paused to let a laughing gaggle of the Mírdain’s apprentices come up from a boat-launch, scrambling up the stone steps set into the river bank.

“I’m afraid the turning centuries have done little to reconcile my husband to your company.”

“Oh, your husband! What can I do to persuade him that I am not a kinslayer any more, that no oath sleeps in me to waken at a careless word?”

“You are a kinslayer, Telperinquar. As am I.”

He turned to her in surprise; he had never heard her express any such thing, but her eyes were clear – sober, unclouded.

“You, Aunt?”

“The shadow that I saw on Fëanor,” she began. “Long ago, in undarkened Aman – it was on all of us. On all of the Noldor. On me. Why do you think I spent half of the First Age trying to forget who I was? I stripped my own name from me, a kinslayer’s name, a murderer’s name. Why do you think I vanished into Doriath when my brothers built realms for themselves? I thought that if I chose the unsullied, that I could avoid the destruction that the Noldor – that we kinslayers – pulled down on ourselves.” She interlaced her fingers, looking at her hands, then raised her eyes to him. “But it didn’t do any good, Telperinquar. Possession and mistrust, greed and jealousy – they came into the Guarded Realm, for all its innocence, they grew there on their own. It wasn’t Morgoth that did that, it wasn’t Fëanor. I saw Doriath fall.”

“I thought you had gone by – by the time –”

“By the time your family showed up? Yes, Celeborn and I were long gone by then. But Doriath was fallen long before that. Fallen even before it was sacked by the Dwarves. I saw the shadow on Elu, yet I couldn’t give its right name, because I believed that Doriath was good.”

“I’ve never heard you say anything like this, Aunt. Has something – did something happen?”

“I’ve spent a great deal of time working this out in my own mind. Sometimes the closer things are, the more effort it takes to see them.”

“And now it sounds like you’re making another point about the Mírdain!”

“Well,” she said lightly, “perhaps I am. As I’ve said, you and I are very much alike.”

“Why, what do you see for us?”

“Nothing clearly. Fire. A gift refused. Rings – Telperinquar, is there something about your relationship with that Maia that I ought to know?”

He considered several responses, but settled on “Why do you ask?”
She had not missed the caution of his reply. “Love is always a dangerous thing, and I wonder if the love of the Holy Ones is not particularly dangerous? They are... less complex than we are. They are committed. We think we are bound to the world? We can’t even imagine how closely they are bound to it.”

“You’re speaking of your old master?” He took the opportunity to shift the conversation away from Annatar and the still-unresolved question of just what he was to him.

Galadriel nodded. “What happened after Elu died – I’ve never seen anything like it. In the Kindler’s mercy I never will again. There’s dying of grief after losing a spouse, we saw that all too often in Beleriand. But all her great work crumbled, and she just – went out. It wasn’t that she didn’t love Doriath; she did. But she loved Doriath in and through and as Elu, they weren’t separate things for her. She was my teacher, she was my friend, she was a being of unfathomable power, and when she lost him, she lost the means by which she existed in Middle-Earth. It was as if the Spring itself could disintegrate.” She shook herself.

“Forgive me, I am in a strange humor today. I see the Mírdain – I see you – strong and happy and striving upward, and I wish to see you keep that happiness, I want to see you safe. It is perhaps,” she added, with a significant look, “to be expected, given my current endeavor.”

A sudden smile lit his face. “If you’re saying what I think you’re saying—”

“You are not the only one undertaking great works these days! Yes, a child. We have chosen these shores. We have chosen the future, not the past. Life, not memory. By this time next year you will have a young cousin.”

He laughed aloud with delight. “She’ll be a fair and fearsome child, aunt.”

“She?”

“I can’t see you creating anything other than a daughter. But I’m not of the line of far-sighted Arafínewë, so I could be wrong!”

It was a cold night, bracing and clear, in the late autumn many years later when Celebrimbor stood once again on the rooftop, looking out over the city with Annatar beside him. He had changed his work-stained robes for layered silks in a blue just short of black, the rich luminous shade of the eastern sky at sunset.

He had to dress the part of an Elven-lord rather than a master of the Mírdain more often, ever since Galadriel and Celeborn had left Eregion, but it wasn’t for ceremony or the tedious work of diplomacy that he had put on the formal clothing this night. He and Annatar had been working on the concepts for the next Ring-series for months, and he could tell, as surely as he could sense the turning of the year, that they were approaching a point of breakthrough, a point where something would change. Those moments were his ceremonies, his festivals, privately observed.

His eyes rested on the city and it seemed to him that dream blended with waking and that it was light itself that flowed through the Mírdain: the bobbing of lanterns on the boats moored by the docks, the colored lampstones among the bare branches of the trees by the river-walk, the warmth of his friend at his side, whose presence was his own enlightenment. We are blessed. Our city is blessed.

“No, not blessed,” said Annatar, answering his thought. “Or if it is, it is you who have blessed it.”

“Not you, gift-lord?”
Only that half-smile in answer, but it did not seem mocking now. He turned his contemplation from his city to his companion. The white of his clothing, the pale gold of his hair, meant that Annatar took on the colors of whatever environment he happened to be in: honey and copper in the firelight of the forges, silver and sky in the bluish, wavering light of the baths. Here in the starlight he was grisaille, black and white and a thousand subtle gray distinctions between. And he seemed to him not just admirable in his beauty and his knowledge, but the friend who knew him better than anyone else had ever done.

“We have been blessed in you,” he said, his heart full but his tone matter-of-fact. They knew each other well enough for there to be no question of flattery between them.

Annatar knew it, and met his confidence with wordless satisfaction. He saw that Celebrimbor felt no more need to prove his independence against his own will, held no more suspicion of the power of Aman and its gifts. And for his part, he had no more need to flatter, no more need to conceal his own purposes behind what Celebrimbor wanted to hear.

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“Do you remember when you first suspected I was flattering you?” He settled himself beside his friend. “How angry you were! You might have set something on fire with your thought alone.”

“You’re confusing me with you again,” Celebrimbor returned. “I’m not the one of us who can burn things with my mind.” He thought back to those earliest days, distance rising in his eyes. “This is exceptional... It seems so absurd now. But of course I was angry then, and for two reasons. Firstly, I am not a piece of lead; I do not take kindly to being manipulated. Secondly –” his voice dropped. “Do you have any idea how much I wanted to hear you say what you said?”

“Of course! Why do you think I said it? I needed the Mírdain, Tyelperinquar, I needed you, and so I set out to give your own inmost desires. I did not reckon on how your pride would complicate things, and I very nearly ruined everything by giving exactly you what you wanted. And since then I have had to speak with scrupulous honesty.” He took one of Celebrimbor’s braids between two fingers, but made no move to undo it.

“Why were we so important to you?”

Annatar raised an eyebrow at him. “Now you really are asking me to flatter you.”

But Celebrimbor’s eyes were still soft with distance. “When I saw you in the doorway, years ago –”

“Centuries.”

“Is it so long? The years have passed like an indrawn breath, like a cloud slipping from the face of the sun.”

“You’re in a poetical humor.” He twined the end of the braid through his fingers, still not undoing the interwoven strands.

“I am grateful, Lord of Gifts. I am finding words for my joy.” His hands moved as he spoke, tracing patterns through the air while he searched for the means of expression. “When you first saw me on my doorstep, then, centuries ago, I do not think that even then I dreamed of all that you could bring us.” His gesture took in the Mírdain and the lands beyond, a widening spiral. “How did all this happiness come to us? If you had only brought us those first insights, the art of binding light to matter, it would have been enough.”

“It would not, and you know it wouldn’t. You are greedy, Tyelperinquar. I do not think you can be sated. Your appetite grows with your capacity to satisfy it; it always outpaces your satisfaction. There
are no limits to your aspiration. Why do you think that you were the one I came to?”

Celebrimbor laughed aloud. “Because neither the Great nor the Wise would have you? Gil-Galad and Galadriel, as I recall, threw you out on your ear.”

“They did not know how to desire. How to grasp for what was beyond their reach. And look at the result. If you asked where to find greatness in Middle-Earth, where to find wisdom, I do not think anyone would tell you to look in Lindon, or in... wherever it is that Galadriel’s taken herself off to.”

Celebrimbor brushed this off, and brushed off a chill with it. He had not been well pleased when Galadriel told him that she and Celeborn and their daughter – now a long-limbed, wild-hearted young girl, a lover of forest and mountain – were leaving Eregion for good. *Eregion is the Mírdain’s now, there’s no point in pretending otherwise. I do not rule you, Telperinquar; and I would rather the question never come up. But visit us in Lorinand, visit us, sooner rather than later...* Annatar had not troubled to hide his satisfaction at their departure, but Celebrimbor remembered how he had parted ways with his father, and had lost himself in work until the doubts in his heart were quiet again.

Annatar noted the slight shiver at the mention of Galadriel’s departure; he stepped closer to him so that he could feel his breath when he spoke, feel the brush of cloth against cloth where their robes met. “I came to this world to bestow great gifts, my own. Do you know how remarkable it has been to find someone who can receive them?”

“Ah, but what will you do when you run out of things to teach us?”

He already had. He had run out years ago, long since surpassed the knowledge that he had proposed to offer the Mírdain. He had come expecting to make use of the instructability of the Eldar – so much more durable, so much less distractible, than mortals – but he had found companions, not servants.

“Run out?” He laughed softly. “Do you think you haven’t been calling greatness forth from me, Tyelperinquar, as I have from you?”

Celebrimbor did not take his meaning, not fully; Annatar felt his bright flicker of pleasure at his words, but not the deeper fire, that devouring joy of discovery and ambition that accompanied real insight.

“Don’t you see what that means?” he said. “This means this never has to stop. There is no limit to the reach of our greatness, to what we can call forth from each other.”

There it was, building slowly: recognition, and with it wonder. He held his gaze, not bothering to glance down as he unwound the bronze ornament from his hair. “That midsummer night, when I danced before the Brotherhood,” he said, parting the strands of the braid, “do you remember what woke in your hearts then?”

“Remember?” His voice was hoarse, catching in his throat. “Desire. Not to – not to serve, exactly. To have great things asked of us.”

“Then you do see it,” he said. “You evoked that in me, yes, even you. I didn’t know that was possible. Not from one such as you.”

“The fire that you kindled within us –”

“Is the same you kindle within me. Do you wonder at that? And with it, my brightness, we shall light the world.”
“Annatar.” His hands were moving again; they could not be still when he was inspired. “The next series of Rings, that’s what they’ve got to do. We are not just going to capture the light that surrounds us. We are going to call it forth, call it from the hidden corners of the world. The sky. The sea. The fires at the heart of the earth.” He did not say the word Silmarils.

“Yes.” He was sure of him, he could not be more sure of him if he spent another four hundred years refining their collaboration. It was not certainty he sought any more. If there were to be progress between them – if there were to be a them at all – it must be on different terms, the terms of the trust that they had built between them. Certainly they could grow no closer as long as there were secrets between them. But when it came to it, there something that caught at him, some ill-assorted thing that if he had been differently constituted he might have called fear.

He looked his friend in the eyes, and they were dark with trust and bright with the fire they shared. “There is greater work to be done than these lesser rings,” he said at last. “What we shall do together, you and I –”

He broke off. Celeborn waited for him.

Then: “We must understand one another completely.”

Celeborn pushed his loosened hair back behind his ear, never dropping his gaze. “Do we not?”

He kept his tone steady and light, but Celeborn heard, for the second time since he had known him, genuine hesitation in Annatar’s voice and knew that something was about to change. Annatar always carried himself with such composure, spoke with a musical certainty that verged on scorn, and slowness in his speech had always been a sign of deliberation. But he knew that catch in the voice, not from Annatar, but from the survivors of lost Beleriand when they were ready to speak about their past at last.

He was entirely prepared to accept whatever Annatar was going to tell him. He had suspected all along that he wasn’t in good standing with Aulë. He had hardly troubled to hide his quarrel with the Valar, speaking in increasingly unguarded terms, words that sounded like praise, but weren’t. Greatness? Aulë could have been great. He bumped up against greatness almost accidentally. And he nearly tripped over himself trying to run from it. He danced attendance on the whims of a creator who was always taking the works of others and turning them into something else.

But there was no scorn in his face now, only shadows. Seeing him twisting on the verge of speech caught at Celeborn’s heart, pierced him with the sudden impulse to take him in his arms and reassure him. He mastered it – it was absurd, of course, Annatar needed no reassurance and anyway any such gesture would only push him farther away. Calm and stable he reached out to him, mind to mind.

I know you, he thought. I accept you. The door is open to you. Whoever you are, whatever you’ve been, if you come in good will, the door is open.

Annatar drew breath to speak, but said nothing.

“Listen to me,” he said, catching both of his hands. “Look at me. Whatever it is, I trust you.

But Annatar remained silent, turning his hand within his own, opening it so the hollow of his hand was turned upward toward the sky. He ran his thumb up over the palm, and out across the responsive fingers, uncurling them.

“Annatar. Show me.”
He looked at his hand rather than meeting his eyes, but Celebrimbor felt the bright, curiously opaque pressure of Annatar’s awareness within his own, the shape of his thought as familiar and beloved now as the angles of his face or the timbre of his voice. But that brightness began to shift and change, the veil of fire growing transparent and then vanishing, and he saw –

No, sight was the wrong word for it, sight was only an approximation. Unfathomably strange and yet appalling familiar, as if the night sky had opened knowing eyes or entropy had spoken in a father’s voice. These were the gods before the awakening of the Children, and, reeling, he knew he only kept hold of his reason because Annatar was modulating his thought to his understanding, projecting infinities onto the finite plane of his understanding.

The realization steadied him; he began to catch up. He did know that – face, yes, call it a face. Aulë, his master, the Smith, the Power of Order and Shape, reverberant with gladness as if the hills themselves were rejoicing. There were patterns rippling from him: the ring of hammers on metal and the crack of picks in stone, the sturdy frames and the sturdier spirits of the Fathers of the Dwarves.

*My creation accepted, my children given life –*

But there was no joy in his thought – in Annatar’s thought, though that was not the name he bore. The last straw, the final piece, this was not to be borne. His master reached for him, sharing his gladness, but he recoiled, snarling. Shock in the Smith’s face, the first fissures of long grief.

*My precious one –*

A cold explosive anger rippling through his being like one of Naugwen’s chain reactions, leaving everything utterly altered in its wake.

*I am none of yours –*

He was tearing himself free, and the scene around him reeled and shifted and grew solid. Middle-Earth now, though it was ancient and raw and strange. Slow rivers of molten rock, seething jets of vapor, deep gashed pits where the earth itself was cut to the very bone. And among the mountains, higher and colder and mightier than they, the ruinous beauty of the one who alone had lifted up his voice against the music that was creation itself.

He looked upon him, fathomless void in the eyes, and he trembled before him, but his purpose held. He was a flame, a spear, a pillar of light; a turning wheel, a waving flag, and he bowed before him with his face to the earth.

The mightiest of the Valar spoke, in a voice like stone tearing free from stone, words wrenching themselves out of the substance of the world. “Well, Admirable One? I told you to come to me when you were ready to lift your eyes higher.”

“My lord and my god.” His word gleamed silver in the dark. “I am yours and not theirs. I will not serve anyone who cringes away from their own greatness. You I will serve.”

There was laughter, or perhaps an earthquake, and he rose, and Melkor laid his shining hands on his shoulders.

“I will ask great things of you.”

Small and shaken, but still stubborn and bright, Celebrimbor’s thought wavered against his friend’s. *That was Morgoth he served, and that’s bad, voluntarily, and that’s worse. But – you knew it had to be something like this, or he would have told you before, you of all people have no grounds to show him scorn.*
Celebrimbor tightened his grip on his hand. “Annatar –” His throat was dry. But before he could speak, images burst into his thoughts, and this time it was truly sight, it was the world as he knew it, it was Beleriand, the mountains of the North.

The figure waiting among the mountains was smaller this time, wearing the outward form of a man in armor. But there was no mistaking the Herald of the Valar for a man. The glory of righteous war still lit his obsidian face, and his eyes shone like stars in the night sky. He was waiting for someone. With effort Celebrimbor pulled his attention back from that terrible, warlike beauty and there, walking slowly among the broken stones, under the dark and shattered sky, was a figure he knew.

It was almost Annatar as he had seen him long ago in his doorway, but he was blurred and unfocused, his outward form barely concealing his spirit, and to look at him, even in thought, set his head ringing like the ears rang after an unbearably loud sound. There was blood on his hands and at the corners of his eyes; there was blood streaked through his white-gold hair, and when he smiled, when he spoke, there was blood on his teeth.

“Why, Eaglet.”

“Abhorred One.”

There was no pain to the shock of recognition, not yet. He recoiled from that knowledge, like flesh recoiling from the touch of fire. But Annatar’s hands closed around his, his thought pinned his own in place with an immobile, inhuman strength, like being caught in the grip of a machine. Stay!

There in those desolate mountains, Sauron faced Eonwë. He held his gaze and slowly opened his hands, showing them empty.

“Do you still believe yourself admirable?” The piercing, unlidded eyes flickered over him. “I have no authority to give you back your name.”

Slowly, as if the motion gave him pain, Sauron sank to his knees, still holding his empty hands out, and still holding his gaze, so that now he was looking upwards.

“Do you think I am one of the Eldar, Ill-Wrought, that you come before me in beauty? I see you what you are.”

The glimmers of light like stars in his midnight skin brightened and grew and opened, a thousand eyes all-knowing and terrible; and the darkness that swept away from them was wings, great beating wings that whipped the air around them to storm. The Herald of the Valar stood revealed and revealing, a complexity of wings and eyes no longer even remotely human in its shape, no longer anything belonging to any earthly geometry.

Sauron, still facing him, rose in answer no less terrible and no less glorious: a pillar of flame and wheels, toothed gears turning in the center of the fire. But those eyes were fixed on him, piercing and inescapable, stripping him of all illusions, of beauty and form and shape, until with a cry that was more than sound, a pressure wave rippling through his thought and his being, that glory of fire and light vanished. Where he had been was only a heap of ashes, where a small blackened ember still glowed.

Man-shaped again, the Herald of the Valar knelt and picked up the coal. It lay in his unscarred palm, half-burned through and gray with ash, but with red and gold still flickering under its surface. He breathed on it; that spark glowed briefly in answer.

“Get up, Stinker.”
Something shifted in the air or in the space, and then there they were again, facing each other, wearing the forms they had worn at the beginning of their meeting (conversation? contest?) and Celebrimbor did not know if he saw the consequence of that incomprehensible encounter, or only a restatement of it. Annatar’s face was set and proud, his back straight and his lip curled, but now he saw the ashes in the gold of his eyes.

“Brother,” said Eonwë, and there was no pity in his voice, but there was something like grief in his tearless eyes. “Why?”

“In his eyes—” and there was no need to say of whom he spoke – “I saw a world without limits, a world bounded only by his mighty will, a vision of power and terror. The minds of the Children burned like straw in that gaze; the wills of the lesser gods snapped like twigs.”

"You say then that your will broke to his?"

"No. I surrendered it gladly. Why should I serve anyone less than the greatest?"

"So he held no terror for you?"

"Of course he did. There is terror in greatness. He knew that. I respected that."

"And your former master?"

"Aulë? He wielded neither power nor terror but knowledge only; his world had limits and he shied away from them. But do you want to know what I saw in Melkor's eyes when I saw him last, in the deep places below the world?"

Eonwë made no answer.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. They tell me you have thrown him out beyond the world. I think he was there already."

A stir of wind, a glitter of spears. "And is that what brings you here? You seem to make a habit of surrender."

“I know when I am beaten.” There were ashes in his voice. “And I want to live.”

It might have been a very long time that the two of them stood facing each other; there was neither day nor night in the ruin of Angband.

At last Eonwë spoke, and his voice was sharp but not cruel, decisive as steel through flesh. “The pardon that you seek is not mine to give,” he said. “But if you will return with me to Aman—”

“To Aman!” The voice was in his ears now, not in his mind. Sauron was at his side and speaking to him, speaking in that familiar sardonic way, in the voice he knew as well as he knew his own. “You and I, Tyelperinquar, we know, do we not, that it is not from the Valar we will find what we seek.”

How could nothing have changed in his face? How could Gorthaur the Cruel still be wearing the features of the dearest friend he had ever known, still be looking into his eyes as if he expected to find understanding and welcome? There are other faults than Fëanor’s echoed somewhere in his memory.

“I served the greatest among them, the only one with the will to shape the world and the power to see it done. But at the end, what did he make? A heap of ashes. There was nothing. That was not what I wanted. What I wanted...
Sauron seemed to realize, somewhat belatedly, that he still kept him pinioned frozen and watching. He released him, and his hands fell, cold and nerveless, to his sides. “But now – don’t you see, Tyelperinquar, it’s done, it’s over, nothing is ruined forever. I am no longer Aulë’s creature, and no longer Morgoth’s. We are masterless men, you and I, and the world is open before us. We can rule it together.”

He felt the doors of that beloved mind slamming all at once, closing against him, snapping shut like a trap.

“Tyelperinquar—”

His friend raised his eyes to him, and they were nearly lightless with horror. “What have I done?” whispered Celebrimbor. “What have I done?”

And though his thought was closed to him now, he heard it echoing as clearly as if he had cried aloud: that brilliant mind spinning into a stuttering motion, a chaotic echo of his customary analysis.

Don’t touch me. Don’t touch me. Get away from me! My city – my people – I have betrayed them all. Sauron the Abhorred! What have I done?

He took him by the shoulders and shook him. “What do you mean, what have you done? You admired that which was admirable. Treasured that which was precious. Aulë himself, and greater than Aulë, did no less.”

Celebrimbor wrenched himself out of his grasp, reeled backward, caught himself and held his ground. Betrayal was in every line of his body, and flaring from him in nearly visible waves: revulsion, bewilderment, guilt.

It was the guilt, more than anything else, that sent rage crystallizing through him. What business did Celebrimbor have to be questioning himself, to be acting as if he were the one who had done something wrong by trusting him? How could he be on the verge of ruining all that they had worked for, all of the trust that they had built? He sighed, summoning everything he could recall of patience and reason.

“Tyelpe, nothing has changed. Pull yourself together and think. All we have done together. All we will still do.” He held out his hand to him, strong and graceful in the starlight. “You and I, we are the ones working for the good of this Middle-Earth, all of, we are the ones who will do what the Valar will not. I came to you and not to them.”

“To – me.” He formed the words with difficulty. “Don’t touch me.”

He would not plead, he would not persuade, he would not beg for the acceptance he had been promised. “You talked very grandly of what it meant to embrace a marred world,” he hissed. “What was that about ‘None of us are what we were, none of our hands are clean, and yet we will raise them again to the light, we will see this marred world shine?’”

“There are – there are limits to what I will embrace.”

“Clearly.”

He turned away from him and walked to the parapet. The lights of the city beneath now seemed as cold and distant as the stars.
“Neither of us exactly covered ourselves with glory in the last age, Curufinwë. I thought you understood that. I thought you –” He found that he could not finish the sentence. The words would not come, his thought could not endure them.

He began again, colder, calmer. “I thought that I was right to trust you. It appears I may have overestimated your capabilities. I saw, perhaps, what it was that I wanted to see.” This was better. The world was sliding back into place, order reasserting itself. He gathered himself; it was the time for decisive action. His robes brushed the stone as he turned again to face him, a whisper like the wind. “But I will fix this. I will fix everything. And you and I, we will...”

Celebrimbor did not seem to be listening; he was staring at his hands. He did not raise his head, or notice when he left.

*What does it say about me that Sauron trusts me? Was that trust, or was that a final deception? Did he believe me so far corrupted that it was safe to tell me who he really was? Was he right?*

He fell to his knees. The stars burned overhead.

*All those years, poisoned? Wasted?*

Even his own body seemed strange to him. There was nowhere and nothing that did not speak of Annatar, nothing that had not been tainted by Sauron’s presence and knowledge and light –

*How do I begin to understand who I have been and all that I have done, to account for this terrible knowledge?*

How long it was that he huddled there on the rooftop he did not know. Words came and went in his mind, scraps of memory and thought, and he could not tell if the stars were fading, or if it were the darkness behind his eyes that rose up to claim them. At last the winter sun rose low and gray, and he was entirely alone.

He got to his feet, an ache and weariness in his limbs such as he had not felt for an age of the world. He cast his thought over his city, and it was still familiar, still answering to him though it was flat and colorless. Annatar – Sauron – was gone altogether. There was no trace of him – of his presence, that is; every stone still spoke of him – anywhere within the Mírdain, or beyond, as far as his awareness could reach.

There was no time for shock or grief or anger or anything else; he had wasted too much time already. Decisions had to be made, decisions that were too important to be made with anything less than clarity. He turned and left the rooftop, without looking behind him, without a pause for a last glance over the city he had loved.

The Tehtar were gathered beneath the holly trees in the winter garden, their spherical tea-bowls steaming in the chill air, filling the courtyard with their morning debates in place of birdsong. Tirnion, finishing an elegant speech and an elegant holly-crown at the same time, looked up as Celebrimbor entered the courtyard.

“Celebrimbor!” he called. “Join our colloquy! The question is of love and carelessness!”

“Yes!” Damros’s apprentice was eager to explain. “So, Tirnion maintains that as love is the highest purpose of our nature, to love is always in some measure beneficial, even if the object is unworthy.
In short, it does not matter what one loves, so long as one loves rightly.

“Naugwen, on the other hand, takes a grimmer view of things. She says that love for an unworthy object degrades the lover and does not ennable the beloved, and that care must be taken to ensure that love is rightly directed before questions of right conduct can even be addressed.”

Alagos patted the bench beside him, proffered his own tea bowl. “But perhaps you would disagree?” he said hopefully.

Celebrimbor looked at them and did not seem to see them; he regarded them blank-faced and desolate for a moment, then walked off without saying anything.

“Our Fëanorian brother is in a strange humor this morning,” said Alagos, drawing a long draft of hot tea.

Tirnion finished the holly wreath and placed it on his head with great ceremony. “Why, only because he is alone. Let him find Aulendil, he’ll soon have him smiling again. Now, Naugwen, I must challenge your definition of love...”

They confirmed it at the gate and again at the bridge: Annatar had left in the night, a white rider on a black horse riding hard out of the city. “Such haste he made!” laughed the bridgewarden. “But that’s your way in the Brotherhood: get an idea into your head and nothing will serve but you must see it done! Why, are you looking for him?”

Celebrimbor stood in the outer chambers of the baths, the faint scent of birch-leaves in the air, and the faint song of the fountains echoing off the vaulted ceilings. He unknotted cords, unfolded pleats, unhooked clasps, neatly and steadily undoing the evening-sky robes, layer after layer until he felt the prickling of cold air against bare skin. He folded the cloth softly and precisely. It took a long time, and it still seemed that it was not enough, that there had to be more that he could strip away to get to something untainted beneath.

There were other people in the bathing halls, but they seemed muted and distant, part of a world that he remembered but could not return to. It was a cold morning, and so most of the bathers were in the saunas, lounging and laughing and scrubbing each other with bundles of birch or hazel leaves.

The cold pool was empty, round and deep and clear as a well. He paused at its edge. At least he never followed me into the water. His skin burned with the memory of his touch, his thoughts burned with shame and horror and with a loss that was only beginning to make itself felt.

Hardly disturbing the smooth surface, he slipped into the water of the cold pool, and let himself sink straight to the bottom. He sat there for a long time, looking up through the water at the shifting lights on the ceiling; he half-expected to see the wavering outline of a shining figure, leaning after him, waiting for him to surface. As he let the cold draw the fire from his thoughts, something like clarity began to emerge, question lapping against question, point against point.

He trusted me, he thought. He didn’t have to tell me. We could have gone on forever, letting him be to us only Annatar, Lord of Gifts, friend of Aulë, my colleague and my brother –

“This never has to stop,” Sauron had said, his hand in his hair, starlight and gold in his eyes, there on the rooftop. “There is no limit to the reach of our greatness.”

