

# DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

*50 years before the War of the Ring*



It was the first day of April, TA 2961. Just ten years before, Sauron had declared himself in Mordor. Now he was trying to rebuilding Barad-dûr while clashing with neighbors on three sides: Nurn, Khand, and Harad.

Sauron proposed an alliance with each of those nations, and invited their ambassadors to Mordor for discussions. Now that the winter rains had stopped and the roads were no longer a sea of mud, a delegation from Haradwaith made its way north to the Dark Tower.

Urzahil of Umbar dumped the contents of the casket onto his bed and groped through the heap of penannular broaches, arm bands, and jeweled collars. Something expensive, a broach or ring, hit the floor and rolled beneath the embroidered bed hangings; he ignored it and kept looking.

"I can't find my chain. Today of all days, and I've misplaced my Chain of Office," Urzahil muttered.

"You're wearing it," said his manservant.

Urzahil put his hand to his chest. The sculpted links that marked him as Mordor's Chief Ambassador lay beneath his

fingertips. He closed his eyes and let out a long breath of relief.

Urzahil stood before the glass while his manservant adjusted the chain and smoothed the folds of his ceremonial robes. They were black as sable, made from fine wool and silk, richly embroidered, the finest he had ever worn.

Today was the first day he would serve in his new rank. He had been elevated to the position only recently, but already they were calling him the Mouth of Sauron. They said that Urzahil knew Sauron's mind better than Sauron did himself.

Actually, Urzahil knew most people's minds better than they did themselves. He was raised as a poor relation in an aristocratic house. He had no security beyond the goodwill of the relatives who gave him charity. His livelihood had depended on his ability to read the emotions hidden behind their eyes and postures. That ability was the reason he was now a diplomat, a master of court intrigue, and the reason he had risen to the top of the ranks in Mordor just ten years after arriving.

Mordor would receive a delegation from Haradwaith, and if all went well, they would sign an agreement to end the border skirmishes between the two nations, leaving Mordor free to concentrate on Gondor.

The day before, Urzahil had tried to prepare his Lord for the meeting with Haradwaith. He needed to discuss a delicate subject.

"Whatever I tell them ahead of time, they're going to address you as Lord Sauron," said Urzahil.

"It's not my name, and I forbid it to be spoken," said Sauron.

"The name is used almost universally, both outside and within your own borders," said Urzahil. "The important thing is, if that's how they address you tomorrow, just let it go."

Sauron scowled, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

Urzahil descended a dozen flights of stairs from his rooms to the Central Hall in Barad-Dûr, where the Dark Throne was housed. He first saw entered the room as an emissary from Umbar, and knew how impressive were the antechamber, the double doors, the black hall lined with torches, which lead to Sauron's throne. He still remembered how Sauron terrifying himself had looked, he who wore no crown or ornament or any kind, only the concealing black.

Entering the Central Hall through the robing room behind the Dark Throne was a different experience. Half a dozen people had arrived before him. They were dressed in robes similar to his own, embroidered wools and silks. A very old woman moved among them, adjusting a fold here, straightening a collar there. The room was cramped; Urzahil had to push between people to reach his place.

The room brightened for a moment as the door to the corridor opened and then slammed shut. Sauron leaned against the door in workman's clothes, breathing hard. His hands were covered in soot.

"You're late," the matron said.

"Sorry, my fault. I lost track of time," Sauron said.

She held up a robe for him, and he shrugged into it. It was plain, but Urzahil guessed it had cost more than any other in the room.

Sauron stood still while she draped a veil over his face, then pulled his hood forward to shadow his face.

"I can't see for crap," Sauron said.

"You always say that. Deal with it," said the matron.

It was already past time to meet the delegation from Haradwaith, who were surely standing in the Antechamber by now, and hopefully not feeling ill-used by being made to wait.

Sauron opened the door to the Central Hall and led them in. He crossed the short space to the Dark Throne and started to mount the dais, but missed his footing. Urzahil heard fabric rip, followed by a muttered curse.

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"Do you have any idea how much a yard of that costs?" said the matron.

Sauron laid his arms on the black marble arms of the Dark Throne. Urzahil took his place at Sauron's left, and the Witch King, Sauron's greatest general, stood at his right. After Urzahil checked that the rip in his hem didn't show, Sauron gave the signal to throw open the twin doors of iron at the far end of the hall.

The delegation from Haradwaith entered from the Antechamber, looking awed. The formal greetings were exchanges, and diplomatic gifts were exchanged. Sauron gave the Emissary from Haradwaith a gift for his King, a sword whose blade had been folded and folded again a hundred times, the workmanship was Sauron's own.

