

Chapter 2

In the beginning of days, I was better than you.

I have been better than you in the days that followed, but I started that way. I remember it well. There I was, a wee lad of ten thousand, and the world lay at my feet. From Chaos we came, hundreds strong, behind our leader, the illustrious Melkor. For a moment I must speak of the Courts of Chaos, the Age of Ruin, and the dawn of my greatness.

When the universe did not revolve like a planet on the axis of its poles, but rather spun, it spun around me. I stood at the center of the Logrus, absolute being, a thing itself that drew to itself all lesser things. They accreted about it, forming a vast disk of shadow that extended out from the eternal sunfire of existence itself. The Logrus was.

Now, in this lesser world, the Logrus and your Pattern form axis, and shadow has bent from a pure flat disk to an orb universe. Inward and outward the gathering effects of power have reached and filled the world in with a field of shadow, but in the beginning, there was the Logrus and the Courts of Chaos, a torus of existence that spiraled it.

But the Logrus itself is not constant. It is eternally in flux, and so the shadows it casts are themselves in flux. Some are big, some small, and some are simply amazing beyond all understanding, like me. But some are living, speaking creatures, and some are world in which they can live, and like paper cutouts before a lantern, they cast shadows themselves. As the Logrus bent and warped in its own fluctuations, it cast its light out, and the shadows drawn to it took on its forms, and from there came we, the first Denizens of the Courts.

Lords and Ladies were we, powerful beyond all reason. We were the Dawn Gods. I am one of the first beings to ever stride the universe, and it rose to meet my foot. Melkor walked the pathways of creation.

You shadow-walkers may make shadows as you see fit, but in the earliest of days, shadows made themselves for us. We were not forms, bound to flesh as you see now. We were power.

In time the just question was asked, who was the greatest of all the Dawn Gods? Of course the correct answer was me, but then I was imbued with humility as great as my magnificence, so I nominated Melkor. Wise thinking people everywhere agreed with me, because if I said it, it had to be true. Melkor accepted the title and stood up, and that should have been the end of the matter.

Yet there were some beings who did not at once see that everything I said was correct. Among them, stood the treacherous Jadis, a boring woman with little to recommend her to dignified company. She was mildly attractive, but she reached beyond her level, yearning for me. Also among the great powers of old stood Dworkin. With him came his bride who wore a shape like a white horse, but with a horn from her prow. Thuday joined us as well, a lowly being of simple mind, inferior manners, and no friends. He was ugly, and he smelled like aged cheese.

And finally, least, and last, stood the lesser gods. They took for themselves powers both elemental and figurative. Some ruled the realms, the heavens, or the deeps. Some dwelt in home and hearth, forge and loom. Others worked with beauty, wisdom, or revelry. But they were dim, weak contenders, who could bring no serious challenge to the powers of the true ruler, Melkor.

When I lead the right-thinking people everywhere to nominating Melkor as King of the Dawn Gods, I was not yet capable of comprehending the wrongness of others. So I assumed that would be the end of it, and took myself to my couch, graciously allowing that lowly woman Jadis to accompany me. Our rest was like an earthquake that shatters peace.

But we were all of us betrayed.

For when Melkor rose before them to announce to the world that he was better than all present, remember I wasn't there, they turned the coward's trick and disagreed. Never before had such treachery occurred.

("Wait a minute," said Corwin. "How was that treachery?")

"Because I said Melkor was the greatest of them all, and they didn't agree," explained Sauron patiently, like one might talk to a stupid, annoying child who talked out of turn.

"They disagreed with you. That was betrayal?"

"Yes. Now you comprehend." Sauron nodded.

For a moment Mordor was silent, broken finally by Merlin saying, "Remember who you're talking to, Dad.")

I return to my tale of woe.

Terrible was our dismay. True statesman Melkor graciously suggested a compromise. He offered to let them agree with him so they would be right too, but lead by Thuday, they spurned his offer. Enraged, great Melkor retired to his mountain fastness to contemplate these grievous insults. He summoned me, and I left my entertainment to build him a fortress worthy of the High King of the Dawn Gods. I built him Shadow Guard.

Ah, Shadow Guard. It was worthy of Melkor, and perhaps of all my efforts, it was the greatest building. In Shadow Guard I first played the themes I would return to in Angband, Utumno, Dol Guldur, and Barad Dur. Its walls were tall and sheer, painted with all the colors of shadow. I worked crystals of amethyst, emerald, and quartz into the stones themselves so the dawn and the dusk were broken into songs

of light. That was the age when the sky of Chaos was set to rotating, and the fortress of Shadow Guard held gems brighter than the dayside on settings of deeper ebony than night. Tall enough to rule the Courts of Chaos, Melkor's throne resided on the crest of the highest pinnacle. He saw all, for then creation itself was laid out before him in a flat disk that fell forever into the Abyss. The gates were fair, the walls were strong, the ceilings high, and the floors smooth as fine wine, made of boulders of obsidian impregnated with gems. To walk the halls of Shadow Guard, one trod on the sky. I took Jadis to the Hearthroom and consecrated the building in dark nethers.

