

The cold dark of the Timeless Void stretched on endlessly. There was no sight or sound or smell, just the consuming darkness. Beyond time or meaning or creation, only one thing remained. One singular consciousness existed there filled with wrath and ruin... and beyond all else patience. Time beyond counting passed, but what was time in the face of such terrible hate?

The world broke and broke again, shattered and reformed as the ages came and went. Land and sea rent and boiled, the very heavens moved and shifted, and the fortunes of those fleeting creations of the One rose and fell. And yet, beyond the edge of creation, the greatest of the Ainur remained. Melkor, the Elder King, first and mightiest of the Valar, waited.

Wrapped in the chains, Angainor, one of Aule's greatest creations, he floated listlessly through the consuming darkness for eons untold. His own beaten crown remained around his neck as a reminder of his failures. It was enough to drive lesser beings mad.

But Melkor was no stranger to the Void. It was here that he'd traveled before creation, before Arda, before the Great Music. It was here where he first ventured alone and found those thoughts which brought discord to Eru's harmony. And so, he remained patient... ever patient.

For in the Timeless Void, patience was his greatest weapon. His very will had been built into the earth. The roots of the world bore his taint and so, he was aware in some small way of its happenings. That was how he knew. A light that had ever looked down on the comings and goings of the creatures of the world finally looked away.

He knew the moment that the One departed from his creation. He couldn't say why, for all his years in Middle-Earth, he'd never come to understand the full workings of the mind of his own father. All he knew was that he was gone, that he left his great work in the hands of his Ainur.

And for thousands of years, they watched diligently over the earth and seas, remaining in form and function just as they had when Eru remained. They were ever loyal to their father, believing that the day would come where the One would return... but it never came, and their faith wavered.

Life flourished anew, beasts in the forests and the seas. But then came something unexpected. Not the elves, but something entirely different. Little creatures unlike the elves of old, made not by Eru or Aule but from the very world itself. Then came men, the second of the Children of Iluvatar, and they named the first the Children of the Forest.

But the Valar paid them no mind either, they wiled away their endless lives in the eternity of night, ignoring that Middle-Earth. Until finally, just as their father, they departed and Melkor seized his opportunity.

At the edge of the world, far in the north where the great city of Valmar once stood, there remained only ruins to speak of its beauty. The withered husk of the two trees still sat upon a hill. On that hill, from those withered roots, new trees grew. White as ash with leaves red as blood. He pressed against the gates, and yet they would not budge. His chains would not break and yet, his will pervaded the world.

Men found that place and bore the weight of his mind and manipulations. And in time, as he did with all things, he corrupted them into his creatures. Born of the cold of the void and his own wrath, they would be his tool to conquer the world of men. With great magic they raised the dead of their one-time kinsfolk. Of giants, of beasts, even of the Children. The world where they made their home grew into a

frozen waste, a cold so impenetrable there was no escape. And yet, they were spoken of only in nightmares and stories for the Children of the Forest and Men were too preoccupied with their own strife. Then he struck, the Others coming from the cold frozen north in their thousands. Slaughtering men and the Children alike, every new death simply added to the strength of their numbers.

His victory looked guaranteed long before he ever mustered the strength to break back into Arda. His pride, that same pride that saw him contend with his father's will before the beginning of things, proved his downfall. For he didn't foresee the return of his fellows.

He assumed the other Valar had left the world to its fate never to return, but he was wrong. They didn't come in force against him but instead as an invisible hand that guided the trifling remains of Men and Children to fight back the tide of the Others until they held only the lands where they were made.

It was here that he felt the hand of his brethren directly. Magics greater than the conceiving of men bound his servants in that place. There were some few that escaped this imprisonment, but then the gates of the world strengthened once more, what small cracks he made repaired by some great craft, and they were beyond him.

A failure that left him furious, screaming into the emptiness of the Void. The world trembled at his fury, but it was impotent in its reach. When finally, he calmed, patience became his great ally once again. He waited in the darkness and watched, pondering the reasons behind their return.

There was every chance that they returned to do the duty entrusted to them by their father, but then why leave in the first place? And then he understood, it was not duty or love that drove them, but for the first time, it was pride. In their absence, they changed, and where once they were content to watch the goings on of the world without interfering, it was no longer the case.

