

# A GAME OF CHESS



After ten days of sand, thorn bushes, and dry wash creek beds, the horses labored up the side of a low ridge. When they crested the top, there it was, the sea. Deep purple-blue, with sunlight glinting from its choppy surface like the glitter of broken glass. The horizon stretched in all directions, vast and unimaginably level.

Er-Mûrazôr loved the sea. He hadn't seen it in over a thousand years.

The breeze picked up, cold and fresh, and it carried the scent of salt. On the plane before him, a thin band of green hugged the coast, the only cultivated land in this region. Everywhere else was sand and rock, interrupted only by a finger of the sea reaching far inland. A rocky promontory towered over the inlet, and on this natural fortress, a great walled city was built, The Haven of Umbar, Númenor's largest and most important port on the mainland.

The city had grown since he saw it last. When he left, Umbar was a colonial outpost with a single wall enclosing thirty or forty mud brick dwellings. Even as one of its founders and the first Captain of the Haven <sup>1</sup>, Er-Mûrazôr's residence had been a one-room cottage.

A second city wall, taller and more substantial than the first, enclosed the palaces of white marble, gold-domed buildings, and tall spired structures built more recently than

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<sup>1</sup> In TA 1350, Er-Mûrazôr acquired a new title, the Witch King of Angmar.

the hasty construction of the first. A portion of the new outer wall enclosed the harbor, protecting the docks and quay.

Warships filled the harbor, anchored so closely together, they almost touched. They filled the haven from one cliff to the other, and reached almost to the open ocean. The invaders had come here with the largest fleet ever assembled. His breath hissed between his teeth.

But this was not a pleasure trip. They had come here to surrender.

There was a protocol to these things. The two kings would discuss terms, the defeated king would swear an oath not to bear arms against the conqueror, and then he'd go home and govern his realm as he saw fit.

That might be the protocol, but Er-Mûrazôr wasn't sure his Master could do it. Mairon would be made to kneel, to apologize for his crimes, and speak the words of surrender. There were conquered rulers who could kneel and abase themselves, but Mairon was proud, he couldn't bear to be humiliated.

The surrender would take place at midday tomorrow, inside the city walls.

Beside him, Mairon was silent. Unusual, for someone who talked *all* the time. Tall and slender, with dark hair and delicate hands, his Master could easily have passed for Elvish. Since the news of the defeat had reached Lugbúrz, he'd barely spoken. He seemed to have withdrawn to somewhere deep within his own head where even Er-Mûrazôr, Mairon's second-in-command and closest friend, was unable to reach him. Er-Mûrazôr laid a hand on his Master's arm.

"You don't have to do this, you know."

"Yes, I do," said Mairon.

The armies of Númenor were sitting on their border. If Mairon didn't answer Ar-Pharazôn's summons, the largest army ever assembled would invade and occupy Mordor, and Ar-Pharazôn would install a Lord who was easier to deal with.

Er-Mûrazôr wasn't supposed to be along on this trip. Mairon had planned to come with only his personal guard, but when the group assembled to ride out the main gate of

Lugbúrz, Er-Mûrazôr tacked up Twilight and rode with them, uninvited.

“I agreed to arrive alone. I don’t remember inviting you.”

Er-Mûrazôr suspected Mairon found the idea of surrender humiliating, and preferred to do it without witnesses.

They rode down the ridge toward the walled city.

“It occurred to me, you belong to the Númenorian Royal family. That makes Ar-Pharazôn what, your great-great-grandnephew?”

Er-Mûrazôr’s nails bit into his palms. Mairon probably hadn’t meant to insult him, but he resented the suggestion that he had anything in common with this most recent king.

In Er-Mûrazôr’s time, nobility meant something. Those who belonged to the upper ranks were held to high standards. Someone like himself would have been expected to come to the marriage bed unsullied, and afterwards, to be chaste within marriage. Er-Mûrazôr himself had never married, he remained untouched and pure.