His mind raced over the centuries they had shared, over the noontide of the Mírdain, looking for signs he had missed, re-interpreting everything he had known and treasured in the light of that
terrible knowledge. Those were Sauron’s words in his ear, Sauron’s knowledge in his art, Sauron’s hand on his hand. But as the doubts rose up and pulled apart everything that he had known or believed, a strange pattern began to emerge from the wreckage, a doubt of doubt:

Over all of those centuries at my side – what has he ever done to hurt us?

What has he done? What has the Lieutenant of Angband, Morgoth’s second-in-command, done? What he has done is written in the bodies and the spirits of your friends, your colleagues, your people. Have you forgotten Tol Sirion? Have you forgotten Finrod, dying in the darkness?

At last his body began to cry for air, and he surfaced. He clung to the edge of the pool, resting his head against the stone lip, breathing slowly and deep.

There can be no forgiveness for such crimes.

Can there not? The voice in his thoughts was cool, rational; his mother’s voice, or the voice of his mother’s part in him. Is that judgement yours to make, Kinslayer?

Was it that Annatar did share his hope after all, to change the legacy of blood and ashes left by the past, to make something beautiful of the world he had helped to injure? I will not say that something marred is lost forever...

His own words returned to torment him, and he groaned against the smooth rock-face. I could wish, he thought, that if my words were to be put to the test, a less extreme case might have been chosen to try them.

This time the voice was unquestionably his mother, laughing at his self-pity. You cannot do what is right only when it is easy, my own.

If Sauron the Abhorred can come back from who he had been – that would be an act of redemption greater than Arda has ever seen. The Teleri still hold a feast celebrating Osse’s rejection of Morgoth’s service. And if he was telling the truth – if he really is trying to work for good rather than evil – what would you have had him do?

And what if you are only entertaining this as a possibility because you want to believe it, because you want there to have been some kind of reason that you loved Gorthaur the Cruel and called him the dearest friend you have ever known?

He thought of him in that vision of the end of the war, of the desolation in his eyes. He didn’t have to come back. He didn’t have to come to us. But now – I cannot ask the Brotherhood to accept Sauron.

He realized that he was already thinking of the Brotherhood on the one hand, and himself and Sauron on the other, and, sickened, he sunk back beneath the surface of the water to weep.

What is the alternative? To expose him to the Brotherhood? To go after him, and – what? Drag him back to the Mírdain in chains? He ran. That is not the action of an innocent person. But I don’t think that innocence has ever been a question – for either of us. Did he do anything other than what I asked of him? Get away from me.

The longer he considered, the higher he realized the stakes were, and that there was no one whom he could ask for counsel or for help in his decision. Distantly, miserably, he wondered if he ought to pray. But for what? And to whom? There were Powers who were the exponents of Doom and Sorrow and Growth, even of Strength against wickedness and Light against the darkness, but who was the guardian of Transformation?
Did not Morgoth himself feign repentance once? I, I of all people, have reason to know what ruin comes from taking an evildoer at his word.

He broke the surface again, this time pulling himself out of the pool and standing down looking into its clear depths, straight to the bottom. His skin was chilled, but it could not touch the fire within him.

I cannot know whether I am right. I cannot afford to be wrong.

The water ran from him in streams.

It comes down to whether he was lying to us. And that is not – He saw it clearly now. The choice – of whether he will be Sauron or not – is not mine. It is his.

The burden did not lift from him, exactly, but there was strength in the clarity, and his mind began to stir to life. He saw, suddenly and clearly, a final series of rings, an instrument for protection greater than any he had yet devised, a power to draw upon the forces of Arda itself that could stand as long as the world stood, stand against any force within it.

Let him be what he will, Lord of Gifts or Lord of Wolves, but I will protect my people.

Though Celebrimbor said nothing, by the end of the day news of Annatar’s departure had raced through the Mírdain, and over the weeks, the months, that followed, rumor swirled and swelled.

Things were not the same in the Brotherhood after their colleague’s sudden and mysterious departure: divisions opened up, mistrust and doubt. There were open tensions between those of the Brotherhood who had been closest to him, who had been most closely linked to his own particular schools of thought. This was only increased by the fact that Celebrimbor, who had unquestionably been closest to him, refused to say anything at all about the circumstances under which he had left. “I am sure he had his reasons,” was all he would offer when questioned. But he had precipitously abandoned ring-work, and indeed abandoned teaching and collaborative work altogether, locking himself in the workshop for days, weeks at a time, speaking to no one.

Whispers and murmurs, dread and doubt. They must have had some sort of fight. The Fëanorian blood will out; Fëanor’s heir drove Aulë’s servant away because he was jealous of the glory that he drew away from him. No, others said, it was Annatar who was jealous when he realized that Celebrimbor’s craft surpassed his own; he left because he would not be lessoned by one of the Eldar. He left because Celebrimbor would not serve him – had one of Fëanor’s proud house ever bent the knee to the gods? No, the two mightiest craftsmen of the Mírdain made something together and then quarreled over whose work it was.

Even those of the Mírdain who had never been entirely comfortable with Annatar were unhappy with the changes wrought by him leaving. The pious saw the Valar withdrawing their favor from the Brotherhood, the freethinkers saw the one who had spurred them to undreamed-of heights abandoning them, and none of them were happy with the alteration in Celebrimbor’s behavior. People spoke less of the noontide of Valinor, and more of how those days of bliss had ended.

celebrimbor heard the rumors, some of them. They passed across his consciousness, like background readings for some experiment. He did not care, he would have to stop his work and make conscious effort in order to care, and, caught up in the fury of creation, he no longer had the inclination – possibly not even the power – to stop. He knew, distantly, that he had come to his great work at last, that this was the culmination of all his labors, that he worked with hand and mind and heart and soul. He had expected to be happier about it.
He missed Annatar as he worked, his absence more like a maiming than anything so simple as pain. It occurred to him, once or twice, that he was longing for the company of a servant of Morgoth, but he put the guilt aside along with the grief and the fear: a fact of his existence, more fuel for his great work.

Though he now dreaded dreaming, he would not stop, for he had more need than ever of the impossible insights, the unimagined breakthroughs of the mind unfettered. The light still shone in his dreams, and at times, faint and far, he heard a voice crying *Where are you? Where are you? Come back to me.*

“Has anyone seen III?” Gaeron was running the departmental meeting; Celebrimbor had stopped attending altogether, months ago.

“Seen him? Who sees anything of him these days?”

Naugwen spoke up. “He’s been shut up in the Great Workshop for weeks now; none of us have been able to use it. I’ve moved the chemistry lectures to the Great Hall.”

There were nods of agreement and mutterings of “Fëanor’s heir indeed.”

“Well, can someone haul him out of there? That steward from the city, Bruithwir, he’s been looking for him on some diplomatic business about the traders from the Southlands, and I can’t keep putting him off much longer. And frankly –” Gaeron paused. “I’m not easy in my mind about him. He’s letting his responsibilities slide."

“This is not his way,” said VeAnne, and was met with more agreement, and someone adding, “The Lord of Gifts has taken something from him.”

No one had any real solution, so VeAnne offered the closest thing she could. “If I don’t hear from him in a few more days, I’m breaking down the door.”

The evening of the fourth day after that department meeting, VeAnne stood outside the shut door of the Great Workshop. There had been strange noises from within that afternoon, and great flares of light, but now it was completely silent. No one answered her call. She laid her hand against the lock, bracing herself to deliver a shattering blow, but she felt, to her surprise, that the door was unlocked at last. She pushed the door open gently and looked around the darkened workshop, scanning for Celebrimbor.

There he was, sitting on the floor, braced against the wall as if he was resting, grey-faced and drained, his head tipped back and his hand curled against his chest. His eyes were closed; he did not stir when the door opened.

“Brother.” VeAnne knelt beside him. “Are you hurt?”

His eyes fluttered, he murmured something unintelligible.

“Tyelperinquar.”

He was not talking sense. “It worked – Annatar – it did work –” She could not tell if he was talking
to his absent friend, or about him, but hearing him speak so was like seeing an untended wound. She spoke again, firm and practical.

“Can you walk?”

He looked up at her, eyes unfocused. “Walk? I can run. I can fly.” But he made no move to get up, did not even lift his head from the wall.

It was not unknown for investigations into the properties of matter to produce side effects ranging from the alarming to the outright dangerous – and it was also not unknown for the craftsmen of the Mírdain to overextend themselves, spiritually or physically. What it would take for Celebrimbor to deplete himself like this, though, she had trouble imagining – the strength of the fire within him was enough to sustain hundreds.

Though he was clearly unhappy, at least it was not despair at work within him; she had seen the brutal effects of despair driving apart spirit and body in the mines of Angband. She knew the look well, for it had fallen to her, when one of her work-gang faltered or fell, to determine with a glance whether they needed only the touch of the lash to force them onward, or whether they would never rise again and were fit only to be fed to the orcs. She sighed.

“You look like a woman who’s had a bad birth. Come, we’ll get you home.” She reached to take the hand that he held clenched against his chest, but he recoiled, nearly snarling at her.

“No! Get away from that! Get away!”

She sat back on her heels and looked at him. “III. Brother. Are you in some sort of danger?”

He turned his face away from her, his cheek pressing against the wall. “I don’t know,” he said miserably, “I don’t know, I don’t know.”

She tried again. “Is the Brotherhood in danger?”

This one he could answer, he turned back to face her again. “No. Not now.”

She sighed again. Regardless of what it was he was holding, what it was that had been consuming him within and without, bed would be a better place for him than the floor; food and drink and the sound of voices. He suffered himself to be hauled to his feet and came with her meekly down the stairs, still holding his hand closed and only leaning on her from time to time. He said nothing except once, at the foot of the stairs, when Veanne turned to him with a question in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, intense and unhappy. “Veanne – I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I know. I am too,” she answered. “Always.”

*Curufinwë III Telperinquar of Eregion, Ring-Maker, Master of the Gwaith-I-Mírdain, to Galadriel of Lorinand, born Artanis Nerwen of the House of Arafínwë: the Kindler’s light on your path.*

*My dear aunt,*

*I send you one part of my greatest work; her name is Nenya. Water is her being, and from water she takes her life and force. Of her nature and powers, you may learn directly through use. Your sight reaches deep and far; now you possess a power to match it. Wielding Nenya you may strengthen and protect, hold off the workings of time and its sorrow, keep all evil from your realm.*
I do not exaggerate when I say that these are the mightiest creations of this Age. They are not weapons, they cannot be used for conquest. But for healing, for preservation, and defense, nothing in Arda can overcome them. They draw their power from the world itself; it is their source and their being. The greatest craftsman in Middle-Earth could call on no force stronger than that.

If you wish it, it will not be long until we may speak directly with each other. Nenya will answer her brothers in my keeping, the Rings of Fire and Air. I pray you, receive this gift at my hand, as I hope that I may ever remain. in some portion of your love,

Your nephew.

She frowned at the paper, making no move to open the small plain alabaster box that accompanied it. “This might as well be a war-missive,” she said to her husband at her shoulder, running her fingers lightly over the neat rows of letters. “Look at it, practically illegible with all the things it’s not saying...What do you think of this, Celeborn?”

But her husband picked up the box. “I think that this is better judgement than your nephew has shown in a long time,” he said, turning it in his long fingers. “Fire and Air? So he’s finally made his Silmarils... I suppose the other two are for himself and that Maia tutor of his.”

“I’m not so sure. Don’t you see, he doesn’t mention a word about him, his absence is scrawled all across this letter? *My works, my hand, my keeping...*”

“Come to think of it, I have heard a rumor out of Eregion, that Celebrimbor had cast Aulendil out of the city, so that now none should rule there besides him.”

“Was this the same rumor that holds that he threw *us* out?” The reproach was gentle, but present. “He sends us this as a gift, Celeborn, one part of his heart’s labor. That is not the deed of a tyrant.” She closed her hand over the box, over her husband’s hand beneath it. “But all of these references to defense, conquest, weapons? Something has happened, or else he wishes to be sure that something will not happen. I would be easier in my mind if I could look him in the eyes, hear from his voice what it is that he cannot say.”

* * *

It had been unsatisfactory, it had been painful, it had been like working with only half his sight, but he had done it at last, harnessing the mountain itself as his forge. Even now, with the fresh-wrought matter of the Ring in his hand, something caught at him: the desire to show it forth and explain it, see it reflected in his friend’s eyes.

This, then, was what the Eldar were always speaking of in their incessant songs: loss, and sorrow, the way that time takes away the bliss to which there can be no returning. He had no patience with it: with weakness of will and disorder of thought. This was a problem of power, and problems of power could be solved.

He walked into the fire in the heart of the mountain.

The stone was burning beneath him, lapping liquid at his feet, the air was burning all around him. The body he kept hold of, forcing it to hold its shape and purpose as it burned, but the fire devoured everything else. In what had been his fingers, now mere shapes of solid flame, his work began to open into an unbound medium of empty matter in the shape, the idea, of a Ring.

He put forth his thought and his power, he felt the spirit catch against matter, and his self begin to
spiral away from him into the substance of the Ring. As he had done in the morning of the world when he with all his kind descended from pure thought into the binding, beautiful limits of Arda, as his master had done when he claimed Middle-Earth for his own, as his friend had done – or tried to do – when he had first attempted to touch the nature of power, he gave himself over wholly to the Ring, pouring himself into it without stint, making of himself an instrument of power.

He was burning, he was losing form, he was coming apart; if he had anything more than the idea of a body left to him, he would have crumpled to the floor. But it was now the Ring that kept him together, sustained by the terrible energy of self split from the core of self. And the bond held, the energy was captured, and he raised his head and began to laugh. Source and substance and wielder, himself to himself, it was all so simple, so beautifully circular, it was the culmination of everything that he had worked for and all his works were contained within it.

By the time he walked out of the fire, there was nothing left to regret, and nothing left to desire, for the beginning and the end of his desire was in his possession. It lay on the palm of his hand, heavy and golden and beautiful, waiting to be used.

The first thing to do was to deal with the other Rings, his lesser works, to call them all to their master and restore the order that had always been inherent in them. Gold within gold, in letters of fire, he spoke through the Ring and felt it answer.

“...and in the darkness bind them,” he said, and the words shone forth from the Ring itself.

Let him reject that, he thought, and smiled, and put on the Ring.

There they were, the greater and the less, the Rings and their wielders, their minds laid open to him, their wills within his own, perfectly unaware of his presence. There was the Brotherhood, the Elvish craftsmen at their work, setting forth their small visions and their little thoughts, waiting to be called into the greater harmony. There were the early Rings that had been more widely scattered – in the hands of kings and farmers, traders, mariners – that must be Numenor he saw through one bearer’s eyes, though the vision was nearly obscured by the fears and lusts that encrusted mortal minds. He surveyed them, his servants, without haste, enjoying the clarity of vision that no one, not even his old master, had ever had of the inner workings of the mind and heart.

But something marred that perfect order, something that he did not create, a Ring and yet not a Ring. No, there were three of them, continually calling on the world and being answered by it. Appalled, he saw the beauty that they had spoken of, the forces of water, air, and fire looped back on themselves and bowing to the wielder’s will. They were still Rings, they answered the call of the Master-Ring, but –

There, looking back at him, unfettered and unhappy, horror reverberating through him even more strongly than it had on that night on the rooftop.

Annatar – Sauron –

Tyelperinquar -

He flung the force of his will back through the Rings, bending all his newfound power upon him, but the Three would not answer to his will.

What have you done?

And to his shock he felt his friend reaching back towards him, through him, reaching for the Ring itself. It could not be wrested from him – the very thought was unthinkable – but that other mind was
not striving for control. Reeling, he felt Celebrimbor’s thought reflected back through his own, through the power of the One, kindling the minds of the ringbearers, exposing him

*The rings, take off the rings! Sauron is here and we are betrayed!*

“And in the darkness bind them,’’ he repeated, the words carving themselves out of substance of the world, slipping in under the minds of the wielders, forcing Tyelperinquar back and out of the heart of his power. He was still wearing a Ring of his own, however it was he had gotten it, sooner or later it must bend to the power of the One –

*See him!*

Celebrimbor fled before the fire of his will and the blistering light of his anger, and he must have taken off his own Ring, for he was suddenly gone, beyond the reach of his power. But the damage had been done; the path had been opened, the ring-wielders awakened. He caught a fleeting vision of them looking back at him in horror, their minds going dark to him one by one as they pulled off their rings, and he knew he was betrayed.

Chapter End Notes

Footnotes:
1: Nolme: knowledge, science, philosophy. Kurwe: skill, invention. If that second sounds familiar, it’s because it’s an element in the name Curufinwë.
2: Fana – literally ‘veil’, the term for the physical form assumed by one of the Ainur, which is more analogous to a set of clothes than to the body of one of the Incarnates.
3: The tehtar are the diacritical marks used in some orthographies to indicate vowels (and other functions such as nasalization and doubling of consonants). The Mode of Beleriand, on the other hand, indicates vowels with full tengwar.
4: These are, of course, the Quenya terms for the physical and spiritual components of one of the Children of Iluvatar.
5: The term Annatar is using is tyenya, literally ‘my thou’, that is, ‘my second-person-singular-intimate’. This is customarily translated as ‘my kinsman’, but I am entirely certain the Noldor would appreciate grammatically based endearments.
6: This is the actual translation of the name ‘Sauron’.
7: This is one of the translations of Sauron’s original name *Mairon*.
8: Saucare – making or doing a thing very badly. The question here: is Eonwë implying that Sauron was bad from the beginning (made badly), or the opposite (worked on so as to become bad)?
9: Saura – foul, evil-smelling, putrid
Chapter Summary

In which Celebrimbor and his friend fail to resolve their differences

Chapter Notes

Well, everyone, here it is. This is the Second Age novel you were looking for. It's been a long journey, full of open tabs that would be difficult to explain to someone looking over my shoulder, and I can say with confidence that I never expected to be this emotionally invested in the terrible life choices of Sauron.

There's a playlist that Sumeria has made for this particular fic, which features the most perfectly wrong song for this generally wrong pairing, which you should enjoy as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Look, Sumeria. This wouldn't have happened without you. None of this would be here if it weren't for you! (Well. Without you some extraneous stuff might have been here as well; my faithful editor; my reader; my limiter of semi-colons.)

Particular acknowledgement is also due to Simaetha, whose multifaceted take on these two has had a deep influence on how I think about them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ONE

What reconciliation
Of two proud men? what peace can be found
To grow between the hammer and the anvil? Tell us,
Are the old disputes at an end, is the wall of pride cast down
That divided them? Is it peace or war?
T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

He was only mildly surprised when the messengers came bearing the demand for surrender. He met them at the gate – men of the South they were, stone-faced, fair-spoken, and well-armored. The muster of the growing empire in the distant lands beyond the mountains was well known now, and the great movement of arms and troops across the plains of Calenardhon had been watched by worried eyes, waiting to see whether they meant to head north to cut off Lorinand, or to cross the
mountains west into Eregion and drive all the way to the sea. Yarrisse’s scouts – the Fëanorian
huntress had not bothered to conceal her savage delight in her work now the city found itself on a
war footing – had been tracking the small embassy, riding under unmarked banners, straight for Ost-
in-Edhil.

He broke the seal, uncurled the heavy paper, and read:

_The King in the East, First of the Powers in Middle-Earth, Tar-Mairon called Annatar, Lord of
Gifts, Ring-Maker and Ring-Giver, to Curufinwë III Tyelperinquar, Lord of Eregion, Master of the
Gwaith-i-Mírdain..._

He scanned the letter. It was distant and high-handed, demanding the surrender of the Rings he had
made and threatening, in impeccably diplomatic terms, the sack of the city and the utter subjugation
of Eriador.

_It is not my wish that your city or your people should suffer the consequence of withholding this from
me. Nor should the world suffer, as now it does, the consequence of your hoarding that which
should be used for the good of all..._

The hand was not Annatar’s; he did not know why that surprised him.

_I am not your enemy. I desire no strife between us..._

He read it once more, carefully this time. It was Annatar’s voice after all, though in a bitingly formal
register. The same tricks of expression, the same words of flattery that soured on examination. But
there was nothing in it that seemed particularly addressed to him, nothing referencing the years that
they had shared. He might have been writing to a stranger.

Celebrimbor closed the letter, the tightly curled paper springing shut in his hand.

It was largely a formality that made him read it out to the Mírdain. The departmental meetings were
gone; it was a war-council now, with Bruithwir and Yarrisse forming part of all of their meetings.
Finwë’s old steward now wore the commander’s mantle once again, and the huntress had taken
command of the scouts that were tracking the progress of the enemy.

The council sat at the round table in the upper library, listening in angry silence to the list of
demands, faces set and cold. But when he got to the final paragraph, reading out _I would not
willingly believe you would withhold unlawfully treasure that by rights belongs to another. There is
no assistance I will refuse you, no aid I will not render if you return_ – a howl of anger greeted his
words, and he was shouted down. Those who had once stood with the Sons of Fëanor were rising
from their seats, and a few scattered others – Timion chief among them – were on their feet as well.

Celebrimbor, bewildered at the strength of their reaction, set down the letter. Yarrisse was shouting
denunciations in a scalding woodlands argot, Gaeron listening to a clipped explanation from
Bruithwir beside him, everyone talking over each other, the sound blending into a roar of outrage.

“Unlawfully-!”

“He dares speak so to you?!”

“What? Wait!” Celebrimbor grabbed Timion’s arm, as he was closest. “What is this? What did he
say?”
“You don’t know?” Tirnion returned. “No, I suppose you don’t – why would you? It was in those words that Maedhros Fëanorion demanded the Silmaril of Dior the Beautiful.”

“How would you know?” Sildreth demanded of Tirnion, breaking in. “You weren’t even in Doriath then!”

“Those words are scored into every Doriathrin heart.” Tirnion was white at the lips, both angrier and more serious than any of the Brotherhood had ever seen him. The clamor rose around him.

“Don’t take that, you don’t have to take that from him-“

“It’s an insult,” Lindis was leaning over towards Celebrimbor, “not to be borne; don’t you see, he flings your ancestry in your face, III-“

“Peace!” he cried. “Peace! Morgoth’s mercy, will none of you hold your peace?” He was on his feet and shouting at them. “Does a man need a healer to tell him the hurt is mortal?”

His outburst silenced the company, but glancing around at them, he sank back into his seat again, dropped his head into his hands. He was not, after all, his grandfather; rage was not his instinctive response to injury and sustaining that fire would take a conscious effort.

“I am sorry. I am sorry.” He laughed, a quiet and humourless sound. “It seems that the Enemy does not know us as well as he thinks, if he is trying to make a point with a reference I didn’t even catch until it was explained to me.” Lifting his head, he looked around the table again. “Well. Besides his mostly-failed attempt at angering us, and a demand he knows he has no right to make, what do you make of this message?”

“He’s as good as telling us his intention. He is planning to cross the mountains; it’s you he means to strike first.”

“Yes,” put in Lindis, “and that’s a threat in itself. He’s telling us he doesn’t care about secrecy. We could throw everything we have into defending the mountain passes, and it would make no difference; he has either the forces or the weapons or both. We can’t stop him from breaking through.” A nod from Yarrisse; she seemed to be about to speak, but then paused for Celebrimbor.

“We must send to Lorinand and Lindon,” he said, “letting them know what we know, and pleading for such aid as they can give us. And we must prepare to evacuate the city.”

“There is...” Ferthil spoke carefully. A smith of the now-thriving river Edain, he had joined the Mírdain and risen to excellence now that their forges were turned to weapons of war. “There is no question of giving – the Enemy – what he wants?” He had never known Annatar, never heard his name spoken except as a curse. Our teacher, our traitor, Sauron the Abhorred.

“None.” It was not Celebrimbor who answered, but Veanne. He shot her a quick look of gratitude.

“I don’t rightly know what these Three he speaks of are,” Ferthil went on, “and I’m not asking you to tell me; more of your Elvish secrets, no doubt. Maybe some kind of weapon, it seems, as he wants them so. But are they really worth the city?”

This was the sort of matter that once, perhaps, would have been decided by the common will of the Mírdain in discussion and debate. Celebrimbor was distantly glad it would not come to that. None of the Brotherhood knew fully the extent of the powers of his three Rings – he had kept all but the fact of their existence secret since the terrible day when he had heard that distant voice speaking from out of the fire – but none of the Brotherhood seemed to regard their surrender as a question even worth considering. If they had, he would not have yielded. Since he had exposed Annatar to them all as
Sauron, he had changed; he no longer made any attempt to deflect those who hailed him the lord of Eregion.

“They are more than weapons,” he said slowly, “and they are less; we cannot use them against him while he wields his master-Ring. Still, he does not demand them idly. He knows – better than almost anyone – just how powerful they are and how much might be done with them. It’s possible he wants to destroy them, but from this letter and from what I know of him, I think it more likely he wants to possess them, to use them, to see them brought under his control. And that, of all things, must not happen. Better this city should burn and all of us perish than a single one of them should fall into his hands.”

There were murmurs of agreement around the table. “Fair enough, lord, fair enough,” said Ferthil. “Besides, while you clearly know more of this Enemy than I do, I suppose one warlord’s much like another: give ‘em what they want and they’ll find they want more, plus then they know they can get it. Not worth it, mostly, from what I’ve seen. They’ll have it all out of you in the end one way or another.”

Celebrimbor nodded, and turned back to the council as a whole. “We should prepare the city for evacuation. It need not be done in a hurry, but we must face the possibility that aid will not arrive in time to save it.”

“There’s only so fast an invading army can move.” Ve anne spoke with the authority of the wars of the First Age. “To get an army that size across the mountains will take at least a season, probably more.”

Yarrisse stood up and stretched. “Bad news there. New intelligence out of the East, and it means we’ve had to redraw the maps.” She nodded to her assistants, who unfurled a painted canvas across the wall. The council studied the map, which stretched from the coastline in the west to the lands beyond Belfalas in the East. But it was the shape of the mountain range in the southeastern corner of the map that drew everyone’s attention, and at last Gaeron – who as loremaster and record-keeper was most familiar with the historical maps of Middle-Earth – voiced what the council was thinking:

“Do those mountains have... corners?”

“My scouts are not given to metaphor,” said Yarrisse, smoothing the edges of the hawk feathers she wore dangling from her ears.

“You believe that is Annatar’s – the Enemy’s – work?”

“Can you think of anyone else who could shove the White Mountains into edges as neat as a farmer’s fence-posts?”

“That’s impossible,” Gaeron said flatly. “Morgoth himself could hardly manage so much when he ruled in the North.”

Elistar hissed and made the sign warding off evil, but Gaeron had become much freer of speech since Annatar’s betrayal. The entire Brotherhood had suffered at that revelation, some turning to anger, some to fear, and others to grief, but Gaeron had taken it particularly hard. He had not just valued Annatar as a colleague and a teacher, but as evidence that the shadow over the rebel Noldor was lifting at last, and that the Valar might yet help them become worthy of the forgiveness they offered. He had withdrawn from the life of the Brotherhood for months, hardly eating or sleeping, and some feared that his spirit might be driven West, or worse. But one who had lived through Gondolin’s fall and Beleriand’s breaking could not be easily parted from the world he had chosen. Gaeron had returned among them, brisk and resolved, and speaking no more of worthiness or of guilt.
His words now stirred trouble and doubt in Celebrimbor’s heart, as he stared at the neatly squared mountain range. Since his great work had failed, the mighty protective forces of his Rings rendered useless, he had turned over and over in his mind the question of what Annatar could possibly have done, of what unspeakable art had gone into the creation of that One Ring to Rule Them All he had glimpsed so briefly. Nothing short of one of the Valar, the Powers themselves, should have been able to overcome the Three. True, Sauron’s art had gone into them, but that should not have given him power over his Rings, which drew upon the forces of the world itself...

“What’s that dark land? on the other side?” Veanne was asking, waving her hand at the mountain range in question, for the land within the mountain-walls was a blank black canvas.

Yarrisse blew out a soft breath through her nostrils. “My scouts cannot tell me; they cannot see. Nothing – nothing – can pass those mountains, afoot or otherwise; there’s a force at work within that guarded land that will not let anything pass without its will.”