("I don't want to hear about that!" said Fiona.

"I do," said Flora.)

Time mattered little, but some of it passed and life was good.

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That was the zenith of the world. Everything since then has been denouement, the steady fall of greatness into lassitude and failure. All of you, born in the twilight days, do not know how great things were before. But I know, and I am cursed with terrible knowledge. I know how far the world has fallen into gotterdammerung.

From greatness comes ruin, and the greatness of my ruin is measured by how far I fell. My ruin was greater than all other sufferings, for my zenith was the zenith of the world, and my fall from power the ultimate tragedy.

One day the treacherous and dissembling Thuday called all the Dawn Gods to the Terrace of Miracles, a shoddy and unstable platform he'd built over the Logrus itself. In those days the great accretion disk of shadow had slowed down and rotated with a semblance of stability. On it the lesser folk had assembled their houses and demesnes. While

the glorious Shadow Guard rose in magnificence from vast pylons driven into phantasms of the Logrus, tangible images of reality that were strong enough to support my artifice, other, weaker crafters could not make them work. So they crusted the edges of the disk where it fell into nothingness, the Abyss, like barnacles.

Thuday announced he was support a new form of mandate. He wanted the assembled Dawn Gods to speak with many voices for who was the greatest, and that person would be chosen. Knowing all right thinking people would select Melkor and assuming some test of competency would eliminate those who voted in error, we demonstrated perfect humility by joining the meeting. Things did not go correctly.

Upon arriving, lesser beings gave speeches. None of them mattered.

In time I rose and said, "Hear me, people of Chaos. Listen to me. We all know the truth. We know what should and should not be, and in days to come, we will look back on this moment as a point of uncertain conflict. 'How could the vote have gone any other way?' we will ask. There is but one choice.

"For the good of everyone and the greatness of all, we must make Melkor the High King of the Dawn Gods. He is the mightiest. His power is the greatest. As surely as we are above all things in shadow, Melkor is the mightiest of beings in the Courts of Chaos, and his is the hand that must rule. His power and only his power is worthy of being set at the top. Already he sits on the throne in the mightiest building in creation, and our vote today is merely to recognize what is."

Having spoken, everyone agreed I was correct and further discussion was unnecessary. But you know how some people just talk to hear themselves talk. Sad for them, but they do blather on.

(Sauron paused for a moment here, but Random said, "No, no. Continue.")

The denizens of Amber waited with peculiarly wry expressions. Sauron considered they must be sharing a humble joke he was too mighty to understand.)

After the some rabble, the insidious Thuday spoke. Thuday took the high stand on the Terrace of Miracles, a dais where the speaker could address all, and said, "Mairon the Wise has no doubt seen a future as he wishes it. I am but curious. Tell me, if Melkor is anointed the High King of the Dawn Gods, what will you personally do then?"

This was a fair and just thing for him to ask.

"I will build wonders and monuments, parks and sculpture, and bring joy for us all. After all, I built that," I said, pointing to Shadow Guard.

A low murmur swept through the crowd. Shadow Guard, even among the artifices of the Dawn Gods, was not undervalued.

"Is Shadow Guard typical of your work?" Thuday asked.

"It is."

"What does Melkor say?" he asked.

"It is worthy of me," replied the deserving High King of the Dawn Gods.

"And will it stand as long as your power?" asked Thuday.

"Surely," said Melkor.

"It will resist all things, even time," I said.

"Then why does it lean?" asked the traitor.

For a moment I did not understand, but suddenly the icy fingers of betrayal reached into my heart. All turned to look at Shadow Guard.

It rose above everything with the Logrus beneath, standing tall on three pylons that reached the three primary shadows of the Logrus. Images of seething power warped and twisted around Shadow Guard's foundations, and played tricks of perception.

But there was no trick of perception at play when I say Shadow Guard leaned. It listed toward its flank as it had not some few moments before.

It tilted. It bent. Suddenly a great explosion took its side, and an eruption of rock and crystal blasted out into space. The Logrus' power bent the plume to itself, and drew the rubble down. Shadow Guard toppled! Pylons shattered; rock fractured. The high and glorious spires toppled. With the sounds of fracture and despair, the greatest fortress the world has or will ever see tumbled into the Logrus and was consumed. Shadow Guard is no more.

"Do you see, Dawn Gods?" demanded the vile Thuday. "Do you see their works are weak? Their powers are broken? Their words are hollow and unsupported, like their fortress? Cast not your votes for Melkor. Vote for me, Thuday the Magnificent, and I will rule over you and create the dynasty of Great Ones, worthy kings. Vote for me and my Queen."

And lifting up his hand like a salute, Thuday caught the attention of all those assembled, and they cheered when his queen took his grip.

Jadis, tall as a giant, took his hand in hers, and the foul mensch voted them the High King and Queen of Creation.

Their first royal act was one of cruelty and evil. I was lifted, carried to the edge of the Terrace of Miracles, and hurled into the vortices of Logrus. And the mensch laughed and laughed and laughed, thinking I had died.