How things had changed. The most recent king, a stocky, short-statured man in a culture where height equaled beauty, with an appetite for young boys and also for the wives of his friends, had forced marriage upon his first cousin, committing both rape and incest in a single act.

“Remind me, why didn’t you ever become king?” Mairon asked.

“I had an older brother.” Er-Mûrazôr never wanted the throne. He was raised to serve a great Lord, not to be one himself.



When the sun touched the horizon, Mairon raised his hand to call a halt. They made camp beside the road in a sandy hollow relatively free of stones and thorny shrubs.

Er-Mûrazôr slid out of the saddle. After watering Twilight from one of the kegs they’d brought along, he drank deeply himself. He found a comfortable spot and sat cross-legged in the sand, the broad blade of a two-handed sword balanced across his knees. During the day, the fine desert sand had

somehow gotten into the scabbard and lay like a gritty film on the blade. He rubbed it with an oil-soaked rag, working carefully around the damaged area where the edge was blunted and notched. Years of sharpening had reduced its width, but the notches still showed.

"I could make you a new one, if you'd let me," said Mairon.

"I like this one." Er-Mûrazôr continued oiling the blade. The sword might be old, but it was a prized possession. His father had given it to Er-Mûrazôr when he came of age, and it was the only heirloom he had from his family.

One of the guardsmen built a circle of stones for the fire, while another went looking for wood. He returned with an armload of dry sticks and twigs which he dropped beside the circle. He arranged three twisted branches in a sort of tripod, then piled little twigs and bits of straw around its base.

When he finished, Mairon knelt by the mound of wood and sang a spell to light it, stumbling over some of the words. The fire roared to life, flames rolled up the sides of the logs and tongues of fire reached shoulder-high.

"I still don't know how you do that," said the guardsman.

Er-Mûrazôr didn't know how he did it, either. Fire starting was a beginner's spell. Er-Mûrazôr learned it from a book. But even as a master sorcerer, Er-Mûrazôr had to say the words exactly right or it wouldn't work. Mairon, on the other hand, often spoke the words wrong, and if he thought he was alone, didn't say them at all. Yet, the fire still lit.

"Is magic a talent you're born with, or is it something you can study?" asked the guardsman.

"Some of each. Native ability is enhanced by schooling," said Mairon.

Er-Mûrazôr could attest to that. He'd been born with considerable talent, but self-study had barely lifted him out of the amateur ranks. After the rift with his father forced him to leave Umbar, he resolved to become a master sorcerer. Like all Númenorians, he longed for more than the years he was due.

He'd traveled East in search of the recently defeated warlord Tar-Mairon, said to be the most powerful sorcerer in Arda. Er-Mûrazôr entered Lugbúrz and found there, holed up

behind the walls of his fortress, with little to occupy his time. They met, and Er-Mûrazôr persuaded the defeated warlord to take him on as an apprentice.

“What sort of man was your father?” the guardsman asked.

Er-Mûrazôr strained to listen, vaguely aware he was polishing the same spot over and over.

“Reserved, distant even. He didn’t say much. And he was strict, but I always felt that he was on my side.”

“Your father?” Er-Mûrazôr asked.

In all the years Er-Mûrazôr had known him, Mairon had never said anything about his early life: the name of his father, his birthplace, or whether he’d ever been married. Yet here he was, confiding in a guardsman he barely knew.

“Foster father. The blacksmith I apprenticed under,” said Mairon.

Er-Mûrazôr shook his head. That was classic Mairon. When Er-Mûrazôr first met him, he affected to be the darkest sort of wizard, a necromancer. When the Eastern nations sent their ambassadors to talk about alliances, he painted his eyes with kohl and sat on the floor with them, drinking tea. When he was passing the time with a guardsman, he became a working person. They sometimes played a game on winter evenings in which you guess what animal a person was. Mairon always said he was a wolf. Wrong. He was a chameleon.