She looked sharply at Tirnion of Doriath. “And if anyone has any doubts about who we’re dealing with, that ought to settle them.”

The meeting went on, assigning tasks for the days ahead, reckoning weapons, supplies and provisioning for the residents of the city who would be refugees by summer. There was no protest, only practicalities. It was strange how quickly the accepted facts of the situation had changed. No, he thought, it is only the speaking aloud of the truth we all know: Eregion was fallen from the minute that Annatar put on that Ring.

He soon called an end to the council; there was more to be done than to discuss. “We must send to Gil-Galad and to Galadriel,” he said, rising and addressing them all, “and to Durin III and Amdir, begging them for aid and for ancient friendship’s sake to harbor our fleeing people. I believe we may count on the muster of the Dwarves, and perhaps even the help of Numenor. Calling the Men of Westernesse in arms to these shores cannot be done lightly, but if the High King agrees, he has their friendship, and may do much. To Khazad-dum I will go myself, and thence to Lorinand and back again. I will go alone; the way under the mountains can be passed more quickly by a single traveler than a company.”

“And as for the Enemy’s message?” Tirnion asked. “No answer?”

“It merits none.”

He tossed the letter into the brazier on the table. It uncurled and flattened in the heat, burning slowly, much more slowly than paper ought. As it burned, other letters appeared across the paper, thin fiery lines tracing their way across the smoldering surface. He knew Annatar’s own graceful, flowing hand immediately.

Tyelperinquar, my friend, partner of my labors, choice of my heart. You answer me as I feared you would. I know your pride. Don’t do this. Don’t make me do this. Come back to me.

If any of the Brotherhood read those words out of the fire, they did not react to what they implied. It might have been out of courtesy, out of horror, or out of sheer loyal unwillingness to believe that Sauron should address their colleague and lord in terms befitting a wronged lover. Celebrimbor did not permit himself to change expression, but stood, gripping the table-edge, and watched them crumble to ash.

He walked with his aunt beneath the trees in Lorinand. The midwinter moon was high in the icy
heavens, shining silver through the golden leaves of the great trees. Even though the winds of winter
had chased the foliage from the black branches in the woods around, here in Galadriel’s woodland
courts, the trees were gloriously, impossibly in full leaf, and the air, though cool, was rich and soft as
summer. Night-birds sang in the branches, and small white flowers blossomed around the roots as if
in place of snow.

Celebrimbor paused at the foot of one of the trees and reached out a hand to its soft gray bark. “What
are these?” Despite his errand, despite everything that had happened and all that was before him, his
curiosity was stirred, and he studied the tree carefully, feeling its life and listening to its silent song.
“It’s – they’re younger than they look, for one thing. And they...” He pushed a braid behind his ear.
“They remind me of something, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a tree like this before.”

“You have.” Galadriel’s smile was slow and knowing.

They were not trees of Eregion or Lindon; he cast his mind back over the forests of Beleriand.
Something, perhaps from the inner groves of Doriath? But those he had never seen. Farther back, to
a warmer time and a brighter place, running as a child through the trees in the land of his mother’s
people near the sea-coast...

“Aman,” he said softly, surprised to find tears prickling at the corners of his eyes.

“Yes, the mariners of Numenor brought their seeds as a gift to Gil-Galad, and he to me in turn,” she
said, “but they would not root in Middle-Earth. The cold, perhaps, or the touch of the Enemy that
lingers in the ground.”

“But the leaves are the wrong color.” He was setting the trees around him against those in his
memory. “They should be silver, shouldn’t they, at least from underneath?”

“Ah, that is because it is winter now.” Galadriel was as pleased to explain her art as any master of the
Mírdain. “Like everything on these shores, these trees must suffer change at the touch of time. In
spring, the green and silver leaves you remember will bud, and the ones you see now will fall, and
the ground will be all gold beneath your feet. But these -” The wind whispered in the broad leaves.
“These will not fall to the cold.”

“Like the undying groves of Aman.” He looked at her sidelong. “Like the holly.”

“The holly wears thorns on its leaves to endure the frost,” she said, and picked up one stray soft
golden leaf from the forest floor, leaving the rest of her thought unspoken.

“A shining summer grove in the heart of the winter.” He looked around, intrigued and appreciative.
“I see your hand in this.”

“Surely you see your own as well.” Almost instinctively she touched the third finger of her right
hand, though it was unadorned now. “The more beautiful world you spoke of? I would never have
been able to recall these trees to life without –”

She stopped short at the sight of the naked pain on his face, and as if in answer to her sudden silence,
the bird in the tree above them ceased its song. They walked on together without words for a while,
both gathering their thoughts in the peace and safety of the grove.

“He can see it, I believe,” Galadriel said at last, “but from far off. I have sometimes felt his
awareness, like a dim and distant fire.” She saw her nephew stiffen slightly at her side, but he gave
no other sign.

“Unless you take up Nenya again, he will have no power over your works.” Celebrimbor carefully
kept all expression from his voice, walking on with measured steps. Then, all at once and in a much more uneven tone, he spoke again. “I will abide by your counsel, Aunt. My works – the Three –”

His voice caught, he forced himself onward. “Should we destroy them?”

“Destroy them?”

“I made them as a defense.” He closed his eyes; his pace slowed and stopped as he spoke. “They are no defense for us, not while he is Lord of the Rings. And he seeks them, Aunt, he would see their powers bent to his own. I have sent them away – they will not, at any rate, be caught in my own fall – but they are only a danger to their guardians now. They cannot be used to heal or hearten or strengthen or anything else. Perhaps the only defense left is to break them altogether.”

After a moment he felt the touch of her hand light and cool against his face. He opened his eyes.

“Telperinquar.” She was studying him earnestly. “Your grandfather faced such a choice, long ago –”

“I do not think he did. By breaking the works of his heart, he might have given light back to the world.” The tightness in his voice made her wince.

“That is not what I meant,” she said quietly. “Destroying the Rings – I have to ask – would you survive that?”

He gave a short soundless laugh and then a small shrug. “I do not think my survival should be the deciding factor on anything at this point.”

But he was already considering the question with his customary analytical attention; one more problem to be solved. “It is possible their destruction would suffice to kill me,” he said after a moment, “but I do not think it is likely. My heart has gone forth from me, yes, but – not into them alone.”

Galadriel looked at him sharply; he met her gaze.

“You have asked me for my counsel,” she said after a long pause. She began to walk forward again, and he moved with her. “It is this: if we concede this to Sauron, the victory is already his. If we destroy what is good, and strong, and beautiful, because it may yet fall to evil, then evil’s work is already done.”

She felt rather than saw the relief flaring through him, though it was mixed with a grief already hardening into resolve. He had never seemed so much like one of Finwë’s sons.

“I am glad to hear you say it, Aunt,” he said, “It would be wise, perhaps, to destroy them, but there is more to us than wisdom – or perhaps less.”

He drew himself up; his step was brisker but his eyes were darkened. “Now we must discuss such defenses as remain.”

He outlined the situation as known to the Mírdain, his hands tracing shapes in the air as he spoke. “Annatar is coming in force over the mountains, dragging most of his empire with him. Easterlings, men of the Southlands, even orcs. The forests of the Enedhwaith are in flames.”

“I know. I receive word from Celeborn in the field.”

He nodded. “We have been sending arms to him; troops as well. His forces have been harrying their vanguard, but they cannot possibly hope to halt the advance.” He paused and looked toward the forest floor, considering drawing a map. He decided against it, he had not come for advice on tactics.
“It won’t be long until war comes to the gates of Ost-in-Edhil. The city’s already being evacuated. Not that everyone can be persuaded to leave. I think that even now they don’t really know what it is that he can do. But I am doing all I can to send my people away – to Lindon, to the Dwarves, over the mountains to you...”

“Yes. That is right.” She caught at his hand, not a queen now, but his kinswoman and dear friend. “Telperinquar. Go with them. Flee into Khazad-dum and shut the doors.”

He did not answer the plea in her touch, but took her hand in his, raising it formally and gracefully as if escorting her through her own courts. “It will do no good,” he said quietly. “Do you think anywhere will remain safe for long?”

“For long enough –”

He shook his head, his eyes fixed on the unseen distance. “I would draw the danger after me. It seems to be me he wants.” There was no humor in his smile. “He demanded the Three, you know, from me, by name. But it is not just my works that he seeks; he desires an answer from me and he will not stop, will not spare anything in his path, until he gets it, or knows that he cannot.”

His steps measured out the forest floor, soft and steady as a heartbeat, as the sound of his breath.

“But I do have something to ask of you,” he said at last in a low voice. Her fingers tightening on his, she turned toward him.

“Please, Aunt. The sight – the gift of your house – the art of looking into the unshielded mind. I know you are mighty in such arts. Is there anything you can do to conceal my own knowledge from myself? I need to forget what I did with the Three.”

He felt her going cold beside him, in body and in spirit. Her hand went chill in his. He waited for an answer.

“I am not a dragon. I could not rip your knowledge from your mind, and would not even if I could; it would not be healthy for you or for me.” Dropping his hand, she moved to face him, eye to eye, blocking his path. “What is it that you are planning? Why would you ask me such a thing?”

“Annatar – the Enemy – is coming straight for us. Our only safety now is in secrecy.”

“Oh, Telperinquar,” she said softly. “You break my heart.” And though she did not say it, he heard it echoing in her thought: their departure for Eregion long ago. The time for secrecy is over.

“You don’t have enough people to hold the city.” Her voice hardened. “Don’t fight. Run.”

“Run?” The tightness was back in his throat. “Aunt, you know what I hoped for once: to bring the light back to the world, to lift the shadow on my house, to blot out the legacy of blood on my name.” He did not speak of what else he had come to hope for, of what else he had lost with Annatar’s betrayal. “And now I have – I have set Morgoth’s lieutenant loose in the world armed with a weapon mightier than any this age has known. And I should run from what I have done?”

Shaking his head, he gently stepped around her, beginning to walk forward again. “Besides, I am... please, believe me when I say I may be the only one with a real chance to stop him. There’s no one else who has any idea what might have gone into that Ring of his. The art of the Ring’s creation – it is not his, not mine, but ours. And if there is anyone left in the world to whom he might listen – And that is also why I need to keep the knowledge of the Three far from anywhere he can get to it. He knows me... very well. And, horrible as it sounds, he knows me better now.”
Galadriel looked at him questioningly.

“Think of your own ring, of the power it gave you, and the insight. Think of what you could do with it, and imagine what he–”

“Could do with his?” From the shudder that went through her, he knew this was exactly what she had done.

“And he was with you for centuries –” Her voice was low and agitated; she was speaking half to herself. “Gorthaur the Cruel with all the arts of the Eldar just handed to him, this is a catastrophe –” She caught herself. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t know.”

There were many things he might have said then; he felt them catching in his throat. But all he said was “Can you help me?”

“I can probably,” she said with reluctance, “do something at least to keep you from giving your knowledge away accidentally. He has ways of breaking in...”

Celebrimbor waited.

“Yes.” Her voice strengthened; he knew the sound of someone working out a complicated problem and closing on the solution. “I can build it for you, a locked door in your mind. But you’ll have the key, do you understand? It will be up to you to keep it locked.” At the expression on his face, she abandoned the metaphor. “I mean that you will be able to undo my work if you put your thought into it – I know you, nephew, what problem can’t you solve given time and attention? But if you’re – if your mind is damaged, or your will is forced, you won’t be able to do anything about it; just wanting won’t be enough.”

He bowed his head. “Do it.”

She took his hand again, her touch now as confident and kind as a healer’s. Then he heard, hardly above a murmur, a song beginning, a dull repetitive little tune that seemed to slip out of his mind as soon as he heard it. She sang of stories shifting over centuries, of nuances lost in translation, of paths looping back on themselves, and then he felt the touch of her mind against his own, as precise and gentle as her hand.

It was not painful, but neither was it precisely comfortable. He willed himself to stay still and open as she carefully traced through the intricate pathways of his memory, the images of her thought adapting themselves to his. They rose before him in quick, unstable impressions: sorting papers, untangling threads, solving equations. Parts of his own mind were going dark to him; it was if he could watch himself misplacing files.

His whole mind lay exposed to her. She was courteous in her work; she took no more than she had to. But it was only a matter of time until she happened across a strand of memory cross-referenced – as so much of his thought was – to that night on the roof of the Mírdain. No longer Aulë’s creature, and no longer Morgoth’s...

The song faltered. She recoiled, as he himself had recoiled long ago, dropping his hand, staggering backward.

“You knew? Telperinquar, you knew? And you did nothing to stop him?”

In a way, he was grateful that he did not have to find the words to tell her. He stood silent, listening to the ragged breath hiss over her lips, the winter wind hiss through the unfallen leaves overhead.
“Telperinquar.” Her voice was on the verge of shaking under its burden. “Finrod was my brother.”

“If you do not wish to help me after this,” he said quietly, “if you do not wish to see me after this, I will understand.”

She could not look at him.

“You have much to answer for, Telperinquar.”

“I do.” His voice was as set as his face. “I will.”

Though it felt endless, it could not after all have been a long time that she stood frozen before him, her thoughts in turmoil. The moon had hardly sunk toward the horizon when she took his hand again, her grip fierce and possessive. The stars had hardly moved in their great wheel in the heavens when she took up her song again, stark and thin in the night.

“Thank you.” His voice was no more than a whisper; he did not wish to disturb her at her work.

“I trust you,” she said, around the melody. “I do still trust you. I have seen the inside of your mind; you are no Sauron.” There was less gentleness in the touch of her thought now: tying off loose ends, shutting heavy doors -

“It’s done.” She released his hand and stepped back.

He searched his own memory, probing and experimental. Even the memory of the creation of his great work was oddly faded and distant now, as if he were reading a description of someone else’s works. After that – he noted that she had hedged the entire topic around with distraction; every time he even began to ask himself what he had done with the Rings, a new train of thought appeared to divert him.

“That is Melian’s touch,” he said aloud, a half-smile flickering briefly over his lips. With a great deal of concentration he thought he could glimpse something through the maze, stone doors beyond a tangle of thickets -

“Don’t poke at it!” She would have swatted his hand away if the operation had been physical. “For goodness sake, nephew!” But there was relief in her face, the simple, concentrated pleasure of having successfully completed a difficult task.

“Well then.” He shifted his shoulders, tossing his head as if to clear it, and breathing more deeply. “I thank you, Lady. Now I can meet him without fear.”

And at those words, all pride in her work dropped away, replaced by a bright and desperate fury. “Do you think it’s a small thing to throw your life away?” She took him by the shoulders, her fingers sharp, her voice vibrating with anguish. “Do you think we want to see you fall into the hands of the Dark Lord?”

He looked back at her, quiet and still, untouched by her fury or grief. “If you have seen enough to know – that – then you know why I have to face him. You said it yourself: he has all the knowledge and the art of the Eldar now. It was my doing that gave him those. It was my doing that gave Sauron back to the world.”

He looked at his hands. “Perhaps I too will be numbered among the great traitors of the Eldar... But if I cannot prevent others from suffering the consequences of my decisions, I cannot refuse to face those consequences as well.”
“Finrod was my brother,” she said again. “I know what Sauron does to his enemies. No one deserves that.” Her fingers dug into his shoulders.

“Why do you think I needed your help to – to forget –” Even the memory of what exactly she had done was rapidly receding, fading like a dream. “And he is my enemy, yes, but he was something else once.”

Slowly she released his shoulders. “You... you don’t just want to stop him.”

“I will stop him by any means I can. But no, I don’t just want to stop him. I want to save him.”

She choked back a cry; whether it would have been of reproach or disbelief or anger even she could not say. “Telperinquar, do you know what you are saying? That creature is Sauron. Save him? What is there to save?”

It had been meant as a reproach, but he considered it as a serious question. “I don’t... I don’t know. We labored together for the world’s good once; do you know what that means, to undertake the work of creation together... He is me, he has a part in all my works and I in his, and that union cannot simply – cease. I could no more abandon him than I could abandon my own self. I cannot cast aside something so precious to me. Besides,” he added, “this isn’t the first time I’ve seen someone I love work destruction on his own nature and thus on everything around him. This time I will not stand aside.”

“And destroying yourself for the sake of your own guilt helps what, exactly?” He opened his lips to answer; she cut him off. “No; this isn’t a question. Don’t do this. Fight if you must, but don’t try to face him. Your – friend – is gone. Let him go.”

“Let go?” He laughed to himself. “Do you hear what you are saying, Aunt? If I were the sort to let go, would you and I have met in Lindon all those years ago with the ashes of Beleriand still hanging in the air?”

“Give him up. It’s impossible. Even if it were possible, it wouldn’t be worth it.”

“To win him back – is that so much more impossible than to defeat him? It is unlikely there is anything left of the one that I called my friend; he has chosen his old path and there is very little hope he should turn again. But I think I am past the point of dealing in hope. And whatever else the songs will say about me-“ again that quick bitter half-smile, the glitter of a knife-edge in the dark – “I do not think they will say that I lacked ambition.”

Everything that she would have said would have been a remonstrance: don’t do this, you don’t have to do this, do you know who Sauron is? But he was looking at her steadily, the moonlight sharp along the strong lines of his face and his spirit burning within him, and she saw in him all of his lineage, the lords of the Noldor blazing like falling stars.

Celebrimbor was studying her just as keenly, but what it was he saw, he did not say. “Please, Aunt. Let me look at you, that I may carry with me a memory of light. For I am going into a deep darkness.”

He looked at her as though he were reading a beloved text, committing to memory the gleam of her eyes, the fall of her hair. His gaze went through her, and past her, and Galadriel realized he was studying not her person alone but her realm: the trees she had called forth in the strength of the Ring, the light of the stars through their golden leaves.

At last he closed his eyes and sighed.
“Will we see each other again?” For a moment he sounded very young.

It was a bitter question to ask of someone with foresight. She hugged him fiercely to her, and pressed a cool kiss on each of his closed eyes.

“No. You will not see me again. Not on this side of the sea.”

The night sky over the Enedhwaith was alight: dark oranges and purples and heavy sickly yellows from the fires blazing in the southern forests. The winter breeze was gritty with ash and thick with the smell of smoke. What the logging crews of the ship-builders of Westernesse had left, Gorthaur’s men were burning.\(^3\) It was hard to distinguish which of the dull lights were from the campfires of the army, which from wildfires burning out of control in its wake, and which from the sheer wanton mischief of the orc-hordes burning for the delight of seeing the forests crumble, of seeing woodland animals driven before it.

There were no fires in Celeborn’s camp. Despite the reinforcements from Ost-in-Edhil, his force was still pitifully small, an irritation rather than a serious obstacle to the invaders. They were Men, for the most part, ruthless and disciplined, welded into a single unit as if by some overwhelming will. Even the orcs – and when had orcs begun to multiply again? – acted with a discipline and focus that he had never seen since the days when Morgoth Bauglir ruled in the lost North. They did not know the land. They did not need to. If there was a forest in their way, it burned, if there was a river in their way, it was bridged, if there were mountains in their way –

He shivered, though he did not feel the cold. The stories that had reached him from the Pass of Calenardhon were each more wild than the last, but what was undeniably true was that what had been a pass was now a gap wide enough to allow the passage of an army, the mountains themselves flattened to rubble over which the grass would one day grow.\(^4\)

Celeborn leaned his head against the trunk of the tree he had climbed nearly to the top to see more clearly. He stayed there for a long time, motionless, looking at the discolored sky, until through the haze he could distinguish the stars, pale and weak, almost hidden by the light.

And all at once his wife was with him, her voice in his ear, her presence as faint and clear and reassuring as the stars glimpsed through smoke. He rested his thought against hers a moment, and breathed the clean air of Lorinand; he knew that she tasted the ashes of the Enedhwaith in his mouth.

\textit{Eregion will fall}, she said.

\textit{It seems likely.}

There seemed, for a moment, little more to be said. \textit{And yet we fight}, he said at last. \textit{You shall make a Noldo of me yet, Lady.}

No words this time, but a quick flare of pain and of pride.

\textit{I have seen my nephew}, she said after a moment. \textit{He means to make a stand in his city.}

Doubt shivered through the peace that her presence always brought him. \textit{Is that wise? The one you call Sauron is a master of persuasion, and he and your nephew were one in all their labors, as close as the left hand and the right.}

Bright, hard refusal from his wife, but he knew that she had never so much as considered the
possibility: not of fall, but of surrender.

He sighed. *I fear that we shall see him yet at the head of Sauron’s armies.*

Though the war was still far away from Lindon by the sea, the High King felt it, like an injury that had not yet begun to ache or a bruise that had not yet begun to show. Refugees were just beginning to flow into the city from Eregion, bringing arms and rumors and scattered fragments of the treasures of Ost-in-Edhil. His steward once again bore the name of herald, and was traveling through the countryside along the coast, summoning the people to take up arms once more against the encroaching darkness.

“Oh, kinsman,” Gil-Galad said softly, to the empty shore beyond the window, “what have you done?”

He looked again at the letter in his hand. It was detailed and informative, urgent without losing precision. As always, it carefully avoided the question of fealty. He had replied in the same vein, assuring Eregion of his aid, mentioning that he had sent to Numenor, making no promise of success.

Privately, he knew that Numenor’s answer would come too late. Tar-Minastir had met to his embassy with warmth and feeling, promising aid to Lindon against the power in the East, lamenting the storms delaying his shipbuilding, and making no mention of Eregion. The Numenoreans would not come until Sauron was finished with Ost-in-Edhil. Either the Mírdain would halt his advance or Sauron would destroy the center of power that had been a check on their own expansion. The Sea-Lords of the West won either way. He said none of this to Celebrimbor. There was no possible good that it could do.

And running up the side of Celebrimbor’s letter, in a cipher so abstruse it had taken both him and Elrond a week to work out which book in his private library was intended to serve as the key, was another message, without greeting and without farewell, explaining the gifts that Celebrimbor of Eregion had given him.

*Kinsman, I send you the greater part of my life’s work, Narya and Vilya, the Rings of Fire and of Air. This is a dangerous gift. One day, perhaps, you may wield them in safety, but until you see Sauron humbled and the Dark Tower fallen and the master-Ring destroyed, they must be guarded, not used. Do not thank me. Do not forgive me. Do not answer me.*

He never did.

The drums were sounding on the other side of the river. They had been beating for weeks now, sometimes louder, sometimes softer, throbbing like a heartbeat or a headache, their reach steadily growing as the invading army drew up its full strength to surround the city.

All the lands beyond the rivers were abandoned now. The defenders of the Mírdain had long since brought down the bridges – the eerie antiharmonies of unmaking still echoed in Celebrimbor’s ears – but Sauron’s army must have forded the Gwathlo somewhere to the west. They did not now know where. Some weeks ago the day had come that Yarrisse had failed to return from her scouting mission; there were now no eyes of bird or beast on the army’s movements and an obscure, vast force of will kept the movements of the army blurred and blank even to the keenest mind.

But intelligence mattered little now: all was moving toward simple, obvious, inevitable confrontation.
The army kept on assembling, crowding the far sides of both rivers, hemming the city around with the sound of drums and the flare of watchfires. Over it all and through it all, the presence of the one who led them reverberated in the air, heavy and concussive as the incessant drumbeats.

It was a lightless morning, and Celebrimbor was leaning on the walls of the Mírdain, staring out towards the waters of the Sirannon, when the drumbeats stopped. Their absence ached in the ears for a moment, then he glimpsed a swirl of red and blue behind him: Bruithwir, making his rounds of the city’s defenses.

“Master Celebrimbor.” Since he had rejected Bruithwir’s proffered service on their first meeting, the old seneschal had been scrupulous to respect the title he had chosen, but Celebrimbor could hear the swallowed *my lord* behind every salutation.

“As you can hear, they are fully assembled.” He moved to the wall beside him. “We may expect the attack any day now; it is time to ready our last defenses.”

He said nothing, and bowed his head in assent. Bruithwir lingered a moment at his side.

“Will you have my fealty now, lord of my lost house?”

He lifted his head. “Yes,” he said simply. “Thank you.”

The battle-worn commander went to his knees before him, speaking again the words of loyalty that he had spoken to his father’s brother, and his grandfather, in a form of the language so ancient that it must have been the very same as that he had spoken before the first High King of the Noldor in the morning of the world. Celebrimbor answered in the same mode, careful not to stumble over the words, accepting his service.

“I am sorry I have nothing more to offer you,” he added quietly, in the use-Quenya of the Brotherhood.

“It is enough, Curufinwë.” There was now a brighter light in Bruithwir’s eyes. “I will assemble the masters for a last war council, and we will show the Enemy’s old lackey just what it means to face one of Finwë’s line.”

There had, he thought that evening, been a kind of relief in that final meeting. Past the point of pretending this was anything other than their end, the defenders had found within themselves a fierce energy and a deadly creativity. “The very stones of this city will fight for us!” Damros had declared, and he had laughed, and the Brotherhood had laughed with him, although none of them could have said why.

Not a single one of the Brotherhood could be persuaded to leave their city. Even Damros, whom most of the masters still looked on as their little brother, who had never known anything but peace in the noontide of Eregion, refused to depart. At the beginning of the year he had, under protest, accepted the Brotherhood’s commission to accompany a group of refugees from the city into Lindon – and had returned alone six months later, a new hardness in his features.

“Damros, your wife, your children –” Veanne had wept openly to see him return. He had left the city carrying his youngest in his arms, his firstborn skipping beside him, excited at the prospect of adventures on the sea-coast. “Leaving them, only to return to your death – how do you expect them to forgive you?”
“Well,” he had answered shortly, “I do not expect they will.”

Now, in the failing light of the chill evening, Naugwen’s students were laying charges throughout the city. She and Alagos and Celebrimbor had mapped out the weak places and the narrow ones, streets that might be suddenly blocked by falling rubble, squares where crumbling masonry might trap and crush. Bruithwir had added the movements of his own troops, showing how an army might be led and turned and guided, intricate as the steps of some terrible dance.

“He knows the city well,” Gaeron had warned them. There was no need to specify who he meant; none of them knew what name to use in any case. “Do you think really that he can be led into a trap here, where he knows every stone as well as you do?”

Celebrimbor had sat back from the model of the city where they were marking buildings, drawing arrows down streets. “He does know the city,” he said. “And he knows how much we once hoped to gain, when we labored here together. But he does not know, I think, how much we are prepared to lose.”

And they were prepared to lose, utterly and completely. Alagos, without so much as a shudder or a sigh, had spoken for the right of unmaking the strong walls and the graceful arches that he had helped to build. Celebrimbor thought of Tol Sirion, of the well-built fortress in the river turned into a forward base for Sauron’s armies, and authorized his city’s destruction.

Veanne had asked for, and received, permission to address the forces under Bruithwir’s command. She had come before them bare-armed, the brand of Angband black on her forearm in the fading light, and told them on no account to allow themselves to be taken alive. And the fighters had shouted, and beaten their swords against their arm-guards in showers of sparks, and launched into a battle-song fit to strike fear into the heart of any foe. Celebrimbor had watched them in silence.

The brisk tread of mailed feet sounded on the ground behind him. It was Bruithwir again, making his report.

“All the defenders should be armed by sundown,” he said, after a quick review of the progress of the defenses. “We must be prepared for them to move at first light; they will need to build bridges or boats and that will be long work, but they will harry us while they do. Still, your mistress of materials has a few surprises for them if they try. It is a very stimulating exercise, my lord, to command a city of engineers, rather than warriors.”

There was no mistaking the energy and uprightness of his bearing, the quick and eager motion of the eye. “Bruithwir, are you enjoying yourself?”

“I am an old war-horse, my lord Curufinwë, and I hear the trumpets calling. The foul foe is before me, brave souls behind, I know who I am and what I must do; I am content. Besides,” he added, “this is a far better death than I hoped to meet, or to lead my lord’s people into. To die under the Star of Fëanor, fighting against the Dark and not against our own people – I had given up all hope of such a fair fate.”

The truth of this settled on him, heavy and uncomfortable. Celebrimbor straightened and looked his retainer in the eye.

