

Emissary II

And thereupon the middle door of the Black Gate was thrown open with a great clang, and out of it there came an embassy from the Dark Tower.

“At its head there rode a tall and evil shape, mounted upon a black horse. The rider was robed all in black, and black was his lofty helm; yet this was no Ringwraith but a living man.

“The Lieutenant of the Tower of Barad-dûr he was, and his name is remembered in no tale, for he himself had forgotten it, and he said: ‘I am the Mouth of Sauron.’

“The Black Gate Opens”, Return of the King
J.R.R. Tolkien

Chapter 0 A Newly Minted Priest



It was Midsummer's Day, the day Urzahil would become a priest. He and his classmates, eight of them in all, would join the ranks of the anointed, sworn to secrecy and entrusted with dangerous knowledge.

Sunlight streamed through narrow windows beneath the dome high above their heads, tracing bright squares on the white stone inside the Temple. A fire burned on the altar, single log that had been the trunk of a massive tree. Billowing smoke rose from it and disappearing through unseen vents in the golden dome high overhead.

Urzahil stood in the back of the Sanctuary with the other second year acolytes. Before the ceremony, each of them had taken off the plain black robes of an acolyte for the last time, and surrendered them to a Temple servant who'd poured an urn of water over them, then dressed them in ceremonial robes, white and of softest wool.

Urzahil shivered from the chill. The sun didn't reach the back of the Sanctuary, and his hair was still wet.

There was a clamor of drums and cymbals, and the High Priest entered the Sanctuary. The hem of the outer layer of his vestments swept the mosaic tiles. Two assistants followed him, one carrying a folding table and the other, a glass bowl of something clear.

One by one, they were summoned to the altar. The ritual was always the same. The acolyte would kneel, the High Priest would dip his hand in the oil and touch the candidate's forehead, the words were said, and it was done. The newly minted priest would return to the group and the next one would be summoned.

A Newly Minted Priest

Then it was Urzahil's turn. His name was called and he crossed the open space beneath the dome, the marble floor cold beneath his feet. He felt as if he were watching himself from a great distance away. Important ceremonies required purification beforehand. In addition to fasting, he and the other acolytes had knelt before the altar throughout the night, from late in the evening until the eastern sky started to turn grey.

Urzahil approached the altar. Bundles of aromatic herbs burned in iron holders near it. Tendrils of smoke rose in the still air, carrying their pungent scent. The High Priest was there, waiting for him. A pair of assistants stood at a folding table which held the things needed for the ceremony.

Urzahil knelt before the altar and crossed his hands over his breast, just as he'd been coached. The High Priest went to the folding table and dipped his hand in the oil, which smelled of sandalwood, then pressed his palm on Urzahil's forehead, with his fingers on Urzahil's hair. A trickle ran down the side of his face. It was hard not to reach up and wipe it away, but his hands remained where they were, as the ceremony required.

The High Priest voice was deep and authoritative. "... from the Void, where dwells the Secret Fire which is the source of all life..." He spoke the most sacred words of the ceremony in Black Speech, the language of Melkor. The ancient language wasn't spoken anymore, and hadn't been for thousands of years, but everyone in the Temple knew certain phrases by heart.

The ritual incantation came to an end, and it was done. Urzahil got up and returned to his place with the others. When they'd all been anointed, an elderly cleric dressed each of them in the silver grey robes of a priest. Urzahil held out his arm and turned his palm over, admiring the heavy damask and the embroidered letters on the cuff.

After the ceremony, a Consecration banquet was traditionally held to celebrate the elevation of the Seminary students into the priesthood. Seating was done by rank, from lowest to highest. Urzahil stood with his classmates outside the Refectory, waiting to be called.

The Steward appeared in the doorway and motioned for them to follow.

The Refectory had been decorated for the occasion. The trestle tables that ran the length of the room, planks on sawhorses, were draped with rust red cloths. Arrangements of flowers had been placed at intervals, roses, larkspur, and delphinium from the Temple gardens.

High Table, on its raised platform at the end of the room, looked particularly magnificent. A long line of high-backed chairs ran the length of it, the one in the center as tall as a throne. But in addition, today it was illuminated by ironwork candelabra at either end of the platform and covered with a snowy cloth that reached the floorboards of the platform.

At the far end of the room, High Table looked particularly magnificent. It was raised up on a wooden platform with a tapestry on the wall behind it, and a long line of high backed chairs ran the length of it, the one in the center as tall as a throne. Today, the table was covered with a snowy cloth which fell to the floorboards of the platform.