After supper had been cleared away, and the horses seem to, Er-Mûrazôr returned the campfire and sat down next to his Master. The sand was soft. He leaned against a saddle and drew his knees up. Just beyond the ring of light from the fire, bumps on the ground turned out to be guardsmen who’d turned in early, who’d rolled up in their cloaks and made a bed in a hollow of sand.

Close to the fire, the smell of resin was overpowering. The twisted limbs of dry thorn bushes burned with their flammable sap, which sometimes exploded with a crack, and the smoke lifted sparks high into the air.

Er-Mûrazôr glanced at Mairon. His Master was staring into the fire, sheltered behind an eerie silence. He shouldn’t left to brood like that, it wasn’t healthy.

Er-Mûrazôr got and borrowed a homemade chess set from one of the guardsmen. He returned to where his Master was sitting, then unrolled the small piece of canvas on a flat stone and arranged pebbles, light and dark, on the crosshatched fabric. The largest had markings scratched onto their surface: horse, castle, king.

“How about a game? This iron coin says I can beat you.”

Mairon made the first move. Er-Mûrazôr advanced his pieces in a wedge-shaped formation which crossed the middle of the board early in the game and kept on advancing. Mairon’s pieces were arranged similarly, but the line wasn’t as tight, and the pieces not as well-defended. Mairon played distractedly, making careless mistakes due to inattention, and losing pieces he shouldn’t have.

Er-Mûrazôr took Mairon’s queen. His cursed softly, and the inscription on the Ring flared yellow-orange, like an ember when you breathe on it. Er-Mûrazôr reached over and touched the Ring on Master’s hand. The fiery letters were warm beneath his fingers, like something alive.

“I wish you’d listened to me and left it at home.”

“We’re here to negotiate terms. It enhances my powers of persuasion, which I’m going to need tomorrow.

He drummed his fingers, thinking.

“I expect we’ll spend most of the day discussing terms. They’re going to ask for tribute. If they wanted in gold, I can handle that. It’s just a matter of knowing where to dig it out of the ground. But if they wanted in grain ...” He trailed off. “We’re not a wealthy nation. It could ruin us.”

He turned back to the game. Still suffering from the loss of his queen, he moved a pawn to the sixth row, and on his next turn, moved it to the seventh. Just before the pawn became a queen, Er-Mûrazôr made a daring move to capture it, and put himself in position to do even more damage.

“No, not my pawn!” Mairon looked appalled.

With a flourish, Er-Mûrazôr plucked up the dark pebble and set it with the rest of the captured pieces.

Mairon leaned back, his posture relaxed, the ghost of a smile at the corners of his mouth. Er-Mûrazôr knew that look. He was gloating.

Mairon moved his remaining castle one square to the left. "Checkmate."

Too late, Er-Mûrazôr realized his mistake. Taking the ambitious pawn left his king undefended, and at the same time, blocked his King's escape. It was a trap, and he'd walked right into it.



They set out before first light. The road ran across the desert and entered the city gates. A mile from their destination, Mairon called a halt, then swung a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground.

"Time to suit up. I don't need to let them see me dressed like a peasant, covered with the dust of the road."

Mairon opened his saddlebags and pulled out folds of heavy brocade, steel blue, the colors of the sea. He undid the fasteners of his overtunic and shrugged it off, then lifted the white linen shirt over his head.

Er-Mûrazôr busied himself with the buckles of his saddlebags where he'd packed his own court clothes, taking longer than was strictly necessary. When he looked up, his Master was smoothing a fold of his hem, which fell almost to the ground.

He straightened. The robes were magnificent. The tailoring was a work of art. The outer robes were embroidered in thick gold thread, the patterns like clouds or waves. An under-tunic of tissue-thin silk showed blue-green at his wrists and throat.

The costume made him look broader in the shoulders, and taller. It seemed like his eyes were level with Er-Mûrazôr's, as if he'd gained half a hand in height with the change of clothing. His hair looked different, too. The humid ocean air had made it wavy, and it barely reached his shoulders. Against the pale grey greens of his outer tunic, his dark hair looked reddish. His whole appearance had changed in some subtle way. He no longer looked Elvish, he looked Númenorian.