“Bruithwir,” he said, “how do I do this? I will be your lord, since you ask it of me. I can do no less for the city that I loved. But I’ve never managed a siege, let alone a last stand.”

“Managed? Have no fear of that, Curufinwë; leave the management of the battle to me. I commanded the strength of arms of the House of Fëanor when it was numberless and shining, and
when it was threadbare and scattered; I can command your mathematicians and archivists.” For a moment his face took on a faraway look. “And what I could have done with some of those explosives in the Thousand Caves – no, excuse me. You asked me a question.

“This is a lord’s duty: not to manage the battle, but to lead the people. To go before them, to rally and hearten them. To show them the face of what they are fighting for. What they are dying for. It is your task, Curufinwë, to be worth it.”

“I understand. I will speak to them. And I will – I will be their standard; I will endure to the end.” He drew a long breath and rested his hands against the wall, whole and sound and strong for the last time. “Play the winning game, Bruithwir; I will play the losing one.”

The commander laughed under his breath, and set his mailed hand on his shoulder, weighty and reassuring. “There is no winning game to be played against the Dark, my lord. Go to your people.”

And so Celebrimbor took his way for the last time through the city that he loved, doing the duty of a lord before the battle; inspecting the preparations, making sure that all was in order, speaking words of quiet encouragement, visiting the defenders, praising their works and thanking them, putting heart into the people who were going to die for him. Saying goodbye.

He moved from position to position, spiraling inward toward the gates of the Mírdain itself. It was astonishing how many of the remaining defenders of Ost-in-Edhil had brought out from hidden hoards the long-preserved livery of the First Age. Shields and banners bearing the beautiful, complex heraldry used for formal occasions mingled with those bearing the simpler battle-devices of long-lost lineages: the fletched arrow of the House of the Swallow, Maglor’s harp-and-sword, and everywhere, silver on black, the eight-pointed star of the House of Fëanor.

“It is your task to be worth it,” the commander had said. But what was there of worthiness in being led to destruction by someone whose heart’s choice was Sauron the Abhorred? There may have been little worth in his family by the end – Fëanorians, Kinslayers, Accursed and Dispossessed – but none of them had ever looked with love on Morgoth’s servants.

He found Ferthil and a small company of mortals camped out by the docks, sharpening their swords and occasionally hurling a curse at the army whose fires shone out clearly on the other side of the water.

“I cannot ask you to remain with us, Ferthil,” Celebrimbor said in a low voice, drawing him aside from his companions, “and this is the last chance you will have to make your escape. If you and your people flee east toward the mountains, staying between the rivers, I do not think you will be pursued. Ost-in-Edhil will occupy him for some time.”

Ferthil started to speak but Celebrimbor went on.

“The nearest place of safety is probably Khazad-dum. I have sent to Durin III already, pleading with him for ancient friendship’s sake to harbor the refugees from this war. He is mustering the forces of the mountains, but it will come too late for Ost-in-Edhil; we cannot count on relief from the Dwarves. I must be entirely plain, Ferthil: this quarrel was none of yours, I have no right to ask you to die for it.”

The mortal smith cocked his head on one side, drawing his eyebrows together. “Flee, you’re telling me? Into a country that’s being overrun by the enemy and his empire?”
“He is our enemy, but...” Celebrimbor spoke carefully, trying not to tip over into offense. “He is not fighting to destroy, but to conquer. I can promise nothing, but I did know him once. You may not draw his attention at all. You and your people may – may not be ill-treated, if you surrender. If it comes to that.”

Ferthil gave him a long and disapproving look. “Near as I can make it, he sounds no better than the Old Enemy, the Lord of Slaves. Peace with him today will be tribute tomorrow and slavery the day after that, and then by and by he’ll either use us up or decide we’re more trouble than we’re worth and make an example of us.”

He looked up from under his thick brows. “You Elves may be used to fighting only in the wars you’ve started yourselves, but if we Men started making a fuss about dying in other people’s quarrels, I’m sure the ravens and carrion-crows would be very impressed.”

“And besides,” he added, patting the hilt of the sword that he had forged himself under the Mírdain’s tutelage, “your weapons here beat anything we’ve got back home, and if we’re to go down fighting, might as well be fighting properly. No, we’ll stay at your side, Elf-Lord.” He took Celebrimbor’s hand and shook it heartily in his own hard work-scarred one. “Stay and have a drink with us, and let’s have no more talk of whose fight this is. We’ll fight together – and fall together, if it comes to that – and that makes it ours.”

The darkness was complete by the time he left them, the sky a clear pure winter black. Bruithwir’s words burned in his thought. Fighting against the Dark, and not our own people... There had been no flicker in his face to suggest reproach or even awareness; why should there have been? The steward was eager to strike as deep a blow as he could against one who had betrayed them all. It would certainly bring Bruithwir no joy to know that one among them at least would, after all, be raising sword against someone he loved. My own people, my own person, my own...

Mad, impossible thoughts flickered through his mind. Surround him, cut him off, take him alive at any cost. The one we knew as Annatar is not to be harmed. He will answer to me, he must answer to me, for what he has done...

It was sheer foolishness, of course; an insult even to contemplate. For the sake of his people, he knew that he would issue no such order. It was some meager comfort to know that it would make no difference either way.

“Your – friend – is gone,” Galadriel had said to him, under the starlit leaves, nearly choking on the word. “Let him go.” Would that be so dreadful, to fall with his city rather than seek to meet him face to face, to curse his friend and die?

His steady steps had brought him to the outer gardens of the Mírdain. The trees that lined the avenue were winter-bare, but their graceful boughs were limned in faint pinpricks of light where their bark was studded with tiny lampstones. Silver on one side of the walk, gold on the other; certain images persisted in the art of the Eldar.

There were voices beneath the trees, carrying in the still air: Sildreth, of course, by her beloved greenhouse, and Lindis passing the night at her side.

“Nearly midwinter,” Sildreth was saying. “Do you remember the masques the journeymen would put on for the Midwinter’s Day feast, before?” She laughed. “And how scandalized the Dwarves were to see them mimic the Masters?”
“Do you think we’ll see Midwinter’s Day?” Lindis’s sharp tones were uncharacteristically muted; quiet and sober.

A pause while Sildreth contemplated the sky. “It lacks three days of the Longest Night.” Another pause, and she was now reading not only the sky, but the turning of the year, the future rising up to overwhelm them. “Three days. No, I do not think we will. The Brotherhood will keep the Yule-feast in grimmer halls this year.”

“Not all of us.” The tension was back in Lindis’s voice, low and tight. “Let Mandos keep his own halls, I’ll have none of them.”

“What are you saying?”

“Don’t look at me like that, my sister. What? If I refused to take the journey West in life, what would make you think I would do so in death?”

The wordless sound of protest from her friend did not even slow the flow of her speech.

“If we are truly free to reject the summons of Mandos, I mean to do so. If I have done wrong, it is not for the Valar to judge me; I will not grovel in their prison-house until they deem me penitent enough to tread the unsullied fields of Aman –”

“Aman?” The new voice was lower, rougher, rust at its edges. Veanne. “I am not ready to go anywhere near Aman.” She sat down beside them with a soft heavy sound of metal against metal, the chainlinks of her mail catching the light in glittering pinpricks. Lindis fell silent; if anyone had reason to refuse to be gathered to her people in the Halls of the Dead, it was Veanne, who had commanded fellow-slaves in the pits of Morgoth’s mines.

“To meet them face to face again. The people that died because of me. The people that I kept alive. I cannot face that. Even in my thought.” Veanne was not one of the Brotherhood’s great orators, but this was harsh and disjointed even for her, staccato bursts of words without expression.

“Not you too –” Sildreth began, but Lindis said nothing. Veanne went on.

“I was married, you know. Before Angband. He took the Valar’s pardon. Returned to Aman. I don’t know if he knew that I survived. I don’t know if he would have known me at all. I could not return. I could not.”

There was silence for a moment, then she began again.

“Afterwards, in Lindon. They told me to my face that I should have died rather than served Morgoth. They were right. Probably.” She drew a long breath and spoke more evenly. “But dying is not so light a thing as to be had for the wanting or even for the will. You have to be done. Have no more to do with the world. And that was never true for me. I don’t know why.”

She leaned back against the tree.

“Well, Sauron’s armies are about to solve that problem for all of us, aren’t they.” The anger in Lindis’ voice was wound to a tension just short of tears.

Veanne, incongruously, laughed. “Perhaps they are! At least through death to force that choice again: return to our people, or remain here solitary on these shores...”

She sighed, like wind through iron chains. “But to become a houseless spirit, a voice on the wind, a bitter memory haunting broken stones? That is not for me, Lindis, I am not done. Is Aman so much
harder to face than Morgoth?"

There was a long silence and then a sharp exhalation from Lindis. “Oh, very well! If you are going to face the Blessed Realm, I can’t very well refuse just to make a point.” She pulled herself up from the ground and began pacing about restlessly under the trees. “I mean to have words with Namo, though.”

“They say the Dead do not speak, in the Silent Halls,” offered Sildreth, who probably should have known better, but relief had made her flippant.

Lindis tossed her head; her hair was braided and pinned for battle and did not move. “Then I will figure something out.”

Celebrimbor left them laughing together beneath the trees.

He found his steps carrying him around the outer edge of the Mírdain’s walls, up a terraced walk where once he had raised his head to see Annatar looking back down at him, smiling, his eyes soft gold. *I believe you do love this city.*

He found himself yearning for the presence of his heart’s companion, to whom alone he had unfolded his inmost thought. *Annatar, how do I face this? I sought to build and heal, but I called destruction down upon us after all...* When he realized what that meant, who it was that he was longing for, a black dizziness rose up behind his eyes and he tasted bile in his throat. He counted his steps as he walked up the terraces, waiting until it passed.

At the top of the walk, at the base of one of the towers, Alagos perched on the low wall, with Tirnion at his feet. The perpetually disheveled stonemason had pulled off most of his armor and was sipping from his bowl of steaming tea with the greatest apparent unconcern, but Tirnion, armed and alert, was watching him, perturbed.

“[I don’t believe you at all,]” said Tirnion suddenly. “You can talk all you like about impermanence and the love of wisdom and the way that a sensible man ought to view death, but you cannot convince me – not me, Alagos, for I do know you a little – that you are truly perfectly content about witnessing the destruction of all that you’ve loved and built and worked for.”

“Would you not have me content?” Alagos drew a draft of the tea, his round face and round eyes turned up towards the heavens. “Don’t you think that it is far better to be Alagos the stonemason, pulling down my works to deny them to the Dark, than to be Annatar the tyrant, pulling down someone else’s works in search of something he can never find?”

Celebrimbor turned aside, not wanting to intrude on their parting. A complex, nameless reluctance dragged at his steps: courtesy, shame, even something that might have been envy.

At the top of the terrace, Alagos sighed, in satisfaction or perhaps lament. “Well, Tirnion, you and I have trodden strange roads together, but it seems we’ve come to their end at last.”

There was a short pause, while Tirnion considered whether this constituted an admission of regret. “Well,” he said tartly, “I am frankly impressed that you are going to die defending some place rather than being run out of it.”

Alagos snorted, and coughed on the steam from the tea. “Ah, friend Tirnion,” he said. “I’m afraid I’ve led you into some rather unpleasant places.”
“That had better not be an apology, Alagos.”

“Oh, it’s not,” he assured him. After a moment, he spoke again, more quietly. “It’s an expression of gratitude.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I asked to follow you. Begged, as I recall. Sued at your feet.”

“Well, it seems you’ll be following me across the Sea. Not seeing Aman to its best advantage, I’m afraid.”

Tirnion sat up very straight. “Excuse me, following you across the Sea? Now you wait one minute, Noldo! I have not been tramping all over Middle-Earth defending you from monsters and spiders and the concerted displeasure of every major ruler you encountered, just to watch you get murdered before my face by a former colleague with a grudge. No. You can follow me for once in your life. I do not ask, I demand the honor to fall defending you.”

Alagos seemed, for a moment, disposed to argue. But at last he gave a hardly-perceptible nod, and a sudden pressure of his hand on his companion’s shoulder, and Tirnion looked back at him in gratitude, and leaned his head against his knee.

“I am sorry, though,” Alagos said after a pause, “that I could never give you what you wanted.”

“You impossible man, are you making one last attempt to convince me that you aren’t lying in your tiresome assertion that you know nothing?” But there was laughter in Tirnion’s voice now, and he sounded much more like himself. “Because that is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard you say, and I’ve heard you argue linguistic philosophy to Daeron until he didn’t know left from right. To be allowed to go along with you, the choice of my heart, to spend my life at your side, and my death in your defense? It is all I could have asked for. I am content.”

Alagos considered this for a while, then, sitting up on the wall, he bent down toward Tirnion and kissed him on both eyes.

Tirnion blinked up at him. “What was that for?”

“Why, it’s an Amanyar gesture of farewell. Until your eyes behold me again, you understand.”

“Really? We had the same custom in Doriath, only it meant something rather different.”

“What?”

“Open your eyes to my blessing – or, if you must be literal about it, I accept your apology.”

On his feet in one graceful motion, he bent over his old companion in turn, repeating the gesture.

“Besides,” he added, sitting back down and leaning against the low stone wall, “I’m sure we’ll see the better side of Aman soon enough. You do have a knack for getting yourself thrown out of places, and I can’t imagine the Lord of the Silent Halls is any fonder of impertinent questions than Thingol was.”

Around the outer walls, toward the heart of the Mírdain itself. Celebrimbor went over in his mind the plan for the battle, the signals for falling back toward the gates of the Mírdain: green flares from the northern quarters, blue from the docks, orange to be sent up when the archers were in position on the walls.
Narvi’s doors, beneath their thin curtain of falling water, glimmered in the moonlight. The Star of Fëanor, under the shifting waters, cast its low shadow over the metal surface. He ran his fingers over it, set his palm against the door – it would answer the lightest touch, until it was bolted shut. Red flares for the shutting of the gates; all remaining outside to sell their lives swiftly and dearly –

He did not expect to be able to make such a bargain. Annatar meant to take the Rings, and that meant taking him. And he wanted to face him, he knew he had to face him, but when it came to it –

He felt his heart hammer in his chest. He wondered distantly if this was terror. He thought of Nargothrond in the days before its fall, the elation mingled with heartsickness, the citizens who wandered dazed with despair. “Future-poisoned,” Orodreth had called them. “They cannot see beyond the battle to come.”

Cautiously, he cast his thought forward, looking for the insight that had once come so freely. He could not see beyond the battle that faced them now. The same searing brightness obscured it that blinded him to the presence beyond the river, a light that might as well have been darkness. Galadriel’s voice was a chorus in his ears: Give up, give up, let him go, it’s not worth it.

He did not fear faltering for her sake, but his own knowledge was harder to face. Sauron is the one you want to win back. Sauron is the one you name your friend. Sauron is the one who is about to destroy everything – else – that you hold dear. It would be easier, comforting, to think of him as two people, but he was not. The foul sorcerer of the First Age, the architect and instrument of Morgoth’s tyranny, was the light in his thought and the choice of his heart. And he still dreamed of the touch of his hand on his.

And for what? A spark in the ashes, a half-finished thought. “At the end, there was nothing,” Annatar had said on the rooftop, looking into his eyes as if trying to find something. “That was not what I wanted. What I wanted...”

He pressed the door open, forced his steps onward. Not wandering, steady and purposeful. Here, the defenders of the inner walls: Naugwen and Noroth, Elistar, Damros. The apprentices and the journeymen who would never rise through the Brotherhood now, their armor well-wrought and untried, their sashes tied around the ends of spears or flying, black and white, from their helms. As if from a great distance he heard himself speaking to his friends, and the words that he spoke were bold and sure and kind. Eyes brightened in his wake, backs straightened; one group of apprentices broke out into a beautifully harmonized rendition of an extremely old, extremely rude Hithlum marching song containing increasingly implausible anatomic speculations about Morgoth.

Nothing caught, nothing stuck, there was no comfort for him in the rising courage of his people. He strove to master himself, calling himself back from the empty and terrible brightness of the future to face what must be faced in the moment.

“One thing no one said of them: that they were cowards.” Who was it who had said that? Celeborn, in the closest words he had ever spoken to praise of his Fëanorian kindred.

Where is that strength? he wondered to himself. Where is the fire of the House of Fëanor, the high valor of the House of Finwë?

“City of singing stone, how silent now –”

He lifted his head. A lonely voice was threading through the chill air. He came into the central courtyard to find Gaeron, in his armor, sitting on the fountain’s edge and singing a lament for lost Gondolin, for the fallen towers and the broken walls, the music stilled in the streets, and the waters that had covered all.
He sat down beside him and spoke no word. When the song was done and Gaeron had sunk to silence, his voice blending with the sound of the falling water until it was lost, he put his hand on his shoulder.

“Come,” he said softly, gesturing with his other hand at the moonlit city around them, still standing whole and unbroken, “the death-song already? Isn’t that a little premature?”

Gaeron turned to him, a strange and distant peace in his face. “Does a man need a healer to tell him the hurt is mortal?”

If he listened closely, he could hear the faint changes in the music of the fountain; the water was freezing around its edge. Reaching down, he trailed his fingers through the water. The cold was sharp, verging on painful.

“I am sorry to have brought you to this end,” he said at last. “It seems you were right, after all. Right to mistrust my judgement. Right to doubt our overreach.”

The archivist considered carefully before replying.

“No,” he said. “I do not think I was. We may –” he looked ruefully at the furled battle-standard planted by the fountain. “We may fail. So the beauty and strength in the world have ever ended. But for a while, this was. We were not wrong to try, Celebrimbor Silver-Hand. And none of us deserve this.”

It might have been a reproach; certainly there was particular emphasis in Gaeron’s voice, and he looked hard at Celebrimbor as he spoke. But he did not feel it as a reproach; rather something rose within him that was neither hope nor comfort, but was enough, enough to face the struggle.

*If I give up on my friend, it was all meaningless, and there never was anything in this marred world that could be made beautiful.*

The morning dawned without color, the sky a flat gray-white with a few sullen snowflakes drifting through the air. Celebrimbor waited with Bruithwir’s division by the high banks of the Sirannon where the stone bridge had once stood. “The Gwathlo’s shallower, but the Sirannon’s narrower,” the commander had said, “and closer to the Mîrdain itself. If they want to build bridges or boats, we can pick them off while they try.” Celebrimbor thought, but did not say, that it was from this direction he most expected Annatar to join the battle, and so he waited, armed and armored, his breath white in the cold air.

Once he had been able to sense him as easily and naturally as opening his eyes or closing his fingers, but he could not find him now, though he was so close. He cast his mind over the troops on the far shore, looking for that bright, familiar presence, but there was nothing, nothing at all. The blankness was unnatural, he should have been able to perceive the presence of the invaders on that well-known country. The thoughts of Men were as noisy and unsubtle as their motions; the far shore should have been alive with fear and energy and battle-lust. There were orcs among them too, he could see them, and he should have been able to sense them, or to sense the land itself recoiling beneath their feet. But something was blotting it all out, an overwhelming, impersonal force like an invisible sun.

That force was growing, gathering itself. He glanced around him; his people felt it too: a creeping sensation beneath the skin, an unsteadiness of the nerves that was more than the tight-wound tension of the moments before battle.
On the far shore the trumpets sounded, and the invaders unfurled their banners for the first time. They shone brilliantly even on that lightless day: a black hand on a silver ground. Bruithwir’s troops in the vanguard hissed and jeered, but their derision was swiftly drowned as all the bells of the city rang out in answer, pealing as if for a festival, and the archers on the walls sounded their horns in one great musical cry. The Fëanorian star flew over Ost-in-Edhil, and Celebrimbor realized this was the first time it had been seen in battle since the Nirnaeth Arnoediad.

There was a rumbling, groaning sound, and at first he did not know what to make of it, for it seemed to be coming from the river itself. There was a disturbance in the swift waters below them, and then, to the horror of the defenders, the bridge that they had broken began to rise, stone upon stone, pulling itself out of the river and arching, impossibly, across the waters’ span. He saw the faces of the foot-soldiers beside him go gray beneath their helmets.

Terror, blind and brutal, was rippling through the people around him. Knees buckling, banners wavering, their courage withered under the assault of that searing will.

“The gods are fighting against us,” someone wailed, “Morgoth is come again!”

Morgoth, he thought with one small, detached corner of his mind, never dared to face the Eldar in open war. “Up! Up! Hold your ground!” he shouted, and they were looking to him, they were drawing their courage from his. “For the world that is, the more beautiful world to come!”

Do you remember who it was who spoke those words to you? asked that same small corner of his mind. The force of that overwhelming presence roared soundlessly in his ears; his eyes watered with it. Across the river the army shouted and beat on their shields, and he thought that he glimpsed among them a flash of white.

But there was no more time, and no thought to spare for anything but the battle. The archers were already loosing their first fruitless volleys at the bridge repairing itself; the signal flares went up by the Mírdain walls, the foot-soldiers peeled off into separate groups to meet the onslaught of orcs that rushed gibbering over the bridge, and behind them, the banners of the Black Hand advanced.

Fighting claimed an intensity of concentration like that of creation. He saw, he had to see, with double vision, not just the enemy before him but the great patterns being traced by rush and retreat, numbers and arms, failure and success. The slant of the light, the brush of the snow, paths blocked and paths clear – he could keep up, but only just. He had felt the life of his city in fairer days, he felt it now in its death-struggle.

Amid the screaming and roar of falling masonry and falling men, there were moments that stood out in terrible clarity. Annatar himself, walking across the bridge behind his masked guards. He was calm and beautiful and distant in the battle; he moved in an imperturbable peace. The air around him warped and twisted; sound itself seemed to bend away from him. Celebrimbor had thought to call out, but he had been forced back again, always back and away, and the chaos and the patterns had closed over him.

Veanne, carving her way through the troops surrounding Annatar, heedless of maiming, crippling hurts, the wounds that would be mortal in hours, in minutes. She fought on until she stumbled and knew that she could get no closer, and as she fell she touched the spark to the explosives that she wore in place of armor.

In the instant before it was obscured by the expanding cloud of dust and debris, Celebrimbor caught a glimpse of his face. A flicker of surprise, but only a flicker. As fast as lightning, as fast as light
itself, his hand came up and the explosion simply stopped; sound and light and force arrested together. Then the dust and debris dropped, with a renewed roar his troops came seething forward again; orcish bodies littered the ground, but they came on without regard to their fallen comrades.

He could not have said how long it lasted. Less than a day; he would have noticed the night coming. The patterns began to break down. There were fires raging out of control on the far side of the city; the docks were overrun. Though periodic explosions continued as enemies tripped off the charges laid throughout the city, the earthshaking rumblings of the great demolitions had ceased. Alagos was gone, then. Flares went up from the northern quarter: the signal to fall back to the Mírdain itself. There was no answer from the docks.

Celebrimbor signaled the retreat, gathered the defenders who had been fighting around him – there were suddenly so horribly few of them – and made for the inner walls, for the gardens and courtyards behind the gates.

The fighting had been fierce along the walls. He noted them, as he passed, the Masters of the Mírdain, the mighty ones of Elvish learning. Gaeron, cruelly hewn, dead with his assistants around him. Sildreth, caught in the fall of one of the outer towers. Young Damros, recognizable only by his bright red hair.

Naugwen and Noroth, fallen together, a single spear thrust through both their bodies. Naugwen had refused to be content with mixing explosives and laying charges, and so Noroth had built for her a cross between a sling and a platform that he wore across his own massive shoulders, and so they had fought, back-to-back, training together until they understood the slightest movements of each other’s bodies. The Giant had fought on careless of his wounds until that savage thrust had brought him down at last; even as he sank to the ground he had twisted to the side, still careful of his partner though it could make no difference to either of them. Dying, Naugwen had pulled herself around to face him as far as she could and her bloodless cheek rested against his. It came distantly into Celebimbor’s mind to wonder if at the last Noroth might have broken the silence of his thought and told her his name.

Behind the gates there was a moment of respite. The retreating defenders stared at each other, battle-stained and gasping, cleaning swords, counting arrows. Are we all that's left? Then a ragged shout came from the remaining archers on the walls, and a deep full-throated yell from the army on the other side.

Within the walls, the defenders braced for the shock of impact against the gates, the ring of hooks against the walls, for something. But there was nothing, that same consuming, aggressive nothing that had waited on the other side of the river. Celebrimbor’s head rang as around him surged another swell of focused power, an expanding bubble of silence.

Narvi’s doors fell, blasted, twisted on their hinges, the waters of the gate-stream cascading over empty space. Annatar stepped through.

Coolly, almost fastidiously, he walked across the wreckage into the courtyard. He appeared to be unarmored, shining in the midst of his troops, his robes as unstained by the blood and smoke of the battle as they had once been by the soot and dust of the workshops. He looked just as he always had but there was something strange about that familiar face, as if he were only an image of himself, as if his form were as much of a mask as those worn by the guards around him.

“Annatar!”

Celebrimbor fought his way out of the press of soldiers that were driving the defenders back against the courtyard walls. His own people fell silent at his voice.
He moved forward, his sword in his hand. His friend looked at him, not changing expression, making no answer.

“Face me, Sauron, face me, brother,” he cried. “Face me, or yield if you will not!”

Still Annatar made no move, drew no weapon. Was it possible he meant to face him unarmed? He raised the sword and charged.

A quick motion of the hand—it must have been a signal to his guards—and Annatar moved in a sudden supple arc, whirling out of the path of the blade, as graceful as a dance.

Again he struck, again the sweeping motion, leading him in interlocking circles over the space of the courtyard, tracing patterns across the ground. Is he playing with me?

For a third time he charged, and this time Annatar did not move away but closer to him, closing the distance between them and passing so near that the edge of his robe brushed against his legs. “Tyelperinquar,” he said softly, almost in his ear, “are we fighting?”

He swung back up and around toward him, and the other caught the edge of the sword against his bare hand. It did not rebound, but simply stopped, as if stuck fast in something. The shock ran up Celebrimbor’s arm; he stumbled and gasped.

A thin line of bright red ran down across Annatar’s palm. He looked at it, a faint smile for the first time touching his lips, and met his eyes with sorrow and compassion and something bright and blank and pitiless. Then he turned to the sword in his hand, and in his gaze the cold-forged steel of Khazad-dum simply withered; Celebrimbor released his grip just in time as the metal flashed past liquid and into vapor.

He held his gaze then, and opened his hands, suppressing the wild impulse to laughter. But Annatar turned away, and nodded to one of his captains, who shouted:

“Take him alive!”

There was a great noise and a great rush of people, both his own and the enemy’s, but theirs were the more numerous. There were members of the masked guards all around him, and they evidently took their orders extremely seriously; for though he fought them off with his limbs and hands and teeth, they fought to bind and not to kill, to grapple and pin and choke. He could take no weapon from them; they had come unarmed—for this very purpose? He could gain no purchase against them, there were too many of them, and they pulled him down at last.

As they bore him to the earth, beyond the grasping hands, beyond the broken gate, he thought he glimpsed a flying black banner, and beneath it Bruithwir’s face, wild and desperate, shouting something. He wondered for a fleeting moment whether there was something else he should have said, something he should have done, but the arm low around his neck was levering shut. A bright fog rose around his eyes and closed off his vision, and then it was no longer bright.

They had put him in—he blinked, trying to clear his still half-focused sight—one of the guest rooms on the lowest floor of the dormitory. He pulled himself upright on the bare bed. They had removed his armor, removed his shoes, removed everything that could be used as a weapon, though they had left him the quilted garments he had been wearing underneath, and wrapped him—he touched the black fabric gingerly—in the spare robes from his work-chambers. And in the midst of that surging ocean of sadness and dread and hopeless hope there was a sudden grief, small and sharp and petty:
they must have ransacked his workroom already. They had not brought the red sash that marked him as a master. Too much like a weapon, perhaps.

By the light slanting through the barred window it was morning again. They must have done something to him, to keep him unconscious for so long. No, he corrected himself, Annatar must have done something to him; he doubted that anyone in that army of Men and Orcs had the healer’s art of invoking dreamless sleep in one of the Eldar.