By tradition, at the Consecration Banquet the new priests always sat at High Table. The Steward took them to the steps of the dais and showed them to their places. They were at the far ends, four at the left and four at the right. The new priests mounted the steps of the dais and crossed the wooden platform, their footsteps hollow on the planks. Urzahil sat down at the second place from the end.

The middle of High Table started to fill up. The High Priest came in with several members of the Council of Captains and what must be a very wealthy merchant. It took a lot of coin to be one of the Temple's major benefactors.

Below the dais, long tables ran the length of the Refectory. The trestle tables had no cloths, and they had benches instead of chairs. Here were the scribes and clerks, and the many kinds of minor administrator needed to run the Temple.

Urzahil had never sat at High Table before, even though his father had been one of the most powerful nobles in the city. As his father's natural son, he'd always been seated with merchants and tradesmen. He wanted to commit every detail to

memory, the white cloth on the table, the pewter polished to a mirror surface, the salt cellar which was a work of art.

“Urzahil, a word.” The High Priest’s Steward laid a hand on his shoulder. Urzahil pushed back his chair and followed the Steward. Perhaps he’d received a message of congratulations, most likely from task or from Lady Linton. The Steward stopped behind the servers’ screen at the far side of the platform.

“The High Priest asked me to tell you that one of the benefactors brought his wife, and there’s not enough room at High Table for her. I’m afraid we’ll have to give her your seat.”

Urzahil followed him to the long tables, where the Steward showed him a place among the scribes and clerks. Back at High Table, the other priests were moving over one, and a man and woman in dark colored wool sat one or two down near the High Priest.

Why did he pick me?

Urzahil had been sitting one place from the end, while the benefactor’s lady was near the middle.

There were several tables just below the dais where the minor nobility usually sat. One or two places were still vacant. The Steward walked right past them, and put him at one of the long tables where the scribes and clerks were sitting.

The clerks at the Temple were educated people and Urzahil enjoyed their company, but he minded it that someone like himself, the son of a titled Lord, had been seated with the sons of tradesmen who brewed ale or sold sailcloth in shops on the wharf. He was a nobleman, he didn’t belong here.

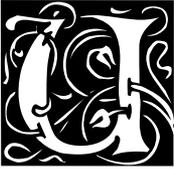
At High Table, his classmates leaned together in whispered conversations. There’d been no opportunity earlier to discuss what they’d all been through, the day long fast before the ceremony, the thrill of wearing silver grey for the first time, and how changed he felt by having gone through the ritual. He’d been looking forward to talking about with the others. His throat tightened.

The first remove was brought to High Table, and the diners turned to their food. His stomach growled. The last time he’d eaten was before first light the day before, and it was

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mid-afternoon now. Serving was always done in order of rank, it would be ten minutes or more before the food arrived at this table. It had been like this at banquets when he was living in his father's house, a poor relation. Nothing had changed.

Chapter 1 A Scrap of Parchment



Urzahil finished his duties in the Temple late in the morning and was enjoying a free afternoon in the library. As he moved through the stacks, the whisper of silk, the feel of the stiff brocade as it brushed the back of his hands, he smiled, reminded of his elevated rank. Last year, Urzahil had completed his second year of acolyte training and submitted to the solemn rituals that made him an anointed priest in the Cult of Melkor. Now he was entitled to wear the silver-grey robes of a priest, a high position in Umbar society.

As a priest, he could roam the restricted stacks freely. He went straight to the section on sorcery, and scanned the spines of the memoirs of famous sorcerers, books on theory, and cookbook-style books of easy spells. Urzahil was looking for spells to extend his own life, an interest he shared with virtually all Black Númenorians.

He picked up a thick treatise on theory, and added to it a thesaurus of the magical symbols used by sorcerers to record their spells.

Urzahil carried the books to his favorite spot, a long table of polished wood which had good light and a view of the courtyard. Water ran down the stone fountain into the lily pond below. It was the height of summer, and the expensively maintained Temple grounds were thick with color.

He opened the treatise and found the place where he got stuck last time, about ten pages in. The material was far harder than anything he'd studied last term in Advanced Sorcery.

He turned to the next page. The text described an enchantment to summon storms. Magical symbols, the standard ones used by all sorcerers to record their spells, were

strung together like words in a conversation he couldn't understand. On the line below, the same spell was written out a different way. It should have helped him understand the structure of the spell, but neither version made any sense. He couldn't even tell by looking what they were supposed to do.