Er-Mûrazôr turned back to his saddlebags and pulled out the sable wool he'd brought, the robe he wore in Lugbûrz for State occasions.

"I told you you're not going. I agreed to come here alone, with only my personal guard. Didn't you hear me?"

His Master intended to go in there, alone and friendless, where he'd be surrounded by men who wanted to kill him. Er-Mûrazôr was not going to let that happen.

"I heard you. I'm just ignoring you." Er-Mûrazôr shook out the formal robe and held it up. Not too wrinkled. Good.

"Look, I already told you ...," Mairon's nostrils flared, and spots of color appeared on his cheeks. "Melkor's chains, I don't have time for this. Guardsman, find him a spare gambeson and a tabard with my badge on it."

Er-Mûrazôr accepted the loan of a protective leather coat and a surcoat marked with the Eye. He looked around for a bush or a rock, anything big enough to change behind. There was nothing. Putting Twilight between himself and the others, he stripped down to his linen and hose and put on the uniform of Mairon's personal guard.

"And keep your hood up. You're starting to look transparent, especially in full daylight."



The road wrapped around the outer walls and passed through the main gate into the city. The main gate, a massive structure of timber and iron, stood open to reveal the entrance to the city, a barrel-vaulted tunnel high enough to admit a man on horseback.

A group of men-at-arms, larger than their own, waited at the entrance. Whenever there was movement, sunlight glinted from steel, probably from their mail or the flat of their spears.

Er-Mûrazôr leaned close to his Master to whisper, "It looks like they're expecting us." His horse stumbled, and his knee accidentally brushed against Mairon's. A tingle swept over his skin and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He pulled away, embarrassed.



The main gate into Umbar lay just ahead.

He felt like he did in the minutes before the start of a battle, when a thousand strategies swirled in his head and he needed a few more minutes with the map and the leaden markers to make sure his plan was sound, and he just didn't have that time.



They reached the gate. Three or four captains on horseback blocked the tunnel, supported by at least a score of armed men, all in identical livery, a tabard decorated with a pair of golden ships. The most war-scarred of their captains advanced a few paces and raised his hand for silence.

"Leave the horses here."

Er-Mûrazôr's nails dug into his palms. *Enter the city on foot, like beggars?* One of the soldiers grabbed Twilight's bridle and hung on to it, and Er-Mûrazôr resisted the impulse to strike him.

His Master kicked his feet loose from the stirrups and dismounted. Er-Mûrazôr did the same. He allowed the soldier to take the reins from him, but he wasn't happy about it.

"Surrender your weapons." Scarface pointed to a makeshift table against the wall of the tunnel, a few planks balanced on a pair of rickety trestles.

Low ranking foot soldiers moved among them, collecting sword belts from the guardsmen until sheaths and scabbards almost covered the makeshift table and dumping them on the rickety table. A low-ranking sentry watched over it, looking bored.

"That means everything. Daggers, small knives, anything with an edge." Eating daggers, pen knives, and small tools were to the pile of weapons.

Er-Mûrazôr started to unbuckle his sword belt, but hesitated. His two-handed sword, an example of the highest Númenorian craftsmanship, was beyond price, even with the notched blade. By custom, the conquerors took the weapons of the defeated as the spoils of war. If some man-at-arms

recognized his weapon as a priceless antiquity, it wouldn't be here when he came back.

"You need to give up your weapons before you go in." The soldier held out his hand, waiting. Er-Mûrazôr didn't have to turn it over, but if he didn't, he couldn't follow his Master inside. Reluctantly, he surrendered the irreplaceable heirloom.



Stripped of horses and weapons, they were allowed through the gate. They allowed themselves to be led, unarmed and on foot, to the city center. Their escort, Scarface and his captains, were armed and mounted.