It had been sleep, though, sleep and nothing worse. Cautiously he felt out the edges of his body and his mind. They ached fiercely – the one with the bruises and battery of battle, the other with the miserable awareness that all was irrevocably changed – but, incredibly, there seemed to be no serious damage to either one. The guards at the door watched him sharply over their face-guards, murmuring to each other in their own language.

*No serious damage.* It was quiet, outside the door, save for the crackling of distant fires. It was over, then. The city was fallen. The Brotherhood –

They were gone. He felt unbalanced, felt the world changed for the loss of them. *Veanne, Gaeron, Tirnion...* Numbly, he searched for them in thought, but found only darkness and absence where they should have been, like pages ripped from a beloved book, or a sky without familiar stars. *Naugwen, Damros...* He stopped. There was still a meaning to the word *Lindis,* still a presence behind the name. Faint and dim – she must be badly hurt – but still there. He reached out to her, calling her by her name, offering her comfort and peace and the memory of light.

A pale flare of recognition. *Celebrimbor?*

*Lindis. I’m here. Where are you?*

*I can’t see. They have – I’m sorry. I can’t...*

He felt the words breaking up, her thought blurring into pain and confusion.

*Lindis, listen to me. I know you, I know your name. Lindis, will you take no relief from me?*

This was not his art. Galadriel would have been better for such a task. Any healer would have been. Helplessly he called her back as he had known her: keen and outspoken, fierce in interest and in criticism, her ready friendships, her flashes of humor and generosity.

The spirit he was calling wavered and faded. The guards watched him curiously. Under his breath, tearless but with the heat and pressure of weeping behind his eyes, he began to sing the parting-song as he had heard it long ago in Beleriand, a song of farewell and of return, to guide the spirit West.

This alarmed the guards, and they both began talking at once, very loudly and sharply. He did not quite understand their words yet, but the order to be silent was plain enough. They must have been warned not to let him speak.

He cared nothing whatever for their orders, but they had broken his concentration, and when he reached out toward her again, she was gone like the rest, and he was altogether alone.

A third guard, this one bare-faced, came quickly up to the other two, moving at a pace just short of a run. A quick conference, and suddenly the room was full of Men, indicating that he was to get up and come with them.

Closely guarded, but free, he was brought into the Great Hall, stepping gingerly through the broken glass of the shattered dome. He saw their intent at once: they were bringing him before their master.
There he was, Annatar, slender as a pillar in the center of the dais, looking down on him, untouchable and remote as the stars.

He set his teeth, lifted his chin, and raised his eyes to his.

Breaking into a great smile, Annatar jumped down from the dais and pulled him into his arms, just as if they had been two old friends who had not seen each other for far too long.

Celebrimbor stood, frozen, partly from the shock and partly from sharp effort of will, for in that wilderness of sorrow and loss his friend’s body was warm against his own, and he had to forcibly hold himself back from returning the embrace.

Annatar was laughing. “The look on your face, Tyelpe!” He released him, stepped back, surveyed him with obvious pleasure. “I’m bringing you good news. Couldn’t you guess that?”

The lack of an answering smile from Celebrimbor did not appear to perturb him. He was positively glittering with satisfaction; it shone on his face like the ring shone on his hand. “It’s all right, my brother, my dear one, everything is all right now. This is the beginning of our greatness.”

Without the slightest inclination to restrain himself, he moved forward again, clasping both his hands. “Stars and spiders, but I have missed you. I was terribly angry at you for a while, of course – your betrayal did sting – but we can put all that behind us now. What,” he added, his voice rich with his musical laughter, “did you think I was one of the Valar, to cast away something so precious, to cringe away from my work because it’s flawed, because I feared I lack the strength to reclaim it? You know me better than that, Tyelperinquar.” A sudden, possessive, affectionate pressure of the fingers.

Silent and shaken, Celebrimbor remained motionless. He had been prepared – he thought – to meet Sauron face to face. He had even been prepared, if it came to that, to invoke the love between them, to call after him one last time into whatever abyss he had cast himself, in the hope that there was something left within him that might answer. But this was not that being of power and terror he had glimpsed in the blistering light behind the Rings, not the blood-stained sorcerer-lord of Tol Sirion, but Annatar, his friend, at his side again as if there were nowhere more natural to be. And he had missed him, all those years; his absence had been etched into everything.

But this was not quite Annatar as he had known him, and not just for the terrible knowledge that lay between them now. There was something odd about him, something off, a kind of flatness. But if the man before him noticed the trouble of his thoughts, he did not pay it any attention. He kept hold of his hand and drew him up after him upon onto the dais, toward the high table. Celebrimbor followed, a sharp ache in his side where two ribs had been broken during the previous day’s fighting.

Annatar pulled out one of the Mírdain’s beautifully carved chairs, brushed the battle-dust off it with a flick of his hand. “Sit down. Drink with me. Wine? Or do you prefer tea?”

“Tea? What do you think this is, a – a break in the workday, a time to relax and converse?”

“I do still want to do this like civilized people, Tyelperinquar.”

“You seem to think we still can.”

“Can’t we?”

Slowly, heavily, he sat down. “The smoking ruins of everything we worked together to build would suggest otherwise, Annatar.”
For the first time, the faint suggestion of a frown crossed the sculptured features. “Yes, I do wish you hadn’t made that necessary.”

“Necessary?!” His thought was already flickering down the branching paths of argument. Is he goading me? Does he expect me to believe him? Does he believe himself? But he found himself spitting back a response before he had even finished his analysis. “You brought a conquering army into Eregion, you brought orcs!”

One of the guards returned with a pair of the Mírdain’s own tea bowls on a tray. Annatar heaped candied lemon peel from a small wooden box into his, but Celebrimbor did not drink. “I’m not going to insult you by going over how many opportunities you had to avert this. You chose to set your power against mine, and it failed, as you knew it must. A pointless exercise of pride, but I suppose I can’t say it really surprised me.” He sipped his tea, looking over at Celebrimbor. Then he laughed to himself, but ruefully rather than mockingly. He seemed reluctant to take his eyes from him, still radiating pleasure at seeing his friend again. “But I had hoped that the appetite for self-destruction which is such a distinctive trait of your people might be satisfied by your little display. You must have noticed I was at some pains to preserve you, at any rate. Now, return me the Rings and we can begin to rebuild.”

“Return?” His lips were numb, with cold or with anger or with something else. “Fine words, Lord of Gifts. Are you listening to yourself? If you aren’t, I don’t see why you expect me to.”

“The Three, Tyelpe, you know perfectly well those Rings are mine by right. You haven’t been using them at all – not even during the battle, and that must have taken some self-restraint. Why? Because you know that they are mine, that they must answer to the One.” He looked at his hand with the same pleased satisfaction with which he had looked at Celebrimbor, lost for a moment in contemplation.

“What a waste you were making of them!” He returned to the moment. “They should be used, not hoarded; like you, my labor’s partner, they should be at work, taking their place in the great design.

“Besides,” he added, “without me they would not exist. That is my knowledge, my art, within them and within you. You know that.”

“Yes,” he snapped. “I do. And if I could cut that knowledge out of myself and return it still bleeding to you, I would.”

Annatar’s face suddenly went completely blank, but Celebrimbor caught himself. Even now the habit of self-examination was too deeply ingrained, and he could not imagine himself telling his friend anything other than the truth. You’re a terrible liar, he heard across the years, and Sauron’s laughter.

“But that’s not true, though.” There was bitterness in his voice. “I did wish that. At first. But there is no way to separate it out; no way to say this art is yours, and this is mine.” And there is was: the clarity he had sought. His voice grew in strength. “Are you sure you want to raise the question of whose art is whose, Annatar? Would you have ever made that Ring you wield now, if not for me?”

But Annatar had already relaxed again, and seemed not to hear the question. He had slipped back into his old manner of mingled tolerance and impatience. “I understand that your feelings must still be somewhat raw, but try to think clearly. Recall what it was that we both wanted. Your doors were open once; remember who you were. Raising Middle-Earth to greatness was never just a theoretical exercise.”

The horror and the pressure of all that was at stake might have been enough to freeze him where he sat,
but instead they kindled his thought, focusing him on what he meant to do. *He wasn’t lying,* he thought. *There is hope and this is much, much worse than if he only meant us ill.* “Remember who you were?” he snapped. “That is excellent advice, I suggest you take it.

“Annatar, you were happy here. Do you deny that? What we made together—“ he forced his voice to keep steady, “was great. Beautiful. Do you deny that? And now you are destroying it.”

Annatar laughed. “Destroying it? Pull yourself together, Tyelpe; if I’d wanted to destroy our work, would you be beside me now? I may be using orcs, that doesn’t mean I’m thinking like one.” He gestured at the ruined hall, and it was clear that he saw not the wreckage, but the strength of the troops within it, the bright armor and the disciplined formations.

“Look at my people. Men from a dozen different clans and cities in the East and the South. Merely a hundred years ago they were at each other’s throats; now generations live and die in peace in the shelter of the Tower. There’s so much potential there, in the lands the Valar forgot... They have one lord now, one land, I’m working on building them one language. Give me another hundred years and they will rival Numenor, a hundred again and Numenor will bow to them. To us, Tyelperinquar. Don’t you understand what I’m offering you? What I have begun in strength, you will complete in beauty.”

He set his hand over Celebrimbor’s where he gripped the edge of the table, sliding his fingers between his own.

“Admitting that you’ve lost is painful. I understand that, you know I understand that. But is submission such a terrible thing? Return the Rings, Tyelpe, and we can start again, you and I, together... Everything you and I have ever wanted is within our grasp. We just have to reach out and take it.”

Bright, focused compassion radiated from the figure beside him, lapping him in its warmth and weight, enfolding him in the almost irresistible appeal of being so utterly understood. He pulled himself back from it, into the cold gritty air with its smell of ash and dust, and he pulled his hand away from Sauron’s.

“This is the first time you’ve kept something from me, Tyelpe; I’m disappointed.” The brightness faded, and the cold seeped into his voice. “I’m offering you mercy. I did not say I was offering you a choice.”

“Do you intend to take something more from me, Lord of Gifts?” He glared back into his eyes, silver against gold. The two regarded each other intently, as if they were both attempting to solve a particularly difficult problem.

Annatar sighed deeply. “You have made things much more difficult than they had to be, you know; you’ve already given up almost everything that I knew you prized. Your city, the city I thought you loved—”

“Yes,” he said bitterly, “what do I have left that you can threaten?”

“You will be surprised.” The mildness in his voice was more chilling than anger would have been. Celebrimbor pressed ahead.

“The fact that we would rather lose everything that we made rather than surrender it to you — that doesn’t give you pause? That doesn’t trouble your certainty, even a little bit? You still speak as if we shared a goal; if that’s a lie it’s not a very convincing one and if it’s truth, that’s even worse. I thought that you once had some respect for our judgment—”
“I did. Once. Now I see that you are willing to lay waste to what you love over a point of pride, I think that respect may have been misplaced.”

“You worked beside us and you gave us knowledge and you spoke of a world made more beautiful. Lord of Gifts, a more beautiful world does not begin with theft and murder.”

“We were more than fellow-laborers.” He sounded almost hurt. “And what we shared – it never had to stop, until you took yourself from me and marred our united work. But marred once is not lost forever, Tyelperinquar, I continued that work alone. And now I am bringing you back to it. To me.

“Don’t you see? This is my gift, Tyelpe. For you, for the world, for all we were together.” He ran his finger over the ring on his hand. Was that a nervous gesture? Annatar had never had nervous gestures, it was one of the disquieting things about his presence. When he felt the need to keep himself from distraction, he had always turned outside himself – writing or sketching, playing with the cat, running his fingers through Celebrimbor’s hair -

“And this gift, the order, this perfection, must be for all, not only for the Elves of the Mírdain, but for all of Middle-Earth. It serves the common good, as all must serve. It does not work if anything is held back. You, your work, the work I have done through you, must be taken up into it.”

“Are you seriously talking about your undisputed rule as a gift?”

Annatar ignored him. “So, Fëanor’s heir, will you not give me what is mine by right? Or will you see the world made dark because you have already been blinded by your own jealousy and mistrust?”

Celebrimbor held his gaze, feeling the cold clarity within him. “My grandfather was not the one who darkened the world.”

This did seem to strike home, for Annatar suddenly pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

“Let me be perfectly clear. You are conquered. You will yield what is mine and you will fall into line at my side. I am offering you the chance to do so as a friend and a colleague, with honor and dignity.” He took a step closer. “But we do not have to deal in reason, and I think you know that altering the terms of our discussion will not be to your advantage. You will ask for what you now refuse. You will beg, Tyelperinquar.”

Celebrimbor got to his feet in answer, slowly, almost lazily. “Is that a threat?”

“Define your terms, as the Tehtar used to say. Threat? It’s a statement of fact. The sun will set tonight. The snow will come tomorrow. You will plead for mercy, and I will grant it. Of course I will grant it, I would grant it now if only you would take it.”

“Before we cease to deal in reason...” He moved closer to Annatar; he heard the simultaneous shifting of weight throughout the room that indicated that every guard there was suddenly on high alert. What did they expect to protect him from? “I will ask you only this, Annatar. Is this what you want?”

Annatar looked back at him, poised and tense. “You leave me very little choice.”

And it might have been the echo of their old closeness, forged through four centuries of close collaboration, but he felt the unhappiness under that composure. “Yes,” he said softly, “I know.”

He caught himself. “Wait. I know no such thing. I’m not doing your work for you; if you want pity you can pity yourself.” He rushed on, borne up by a bleak exhilaration. “Annatar, you do have a
choice, you have so many choices here and you are making all the worst ones, but it doesn’t have to
be like this, you can still stop, you can choose to stop. You spoke of mercy? This is mercy and I’m
offering it to you right now. Take it, for the sake of everything we loved, take it while you can. Stop.
Turn back. Don’t do this.”

For a moment it was his old friend who was frozen before him. Then there was a glimmer of gold on
his hand, the new nervous gesture, caressing the ring on his finger. Then he raised it, and there was a
motion throughout the room, stiffening and straightening, anticipation of an order.

“You can strip, or they can strip you. It makes no difference to me; I imagine it does to you.”

Celebrimbor held his gaze, feeling anger beginning to rise at last, bright and clear and sure. “I’m not
going to do any of your work for you.”

Sauron shrugged, and gestured to the guards behind the table. For all his fair words, Celebrimbor
noted, he had clearly come prepared for the negotiations to go badly; the orders were already in
place. The guards surrounded him closely, restraining him as they cut the fabric of his garments
away. But they handled him almost warily, and for a moment he had the absurd idea that they had
been instructed not to hurt him.

They came off in strips: the robes of his office, the quilted underclothing. There was quick, nervous
fumbling at his ears and his neck; they were taking his jewelry as well. If Sauron wanted him
frightened or humiliated, he would be disappointed. He stood straight and proud, calling on the fire
within him against the cold that was more than the winter air against bare skin. Sauron watched him,
expressionless.

“Give me your hands.” But he reached out and took them without waiting for Celebrimbor’s
response. He must have been anticipating this too, for he had produced from somewhere flat pieces
of metal, perforated at both ends. With nothing other than the strength of his fingers, he bent the
strips into shackles, wrist and wrist, ankle and ankle.

When the Lord of Gifts sank to his knees before the prisoner, graceful and fluid and almost reverent,
there was another alarmed murmur, another shifting movement from the troops. But Celebrimbor
watched him, his face set, making no sound, and when the heated metal hissed against his skin, he
laughed at him.

“What, do you think I’m going to escape?”

Annatar looked up, mild and matter-of-fact. “You’re going to try. Everyone does.”

He straightened and took his hand in his, the shackle cooling around his wrist. He leaned very close
to him and spoke softly; Celebrimbor could feel the heat of his body and breathe the bright, clean
ozone smell of his skin.

“Is what has happened to your city not demonstration enough that I really do mean what I say? Do
you think I won’t do this?”

“I hope you won’t do this.” His own voice was low and clear. “There’s a difference. I don’t think
you won’t do this; that would be an opinion and probably it would be wrong. But I hope you won’t.
Because I love you. Because you are still the dearest person ever to be known to me.”

Annatar looked at him coolly, thoughtfully, and for a long time, as if he were memorizing his face
and form: the balanced frame and work-shaped musculature, the old scars and fresh bruises.

“You didn’t tie your hair back,” he observed.
“No. One way or another, the working day is over.”

“Almost, anyway.” Annatar gathered the loose dark hair in his hands, lifted it in a mass off his back and brushed it over one shoulder, running his fingers through it with evident enjoyment. There it was again, the odd flatness and shallowness to him; light off the surface of a mirror. He did not seem to realize the gravity of the situation; hardly seemed aware of it. Is he playing with me?

“No,” he said, almost to himself, “it’s all right. When this really is over, Tyelpe, when we have this one small thing out of the way, you will be at my side again.”

Without changing expression, hardly raising his voice, he spoke past him in a language that Celebrimbor had heard only once before, out of the fire of the Rings. It was a command, that much he could tell; he caught fragments of meaning but nothing whole. His eyes stung and smarted at the words, they burned in his throat like a choking vapor. The guards took him by the arms.

“Wait a minute, when you said one language – do you mean to tell me that language is something you’re creating?”

“Yes!” A spark of genuine pleasure in Annatar’s eye, and at once he was again, unbearably, the colleague talking with Gaeron and Naugwen about language reform. “I’m designing it myself, unity of purpose requires unity of language, we’ve talked about this. It’s meant to be clear, and as effective as possible; there are several simplifications I’ve made–”

Celebrimbor’s laugh was almost a bark. “All of our late-night talks about language, brother, they came to this? It’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever heard, and I’ve heard orcs singing. What was that, something hand, something something breath –”

Annatar ignored the jibe, pleased at Celebrimbor’s efforts at comprehension. “Very close! I said ‘Leave his hands, leave his face, leave him breathing.’”

Celebrimbor caught the flicker of relief in a guard’s eye. “You know that not even your own troops understand what you’re saying?”

This did irritate Annatar; he had evidently touched a sore point. He hissed a single syllable, which was evidently simply the imperative ending, for his troops hastily moved to pull Celebrimbor out of the hall.

“Annatar!” Before they left the dais, he turned over his shoulder, and spoke sternly. “I am warning you. Don’t do this.”

“Tyelperinquar,” Annatar was already sitting back down at the table and moving on to the next task; he looked up with open irritation at being offered orders by a prisoner. “I am entirely serious.”

Celebrimbor looked back at him, eyes bright and gaze steady. “So am I.”

The courtyard was in better condition than most of the rest of the city, but it was still a mess: mud, debris, even bodies not yet cleared away. They had already assembled some sort of sturdy tripod in its center, and now they set about binding him to it.

The world went flickering in and out of focus, as if he were adjusting a lens to examine the inner structure of some complex material. Now startlingly close; now distant, peaceful, almost abstract. The bite of the rough wood against the burned skin at his wrists. The odd fact they used long strips of a tough cloth instead of ropes. It looked like the same cloth they had wound around their arms.
Lindis would be interested to see that. Did they use it as armor? Bandages? No, Lindis was gone, he had felt her die, she would never quiz Men on their customs again. They were taking a good deal of care to protect his hands; they took Sauron’s orders almost religiously. He felt their nervousness around him and suddenly wanted to ask them what they thought about it all.

But being present would do him no good. He focused outward, into the distance, and his thought was already far away as the first blows began to fall.

He was sitting in the King’s library in Lindon, sea breeze blowing through the open windows, reviewing a commentary on a twelve-volume treatise on language and history. Thus by deceit, by lies, by torment of the body and the spirit, by the threat of torment to others well loved, or by the sheer terror of his presence, Melkor ever sought to force the Incarnate that fell into his power, or came within his reach, to speak and to tell him all that he would know...

They moved slowly with the whip, deliberately so, leaving time enough between strikes for the slower burning pain to swallow the quick stinging one, time enough to wonder if they were done, time enough for the unstoppable hope that perhaps there would be no following blow.

He drew breath steadily, and focused on the written page, the texture of the paper, the curl of the letters. Behind the words (even of those in fear and torment) dwells ever the sáma inviolable: the words are not in it, though they may proceed from it...

There was something besides leather built into the whip’s structure; probably wire, possibly small pieces of some other substance. Bone? It was designed to catch and tear flesh, at any rate, to maim or kill. He tried to continue reading, but the page kept blinking out into a fire-tinged blackness; there was blood on the breeze, not sea-air. He cast himself farther back, and the fires in the dark were those of the Mithrim camp. The Sons of Fëanor were gathered by the fire in their newly built great hall – all but one.

His father’s brother, Maglor, at the head of the table, the crown on his head and a paper in his hand. His father himself, on his feet, leaning over him, speaking low and angry and urgent. “You can be sundered from your will,” he was saying, “but that doesn't mean your will is destroyed, it just means you can't get to it.” His hands curled into fists. “That letter's a forgery.”

“It's certainly not his handwriting,” said Maglor, and he heard the uncertainty in his voice as he looked again at the paper he held.

Celegorm squinted at it, then closed his eyes and moved his hand over the paper, with his thumb clamped against the side of his hand. “Might be though. If he can't close his fingers.”

“It doesn't matter if he wrote it or not, it's still a forgery.” Curufin snatched the paper from him and threw it into the fire; Maglor half-rose with a cry but Curufin whirled to face him, his eyes blazing.

“If his will wasn't behind the writing, it doesn't matter whose hands were. And even if his will's been torn from him, it certainly hasn't been torn from us. If his will lives only in us now, then it is up to us to keep it alive. For him.”

They were all watching him now, the fire of his words the brightest thing in that darkness.

“Brothers, we know, we know, that the highest and holiest and most precious things that we possess can be taken by force, kept from us, locked in darkness. But they cannot be destroyed.” He began to pace back and forth across the hearth.

“I do not call things sacred,” he said, “I do not call things holy. That’s a word that the Valar use to
mean things they approve. What do we have to do with the guardians of holiness? But if there is one thing that is holy in this world, it is the unwill. Unwillingness is sacred. You can't make someone else's choices. You can bend them or you can break them but that is a parody of choice, not choice itself.”

“There are other things that are holy,” said Celegorm to no one in particular. Curufin went on without a breath.

“There is a power beyond the Powers, and it is by that power we refuse. When nothing is left to us, that refusal is still ours. It is sacred, and nothing in this world or out of it can destroy it, no, not even we ourselves. We may be destroyed in body and mind – did grim Namo promise any less? – but we cannot be erased. He cannot be erased. Our brother, our king, he remains ours. No matter what the Enemy does to him.”

Complete silence fell after he had spoken. His brothers took hold of his words, clinging to them, drawing out a strength beyond hope -

“Besides,” Maglor pointed out after a minute, glancing into the fire where the ashes of the letter still smoldered “it's not as if it's actually possible to renounce the Oath. Even if we wanted to.”

Curufin bared his teeth in what could hardly be called a smile. “And we're all going to pretend we don't know how you know that.”

"And that is exactly enough out of you,” Maglor hissed. “Get out of my sight.”

He must have left, and they must have gone to look for him, because the next thing in Celebrimbor’s thought was the wrenching and terrible sound of weeping. Celegorm found Curufin sobbing in the woods. "You didn't cry like that for Father,” he observed, leaning against a tree and looking down at him.

Curufin raised his head, and this time his smile was pure vicious grace. "And I won't for you."

His brothers were drawing closer around him, hesitant, desperate, Ambarussa wanting to know if someone who had been severed from their will could ever return to it.

Curufin rounded on them, his face savage. “I don’t know,” he hissed, “I don’t know. I don’t know. All I did was make a speech and now you expect me to be some kind of authority?”

"...As Fëanor said at Araman,” drawled Caranthir.

The pain was louder now, a blaring, insistent noise that made it harder and harder to think of anything else. He could no longer control his breathing, he heard it catching in his throat, great uneven gasps and gulps -

Someone was counting the blows. It was not a language he knew, but the number-sequence was unmistakable. That would do as well as anything else, he caught hold of it. N+1. N+2. He let it trace out shapes in his mind. A closed unoriented n-dimensional manifold is a vector space over the field of two elements -

Memory flared and skipped, now coming in flashes like lightning. “Let the pain come out through your lips, Turko,” Curufin said as Caranthir bent over his brother, stitching the raw edges of the slash in his arm with tiny careful knots. “It’s not cowardice, it’s good management.” But his uncle’s eyes were wide and wild as an injured beast’s, and like a beast he bore the injury in frozen silence, as if afraid of what enemies might be drawn to the rumor of weakness.
The fall of a city was at its heart an administrative challenge. He was, in a way, glad to have Tyelperinquar out of the way while he dealt with the interminable complex minutiae of billeting and provisioning, securing of streets and stabilization of buildings, division of plunder and establishment of defenses. The Mírdain had been provokingly thorough in their sabotage of the city, and he had lost several squads of orcs to mined streets (and one to a rather spectacular release of poison gas that he resolved to make a closer study of at some point) before it became apparent that he would have to put forth his own power to determine the most likely points for blast charges and destabilizations. Neither had the remaining forces of Ost-in-Edhil been entirely subdued – all the serious fighting was over, but patches of resistance remained here and there.

No one task was exceptionally absorbing, but they all had to be done, and his friend deserved nothing less than his full attention. Still, he could not stop his thoughts from flickering over to him – what a pleasure it was, to know that he was so close! From the dim, guttering quality of Celebrimbor’s presence, he was just where he wanted him: suspended securely between life and death. Occasionally he sent forth a small amount of power, pushing him back down into the darkness of his dreams. Celebrimbor was strong and angry and possibly, he thought, drawing in some obscure way from his creations. It would not do to have his friend healing too quickly, not before he was ready to devote himself fully to the problem that he posed.

The troops, on the other hand, were less content. They did not know what to make of the prisoner, and found their lord’s actions toward him inexplicable. That was all very well – it was their duty to serve the Lord of Gifts, not to understand him – but as a result they seemed to regard dealing with the prisoner as dangerous, complicated, and uncomfortable.

The entirely unacceptable suggestion that the prisoner’s hair be shorn, as was customary for a high-ranking defeated ruler, had been greeted with sharp displeasure, and their lord’s displeasure was perilous enough. The two guards, on the other hand, who had made the unsupportably foolish decision to mock his friend as he cried out and struggled in his bonds, had met a fate so sudden and grisly that it left the entire army on edge and preferring any assignment, even explosives-clearing in the outer edges of the city, to dealing with the fallen lord of Eregion.

The captain of the 16th Tower Company was making his report, careful not to look directly at his lord’s face. Fighting still continued sporadically in the southern end of the city; the fires were now entirely under control but the water system was damaged beyond repair; they had lost a few captives to wounds suffered during the battle but did not expect to lose many more -

“Yes, yes.” He nodded impatiently. “And the prisoner?”

There was only one the prisoner to the Lord of Gifts

The captain paused before replying, weighing his words. “Delirious. Calling for his father.”

“Good. Tell me when he calls for me.”

He was burning, or perhaps freezing, or perhaps merely dissolving, coming apart into his constituent elements. Awash in pain, broken in body and wandering in mind, he could not tell what was
memory and what was dream. The images formed and broke up again, nothing caught or cohered. A floor slick with blood, unnaturally close to his face. Fingers at his neck feeling for the pulse. A storm on a darkened sea, a howling silence that would not lift – no, that was Alqualonde. But surely that was a very long time ago.

*Something terrible has happened.*

He felt his body struggling to repair itself, supported by the strength of his kind and the memory of the light of the ancient world, but by the force of some power working against him, his efforts crumbled and were swept away. The pain took on dimension and direction: he was pinioned by something-

*I am trapped,* he realized, drifting closer to the surface of the world, *I have fallen into the hands of the enemy. Perhaps my friend will come for me.*

No, that was his uncle, and that was also a very long time ago. His friend was gone; he had left him. Where was he? He stood before pages and pages of formulas and diagrams, knowing that it was terribly important that this be worked out, but the light had failed and he could not see clearly. He wandered, as it seemed to him, through the dark and empty hallways of Nargothrond, looking for something, or perhaps for someone. *Where has the light gone?*

Then he felt the breath of air in the darkness, and he knew that the roof above him was open to the sky. The treasury plundered, the blood on the doorstep – not Nargothrond. Formenos.