He opened the thesaurus. In advanced work, the same symbol could mean different things, depending on context. Sometimes a diacritic changed the meaning. Sometimes several symbols formed an idiom whose meaning couldn't be inferred from the symbols from which it was made. The thesaurus didn't help. He decided to make a copy of the page to study later.

Gûlon¹, the keeper of the archives, sat at his usual table, his iron-grey hair falling in his face, the tools of his trade spread around him. A shallow tray numbered 1528 sat at his elbow, its hinged lid standing open. He was using tweezers and a thin steel spatula to manipulate fragments of parchment blackened by fire, or possibly mold, on a linen cloth spread in front of him. He frowned, then put down the tweezers and made a few notes.

Gûlon was different from Sûrion and the other Lore Masters. He focused on the physical condition of the documents themselves, preserving and restoring them, and keeping track of where they were stored. He was familiar with the information in the text, but it was secondary for him.

Two or three librarians moved around the stacks on hushed feet, shelving books and bringing fresh paper to the Lore Masters. Gûlon raised his hand and one of them came over. "Can you bring me the, it's hard to describe, the thing in the storage cupboard, in a small drawer on the right, I mean left. Never mind that, maybe I should get it myself." He got up and left the room.

Urzahil laid out paper, uncorked a jar of ink, and began to write. He dipped the brush and drew a graceful line from the middle of the letter upward, and twisted the brush as he lifted it from the parchment, forming a sharp tip. He dipped the

¹ gûl' - 'knowledge', 'on' - 'large amount of'

A Scrap of Parchment

brush again, and starting from the same place, drew a long downward arc, black all the way to the end.

Up like smoke, down like rain, a trick he'd learned as an acolyte. The elderly scribe who'd taught them to form their letters properly explained that the brush held only so much ink; in order to make the long arc, they must draw it in two strokes, middle to top, middle to bottom. It was the only way to get both ends black and sharp.

Laymen, untrained in the proper way to form letters, tended to draw the long arc in one continuous stroke. As the brush approached the tip of the descender, the ink often ran low, the black thinned to grey², and sometimes, the drying brush began to skip, leaving a stuttering line of dashes and dots. A layman was unlikely to notice the change in color or even the stuttering line left by a drying brush, but to a scribe's trained eye, details like that jumped off the page.

Urzahil used to write like a layman, most people did. However, the Temple required its priests to form their letters in the ancient style when they made copies of the sacred texts. Urzahil hadn't been happy about it at first, but when he got used to it, he found the formal script more educated-looking than his own hurried scrawl. Now that he knew how to write properly, he did it all the time, even for rough notes like the ones he was taking now.

The door banged open, and the booming voice of Tar-Castamir rang through the hushed atmosphere of the stacks.

"...whether or not it's authentic. The thing is, I can't make the announcement until I'm sure."

Urzahil looked up from his writing and saw the two most powerful men in the Haven of Umbar striding across the room, Tar-Castamir, Captain of the Haven, and the High Priest of the Temple. Tar-Castamir raised a hand in greeting. He held a folded parchment decorated with ink drawings in red and black, wrapped in the tapes and seals characteristic of a diplomatic letter.

² Egyptology technique regarding hieroglyphics

"The horseman who brought this is outside the city gates, waiting for an answer," Tar-Castamir said to the High Priest.

"I'll find you a handwriting sample." It was unusual to hear the High Priest speaking in such a deferential tone to anyone. "The Temple Archives house an extensive collection, and Gûlon will turn up something to compare your letter against."

Curiosity satisfied, Urzahil returned to his task.

They stopped in front of Gûlon's table. "The Keeper of the Archives will be able find whatever we have. This is where he usually sits." The High Priest indicated the parchment fragments, tools, and notebooks. "Look at this, he's reconstructed half a document from a few slivers. I don't know how he does it."

Just then, Gûlon returned with a handful of tools. "I use stock phrases, the standard formula for the greeting of a letter, a well-known proverb, the titles of a king.³ I can recognize a stock phrase from two or three letters, and often, the phrase lets me tie two fragments together. But I don't suppose the Captain of the Haven came here to talk to me about the archivist's craft."

"We want to see the Founder's Letter," said the High Priest.

Urzahil froze, his brush hanging in the air. The Founder's Letter was the most important historical document preserved in the Temple archives. Handwritten in Númenor by Sauron himself, it conferred upon Tar-Ardûmir, the priest who brought the Cult to the mainland, the authority to build this Temple. Sauron's letter to the Founder was one of the best examples of Sauron's handwriting known to exist.