The road they were on appeared to be the main avenue through the city. Marble palaces lined both sides of the street, none of them familiar. The city was more like Armenelos, capital of Númenor, than the colonial outpost he'd left behind.

Both sides of the broad avenue were lined with people, shoulder to shoulder and ten deep. Many of them waved small flags bearing the same ships emblem on the soldiers' tabards. Ropes strung between stanchions kept the crowd from spilling into the street, backed up by armed soldiers at regular intervals.

The murmuring from the crowd sounded hostile. It was impossible to make out individual words, except the occasional *liar* or *filth*. At one point someone hissed and someone else laughed unpleasantly.

Er-Mûrazôr walked at his Master's side. Mairon looked straight ahead like the accused at the start of a trial, just before the charges are read. His face was still, his mouth a thin, hard line. *I expect instant obedience from you*. His voice was as clear as if he'd spoken. *No questions, no arguing, no hesitation. Do you understand?* Er-Mûrazôr nodded once, the gesture almost unobservable.

They passed through the small gate in the inner walls. Here, everything was familiar, the narrow houses, the market stalls, the fountain in the center of the market square. It felt like going into battle, a clarity of focus, the feeling of everything else dropping away.

They crossed the marketplace. A few blocks further, and the street opened up onto the square at the very center of the city. He knew it well, his house had been here once, behind the pavilion housing the throne of the High King.

A huge crowd had gathered to witness Mairon's humiliation. Er-Mûrazôr's eyes darted around the square, but no gallows loomed above the crowd, and no scaffold-shaped gap among the sea of heads suggested a place of execution. He whispered a prayer of thanks to Ossë<sup>2</sup>, though he wasn't really a believer anymore.

Soldiers forced a path for them through the crowd and took them to the space in front of the pavilion. Ar-Pharazôn was waiting for them. Mairon approached him and knelt on the stone step to the dais.

A canopy shaded the High King and his courtiers, but the steps and the paving stones in front of them were in bright sunlight. It would have been an ordinary courtesy to provide Mairon with shade, but it appeared to have been deliberately withheld. Similarly, Ar-Pharazôn's throne sat on a carpet that was impressively large, but the bare stone where Mairon knelt, a few feet from the king, hadn't even been swept.

Mairon spoke the words of surrender, "I acknowledge I have been beaten by a greater lord than myself. I surrender and crave pardon for my offenses." The crowd seemed to enjoy this, and someone laughed.

Ar-Pharazôn looked at him with the contempt due to a defeated rival. "You claimed to be Lord of the Earth. I should have you killed. But instead, I will spare your life and strip you of all your titles."

Mairon bowed his head in submission, one hand clasped in the other, but Er-Mûrazôr felt the fury radiating from his Master like heat from a forge. Er-Mûrazôr touched his temple, he felt like his head might explode.

Ar-Pharazôn then demanded a staggering tribute, and he wanted it in grain and livestock. Mordor had never been a wealthy nation, and most of their resources had been

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<sup>2</sup> a sea god Er-Mûrazôr prayed to when he was young

consumed in the war. Mairon offered a sum in gold, which the king rejected.

The sun beat down on them. Er-Mûrazôr resisted the temptation to wipe his brow. Rivulets of sweat ran down his back. He wished he'd remembered to drink from the water skins before they got here. Mairon had been kneeling since they arrived. The gravel on the stone step must have hurt him. From time to time, he shifted his weight and tried to rearrange the brocade beneath his knee. The king was sitting in the shade of the canopy. He raised a goblet, and a servant hurried over to fill it.

Er-Mûrazôr glanced at the sun, now well past its zenith. The discussion of tribute went on for over an hour, but the king wouldn't negotiate, and Mairon had to agree to the original terms.

Finally, Ar-Pharazôn required Mairon to become his vassal. The oath included a pledge that he personally would not harm the king, nor would he do so through someone else.

That was what his Master had come here to do. If he didn't go through with it now, he would lose his realm.