Thoughtful and evaluative, he watched his friend swaying in a kind of restless stupor. They had tied him, in one of the prescribed configurations used in the dungeons of the Tower, to the wall of a hastily-cleared store-room just off the courtyard. One arm was pinioned over his head, one stretched to the side, with a good deal of slack in the restraints on both so that he could not properly rest in any position. In addition to the burns at his wrists and ankles, they had scalded the fronts of his knees and the soles of his feet, so that he could not bear any weight on either for long, offering him only the choice between one sort of pain and another, and with the condition of his back there was no question of being able to lean backwards against the wall.

His face was dangerously colorless, his lips almost gray at the edges – cold, or pain, or sheer loss of blood. The scourging had laid his back open to the bone. Sauron observed with interest as he would fight his way back closer to awareness of his situation, struggle against it, then as the effort exhausted him, fall back into insensibility. Then rest would refresh him, and everything would begin again.

The guards at his side watched him, their eyes nervous and anxious over their face coverings, but he was highly satisfied to see the prisoner still struggling. It was a positive sign; if Celebrimbor were to stop moving, that might be cause for concern, but as it was -

“*We must separate the will to live from the will to resist,*” he said, gesturing towards him as an example. “*Like separating silver from lead when the elements are enmeshed; lead, being a baser metal, will oxidize* –”

It seemed perfectly natural, back within the walls of the Mírdain, to take up his old manner of instruction, but the guards were decidedly lacking as students. They nodded silently, neither understanding nor particularly interested in understanding what he was talking about. With a hiss of contempt, he turned back to his friend.

The work of taking the city was not entirely finished, but he was unwilling to wait any longer. Other work could be delegated, this could not.
He spoke a word and the straps holding the shackles parted suddenly. The prisoner collapsed with a low cry – he was long past the point of being able to support himself – but he caught him as he fell.

Celebrimbor was not slightly built, but he lifted him up in his arms without the slightest effort. The wave of relief that passed through him as he realized who was with him was a tangible thing, the bleeding body shook with it

“Annatar,” he murmured, reaching for him, his fingers clutching vaguely at his robes. “You came after all, you came back... Terrible things have been happening. Terrible things...”

“My dear one, hush. It’s all right now.”

“No, it’s not safe, you’ve got to get out –”

“Lie quiet, Tyelpe. I’ve got you.”

He carried him up the stairs to the Great Workshop and laid him carefully face down on the worktable. For a moment he stood surveying him in the clear winter light, with the meticulous attention he gave to any absorbing project. His friend gave a stifled moan, feeling him withdraw. He patted his hand, absently, and stroked his hair. His fingers caught almost immediately; the dark tangles were matted with blood and sweat.

The Ring burned on his hand, constant and brilliant and mighty as a small sun. He sank himself fully into its power, into the relief and the joy and the satisfaction of something so utterly his. He might have remained within it indefinitely, but he had an urgent task, and so he looked outward, regarding the world in its light. Seen so, the world was an arrangement of vectors – the lines of tendency, fear and desire and decision and fate. The Ring warped those lines toward itself, drawing them like a magnet drew iron, or as beauty drew the eye and the heart. And a concentrated exercise of power through that Ring...

He bent to his work.

“The Rings act to focus the will,” he said, as the ragged flesh began to draw together, “and this Ring, the master-Ring, can act as a focus for even the weakest and most diffuse desires. It has power to make as well as to mar. In short, your body wants to heal, and I have the power to let it do what it wants.”

Skin and muscle knitted, new capillary networks spreading across the damaged tissue.

“It still requires a fairly intimate understanding of what you’re doing, of course,” he added, “but I do know a thing or two about bodies.”

He went on talking while he worked, bright and interested, like talking over a particularly tricky set of equations, expecting at any time to hear Celebrimbor chime in with a question or an observation.

“This is going to solve a lot of the problems we have with the durability of the Secondborn, for instance. Do you know how badly they want to live? It’s practically the only thing they want, when you get down to it, which is one reason they’ll never be entirely satisfactory in terms of real vision...”

He was lying down at last, he could rest. The surface of the worktable was cool and smooth against his face. The one he loved was beside him, tending to his wounds. The one he loved...

Knowledge of who he was and where, what had been done to him and who had done it, returned
gradually rather than all at once. And for a long and shameful moment, he longed to remain deceived, to rest against the comfort of Annatar’s hands gentle on his injured body, combing through his matted hair.

*I cannot go back to the truth*, he thought. *It’s better this way. We are both happier for it.*

He felt renewed life rising in his body, renewed clarity in his mind. He was not even particularly uncomfortable, at least not compared to the gasping wastelands of pain through which he had been wandering: a dull fading heat followed by a sharp prickling as his old friend carefully rebuilt what had been so grievously harmed. Then Annatar’s hands running across unbroken skin, cool and soothing and utterly at peace –

*The one thing the songs never say of them is that they were cowards.*

He drew a breath, forced his eyes open, and wrenched himself around to face Annatar where he leaned over his prone body. He expected a scream of protest from his back, but there was nothing, only the hollow echo of pain remembered and pain anticipated. Annatar did not seem surprised at his sudden motion, but merely stepped back and watched him with quiet regret.

“What do you think you are playing at, Annatar?” he demanded.

“You see?” said Annatar, as if he were continuing an entirely different conversation. “It was better before. I cared for you. You trusted me. And I do mean well towards you, Tyelperinquar; I am here to make you whole. I will fix everything.”

He laid his hand back on Celebrimbor’s shoulder, firm and reassuring. The precision and gentleness of his touch was suddenly and horribly reminiscent of Galadriel’s: a touch conveying insight, healing, tenderness –

“Relax.” He ran his hand across the shoulders. Celebrimbor’s body was still twisted backward from raising his head to address him. “It’s fine. It looks good. There won’t even be scars.”

Celebrimbor blinked at him, somewhere between anger and disbelief. But while he was still trying to find the words to convey just how low preservation of the beauty of his person ranked among his various priorities, Annatar went on.

“You understand what this means, don’t you? It means that there is nothing – not the greatest matters nor the smallest – beyond my reach now.” He was moving his hands deftly along the shoulders, calling life back into the flesh beneath. Celebrimbor kept his focus on the moment, on the anger and the tension between them, but somewhere in the background of his thought he found himself relaxing into that offered strength, and was revolted by his own response.

“This also means that you are not going to die. I will protect you.” It was spoken with all the calm reassurance of a promise, but it had, and Celebrimbor knew it had, the force of a threat.

“For someone older than the universe, Annatar, that’s a childish trick. Do you expect me to forget what you’ve done? Are you trying to get me to associate you with kindness?”

“I give you more credit than that, Tyelperinquar.” He did not cease his ministrations. “You were never deceived about my nature. You know perfectly well I have nothing to do with kindness. But power? Freedom? Generosity? Yes, if you associate me with those you come nearer the mark. I want to give you everything. I want you to be capable of receiving it.”

Celebrimbor struggled to sit up, his limbs heavy and hard to control, and a seething blankness at the edge of his vision threatening to overwhelm it if he moved too quickly or too far. Eventually he
succeeded in raising himself onto his elbows. Annatar, still the very image of gracious solicitude, stepped back. He went to the spigots at the wall, filled a bowl of water, and held it out to him.

“Drink now. You’ve lost a great deal of blood.”

Celebrimbor considered a number of objections – the first and most serious being a reflexive refusal to take anything his captor offered him – but after a moment he took the water; he was overwhelmingly thirsty and he had built the water system himself. It was still pure and clean, the best thing he had ever tasted. He felt his body rejoicing at the refreshment, and across it, a meshwork standing out in a strange and subtle contrast, he could feel the lines of repair, the power of the Ring at work in his flesh. It was only, perhaps, the truth in the body of what had long been true of the heart and the soul, the intermingling of Sauron’s art with his own. That made it no easier to bear.

“This is... wrong,” he said after a minute. His lips were stiff, and there was an odd lag between his thought and his speech, though from which it originated he could not say

Annatar perched on the table beside him, smiling indulgently. “I don’t think that you being whole and sound is wrong: you’re free to disagree.’

“You’re being deliberately obtuse.” He finished the water and set the bowl down before his hand had the chance to start shaking with effort. “Although that is the least worrisome of the behaviors you’re displaying now, so go ahead, make yourself difficult. I don’t mind explaining things to you in small words.”

Annatar laughed aloud, and he had to keep himself from smiling in answer; it was easier if he didn’t look at him.

“For instance,” he said, closing his eyes, “I don’t think this is going to be nearly so useful as you suppose in terms of increasing the durability of the Secondborn.”

“Oh?”

“What you’ve done to me...“ he heard his voice blur, though again he could not tell if the error were in his speech or his perception. “I may be whole, but I’m certainly not sound. There’s this –” he moved his shoulders experimentally; grey suns burst behind his eyes “this instability, a sort of looseness -”

“Does it hurt?” He could not tell, from his voice, if Annatar were curious or concerned.

“Not... not exactly. It’s unpleasant. It’s like my body knows it’s broken, and that its wholeness is entirely dependent on the will of its enemy.”

Annatar slipped down off the table, standing up. “Well of course healing is going to take longer if you are actively fighting it,” he said crisply. “Now lie down, Tyelpe, or you really will hurt yourself.”

He stepped back again, looking at him thoughtfully. “The troops told me you gave poor sport,” he said after a moment.

Celebrimbor snorted. “I don’t think they told you any such thing. You must have seen the terror they hold you in; the only thing they’re going to be telling you is precisely whatever they think you want to hear. They didn’t even ask me any questions.”

“Would you have answered them?” Annatar’s tone was somewhere between indulgence and impatience, so familiar and well-loved that he had to concentrate in order to remember exactly where
he was, what was happening between them.

“Still,” he said, ignoring the remark, “I suppose they knew their business. They seemed practiced enough. Is that their standard treatment of prisoners?”

“No, of themselves. If a company fails in its mission, every twelve-man unit selects one of their number, and the rest must flog him until he dies.”

“That’s appalling.”

“You think so?” Annatar was refilling the bowl. “It aids unit cohesion. Keeps motivation high. And it was their custom, not mine. When I took the cities of Teliz and LoS, I assumed control over their armies; for the most part I’ve reorganized them but I kept the elements I found useful.”

Celebrimbor glowered at him from between his arms. “I thought you loathed wastefulness.”

Annatar laughed. “A few mortal deaths? Do you have any idea how quickly they replenish themselves? They multiply faster than orcs. I did try introducing the decimation among the orcs,” he added, “but they enjoy it too much for it to be at all effective. Without a central intelligence directing them, they really would tear each other apart for the fun of it; that’s why they were useless to anyone but Melkor for so long. The Ring makes them so much easier to deal with; there’s real potential there for the first time in ages—”

“You’re appalling.”

“Oh, save your posturing, Tyelperinquar; weren’t you the one with that line about the enemy’s tools? Besides,” he added, sitting back down on the table beside him, and looking down at him with deep warmth in his eyes, “you’ll be leading them yourself soon enough. Once you come back to me.”

Deciding not to pursue that particular remark, Celebrimbor let his head sink back onto the table. “Annatar, what is this for? I’m not – not a stuck pipe fitting; you can’t hit me until I do what you want, you can’t hurt me until I agree with you, that’s not how it works.”

In one smooth movement, Annatar stood up and set both hands against his back, the pressure firm but not painful.

“Oh, my dearest. I’m afraid that’s exactly how it works. You are...” He considered the word carefully, “...valuable to me. But you are finite, you are fragile, you are made of matter.” He kneaded the mended muscle with his unnervingly strong fingertips. “You yourself know what it is to draw the secrets out of matter. Did you think your own substance enjoys some kind of exception?”

Celebrimbor drew breath to speak, but Annatar went on talking over him. “This—” he ran his hand fondly over his back, “was to define our terms, to explain the situation to you as plainly as I can. We might have wasted weeks, years, going back and forth in argument, with you attempting to set your strength against mine. This, by the way, is not the worst I can do.”

Celebrimbor snorted.

“This is not even measured on the same scale as the worst I can do. This is just to remind you what your body is, give you an idea of its limits, allow you to reconsider your position with a more accurate understanding of who you are in relation to me.”

He was going to snap out a retort, but stopped himself.

“Yes?” Annatar’s voice was honey and wine, as strong and sweet as his touch.
“Oh, I was formulating an objection, but as I considered, I noticed that you’re right. Yes. Being beaten to the verge of death is indeed a reminder of the inherent limits of physical existence.”

He did not raise his eyes, but he could hear Annatar’s smile in his words. “That is one of the things I do so appreciate about you, my brightness: you are honest with me, even if I do have to remind you to make the effort.”

“I’m unclear why you think I might have forgotten that in the first place, but then you seem to have forgotten quite a lot yourself. That would certainly account for why you can no longer tell a spirited discussion from a vicious assault.”

Annatar was beginning to lose patience. “You can try to work out how this goes on your own, Tyelpe, or I can just tell you. This is a solved problem, it’s been solved over and over and over again. You spit defiance for a while until you realize that you’re the only one listening to yourself, then you go quiet until you realize that silence doesn’t mean it stops, then you think you can give both of us what we want if you lie. People find all kinds of really extraordinary half-measures to take at this stage, but it’s a good sign really, it’s a concession, and if they realize that, it ends there. But if not, it goes on, making the world smaller and easier to understand.”

His voice dropped, low and soothing. “And there at the bottom, underneath language, you learn as you did before you learned to speak, when all the world was only light and dark, things that hurt and things that do not. You are an incarnate, and like all incarnates, you were made to learn through pain.”

He straightened, and set his hand firmly on his shoulder. “The sooner you come to terms with your own nature, the sooner we can get back to doing interesting things.”

This time Celebrimbor did manage to force himself all the way upright, eyes blazing, glaring at Annatar though his vision contracted to a single bright point in a grey fog. “No, Annatar, I’m going to tell you how this goes. Do you want to know? It’s only going to get harder and harder for you to stop. With every step, you are refining the shape you have cast yourself in. And you will tell yourself that you meant this until finally you won’t even see anything wrong. You won’t know why you’re suffering, and you’ll tell yourself that you aren’t suffering at all.”

His eyes were clearing, but he already had the clarity he needed. “Do you think I haven’t seen this before? Do you think I don’t know exactly how this plays out? You will get so good at lying to yourself. You’ll actually believe what you say but eventually you won’t even need to. Everything you try to grasp will slip through your fingers until you find yourself destroying because you cannot possess, destroying where once you dreamed of building, and all the while wanting to lose, trying to lose, because only when you’ve lost everything will you be able to whisper the truth to yourself: this isn’t what I wanted. That’s how this ends, Annatar, it ends in nothing. I see it. I see it.”

Annatar’s eyes were fixed on him, his face mask-still. For a moment Celebrimbor wondered if he had actually been heard, but then a line of frustration crossed the smooth forehead. “Why are you doing this? Are you trying to make some kind of point?” He cocked his head toward the window, toward the silent guards who lined the walls. “There are some groups of Men in the East who believe that only the cruelest of deaths can erase the shame of having been captured alive. I know you have more sense than that. There’s no shame in surrender. Stronger people than you have surrendered under less persuasion. Because some of us know when to cut our losses. Surrender, my dearest and my best, surrender and we will rise together to heights beyond anything these shores have known.”

He began to pace, back in his lecturing mode. Celebrimbor half expected him to pull forward one of the boards that still stood in the corner and begin drawing diagrams.
“There are three approaches you can take to a problem like this. You can try to break down the will – through pain, yes, and exhaustion, but principally through fear. The subject feels their strength diminishing, and knows that they have fewer resources with which to continue to resist, which will itself diminish their strength still further. You can try to bypass the will altogether. Put the body into imminent anticipation of its own death, and it can simply take over, do whatever it feels is necessary to survive. But the third approach is neither to break the will nor to bypass it but to bend it, to bring it into compliance with your own. And that depends not just on fear of future pain but on hope of future good.”

And at the mention of future good, his voice softened, and he returned to stand over him. He took his face in both his hands, turning it upward toward his own, running his fingers backward through his hair to cup his head in his hands. He used no force at all; it was deeply unsettling. “And there is so much good, my heart’s own, so much I’ve begun, so much still to come, so much that we could do together. You should see what I’ve been building in the East. Well, you will see it. You’ll rule it, if you like. You will be my lieutenant. You stood beside me before; you will stand beside me again. There is so much I want to give you, beloved.”

He seemed almost to be talking to himself, but Celebrimbor closed his eyes against the wrenching pain at the words.

“What a relief it is, Tyelpe, what a pleasure, to be able to be perfectly honest with you at last about my regard for you!” He caught the distress on his face. “It’s all right, my sweetness, it’s all right, you’ve made mistakes but that doesn’t mean everything is ruined. Even I’ve made mistakes.”

“That is... one way to put it.”

“Telling you the truth when I did; that was a mistake. I see that now. This was the error: you shouldn’t grasp for the thing beyond your reach, you should grasp for the means to make it yours. But I had turned my own head that night, talking of desire – and that was another mistake, I had overestimated the strength of yours. That’s a mistake you’re making now, by the way: overestimating your strength.”

He hissed out a breath of frustration through his teeth, letting his head fall back against Annatar’s hands. “What are you thinking, Annatar? What is going through your mind? Do you really think there’s – there’s some version of the story where our friendship survives this?”

Again that rich and quiet laughter. “Why not? I am willing to look past the way that you hurt me, after all. For your sake, for my sake, for the sake of the dream we share. But the greatest obstacle to that dream – right now, the greatest obstacle is you. I will not let you pull down our shared vision over a petty point of personal pride. You must surrender, you will surrender, and when you have surrendered and everything is restored to its rightful order and we have all that we ever wanted, you will see that this was all worth it. I’m curious,” he added, “do you really think there’s some version of this story where we succeed separated from each other?

“You tried working without me, Tyelpe, and you couldn’t: your greatest works are my works; they are useless while they are kept from me. But together, we have everything.”

He ran his fingers up his arm where he had braced it against the table. “I really do want to show you the Great Tower, though. It already stands as mighty as Angband; with you to labor beside me it will be more beautiful than the cities of the Noldor, more beautiful than Aman itself –”

“You are not nearly as smooth a speaker as you seem to think you are, Annatar, if you think that comparing something favorably to Angband is going to win you any favors from one of the Eldar.”
Sauron’s eyes flashed, a shiver of gold. The air in the room seemed suddenly heavier, charged like the air before a thunderstorm. “Enough. You wanted a question? Here it is. Tyelperinquar, where are the Rings?”

He burst out laughing, though the weakness in his body kept it hardly above a wheeze. “Would you believe, Annatar, I don’t know?”

“This is not the moment to make jokes, and this is not the moment to start lying to me,” he said, clipped and tight. “And if you do mean that, Tyelpe, then laughter is very much not the appropriate response to the situation. If you do not know, I suggest you find out.”

He stepped back, gestured to the guards in the corners, and spoke another one of those words like bubbling pitch. The guardsmen hesitated.

“He said ‘chair’,” explained Celebrimbor helpfully, “only he’s using both a dative and the imperative verb ending stacked on top of each other, which I’m assuming means it’s an order to do something regarding it—” They were already swarming around him, lifting him, binding him into one of the Mírdain’s sturdy seats. When they had finished and returned to their places, he looked at Annatar for a long moment, then let his gaze travel around the familiar room: the high ceiling, the worktables and the workbenches, the diagrams still pinned to the walls. He laughed again, bitterly this time.

“The workshop, Annatar? That’s the battlefield you’ve chosen?”

“Good light. Good drainage.” Annatar paced around him, quietly evaluating the effectiveness of the bonds. “Supplies at hand. It’s a good place to work.” He stood behind him, his hands resting on his shoulders.

“I was happier here than I had ever been,” he said quietly. “Than I knew I could be.”

His hands tightened on his shoulders. “Nothing has to happen to you, here or anywhere. I do not want to hurt you. I do not want you to be hurt. I want to see you as I want to see Middle-Earth itself: whole and sound, strong and glorious, rising to heights that the Valar would envy.”

“And under your control?”

Annatar did not answer. He turned away and began rummaging in the drawer marked with Celebrimbor’s own *calma* and three tick-marks.

“Why Tyelperinquar,” he said after a moment, “you even kept my tools. I am genuinely touched.” He pulled out his pliers, tested their spring.

He had thought that he might be afraid, when it came to it, but there was no fear. There had never been fear, he realized suddenly, not even when he had learned the truth that night there on the rooftop, the last time he had been truly happy. There had been horror and doubt and an anger like sickness. But not fear, not of Annatar, never of him.

“Annatar,” he said, “I’ll tell you this once, and I’ll use the simplest terms I can think of. You don’t do this to someone you love.”

He closed his eyes as Annatar approached. He felt him bending over him: the brush of his loose hair against naked skin, the touch of something cold and sharp at the joint where the arm met the shoulder. Annatar pressed his lips to his closed eyes, and the thin skin blistered almost instantly.

“Your kingdom is gone,” he whispered, “and you will serve me. Because you have no other choice. And you and I, we will...”
Time dilated and stretched, it spun out like wire. There was a terrible focus and clarity to his consciousness, which reminded him bitterly of the days when he and Annatar had bent their minds together to the study of the inward secrets of creation. *Look at its nature, really look at it...*

It seemed to him that he could map everything about the body, illuminated in the harsh radiance of pain: the intricate meshwork of nerves and the broad lines of bone, the roots of the teeth and the hair, the beds of the nails, the patient labor of heart and lungs and viscera. There was a great beauty to it, and it suddenly seemed a grief to him to see it spoiled so, and the grief wound around the pain, called out to it and was answered.

He could not cast his mind back to happier days; Annatar was there in all of them, his eyes alight as they spoke of their shared vision, or laughing to himself in the midst of the Brotherhood, or lost in some abstraction, or on the roof of the Mírdain, shimmering gold and silver under the starlight, with wisdom in his words and power in his hand. And then – and even then -

All the while he worked on, in that same tranquil storm of concentration, slowly and carefully disassembling his body and reconfiguring it for the brutish, simple purpose of pain. He peeled and carved, burned and tore, he took the pull rods from the jewellers’ workshop and forced them, without haste, into the joints between the bones. Whenever he was dissatisfied with his work he would undo it and begin it again; he had spent a whole day breaking a single rib, over and over, until he was satisfied with its angle, the way it dragged at the breath, the access it allowed to the organs beneath.

Celebrimbor tried closing his eyes; it was at least momentarily better not to look at the knife, not to see it at its work. But in the darkness the horror sprang: the raw-meat smell of his opened body, that sense of sickening wrongness worse than simple pain, the feel of the air in places where air should not be, a maker’s dread of being unmade. He had to keep his eyes open, but there was less and less meaning in what he saw: the wheeling of light and darkness, the comings and goings of the soldiers, someone wearing a face that he had loved, who wanted something from him -

He tried to speak, groping for language, but there was no clarity to be had in words. He could not tell what he was saying, or even if he was forming words at all. There was some sort of sound, twisting between them in the air.

“Annatar – it hurts –”

He felt a hand, warm and comforting, resting on the side of his face. “I know it hurts. Let the Rings go, and it will be better, I promise.”

Somewhere there was an answer that he should give, but he realized, dispassionately, that it was beyond him now, that the pain had already gotten the better of him. His vision swam and darkened, his eyelids stuttered shut. He felt the strength leaving his limbs, he cast himself backwards, his spirit falling away.

Suddenly, like a hand on his back, catching and steadying him, a sudden bright infusion of strength came pouring into his spirit. “Don’t even think about it,” Annatar said evenly. “You don’t want to die, and we both know it; you want to stop hurting and that’s not the same thing. It’s the opposite thing. It’s good, a good sign, it’s strength in you not weakness.”

He caressed his face again, trailing his hand down his cheek, one finger tracing his lips, swollen and bloodied where he had bitten into them. “We both have the same goal here, my brightness, my heart’s brother. I’m trying to help you. Why won’t you let me help you?”
Celebrimbor gulped for breath, aware and angry. The pain was brilliant across his being, glaring and bright, but it no longer mapped out the whole world. There were so many things he had to say to Annatar. *And a rapidly closing window in which to say them,* whispered his thought.

He looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Did you speak this way to Finrod in the darkness of Tol-in-Gaurhoth?”

“What?” He seemed puzzled by the turn of the conversation; it was clear that his thoughts were concentrated on the moment.

Then: “Oh,” he said, with a faint edge to his voice. “The King of Nargothrond. You loved him, didn’t you?”

“Of course I loved him. Everyone loved him. How do you think you get a name like The Beloved? You ought to know; I recall you earned something similar, The Abhorred.”

He smiled thinly. “Finrod, yes. I do remember him. Now that you mention it.” Against his will the images from Annatar’s thought flickered into Celebrimbor’s mind: a light flaring up and dying, someone twisting and falling to the ground, a gleam of bright hair in the darkness, the crunch of teeth against bone.

Annatar watched him closely. “Cursed your father, you know, before he died.” He paused. “Of course, he said a lot of things before he died.”

Celebrimbor sighed, closed his eyes. “Any curse on my father would have been entirely superfluous.”

There was a scraping sound; Annatar had drawn up a stool to sit down beside him. He seemed pleased to be taking a break, and was contemplating the topic with interest. “Finrod, Finrod... if you had tried to best me with song, as he did, what would you have invoked, I wonder?”

To his annoyance, he found himself actually considering the question. “Friendship, probably. Knowledge unfolding. Skill increasing. The world, Annatar. The world in its complexity and harmony and beauty, that’s what I would have brought into my voice to bend it against you.”

“I thought so. That’s certainly what I would have used on you, if there were still any such question between us. It’s an interesting challenge, because of course you’ve conceded to me every point you could possibly make, but that does cut both ways. What would decide a contest like that is simply power. So you see why I have no more need for songs.” He sank back into thought, twisting the Ring on his finger. Celebrimbor felt as much as saw the gesture now; it shuddered through artery and vein, it rang across every raw nerve.

“What I – don’t understand –” he said, gasping a little, when he could speak again, “is why you think this will help. Do you look back on the Isle of Werewolves and think *yes, that was a glorious victory?* On Morgoth and think *there was a notable success, I should emulate his ways?* I thought we wanted – we both wanted – something more than the past –”

“Melkor? He broke things for the interest. Trying to get at their nature. Trying to see if they could be broken at all. Not much point to it; there’s really very little to learn. Everyone under torture’s the same person in the end and not a very interesting one. I, on the other hand, see this as a means to an end; no more than that.”

He leaned forward and took Celebrimbor’s hand in his, shifting it against the restraints, disturbing the pierced joints at the elbow and shoulder. His touch was tender, almost confiding, and even that small
motion sent pain like forked lightning up the arm and through his body. Annatar watched him carefully, analytically, noting the sudden dilation of the eyes, the arch of the neck, the short blunt sound in his throat as he bit back a cry, the way his fingers clenched around his hand.

“It’s your will that’s hurting you. I will help you to let it go. I wish it didn’t have to be like this. But I am giving you as much help as I can, as much motivation as you need, to do something I know is difficult for you.

“Unlike my old master,” he went on, “I know what I want and I’ll stop when I get it. That’s good for you. But I’m also less distractable, of course. My master lost patience with your uncle once he realized that he had nothing he wanted. I have a great deal more ability to focus. And you must know by this point that you have always had my full attention.”

“Are you trying to compare yourself favorably to Morgoth?” Celebrimbor’s voice was still steady, but hoarser now. “That’s not a very high bar, is it? I thought you hoped for better things.”

He withdrew his hand and stood up, cold and angry. “I am now the first of the Powers in Middle-Earth. The comparison is going to be made. I thought it wise to make sure that you understand the crucial differences. And I think that both of us have learned something from the past. Don’t you, Curufinwë?”

“We never did learn to bend the neck to tyrants and slave-lords, Sauron.”