They became as gods, gods that wished to suffer no rivals. But it was clear that, even amongst themselves, there was discord for they influenced the lives of men in their own way and by their own wills.

Six of them banded together: Manwe, Varda, Vana, Aule, Tulkas, Vaire. And a seventh, Namo who remained impartial and did his duty to the dead. They became the Seven-Who-Were-One revered in the lands the men called Andalos. Though that alone failed to satisfy them, and they found themselves influencing worship of every peoples on Essos. It was only Ulmo who seemed content in his new abode. He sequestered himself to the seas, and became the Drowned God, worshipped by the people of the isles off the coast of Westeros to some, or the Merling King to others.

There were Maiar as well, ill-contented with being little more than servants, that influenced the people of the world. And it seemed a new religion sprouted up in every corner of the world, thanks in some part to the Powers of the World.

And yet, they didn't account for all things. There were the Old Gods of the Forest, worshipped by the First Men and the Children, of whom even Melkor couldn't gather their origins. Hundreds of gods across the world rose and fell in the years that his brethren remained in Arda. For all their pride newfound, they refused to use their might to bend the wills of lesser beings to their cause.

And so, they were weakened by their disunity, their own followers slaughtering those of their brethren, until many of them grew weary of the world, yet again, and they left creation to continue under its own devices. Namo remained behind, ever faithful to the departed souls of the world.

Melkor rejoiced, as year by year, decade by decade, he felt the weakening of the spells that held back his terrible servants. But then he was given pause, for he witnessed the rise of Valyria.

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Pain, unimaginable pain had been the root of his existence for time immemorial. The destruction of the ring had left him powerless, truly impotent. He was little more than a malevolent spirit forever bound to the trappings of the world. Never again to grow in strength or body, for he had poured so great a portion of his might into the ring.

But not all things could be foreseen, even by the mightiest. He watched the rending of the world from the darkness of the shadows as the first age of men came to its end and the world was reshaped], only for men to rise yet again.

It was then that he made a home for himself in the molten heat of the world. For some time, he knew little of the greater world, his power was too diminished for such sight and comprehension. But there was no denying the will of his old master. He felt the hand of Melkor at work in the world, and he rejoiced if only for a short while.

The First Dark Lord had been mighty indeed and might have restored some of his power to him were he to return to the world, but at his height, Sauron had been his equal. No, even that didn't do it justice, he'd been the greater of the two. All of Middle-Earth was to be his unopposed. A god-king with unmatched temporal power over the whole of the world. But that power had been lost to him, though he intended to build it once more. For he would not simply bow down before his former master, nothing more than a weak and pitiful worm.

For years, he plotted in silence for a way to regrow his power, extending his consciousness to the minds of men. In the fires he influenced them against the hand of his once-Master, even after he felt the return of the Powers of the World, and his inevitable failure in the wake of them.

They worshipped him as a god, though they didn't know his true name nor machinations. A god of flame and shadows. He gave them glimpses into the weaving of the world, and even seemed a benevolent god in the face of Melkor. And their worship served to bolster him, to return some modicum of his old power to him.

But it wasn't nearly enough. Without form of his own, he made them there amongst the fires of fourteen flames. Dragons, not so mighty as Ancalagon the Black of old, but great, nonetheless and far greater than the fire wyrms which they came from. It was nearly enough to take all of him, but it was worth it. For in them was opportunity.

Born of the flames of the world and guided by his hand, he needed only wait. Tempered by his own failings, he was patient for centuries as they remained hidden beneath the earth. And then men delved into the fire, people of such great pride and ambition he hadn't seen since the drowning of Numenor. Pale skinned, with eyes of violet and lilac, and hair like spun silver, they were nearly as fair as the elves of old, and they were his instrument. The gods they worshiped were nothing more than him, in all but name.

The great Empire of Valyria rose from the workings of his mind. Their dragons were born of his efforts, as was every sorcery, and metalwork, and architecture. He was the greatest of the Maiar of Aule, the craftsmen of the One Ring, and from his mind they learned great works. But these things came with a price paid in blood and with every blood sacrifice made to advance their great empire, he grew in strength. Little by little, amongst fire and darkness, he grew stronger as the Empire spread across the continent.