Once an oath was sworn, there was no getting out of it. Oaths were promises to Ilúvatar<sup>3</sup>, the consequences for breaking them were terrible. Mairon wasn't stupid. He was guilty of many crimes, but oath-breaking wasn't one of them.

A muscle in Mairon's jaw twitched, and he drew a deep breath. Finally, he placed his hands between Ar-Pharazôn's and swore the oath of fealty. The pressure wave of anger and hatred from Mairon felt like a concussive blast. Er-Mûrazôr stumbled half a step backwards, a guardsman held his arm to steady him.

When the oath-swearing was complete, Mairon got to his feet and turned to go. There was stone dust on his robe where he had knelt, and the costly fabric was rumpled.

"Wait! You're not leaving. I decided to keep you as a hostage," Ar-Pharazôn said.

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<sup>3</sup> God (Sindarin for "sky father")

“No! You promised I could leave afterwards!” Mairon looked dismayed.

“I changed my mind.” The king raised a hand, and soldiers moved closer.

The king raised his hand, and soldiers moved in, surrounding Mairon and cutting him off from his personal guard. People pushed closer to see, and there was scattered applause. Er-Mûrazôr reached for his sword hilt, but his hand closed on air.

Ar-Pharazôn addressed the embassy from Mordor. “Do you understand what *hostage* means? If your armies move against me, you fail to pay tribute on time, or you so much as speak against me, he goes to the scaffold.”

The man was utterly ruthless. Er-Mûrazôr didn’t doubt he would do it.

A single rank of soldiers separated him from his Master. In the gap between the heavily armed men, he saw Mairon put one hand over the other. Their eyes met. Mairon stepped towards him, arm outstretched. *Take it and run!*

Er-Mûrazôr reached between two foot soldiers surrounding his Master to take whatever Mairon was trying to give him, but one of the soldiers raised a club and brought it down on his wrist, hard. His arm went numb and useless.

Mairon put his fist over his mouth and gasped, as if in horror at the sight of his servant being abused.

Soldiers stepped forward and seized his arms. Mairon twisted and fought to get loose. They pinned his hands behind his back and jerked upward. A look of pain swept across his features. He froze and stood there, breathing hard. Too much blue undertunic showed on one shoulder, where the collar of his robe had slipped.

A soldier appeared with chains, rusty and cheaply made, the sort used on criminals. He stepped behind Mairon. He fiddled with something, and there was the sound of a lock striking home. He wrapped a chain around Mairon’s waist, grinding rust into the pale brocade. The jailer knelt and fastened an iron cuff to one ankle, then the other. Just enough chain connected them to allow him to walk.

Er-Mûrazôr met his Master's eye. He heard the command as clearly as if it had been spoken. *Instant obedience, no hesitation.* He threw his whole weight against a soldier to knock him aside, took two long strides, embraced his Master, and kissed him full on the mouth.

Almost immediately, strong hand grasped him and pulled him away. They twisted his arms behind his back and frog-marched him back to where the other guardsmen were standing, then shoved him so hard he stumbled and fell, scraping his knees and the palms of his hands.

Ar-Pharazôn said, "Now here's a good opportunity to demonstrate what a hostage is for." He looked directly at Er-Mûrazôr. "When one of you gets out of line, I don't have to do anything to you, because I can do it to him."

He walked over to Mairon, studied him for a moment, and then struck him hard across the face. It left the imprint of a hand in red on Mairon's cheek, each individual finger clearly visible.

"Now tell me you're sorry for what he did."

Mairon bowed his head in submission. "I am sorry, I beg pardon."

Er-Mûrazôr clenched his teeth. *That tyrant is a dead man.* Tears of rage and frustration burned behind his eyes, and he wasn't someone given to tears.

Ar-Pharazôn pointed to the road leading down to the harbor. "Put the hostage on a ship for Númenor. Cast off on the next tide."

Soldiers pushed a path through the crowd, shouting "Make way." People pushed forward to see what was happening, standing on their toes and craning their necks.