This was less satisfying than he had hoped. It was as he had said to Celebrimbor: there was nothing particularly new or interesting or even challenging about the process of reshaping the unstable will of one of the Incarnates. Still, the sight of his friend suffering gave him a ferocious, splintering headache, like a discord played on a half-tuned instrument: every time he looked at him he thought simultaneously this isn’t right, this must be fixed and yes, this is good, we are one step nearer to where we want to be. The fact that Celebrimbor was putting him through this made him irritable; it was a stupid, selfish thing to do and the sooner he could be persuaded to stop, the better.

There might have been more subtle ways to go about it: poison, isolation, the weight of time alone. But he was unwilling to expend unnecessary time: the reinforcements from the little king by the shore would not delay forever, and with the recovery of the Three the war might be ended that day. Nothing needed to be a question of time any more, only a question of power. He had fire and steel and the pressure of his mind, and matter answered to command backed by the Ring, bones splintering, tendons snapping, nerves catching fire.

And Celebrimbor was learning, though he was trying hard not to. Hanging by his wrists from a hook that the men had driven into the wall, his head bowed, he was still clinging to consciousness. Exhausted, he refused to let himself sleep, in futile fear of the loss of a control that was inexorably ebbing anyway. There were fewer things now that could draw a response from him; he was clearly husbanding his strength. But his eyes were still bright and angry; they flickered open as he felt his approach, though he did not lift his head.

“Annatar.” His voice was slurred; he was still trying, with diminishing effectiveness, to summon stern authority. “Don’t do this.”

“Your problem, Tyelpe, is that you’re confusing me with you. You still think that because you were so easily turned from your goals for the world, that I too must hold them lightly.”

He stepped in close to him, reaching up to touch his face; the sturdy line of the jaw fit so neatly along
his hand. Despite his activities, his robes were as spotless as ever, luminous in the twilight of the
workshop. It required only the most trivial exercise of power to prevent the blood from taking hold
on the rich white fabric. Celebrimbor was still a bit of a mess, though he had had his men dash cold
water over him from time to time, as much to give him a clear work surface as anything else.

“Do you really think this is about you? I have a vision, Tyelperinquar. I thought that we shared it.
You may betray me, but you will not betray our dream.”

He could feel his fear, could taste it, like sugar crunching between his teeth. But, infuriatingly,
around the fear and stronger than it, a sense of betrayal; Celebrimbor evidently still would rather hold
onto his pride.

“Why – us?” Celebrimbor spoke carefully, through closed teeth, moving as little as possible against
his hand. “What did you want?”

“Exactly what I told you. Middle-Earth remade, peaceful, useful, more beautiful than before, more
beautiful than Aman – of course the Eldar are a part of that. They still are. They must be. You know
that perfectly well, you, my second person, you who would have been the first of them, until you
turned against me.”

His hand tightened on his face, fingers digging into the flesh. “I will show the Valar what I am
capable of, what I can build out of the things that they threw away and discarded. Nothing need be
wasted, my heart’s brother, my other self. But I cannot lose the Eldar. I would not have even risked
it, if it had not been for you.”

This was the first time he had admitted it in so many words, and a hot flare of anger surged through
him at the realization.

“I thought that I had reason to trust you. I knew that I had reason to show you my self entire. I knew
that you desired, as I did, that we might be one in body and soul, as we were one already in mind
and in heart. And so I reached for you, and you turned away from me.”

He found himself suddenly and powerfully unwilling to look at him. He dropped his head, and they
stood there, foreheads nearly touching, faces turned away from each other.

“You would have liked it,” he said quietly, almost to himself. “The world we would have built.”

He drew himself up, radiant and angry. “Why did you do this? Did you not share my vision? Did
you not also long to see Middle-Earth as fair as Valinor? That is my heart’s labor, as I believed it was
yours. Was your great ambition truly so weak as to be shattered by the knowledge of who it is that I
am? Was your -”

He would not say the word love.

“Even the Three are something that can be fixed. They were not in the plan, no. I did not plan for
your betrayal, even if you planned for mine. But I am greater than you are, my power is greater than
yours, and there is nothing you can do that can ruin things for us finally and utterly. Oh, lift up your
head, Tyelperinquar.”

But his friend did not move; he felt him clenching his jaw beneath his fingers, felt the muscles
tensing in the neck. He knotted his other hand in his hair, forcing his head back.

“Well.” The teeth yielded particularly readily to the command of the Ring, perhaps because they
were primarily mineral structures. “I know the weakness of incarnate creatures intimately, even if I
did hope that you could rise above your nature.” He did not even need to move his hand in order to
break the bonds that held the teeth together, uncrystallizing them down to the raw mess of nerves and pulp at the center. “And since you have shown yourself willing to cast aside your dreams, your desires, your ambitions, your chance to create works mightier than you have ever dreamed of – don’t think you don’t have further to go, Tyelpe, don’t think there’s anyone else who could bring you there – to throw that all away over petty personal resentment...”

He realized that the prisoner could no longer hear him over the sounds he was making, and without a pause continued speaking directly, mind to mind.

“No, I knew of your father’s character, that should not have been a surprise. I am sure you see now the necessity of the One.”

He looked at it affectionately where it shone on his hand, golden against the blanched skin of the prisoner’s face. The prisoner was twisting now, trying to get away from him, from it. But they both knew the effort was pointless; he did not even reprove him for it.

“And with it, I want to take you as far as you can go. I know you, Tyelperinquar, I have seen you rising. How you surpassed even my hopes for you, the first day I saw you on the doorstep of the Gwaith-i-Mírdain... You have become so much, and you might become so much more. I want to see you achieve everything you could! I want to see you surprise me again.”

The noise wouldn’t stop. It was most likely a door hinge: a grating, tearing sound, like metal scraping over metal, regular and persistent.

Morgoth’s mercy, Narvi, sand that down or oil it or something, that noise is unholy.

He tried to speak, to call out in irritation, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. His eyes wouldn’t open, either – had he fallen asleep? Eventually he discovered who was making that noise and why. Trying to stop made it worse; he let the sounds keep pulling themselves out of his raw throat while he gathered himself enough to open his eyes and face what he must.

He was flat on his back on the workshop table, with neither the power nor the inclination to move. As far as he could tell, he was alone. All the city now ached with Sauron’s presence, but the workshop seemed to be empty. The sun poured through the windows, white and clear and mid-morning bright. Looking up at the high ceiling, he could still find the faint scorch mark on the stone, still visible after centuries: the scar of his first attempt at a Ring of Power. He looked at it for a long time, breathing as shallowly as he could. The pain still zigzagged across his chest, knifed up the inside of his lungs. But even that had a sort of rhythm to it which he could relax into. It was abhorrent, what one could become used to.

All at once a great shout rose from outside the window, and a clatter of metal against metal.

“The cruel city has fallen!” someone cried. The voice was that of a Man, but the words were Sauron’s own construction. They did not have the same ear-melting quality coming from a non-divine speaker, but they were no lovelier. Another shout greeted the words, and another clatter of metal. Beating their swords against their shields, probably.

Bending his attention toward the courtyard, he found that he could gather a sense of the presence outside: most of the army, happy and relieved but still somewhat on edge. The desire to impress. The sense of vindication. The longing to be done. But amongst the loud and simple desires of the soldiers, there was another presence: thin threads of terror and despair.
A high cry, suddenly cut off, and another communal shout. *Sacrificing their prisoners*, he realized. Again that single voice:

“For the Lord of War, the Lord of Gifts!”

A light in the corner of his eye, a pressure in his head, a lurching sense like the room itself was tilting. Annatar had swept back into the workshop, the gold circlet on his head far duller than the Ring on his hand. Celebrimbor addressed him without attempting to stir from the table’s surface.

“That’s you they’re talking about, isn’t it.” His mouth was dry, and gritty with the fragments of shattered teeth.

Annatar shrugged. “Men will worship literally anything you put in front of them. Give them a rock, and next week they’ll be crying: All hail the rock! O rock, spare us from death!”

He looked toward the window, where another shout was rising. “It would have been more trouble to break them of the custom than to let them keep it. Besides, it’s good that they understand the meaning of sacrifice: nothing is achieved without cost. And are they wrong? I have given them victory.” He paced to the window and looked down into the courtyard; Celebrimbor could not see his expression. “I have given *them* victory,” he repeated, with the emphasis only slightly altered.

“Annatar.”

“Hm?”

“Come here. I want to look at you.” If he kept very still, kept his voice low, he could speak without his voice trembling at all. Annatar, evidently amused to hear himself being ordered about by an immobilized prisoner, cocked his head on one side then paced over to him, his indulgent smile fading as he looked at him. But Celebrimbor, summoning all of his strength of focus, gazed at him carefully, searchingly, setting the person before him against the person in his memory. At last he spoke.

“What have you done to yourself?”

Annatar looked at him blankly.

“I couldn’t believe it at first – I thought it was the fear, or the battle-lust, or the – or some other thing, clouding my vision, but it’s too clear to mistake now. You’ve mutilated yourself, Annatar. You’ve – Morgoth’s mercy, why? What could possibly be worth that?”

“Tyelperinquar, if you have however belatedly discovered an inclination to talk-” But he did not turn away, and he did not move to touch him.

“I’d been puzzling over it ever since I first glimpsed that Ring, you know. How on earth had you managed to do that? Nothing in Arda should have been able to overcome the Three. But it’s not anything in Arda, is it, that Ring is *you*, you yourself, it’s drawing on your own soul, it’s literally made from the splintered self of one of the Holy Ones who sang the world into being before the dawn of time -”

Annatar looked at the Ring on his hand. “It is beautiful, isn’t it?” he said almost to himself, and Celebrimbor could not tell if that were meant to be a question, or an answer.

“It is sickening,” he returned. “What were you thinking? The person that I knew was –” his voice caught – “shining. Oh, my beloved, whatever else you were, you were beautiful and you called forth beauty. And now look at you. Can you create at all any more, or have you traded it all for power?”
“I am become the first of the Powers in Middle-Earth.” His voice was cold, but he still had not moved to hurt him or to make him stop speaking. “The Ring is precious to me, yes, and in my hand there is no greater tool. The Great Tower rises in the East. My command blots out mountains and summons armies.”

“I’m sure it does.” He sighed, remembered too late what a bad idea that was as pain branched and crackled through his lungs. “Annatar, you can go back to trying to crack my mind open in a minute but just do this for me now, show me this Great Tower that you built –”

He showed him.

“And you still talk of a more beautiful world,” he said quietly, when it was done and the image faded from his thought. Annatar did not look at him, but stared, mask-faced and silent, into the distance.

“Was it a lie from the beginning?” he asked at last, quietly, his voice distorted by his injured mouth. “All you said to us – the world renewed, as fair as Aman – was that just because you knew our weakness, knew the great desire of our hearts? Did you come to us as your old master came to our fathers, to gloat over our destruction, to see us destroy ourselves?”

This roused him. “If that had been the plan from the beginning, I wouldn't have needed to come to the Elves! Don’t flatter yourself, heir of Fëanor, as I’m sure you have noticed by now, the Eldar hardly need my assistance to destroy yourselves.”

“Oh, now you lesson me on self-destruction? Look what you have done to yourself!”

“What I have done-“ and he was really incensed now, leaning over him with his hands planted on either side of his shoulders, his anger pulsing at the corners of his mind like a vicious headache – “I did for you. I did it for the dream that we once dreamed together. For once in your life, Tyelperinquar, put aside your pride and think. If I wanted to ensure your destruction, would I have given you useful things, beautiful things, would I have made you great?”

“And if you did not want to destroy us,” Celebrimbor snapped, staring back up at him, ignoring the pain licking like flames across his ribcage, up the inside of his throat, “would you have ruined everything we built together?”

“If I wanted to destroy you, you would not be here now!” He was almost shouting. “If I wanted to destroy your work, I would not need you to surrender it! The Three, my Three, my art passed through your hand, if you will not give them to me then I cannot use them, and you will leave me with no choice but to destroy –”

Sauron wrenched himself away and began to pace up and down the workshop. His edges blurred to Celebrimbor’s sight, his agitation a fractured corona around him. “I am unclear,” he said after a few minutes, in a deliberate, controlled, mild tone, “exactly how you want me to demonstrate my good faith. I gave you wisdom and skill and strength. I gave you my secrets. I gave you myself. What more was there that I could have offered you than all that I am?”

He rounded on him. “Without you, without your skill and your vision there is no longer an option for a Middle-Earth restored, strong, and beautiful. Yes, I may have sacrificed a certain... aspect of myself, a certain faculty of creation, but that need not be a loss, not while I have you and your art, while I have the Three. You know what the Ring is, apparently, so you know as well as I do that the service of the Eldar is even more crucial than it has ever been. And so I am willing to put your betrayal behind us, and work together.”

His voice softened, golden and coaxing. “We can still have everything we wanted. And I will extend
to you the generosity you were unwilling to extend to me.

“I told you I was the Lord of Gifts, and I told you the truth. I gave you everything, and you betrayed me, and I will still give you everything. I will forgive you, forgive you, Tyelperinquar, and it can be like it was before. Just turn to me again, friend of my heart, just do this one small thing for me, and I will know that you are with me in truth; I will know that I was right to trust you.

“Didn't we swear we'd make Arda beautiful together? Didn't what we have mean anything to you?”

Celebrimbor exhaled, more carefully this time, still feeling something catch in his chest at the end of the breath. “Look what you've done to our city, Annatar. Look what you've done to the Brotherhood. Look at me. Are these your gifts? Is this your more beautiful world? Is this what the Valar will behold with envy?”

Annatar tossed his head, light catching in the silver-gold strands of his hair. “A city? A body? Those can be mended. You broke my heart, Tyelperinquar. I was your friend. I believed that you were mine.”

He came to rest at last, standing again over Celebrimbor and looking down at him. The diffracted light that seemed to follow him stabilized into an aureole, limning his person, shining from his face. Even with all that lay between them, even knowing all that he knew, Celebrimbor saw a being that even the wise might rejoice to serve. And yet compared to Annatar as he had once seen him in his doorway, this glory was flat, colorless, a careful reproduction of something whose meaning had begun to fade.

“But I am the most generous of a generous kindred,” he was saying, and there was the echo of ancient music in his voice. “A giver of great gifts, mercy and forgiveness not the least.” He touched the bonds that held his near arm down; Celebrimbor felt them evaporate, he could move his hand again.

His own voice was an unlovely, broken thing now; beside that power and harmony it was almost an insult, a scratch across the surface of the world. “This is when you decide whether you were only ever lying to us. I want to believe that you weren’t.”

He reached out his freed hand to him. “Oh my friend, my second person, my light in the darkness, you don't have to do this. I don't know if you can go back. Not now. But I know you can stop. It doesn’t have to be this way. Let that Ring go! I will find a way to heal you, I promise – preservation, restoration, you know those are the powers of the Three -”

But Annatar was laughing, quiet and rich and hopeless. “Oh, Tyelperinquar. Don’t you know that the same offer stands open for you? Stop. Just stop. Let go. I will forgive you, I want to forgive you, just do this one small thing and I can forgive everything-“

“You can't stop while you have that Ring though. Who knows that better than I do? You said that we betrayed you, and yes, the person I knew has been betrayed. Look what you've handed yourself over to. Look what it's done to you.”

The richness was fading, he was dimming his glory, he was somewhere between the impatient colleague and the implacable tormentor. “Give this a minute's thought,” he said. “I would like to put it to you that if anything is being done to anyone here, that I am not the one to whom it is being done. I am happy to clarify what I mean by this. If you feel like you need clarification.”

He clamped his hand around his wrist, pinning it to the table, leaning over him.
“There is exactly one of us, Tyelperinquar, who is the position to be making offers at this time. And I
think we need to be clear about this. We need to establish clarity on several points, really. Who has
wronged whom, of course, you seem to be confused about that. But especially about who has the
power to make offers of forgiveness and demands of repentance. And I am making that offer, all you
have to do is -”

Celebimbor met his empty golden eyes. “Can you really believe that you still have anything I want?
Lie to yourself if you have to, Sauron, but not to me.”

This was the wrong thing to say, and he knew it as soon as he saw his smile. And now Sauron did
touch him; keeping his wrist pinned he reached out with his other hand and traced, with one finger,
down the side of his face, brushing aside a strand of hair, running over the angle of the cheekbone,
noting the hollows beneath the cheek where the teeth had been broken. But when he spoke it was
serene and gentle again, a quiet observation.

“I don’t lie nearly as much as you seem to think I do. As I recall, our only serious disagreement –
besides this one, of course – was because I told you the truth. You flinched, Tyelperinquar. If you
ever wanted anything for the world, it was not strong enough to overcome your fear.”

He knew that he should stop talking, but it was already too late. It had been too late for years, too late
since that night on the rooftop, too late, perhaps, since light had broken over his work and he had
raised his head to see a god standing in his doorway.

“I had just learned that the core of my power, to say nothing of my own inmost heart, had been laid
bare to Sauron himself. Look around you now. Look at me. Can you tell me that I wasn’t justified?
You’re still trying to carry on like you’re the Lord of Gifts. But you can’t give that Ring away, can
you? Try it.”

Annatar’s smile faded.

“First of the Powers in Middle-Earth, surely it is a small matter for someone so powerful to make
many such – what did you call it? A tool? You want my service? Give up that Ring. Let it be your
pledge to me, a sign of your own good faith -”

With no warning whatever, still pinning his wrist, Sauron backhanded him across the face, whipping
his head to the side and driving it backwards into the table.

It was an open-handed slap, but it felt as if he had been hit with an iron bar; his cheekbone was
almost certainly fractured. Sauron had struck him with his full force. No, that’s not right, he thought,
dizzy, if he had struck me with his full force he would have snapped my neck.

Some kind of response seemed called for, but his mouth was too dry to spit. “There you have it,” he
rasped, when he could draw enough breath to speak again. “Whether or not you were lying to us
about being Annatar at first, you’re lying now.”

It was cold in the north-country, even noontide was cold as the nights in the desert of Sîn. The winter
temperatures did not seem to bother the orcs, but the soldiers of Harad looked mournfully up at the
brilliant sun, whose light did so little to warm them, and kept the campfires piled high throughout the
city.

The Lord of Gifts had structured his armies so as to explicitly erode their tribal and regional loyalties,
and in the presence of superior officers, the troops made a dogged effort to speak the Godspeech or
at the very least the trade-tongue. But somehow or other, the groups that formed around the fires seemed to keep finding that they shared one of their old tongues from the East or the South. They were much better for conversation; the Godspeech may have been the supreme and perfected mode of language (or so their commanders assured them; word direct from the Tower itself) but there was something comforting about being able to say just what one meant.

The group gathered around the fire in the summer garden, near the ruins of the greenhouse, were mostly from what had once been Los in Far Harad. There was no shortage of fuel from the wreckage of the city. The valuable books from the library, of course, had been divided up with the rest of the plunder, but the workrooms had been filled with paper and parchment, which had been confiscated for kindling.

“The boys from the East won’t touch these, you know,” one of the soldiers said, and laughed, tossing a pile of notes into the fire and watching them flare and flutter. “Mumbling about curses and such. I think they’re scared of the Elves.”

“I’m scared of the Elves,” grumbled his companion, who was wrapped in two looted blankets and huddling on a bench.

“Still?” The third was the oldest in their unit. “I didn’t like the thought of them one bit when we started this campaign. I don’t mind saying it, I thought the Boss might be leading us into a whole nest of things like himself. They said they’re immortal, you know. Sorcerers and woods-demons and who knows what else. But immortal or not, they bleed and die like any of us.”

“Well, not quite like any of us.” A mutter ran through the group, a pause, a nervous glance toward the Great Workshop.

“Who is he?” asked one of the younger men after a minute. There was no need to specify who he meant.

“Their king, I thought. The chief of the Elvish sorcerers, at any rate.”

“Seems he stole something from the Generous Lord a long time ago.”

“Did you see him at the gates?” The old soldier spoke up again. “Managed to get a cut in on the Boss. That right chilled me, I don’t mind saying it.”

“Here now, you watch how you think.” The new speaker was not the oldest in the group, but he was the highest-ranked. “He hears everything; he hears it whether you say it or not.”

The older man brushed this off. “He’s got other things to worry about at the moment. Hey, any of you been up on guard duty for the prisoner?”

The murmur now were distinctly uncomfortable, almost all of them had and none of them felt inclined to reminisce about the experience. “Course you have,” he said, peering at them. “And course you won’t talk about it.” He turned to the officer. “You don’t let the men have their fun, they get sulky. You know how it is: if you can’t laugh at someone under the question, then you get to feeling sorry for them, and that’s bad for morale.

“When they had us pinning him up, after we’d given him the twelfth-man’s-dancing-lessons, the Boss came by and was on us about how we had better do it right and how one drop of his blood was worth all of our lives, one of the boys – a new one – said to the Boss ‘So you want us to flog him respectfully then?’ Well, I was waiting for his tongue to catch fire or his eyes to melt – you know how the Boss is – but he just said ‘Yes! Exactly!’ in that impatient way he has when he thinks
“Someone’s being stupid.”

The ranking soldier sighed. “Whoever he is, I wish he would just give Him what he wants and be done with it. At least then we wouldn’t have to listen to it any more. Gives me nightmares, and I’ve done Tower duty.”

“Have you heard ‘em when they talk to each other, though?” A new soldier spoke up. “Both of ‘em! It’s all ‘how could you’ and ‘why would you’, for all the world like a lover’s quarrel.”

Nervous laughter. It was uncomfortably plausible.

“Brr! Save me from such lovers and such quarrels!”

Progress, but it still wasn’t enough, and he was no better pleased than he had been. Even now, when he looked at the prisoner, he still felt the sudden swell of anger at seeing those strong limbs bruised and broken, that beloved face twisted with pain. Even now he still had to repress the impulse to rush to his side, hissing out “Who did this to you?”

After what had been done to his legs, he no longer bothered to restrain him. In between encounters now he left him in a heap in the corner. He had seen, pitifully conspicuous in Celebrimbor’s thought, the realization that he was free, followed by the crushing knowledge that it made no difference at all. The internal calculations were now slow and awkward in the mind that had been so swift and graceful, eventually arriving at the conclusion that while he could probably drag himself to the door by his fingertips, he could certainly get no farther.

Concession after concession. His strength was failing and he knew it. He hardly made an effort any more to keep himself from sleep, he no longer even tried to swallow his cries. And still he refused to surrender, still he forced him to keep going.

The prisoner lay limp and crumpled on the floor now, eyes half-shut, motionless save for the uneven rise and fall of his chest. He bent over him. “Tyelperinquar?”

He flinched at the sound of his voice, curling into himself and raising his arms as if to shield his head from a blow. It was an automatic gesture, practically animal, he had seen it thousands of times in thousands of faceless prisoners.

No, this was not quite the same gesture after all; he was hiding his hands beneath the curve of the skull, he was not protecting his head instinctively, he was protecting his hands.

And this somehow made him more angry than anything that had gone before: that he should value his ability to create above even his life. This jewel-smith really did intend to jettison everything he was, in order to protect what he claimed as his creations.... He hissed for the guards and they kept going as they had been, pulling him to his feet, to the wall, to the chair, to the surface of the table, to hurt him again and again and again.

He spoke less now, at least less sense. He had little fear of the nonsense that he gabbled in the grip of the pain, there was no dignity in it but there was also nothing of value. And at the very least he still managed to muster each time he approached him: “Don’t do this, Annatar.” He would have to stop soon, he reflected, it was starting to sound less like grave counsel and more like terrified pleading.

But this time Sauron did seem to listen. “Do you think I want to be doing this?” He sounds like he
has hardly more control left than I do, Celeborn thought, and wondered distantly what that meant. “Do you think this was my idea? This is wasteful, this is stupid, and this stops the minute you want it to.”

“Wasteful?” he rasped. “Stupid? Coming from someone who apparently thinks burning out his own soul for the sake of that Ring was a perfectly reasonable course of action? Oh, my –” The word friend stuck in his throat. “Use your good sense, Annatar; you had some once and I’m assuming you still do. I don’t like what you’ve done to yourself any better than what you’re doing to me.”

“There is nothing I have sacrificed that, with you at my side, cannot be ours again.” He felt Sauron gathering himself into another display of power and glory. It seemed that every vein in his body answered to the Ring now; he knew bone-deep when power went out through it. But as soon as it had begun, it was gone, dim and dull and lightless Annatar stood before him.

“Tyelperinquar,” he said in a low voice, “How can you do this to me? Without you, I am left with nothing but darkness.”

“Can you really still not understand?” He did not have the energy to sort pity from anger from grief, no energy left for anything but the simplest of truths. “Let the Ring go, Annatar, let it go, or it will leave nothing of either of us. We fought for this world, though it may be doomed to darkness. I fought for my city, though I knew it was doomed to fall. And I would rather see you dead than bound to this.”

“The city has been cleansed, Lord.” The Man at the foot of the stairs outside the workshop was one of the captains of the Fifth Division, 05-7793 by number, Tesh by name. He had been in charge of securing the half-demolished city house by house and street by street. In fact, the city had been cleansed days ago – no, weeks – but the captain obviously wanted to lead off with good news. He nodded for him to continue.

“Our scouts bring words of Elvish forces mustering beyond the Gwathlo.” The captain paused, waiting for a response. When there was none, he tried again. “Eregion is ripe for the sacking.”

He let himself smile at this. The captain’s thoughts were even clearer to him than his words, mortal minds were such simple things.

“Do you grow impatient, Captain?” he said. “We will move on when I give the word to move on. There is a battle still being fought in this city; it is one that I fight alone.”

The captain bowed his head. “Very good, sir.”

A spike of recognition and – was that revulsion? Battle being fought? Looks to me like you’re just torturing that one poor dog to death. I know it, you know it, the men know it. And yet you won’t let them have the fun of it, or the fear. What’s the game here? He could see the captain making a crude effort to suppress the disloyalty in his thoughts, but only succeeded as far as keeping them mostly off his face. It was almost amusing.

“Show some respect,” he said coldly, answering the thought and not the words. “That is your future lord you’re speaking of.”

There was the fear, then, as pleasant and cloying as honeyed milk. He sees my thought, he sees everything. Then speech again. “The prisoner, sir?” Lord? Is he making a joke? And future? That one has maybe a week’s worth of future left in him; less if he keeps on like he does. “Very good, sir.”
To hear the words of submission with doubt and scorn swirling in the thought behind them was more insulting than amusing now. The captain bowed and turned to go, but he put forth a small amount of power, freezing the soldier’s steps, raising his head. The fear swelled into terror, but he held the panicking eyes and spoke, gentle, firm, mildly saddened.

“There are many things I ask of my servants, Tesh, and one of them is complete honesty.”

It was almost disappointing how easy it was to dislodge the spirit of one of the Secondborn, to send their soul houseless and howling into the darkness of wherever it was they went. He called out a few sharp-edged syllables to summon a few of the guards to clear the body away and inform the captain’s second of his promotion – it was a routine that had become practiced, and he left them to it, while he returned to the workshop, fuming as he went up the stairs at the astonishing presumption of the Man.

*I will not have mortals gloating over my friend, the one I have chosen,* he thought, and anger flared again as he thought of the captain’s clumsy attempts to keep his thought separate from his words. For all he demanded honesty of his servants, not one of them said what was truly in their thought. *Without him, I have no one who will speak the truth,* and the thought spurred his steps.

“Tell me the absolute truth, Tyelperinquar,” he said as he swept back into the workshop, but the words were pitched for his own hearing rather than that of the half-conscious prisoner. “Tell me the absolute truth. I will show you what that truth is.”

“Express the ductility of time,” said Lindis, “in terms of yield strength, fatigue strength, and impact strength.”

“What is the tensile strength of the will?” asked Veanne, “and what effect does an alloy of despair have upon it?”