The Emissary invited Sauron outside to see the gift from Haradwaith to Mordor: a pair of bronze statues, a wolf and a wolfhound circling each other in deadly combat[1]. Urzahil felt the color drain from his face. If the hound was Huan, then the wolf was Thû, or wolf-Sauron. Anyone who'd heard the story knew the hound ripped out wolf-Sauron's throat and forced him to surrender Tol Sirion. A gift can be an insult, this one was worse than most. Urzahil hoped it was unintended. But Sauron was delighted with the bronzes. He gave orders to have them installed in the courtyard, just inside the main gate.

The negotiations and the pleasantries afterwards ran longer than expected. Urzahil couldn't think of a polite way to hurry them up and stay on schedule, and unless he was willing to have food come to the table dry and overdone, or set aside and cold, the feast welcoming the delegation from Haradwaith had to begin on time.

He had scheduled an hour between talk and feasting to allow people time to change, and to rest, but the allotted hour had eroded to no more than six or seven minutes.

He couldn't wear the somber shades of black to the evening festivities; it just wouldn't do. The feast required

formal clothing, but of a festive nature: brightly colored silks, gold and jewels.

There was barely time to change. He raced up twelve flights of stairs. Two servants dressed him at once, then he raced back down minutes later, hoping that all the fastening had been done up.

The Great Hall was arranged with the High Table at the end of the room on a raised platform. Sauron sat in the center, in a chair like a throne. Haradwaith's Emissary was seated at Sauron's right, in the place of honor, with the Witch King of Angmar on his other side. The Emissary's deputy was on Sauron's right, with Urzahil just beyond.

A Nazgûl sat at each end of the High Table. In theory, seating was determined by the Order of Precedence, which meant that Dwar and Indur, the third and fourth to take a ring, were entitled to those places. But Dwar had rustic table manners, and Indur was famed for practical jokes; Urzahil didn't trust him around the visiting diplomats. When Urzahil drew up the seating chart, he'd replaced them with Akhorahil, a master of court intrigue, and Hoarmurath, who was reliable and steady.

Below the High Table, the lower tables were arranged around an open space, where acrobats and jugglers performed. Urzahil was responsible for the entertainments at the feast. He'd approved all of the performances, every song lyric, joke, and poem, to make sure none of them were in poor taste.

The third remove was cleared away, and the acrobats bowed with a flourish and filed out.

Urzahil spotted Indur at one of the lower tables, sitting with Uvatha, another Nazgûl. Neither was causing trouble. Good, that was one less thing to worry about.

The fourth remove was served. A group of musicians took their place and played ancient themes on harp and drum.

Urzahil held out his wine cup to be filled again, and allowed himself to relax for the first time all day. So many things could have gone wrong today, but didn't.

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The final chord faded, and the musicians were replaced by two actors in masks and costumes. Urzahil had no idea who these two actors were, or what they were about to do. His mouth went dry. He looked to the lower table where he had last seen Indur and Uvatha. Their places were empty.

Urzahil started to get to his feet. He had to stop them. Then he remembered his place, and sat down again. He was the Chief Ambassador for Mordor. He was sitting almost in the center of the High Table among the greatest lords of the land. He could not jump up from his place and go running across the Great Hall. There was nothing he could do.

The costumes looked as if they had been thrown together an hour before, but the peacock colors were easily recognizable as the Emissary from Haradwaith. The second actor turned around, and Urzahil gasped. The actor was costumed in Urzahil's own earth tones and rusts, with a passable replica of Urzahil's Chain of Office.

The skit began.

"I am the Mouth of Sauron. My Master bids thee welcome." The actor in Urzahil's chain bowed low, his arm sweeping in a wide gesture.

Urzahil cringed. They weren't supposed to say "Sauron".

"I am the Emissary from Haradwaith. Our King proposes that we unite our two nations. Let a marriage be arranged between the Dark Lord and the daughter of our King," said the peacock costumed actor.

"This marriage is an excellent accord! It will put an end to years of ... " said the Mouth of Sauron.

"... strife between our two nations," said the Emissary from Haradwaith.

"I was going to say, ... years of meaningless self-abuse," said the Mouth of Sauron.

From the corner of his eye, Urzahil saw Sauron bent over, his hands covering his face. The real Emissary from Haradwaith wore an expression Urzahil took to mean, "If I laugh, I will commit a terrible diplomatic offense, but if I don't, I'm going to suffocate."

## Uvatha the Horseman

After a while, Sauron pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"Indur," he addressed the wayward Nazgûl, who began to look apprehensive. Sauron put his hands together, and very slowly, he began to clap. A grin spread across his face.

"That was a fine performance. I laughed so hard, tears ran down my leg."

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[1] "Wolf and Wolfhound" by Zenos Frudakis, Brookgreen Sculpture Gardens, NC