The moon was three days past full. It was hours past midday, the surf would be touching the sea grasses on the dunes along the coast about now. In another hour, the rising sea would reach the back of the inlet, lifting the enemy's ships. And when it turned, it would spill back into the open ocean in a great rush of current, no oar or sail could resist it.

Mairon was no longer visible through the crush of people, but Er-Mûrazôr guessed he was in the part of the crowd where

the catcalling and hissing was the loudest. Sunlight flashed from the spears of the soldiers, and they fell back and quieted some.

*Run. Just leave.* His Master's voice broke Er-Mûrazôr out of his trance.



The street from which they'd entered the square was right behind him. No one blocked their way, the crowd was flowing in the opposite direction, toward the harbor. Er-Mûrazôr caught the eye of the guard captain and jerked his head towards the exit. No one tried to stop them from leaving, assuming they even noticed.

He moved through the old city, the buildings as familiar as members of his own family. The gate lay just ahead. He walked faster, hurrying toward the darkness of the arched passageway and the way out.

He emerged in the sunlight on the other side, but where there should have been sand, rock, and scrub brush, there were lush gardens around the palaces of the wealthy. They were still inside the outer wall, which didn't exist in his day. The avenue was nearly deserted. The ropes and pylons were still there. One had fallen over, but it didn't matter, there was no one here to hold back.

From the direction of the harbor, a great roar reached them, as if many voices had been raised at once. Er-Mûrazôr turned towards the sound. There was still time. The tide hadn't turned yet, it would be another half hour before sailors lifted the mooring lines over the pilings and pushed off into the current. It was possible Mairon hadn't even been put on the ship yet. It wasn't too late.

From here, Er-Mûrazôr could reach the harbor in ten minutes, and then ... do what? Mairon had been taken away by heavily armed soldiers, and Er-Mûrazôr was unarmed. The soldiers were surrounded by the entire population of Umbar, thousands and thousands of people. They wouldn't help him. They'd enjoyed watching Mairon surrender, and seeing him marched through the streets in chains.

He made the long walk to the gate without speaking.

They approached the outer wall. Beyond the gate, their horses were waiting for them. He stumbled through the tunnel like a sleepwalker. He'd considered every scenario, from the likelihood it would be routine diplomacy to the remote possibility they'd all be killed. He never, ever thought he'd Mairon behind.

Er-Mûrazôr walked over to the horses. The more skittish among them danced and rolled their eyes. Not Twilight, of course, who he'd hand-raised from a foal. Midnight, Mairon's big stallion was used to him, too. He looped Midnight's reins around Twilight's pommel, and prepared to mount.

"Chief? You'll be wanting this." One of the guardsmen placed the notched sword in his hands. Er-Mûrazôr nodded his thanks, and buckled the sword belt around his hips with unthinking fingers.

The big stallion, riderless now, was tied to a lead line from Twilight's pommel.

But something was off.

When they were negotiating the terms of surrender, Mairon had been so angry, Er-Mûrazôr felt it in his own body. But when Mairon was seized and chained and struck across the face, there was nothing. It didn't make sense.

Then he got it.

When Mairon protested his capture, he used his, "Not my pawn!" voice. It was a trap, and Ar-Pharazôn had walked right into it.

He rode well ahead of the others to avoid spooking their horses. Even so, fragments of conversation reached him from twenty paces back.

"Our Master got hit because Number One insisted on trading spit with him. What was he *thinking*?"

"He's a Númenorian. It's a Númenorian custom for men to kiss on the mouth upon parting, but I thought it was supposed to be ... um ... more chaste than that. Not with the mouth open, and not for so long." Someone laughed.

"When do you think they'll announce their betrothal?"  
More sniggering.



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Er-Mûrazôr was silent. His mouth had been on Mairon's for just a few seconds, but it was enough. When the soldiers pulled them apart, he had the Ring in his mouth. But until he could find a moment of privacy to put it on a chain and hang it around his neck under his shirt, he wasn't going to open his mouth for any reason.