You’re dead, he said to them, and it was an apology and a protest. *You’re dead, what would you know about it?*  

There was no relief in the darkness that dropped upon him from time to time, even when it was not haunted by nightmare, not cracked and shivered by the pressure of Sauron seeking a way in. Impatient with his refusal to yield, Sauron had for the moment left off his attention to his body and taken to attempting to pry his knowledge from him directly, in an unbearable pressure in his mind which left him retching and twisting, thin threads of blood running from the nose and ears. The fiercer the assault on his mind, the more solicitous Sauron became with him, stroking his hair and carefully cleaning the blood from his face.

But even when his mind was his own, some corner of his thought continued making Sauron’s arguments for him. It spoke, sometimes in his own voice, sometimes in the voices of others:

*You are no good to anyone broken, not to the world, not to yourself. Not to him.*

Take his offer. You know he means what he says. What could you not accomplish at his side? Work from within, turn him from the path he’s set himself on.

You know all about letting yourself lose. Lose this. Lose the battle to win the war.

Shame at these thoughts sickened him more than the slow ruin of his body, and yet he could not put them away from him. It hardly seemed fair that he should have to be refusing himself as well as refusing Sauron, but he took refuge in the unwill that his father had praised so long ago. *I don’t actually have to remember anything except for no.*
He tried to call the Three to mind, but they were blurry and indistinct in his thought, a memory of a memory. He remembered vaguely having been proud of them. *I hope to goodness I did something sensible with them.*

The light was searing through him again, Sauron was back, it was time to play the losing game. The voices ebbed, but he heard still, somewhere on the edge of his hearing, or perhaps of his thought, the sound of someone who wept and wept and would not be comforted.

They both worked for a while in silence, the mere drudgery of strength against failing strength. At last Celebrimbor spoke, hardly above a whisper.

“Back there,” he said, “you appeared to be genuinely puzzled about why I’m doing this. I’ll tell you, if you want to know.”

He sighed, closed his eyes, and let his head fall back against the chair, concentrating on speaking clearly through the surging waves of sickness. “You’re not entirely wrong,” he said after a minute. “I’m sure pride had something to do with it. At some point. But pride isn’t worth this, not even to me –“

When he could speak again, he went on. “It’s not even – the Three. You want – a concession about the world – that I’m unwilling to make –”

It was longer this time, and worse; he could feel the thread of his thought thinning almost to the snapping point. “Because – to say you’re right about this, to say you’ve won – that’s a worse loss than –“

“Than everything?” Sauron’s voice was silvery and sharp, or perhaps that was the edge of the blade. “And it will be everything if you don’t stop this, Tyelpe, don’t think it won’t be.”

He forced his eyes back open, forced them to focus on his face. “What is there left to keep, Sauron, in what I loved? For I did love you... Maybe I can’t undo what you’ve done. But I don’t have to embrace it. Embracing it – saying that you’re right – means accepting that it can’t be undone.” The sound in his throat might have been the beginning of a laugh or of a sob; either way it caught on a choking cough. “And I refuse to say that’s true. That’s not... not a world I want to live in.

“So there’s your answer. I’m not doing this for myself. Believe me or not, and I doubt you will, I’m doing this for you. Because the worst thing, the very worst possible thing, would be for you to be right.”

He let his eyes close again, felt the relief of it. “That would be the worst thing...”

“Are you under the impression I find this easy or pleasant?” He was not expecting an answer to the question, and the prisoner did not provide one. “Do you think I like seeing you like this? But my will is stronger than yours; I at least can sacrifice something I treasure, for the sake of what we wanted.”

It was increasingly difficult to remember what he meant by that. *What we wanted, what we wanted* – they looped and circled through thought and speech, words without meaning. It was hard to see beyond the struggle in that room, beyond his friend’s body writhing and bleeding before him. The mind that had been like a lens or a prism, focusing light or scattering it into its complexities, was dulled and opaque. It hurt; it was not what he wanted. He wanted his friend back, answering to his mind and his touch with beauty and strength, ardent and alive and *his*.

*What would it take to make this stop? Are the Three really worth this? His works, my works, what*
“You can’t stop while you have that Ring,” Celebrimbor had said to him, when he could still speak. “You can’t give that Ring away, can you? Try it.” It was an insult, of course, only an insult, a weakening mind casting about for whatever defiance it could muster. But was he wrong? The thought that there was something that he could not do caught at him, a misalignment in what should be the power and harmony of his vision.

Would it be so bad – to give him what he wants?

He was not accustomed to a lack of clarity, but the pain-racked darkness of Celebrimbor’s mind seemed be catching, and for the first time he began to wonder if something had been irrevocably lost.

No. No, there was no irrevocable loss; he had made sure of that. They had worked on that very question together, that had been one of the forces driving the creation of the Rings themselves.

Surrender now, on the point of victory? Surrender to him? To that?

He looked at the Ring on his hand, and there was the clarity that he sought, the beauty that was his own, endless depths of fire within fire.

It is his works or mine.

The doubts seemed absurd now, fragile as paper. He watched them burning away in his mind. How could he sever himself from something so precious to him, his greatest creation, his very self? The very thought was unthinkable; he watched himself unthinking it.

“You cringed away from your greatness, Tyelperinquar,” he said to the prisoner, “but I will not.”

He smiled to himself, charged with the Ring’s own power, and as relieved as if he had passed some sort of test.

He woke to find that he was covered at last. Sauron had wrapped him in a blanket and was seated on the floor, cradling him in his arms. Numbness spread from the touch of his hands, the pain in his body blurring and fading until all that was left was a bone-deep, heart-deep exhaustion.

“You’re so close now, Tyelpe. Let me help you. Please let me help you.”

His head resting against his shoulder, he could not summon the strength to pull himself away. He could not even summon the will to resist; all he felt was relief and an overwhelming, abject gratitude.

“Oh, my dearest, you’re so tired,” Sauron murmured against his hair. “Just let go, Tyelpe, and then rest. Sleep. I’ve got you, it’s all right.”

“Stop it.” His voice was unsteady; he was moments from tears. “Please.”

One arm was wrapped around Sauron’s shoulder, he was clinging to him, why could he not force himself to let go? But Sauron made a pleased sound deep in his chest and tightened his arms around him, as if he would be perfectly content to hold him like this indefinitely.

“I told you you would beg,” he said quietly.

His body was shaking against him, tremors running through the strained and torn muscles. Sauron spoke on, calm and soothing.
“You asked me if I thought you would forget what I’d done. No. I think in the end, it won’t matter what I’ve done. I think it doesn’t matter now. You were the one who taught me that, that it’s suffering that makes us treasure what is good, that what’s past can be erased by what’s to come. Don’t you realize that it’s not the pain that’s the point, it’s this? I want to be generous to you, heart of my heart, I want to raise you up beside me.”

Slowly, as moving through water or through something heavier, he reached up, closed his arms around him. He felt Sauron glowing with satisfaction at the embrace, but his hands met behind his neck and he dug his fingers into the open wounds at his wrist as hard as he could; agony spiked through the numbness and he cried aloud.

Sauron recoiled against him – he might have cried out himself, it was hard to be sure. He shook himself free, pushed him away, stood up, and looked down at him as the pain seethed back in like floodwaters.

“You really are doing this to yourself.”

He did not even bother with words this time, a sharp gesture was all that the guards needed to pick him up and secure him to the table again. Sauron watched them, expressionless, and when they were done paced over to him, unhurried.

“Out of curiosity, Tyelperinquar,” he said in a conversational tone, “do you really think there are lines that I will not cross? That there are things that matter more to me than this? I’m not at all clear where you would get that idea from.”

He moved about the workshop gathering his tools. Celebrimbor wished he could not read those sounds so well. He closed his eyes as the other laid them out neatly on the table near his head: shining things, burning things. Sauron was not moving with the haste of anger, but carefully, thoughtfully, with an intensity of concentration that seemed the most natural thing in the world, in that place where they had labored together.

He released the bindings on one hand, took it in his own, and then was silent. He held it for a long time, touching it gently and looking at it closely, tracing the long graceful bones beneath the skin, the intricate lines of tendons and ligaments, the broad strong muscles at the root of the thumb, the calluses on the palm, the pads of the sensitive fingertips. He rested his own hand against it; they were very nearly matched.

“Beautiful,” he said at last. “Your people like to speak of the eyes as showing the soul, but I think it’s in your hands that I see yours.” He brought his hand to his lips in a horrible parody of devotion, the more horrible because there was nothing in his eyes but something that might have been reverence.

“Yield me the Rings, Tyelperinquar.”

Celebrimbor tried to hold himself steady, but his lips were still resting against the back of his hand, thin skin over bone, and he knew he could feel the faint tremor.

“Do what you came to do, Sauron,” he choked.

He set his hand down very tenderly, picked something up off the table, laughed to himself. “Oh, Tyelperinquar. I am going to miss you, you know.”

He bent to his work.
There was no more defiance after that, no more rejection, no more refusal. The mutilation of his hands left the prisoner dull-eyed and unresisting, and he did not know if he was profoundly satisfied at this or so deeply enraged that the anger could not even be felt. Still, it was over at this point. The problem was solved, it was just a question of sifting carefully through that broken mind to assemble the information that he needed.

His troops took every excuse possible to be out of his sight and away from the details assigned to work on the prisoner. Their Lord had become erratic, and in his rage he was terrible, and the brilliant white robes were stained with blood that he no longer bothered to wash away.

The terrible clarity of the early days was gone, inverted, replaced by a broken confusion. He could not tell where he was or when, could not distinguish waking from dream, body from mind, for Sauron pursued him across spirit and flesh. At one point he saw, or thought he saw, Annatar with the Seven in his hand. “You’re going to have to do better than this, Tyelpe.”

He could not remember having yielded them, but there was now very little that he could remember; his world had contracted to something slightly less than the present. Figures rose before him, some pleading, some reproaching, and he did not know whether the visions proceeded from his tormentor, or from his own crumbling mind.

Galadriel knelt beside him, holding out water in her cupped hands, but he could not drink. “Telperinquar, what have you done? This isn’t worth it.”

He tried to speak, to warn her away, while the water ran out from between her fingers and soaked into the earth.

“Cousin?”

It was the High King’s dark-eyed steward, but he was hardly more than a boy. Were there two of him? No, only one now, standing on the seashore with the wind whipping his hair. “A kinslayer after all,” he said, and his voice was young and clear and disappointed. Celebrimbor looked down and saw his hands fouled with blood. It’s not their blood, he tried to say, it’s mine, but the wind blew away his words and the seashore was gone.

Image followed image with bewildering rapidity, words in a language that now he would never learn. The slopes of a dark mountain, an old man in white robes, a figure dressed in gray standing on the verge of a forest. He raised his head; the face was Annatar’s but the eyes were his own. A great wave, rising to overwhelm him, driving spirit from body, and then there was nothing at all except for a stern summons somewhere in the darkness.

He might have wept for the relief of it, but the Dead are tearless. He reached out for them: his lost family, his father, his uncles, the grandfather for whom he had been named. Nothing, only the blank blackness and the vast and terrible presence that summoned him.

“Are they here?” he asked.

“To the everlasting darkness doom us if our deed faileth,” said the cold voice. “No. They are not here. They are no more.”

He did weep then, and in that abyss of bottomless grief, there was a spark of something like relief. At least they never had to see what became of me.
The sounds the prisoner was making were not loud, not anymore, but they rang unpleasantly in his ears, they itched inside his head, he wanted them to stop.

“I can give you back your hands, Tyelperinquar Silver-grasp,” he said quietly. He had pulled up a chair next to the prisoner’s, waiting, still holding out to him the chance of surrender before the final defeat. “I can give you back the Three, even, once you have yielded them to me. I am still the Lord of Gifts. Everything you have lost will be restored to you, yes, in double measure. Everything you wanted. Everything we wanted.”

No answer; those sounds were not an answer. He ran his finger over the Ring he wore, and there was an answer: power and beauty and smooth perfection. Everything you wanted.

“Surely,” he said, and he did not know to whom he addressed the question, “there was some moment when we could have said no?”

There was a change in the noises from the prisoner at his side; he looked over sharply and saw him struggling to speak.

“I...” he whispered, “...you...”

He got up swiftly and filled a bowl, held the water to his lips and supported him while he drank. The prisoner drank desperately, clumsily, spilling the water everywhere, but he did not fall back into his stupor when he finished, instead remaining still, his sobbing breath the loudest thing in the room. He leaned closer.

Then Celebrimbor opened his eyes, and they were dark with pain and old with bitter knowledge, but they were clear; he knew himself and he knew him as well. For I shall neither see you nor speak to you again in this world rang through his thought, more clearly than if he had spoken aloud.

But he was still determined to speak, though his voice was hoarse and strange and the words came with difficulty.

“I – forgive you,” he said. His eyes fluttered shut again, but he kept speaking. “I do not excuse what you have done. I do not excuse – what you are still to do. To me. To yourself. To the world we might have shared. But I forgive you. I forgave you – a long time ago.”

Celebrimbor drew another shuddering breath; he felt something gathering from Sauron and knew that if there were anything left to say, he must say it now, now, while he still could. “And if I could see you walking toward me, holding out your empty hands to mine, I would still embrace you.”

And then Sauron’s anger exploded, incandescent and sickening against his sight and inside his mind. He felt something tear inside his eyes, he heard a voice speaking out of the inferno as he had heard it speaking long ago.

“I do not want your forgiveness,” Sauron hissed, “I want your surrender.” His words were fire within fire. “How dare you, how dare you speak to me as if you were the one who had something to offer me?”

Things became very bad after that.

Celeborn stepped outside the circle of the camp at the feet of the winter-bare hills of the Tyrn Paryn. Here by the hills, with the full force of Elrond’s troops from Lindon, the army could afford low fires at night, for the warmth and cheer they provided. But that meant that Celeborn needed to walk a fair
distance from the camp into order to see the stars with the clarity that he liked, listening for word from his wife across the mountains.

She was with him again, her voice in the winter wind, the distant stars shining like her eyes. They exchanged the wordless comfort of their presence quickly, then moved to the news of the war.

*Amroth is on the march,* she said, *he is already in the mountains. He may yet reach you before the attack, if the Enemy delays.*

He sent her his own knowledge, gathered from their scouts and from the remnant who had escaped the fall of Ost-in-Edhil. *Sauron has made no move to leave the city. I do not know what he means by it. Is it –* He did not need to find the words to ask after your nephew, she was with him in spirit and she knew all that he meant.

*He has fallen into darkness and I cannot see him clearly.* Her thought was now sharp-edged with emotion. *Only the one who assails him, in the distance, like lightning that beats on a mountain peak. I called for him, I call for him daily, that I might take something of the pain from him, ease something of his torment -*

He had felt such grief in her once before, when she had learned of her brother’s death in the dark. She did not rest against his offered support but went on.

*He will take no relief; he turns away from me. He does not know me, or does not trust his knowledge.* Her thought chilled like the wind. *It was what I did to him. What he asked of me. I am no more to him now than someone who must at all costs be avoided.*

Her sorrow shivered through him; he bore it with her, and after a moment she spoke again, so clearly that it seemed that he had spoken himself.

*He is lost, but Amroth may reach you, Durin’s forces may reach you, before Sauron turns back to battle. He is buying you time, whether he means to or not.*

The prisoner was beyond speaking now, even beyond screaming. He would no longer open his eyes unless forced, for the slightest light blasted them. The bright irises hung in tatters, like ripped curtains over the darkness of the pupil, and behind them was only an uncomprehending emptiness.

But he did not need him to speak, did not need him to understand, did not need to look into those ruined eyes. The last resistance was cracked, and he went picking through the contents of his mind as through the rubble of a building. He even had to supply the images himself: the gates broken and twisted on their hinges, thought and memory scattered. Fragmentary references to the Three were everywhere, marked with joy and fear and deep knowledge, but all of them ended abruptly, all of them in the same echo of a whisper of refusal.

Something dropped onto his hand; the prisoner was weeping. There was no clear sign in his blasted thought of what he mourned for, only grief for a loss so great that it could not be comprehended but only experienced. He watched him, within and without: the expunged records of his heart’s labor, the slow tears that slipped from under his eyelids.

“They are not here at all,” he said slowly.

In all his calculations, that had never so much as crossed his darkest imaginings. The seven-series, yes, they had been given away and yielded again, the nine-series had been largely recovered from where they had been scattered, the lesser Rings would come to him in time. But for that proud
craftsman to disown the greatest works of his hand -

“Do you mean to tell me, Tyelperinquar, that you gave them away? You did not keep even one of them? You made them to oppose me, did you not? And here you are opposing me without one?”

Rage leaped and flared through him like the molten stone at the core of the Sammath Naur. “Do you mean that all this has been done to you for nothing, and that I am still going to have to throw down the kingdoms of the Elves, one by one?”

He had not thought it possible that the prisoner had any insult left to offer him, and yet there it was. He had yielded the Rings already, and not to him, not to the one who -

“Galadriel?” he spat. “Gil-Galad? Who else? That Sea-Elf by the Havens?” There was no hint in the shattered mind as to whom, but there were only so many possibilities. They would all fall, all of them. There was no longer any other choice: the Three that might have served him must be destroyed, and Celebrimbor had known that, had known that every minute he refused him.

“This is what you’ve chosen? This is what is most precious to you? This – nothingness? Stop crying. Stop it!” But the silent tears continued to fall. “You have what you wanted, Tyelperinquar. And so do I – why, we are both happy. Are we not?”

There was no answer, there would never be an answer.

He took a step back, breathing hard. “You have done this to them. You have done this to yourself. You have done this to the world we would have shared. I am going to rip this land to shreds, and I am going to rip your people to shreds, and you are going to be by my side while I do it. And if I could, I would make sure that you looked into the face of every innocent who dies because of your stubbornness.”

He looked hard at the prisoner. “But you can’t even see me now, can you? So be it, they will see me in you.”

He placed his hand carefully in the center of his chest, and the fire within him that Celebrimbor had once sensed from far off blazed forth; the touch was red-hot, then white-hot, and then his mark seared into him, burning black down to the bone.

“There. Go before me, my second person, carry my message, tell them all once again Sauron is here.” He knew what he had in mind; a series of commands sent two guards dashing for the tools for it, but he would not leave the prisoner’s side.

“You think I won’t do it?” he said to the silence. “I’ll do it. Do you honestly believe you still have anything I want?”

No answer, of course there was no answer, only the turmoil of pain, only the echo of a refusal that had lost all meaning. This is victory, he thought, this is triumph, but he was still choked with anger, that all that should be left of that brilliant, open mind was rejection, that all that would be left of those great works was dust and ashes.

When he reached out to him for the last time, the prisoner did not move except to shudder away from his touch; it seemed he could no longer distinguish gentleness from cruelty. Patiently, thoroughly, he washed the long dark hair and combed it out and set about braiding the heavy bronze ornaments into it.

“I want you to be recognized.”
He had the soldiers saw off the ends of one of the long rectangular frames that held the oblong war-banners; he had to instruct them three times and four men were dead before they finished. There was no good reason for this, it was a simple task, he wanted a sturdy pole with two spikes at the end and the unremitting uselessness of the people under his command was beginning to wear on him. One more thing to be amended, eventually.

He was obscurely glad he could not see the face during the awkward, prolonged process of attaching the prisoner to it. There was no cry, no reaction at all save that the limbs twitched feebly as they forced the sharpened ends beneath the shoulder-blades, and raised him to hang there, displayed and degraded, a trophy of war.

They planted the pole in the courtyard with the other banners, black and silver. He watched them from the window, the new commander of the First Tower Company, his own bodyguard, at his side.

“An admirable device, Captain, is it not?” he said to him. “The blazon of my victory.”

“Truly admirable, my Lord,” said the captain, his eyes scrupulously averted. An Easterner, by his voice, with a welcome eagerness to serve. Fueled, of course, by the fear of death, but that was true of all mortals, at all times. He beckoned and the captain hurried after him as he swept down the steps, his robes hissing against the stone.

“I want that standard borne in my own guard; find someone strong enough to carry it, look among the orcs if you have to. Let all the Eldar see it and let their courage fail at the sight, for thus do I deal with those who would withhold what is rightfully mine.”

“So perish, Mighty and Excellent, all who refuse your sovereignty,” said the captain carefully, still keeping his eyes on the ground.

At the foot of the stairs he turned and looked hard at the soldier, who quailed under the terror of his gaze. He smiled.

“Do you tremble, Captain? You are right to fear me. There is terror in greatness. But to those who serve me well I am the most generous of friends. You have no idea what my generosity can bestow.”

Why not, if this one proved satisfactory, preserve him indefinitely in his service, hold off the death that he so dreaded?

But he forgot the mortal in an instant, even as he followed at his heels. There he was, Fëanor’s heir, the Ringmaker of Eregion. Had he really once called that piece of carrion his friend? He paused. There was blood on the lips, and foam; they must have pierced a lung. The chest was still moving. Even now, somehow, he was still alive, like a last spark in the ashes of a dying fire.

He called him, first gently, then sharply, and there was no response, not even the flare of refusal. But when he looked closer, he saw the spirit still clinging to life, a small huddled thing in the wreckage.

This was absurd. “Captain, call your archers.”

As they piled into the courtyard – orcs, good, they were suited to this sort of work – he took what remained of the hand in his own. He would have infused into him enough of the strength of his own spirit to witness the shame of his death, but the unwill that was all that was left of Celebrimbor guarded him still. Refusal, refusal of any help or relief, and not all his power bent on him could raise the head or open the eyes.

The headache that had been singing through his skull was gone at last. There was no more disharmony – indeed, no more songs, only hatred, clear and cold and strong. He breathed deeply for
the relief of it.

“Fire,” he said to the captain.

“Lord –” he began, looking nervously at the way he stood at Celebrimbor’s side.

“Do it.”

There it was. Something like consciousness; a brief pale burst of awareness at the impact of each arrow. He felt a weak tremor in the arm, and what might have been the echo of an answering pressure from the hand that he held, but Celebrimbor could not close his fingers, and his awareness was faint and growing fainter.

He could not have said exactly when the last blood-flecked breath had crossed the parted lips, when the last ember had gone out in the heap of ashes that was his mind, but he remained at his side, silent, until the ruined fingers grew cool in his.

He laid them against his cheek, and looked up into the ravaged face. Empty, empty, empty -

“I gave you so much,” he whispered. “I gave you everything.”

The army was mustered and ready to leave what had been Ost-in-Edhil behind, a pile of stones for the grass to cover. They covered the ground outside the broken gates, division after division, well-ordered and battle-hungry, banners snapping in the cold wind. Their lord shone at the heart of them, brighter than the winter sun, with power in his hand.

There was a stir in the air, and a beating of wings. A carrion-crow was pecking at the banner of the Lord of Gifts, perched on the shoulder, tugging at the hair. The Captain of the Guard launched a stone at it, and it flew away with a croak, a hank of the long dark strands in its beak.

Sauron raised his hand, and utter silence fell at the signal. “We march,” he said, and the words and the will behind them reverberated through the entire army.

The horns resounded, the drums began to beat, thousands and thousands of feet struck the earth and his force began to move forward again.

“Great is the victory of the Lord of Gifts!” they shouted.

But the Lord of Gifts was still gazing at his upraised hand, or perhaps beyond it, as if at something unutterably precious to him. And he smiled.

Chapter End Notes

1. Seriously, look at a map of Mordor.
3. Numenor’s deforestation in the Enedhwaith is attested as being a significant problem at this point in the Second Age.
4. The Gap of Rohan, to be precise. There is nothing in canon to suggest that this
particular geographical arrangement was anything other than natural, but mountain-moving certainly seems within the power of the one who built Barad-Dur with the force of the Ring.

5. From the Osanwe-Kenta, or Enquiry into the Communication of Thought, notes on Pengolodh’s *Lammas*, Vinyar Tengwar 41

6. The technique that Sauron is describing is cupellation, one of the earliest refining processes developed, and one that alert readers may remember Celebrimbor was credited with improving during his stay with the Dwarves of Khazad-dum.

7. A possible construction for the name of the region that would in later ages become the Barrow-Downs.
They were calling someone again. It was not a name he knew.

The world was simpler, after all, there at the end, underneath language. There was the order, a summons, beating at him, pulling at him, commanding him, asking something of him. He did not heed it. There were so many things that had pulled at him, pulled him to pieces.

No.

That small core of unwill that was all that remained to him turned away from that voice speaking out of the void, no matter its power or promise, no matter its authority. He was only a thing which refused. Silence, and stillness, the summons washing over the fragments of his shattered self like water over rocks on the shore.

No.

It was said, in the sunlit world, by those who had never seen the Halls of Mandos, that the Dead do not weep, and for this reason the Lady of Sorrows must weep for them. This was not true, or not the whole of the truth. Curufin was dead and he wept; in the darkness of the Silent Halls, Fëanor’s son Curufinwë wept bitterly for his only child.

The Dead may behold all that passes in the world, and Curufin had left his self-imposed isolation of resentment and shame only to see his son betrayed and broken and driven to death.

Then there was nothing. His well-wrought child was gone altogether; his spirit sunk somewhere beyond his reach. With the clear sight of the dead Curufin saw an earlier time. Be what you will, now you are mine no more he heard his own voice echoing, and no son, no son, no son.

He mourned, and in his mourning the Power of Sorrow was at his side. She wore her nature veiled – even the Dead could not bear the full weight of her presence – but she was solid in that place of shadow and memory. “Your son does not answer the summons of the Judge,” Nienna said to him.

Anger and grief and desperate longing flared through him, flickering like flames. “My son has nothing worthy of shame, Vala, why does he not come?”

“He is past shame,” she said, “and past sorrow, but he does not trust any voice in the darkness now and he will not answer Namo’s call. Refusal is sacred. Namo must respect that choice.” Nienna’s voice was gentle but inexorable as sorrow itself; the unbearable answer to all the wrongs of the injured world. “He will fade to a shadow among the ruins, voiceless and houseless, a wordless echo on the wind.”

The horror and the grief rose up to consume him, and he burned, burned as his father had done before him, burned with the fire of the House of Fëanor, consuming the pride and the anger of the past and leaving only the longing to hold his child again.

But the Lady of Sorrows looked at him with pity in her eyes. “Curufinwë Atarinke,” she said, “call your son. He is beyond us but not, perhaps, beyond you.”

“I rejected him,” he whispered, “and he rejected me; he has done nothing worthy of shame, but he was ashamed to be my son.”
“Perhaps that is true,” she said, “but he is deeply injured in spirit and he needs his father.”

Not knowing if his son could hear him, not knowing if his voice would be more welcome than that of Mandos, or of Sauron, he called to him. He called him by the names that his son no longer recognized, he called him as he would have called in childhood. Come home, come home, come back to me.

And Celebimbor heard him, though the past had been ripped away and the meaning scoured out of words, still in his very core he heard him, for in the time before language, that voice had meant home, and comfort, and a name -

He turned, he reached out for him, he answered the call.

Father?

Death is simple, unbearably simple to those who were meant to move as flesh and blood, to speak in words, to experience the world in metaphor. And so in the Silent Halls, the Dead wore the memories of their bodies to give shape to the spirit.

There was no such shape to the spirit of the one who had been Celebimbor of Eregion. The body was nothing that he could remember whole; such fragmentary images as juddered across him were deeply distressing. But his father was with him, as though he had wrapped his arms around him, carrying him as he had carried him in childhood, with his mother singing the hexadecimal multiplication tables as a lullaby.

He did not move, and he did not speak. There would be nothing like words from him for a very long time. But he rested against his father, drawing strength from him, from one who remembered him as he had been before he was unmade.

When the silent spirit in Curufin’s care finally did move toward awareness, there were at first only a few slow images: three rings on an open palm, a star on a closed door, a glimmer of bright hair in starlight. Then words, heavy and halting.

I loved him.

A shadow of form on the formless spirit: a swirl of dark hair, a flicker of a face, the hands for a moment graceful, strong and whole.

Who... was I?

He sank to silence again, but seemed stronger for having spoken.

There were many things his father might have said to him. But they could wait, there would be the rest of the ages of the world for memory and forgiveness. There was only one thing he needed him to know.

You are my well-wrought child. My perfect son.
Give by lifeisyettfair, A Banner Before by Iferion, [Podfic] These Gifts That You Have Given Me by WolffyLuna

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