Strong enough that it was only a matter of time before he could again take physical form. And he meant to lead the people of Valyria in a final glorious conquest across this new world, establishing a permanent order that would last until the final breaking of the world. But he was thwarted again, by chance and oversight.

For much like the dwarves of Moria, driven by the influence of the rings, the Valyrians dug too deeply into the fires of the fourteen flames and the world responded with a great cataclysm. Flames and ash spewed forth and the earth split open, and the Freehold was annihilated in a day. Many of the works, driven by his will turned into unspeakable abominations that would haunt the peninsula for centuries to come.

And with the Doom, came a great loss of his own power, though not so terrible as losing the ring. The might of Valyria had been his own, but he took heart in the years that followed. For despite the Doom, he had laid the seeds of his next gambit in the days when Melkor had beat against the walls of the world. And so, the worship of the red god, R'hllor as they named him, sustained him as it grew in every Free City across Essos in the wake of the Doom.

And with the final departure of the Valar, for one final time, Sauron knew that conflict was inevitable. Whoever should win whether he as the red god, or the Great Other, as they named his former Master, the world would be forever changed.

But it wasn't their will alone at work. As in the Third Age, there were those who would stand against the inevitable. Only time would tell if it would be their undoing.

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Above and below and to every side was the twinkling starlight of the heavens. The water beneath the boat was clearer than crystal and calm, so very calm that it was hard to say if it rode the water at all or if it was merely sailing through the darkness of the night's sky, eastward, ever eastward.

Then he saw it, looming up out of the darkness, wings black as the night around him. Eyes alive with fire, fire burned bright and hot within his maw, as he unleashed a great torrent of heat. And as it licked against the sides of the ship, there was a screech that enheartened him.

The battle that followed brutal, fought with teeth and claws, and every clash was like that of thunder as lightning lit up the darkness of the sky. Until finally, the great beast was thrown down against the earth and his ruin destroyed towers larger and stronger than any seen in the world.

It shook the earth down to its deepest pits. And it was only then that Jon woke as the door to his small cabin was thrown open, "Good, you're awake." It was Brandon Tallhart, first son of a second son who rued the idea of following in his father's footsteps as castellan.

There was the sound of hammers and mallets meeting wood outside. For the first time since Brandon the Burner, there were shipyards in the North, and it was all thanks to Jon. For years, since almost as

long as he could remember, he'd been dreaming of the sea, and of the world on the edge of the horizon. And for all those years, he knew that it would likely only ever be that... a dream. For a time, he even abandoned it, instead believing that his days would be spent with his Uncle Benjen at the Wall.

But when he was three and ten, he spoke with his father, even though he was afraid to do it. For weeks, he took the time to prepare. He spoke of the fleet that could be, of the threat of the raiders, of the strength of the fleets of the south at Lannisport and the Arbor, and that it was only right that the North be able to match them. And the Lord of Winterfell listened and said nothing.

Then three moons later, he pulled him out of bed in the early morning and they rode hard and fast for three days to the coast. There was timber and men, and shipwrights of some incredible experience waiting there for him. And for two years since, he'd been working tirelessly, first at the direction of those men and then as their foreman as he proved to be a deft hand at all things regarding the sea.

Other young men of the north joined them in time, whether it was because they wanted to make the coin promised them or they sought a different sort of life, it didn't matter. And every day, they saw the fruits of their labor built up plank by plank. All of it was done for the right reasons, every ship built honestly for the sake of the North, but it was not the building of ships alone that interested him.

*Something calls to me in the east, and I mean to find it for myself.*

"Yes, I'm up, if only just." He shifted in his bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Just in time, too. Your father is here."

Jon looked at him owlishly, "Already?" He'd gotten the letter, and he knew to expect him, but it was sooner than he anticipated.

"It seems your sister was rather insistent." From the humor in his voice, he would wager that Brandon had experienced Arya for himself.

"I can imagine." He stood stretching his neck from side to side as he shook off the last of his slumber. He was looking forward to seeing his father, and Arya even more so, even if he was struggling with how to say what he needed to say.

"I'll tell him that you'll be with him shortly?" They were of an age, and Brandon was trueborn while he was natural-born, and yet, he'd never been anything short of deferential since arriving in the shipyards.

"Yes." With that, he was left alone with his thoughts. The conversation to come would be difficult, but he was ready to have it. *Hopefully, he understands.*