Tar-Castamir wanted to see the Founder's Letter because ... No, that was impossible. Sauron was a historic figure from the Second Age who died three thousand years ago. He couldn't have sent a letter to Tar-Castamir, and he didn't have a messenger waiting outside the city gate for an answer.

Urzahil pretended to be absorbed in copying the page from his book, but the whole of his attention was focused on their

³ Without long, predictable German military titles, the Enigma code could not have been broken.

conversation. Nearby, a librarian seemed to be taking far longer to straighten a pile of books than the task required, but Urzahil could hardly blame him. If Tar-Castamir really had received a letter from Sauron, it could be the most important diplomatic event of their lives. His book of spells forgotten, Urzahil put down his pen and stared openly.

“Follow me, I’ll show you where it is.” Gûlon led the High Priest and the Captain of the Haven in the direction of the entrance to the vault.

Urzahil stood and smoothed the grey silk of his ceremonial robes, and with the dignified gravity of a newly-minted priest of the Temple, followed in their wake. By the time Gûlon reached the entrance to the vault, several librarians and a clerk had joined them.

Gûlon stopped in front of an iron-bound door set into the stone wall. He took a key from his belt and twisted it in the lock. Two clerks pulled the door back and secured it open, and Gûlon led Tar-Castamir and the High Priest down narrow stairs into the dimness of the vault.

Urzahil and the others followed, picking their way down the seven or eight narrow steps hewn into the rock, worn into half-moons from age. The walls of the chamber were the same white coral rock, formed long ago in ancient seas. Urzahil’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, and he looked around the small chamber.

There it was! His breath hissed between his teeth. In the middle of a vault lined with shelves of books and scrolls, a stone slab supported a glass-topped wooden case. Beneath the glass lay a sheet of parchment, three thousand years old and written in Sauron’s own hand.

The Founder’s Letter was the Charter founding this Temple. It described every ritual of the cult, from the prayers said on an ordinary day to the elaborate ceremonies performed on High Holy days. He was sorry it was too dim in here to read it. Like everyone else in the Temple, he worked from a copy of the Founder’s Letter almost every day, and knew whole sections of it by heart. He’d seen the original once before, on a class tour of

A Scrap of Parchment

He studied the writing itself. The brush strokes of each letter had been formed in the order and direction traditional to scribes. The block printing was legible and clear, without slant. There were no inkblots, no cross-outs, and it lacked ornamentation of any kind, even the diacritics were plain.

He reached the closing line, set apart and below the body of the rest,

...given by my hand at Armenelos, SA 3298

Urzahil shivered, as if in the presence of something holy.

Tar-Castamir unfolded the diplomatic letter and placed it on top of the glass beside the Founder's Letter. Urzahil craned his neck to read over Tar-Castamir's shoulder.

"Sauron of Mordor to Tar-Castamir, Captain of the Haven, greetings.

I seek the friendship of Umbar, and propose that our two nations form an alliance

against our common enemy, the nation of Gondor...given by my hand at Barad-dûr, TA 2951"



Diplomatic Letter
to Tar-Castamir

Slanted cursive with long ascenders and descenders. Some of the letters were ornamented with curlicues, and it had diacritics of crowns and stars. Wherever there was a long arc, the lower part of the descender was pale, and sometimes the slender tip was dashed.

"It's not a match." Tar-Castamir's shoulders sagged.

"No, it isn't. The Founder's Letter was written by a scribe, and your letter was written by a layman." The High Priest spoke with the authority of someone trained as a scribe. Urzahil had to agree, the brush strokes told the story.

"It's not a match." Gûlon said.

"Could it be a fair copy? We might be comparing the Founder's Letter against something written by a clerk." Tar-Castamir looked hopeful.

"No, it says, 'given by my hand.' That means the one who signed it wrote the whole text. They don't match." The High Priest shook his head.

"How did I fall for it? I should have known the moment I broke the seal. 'Sauron sends greetings'. He wouldn't have called himself Sauron, he hated that name. He would have used his real name, Tar-Mairon." Tar-Castamir pressed his lips in a thin line.

"Tar-Mairon isn't a name, it's a title. It means 'Admirable Lord'," the High Priest corrected him. "Sauron used a dozen different names: Annatar, Artano, Gorthaur, and most recently, Durgbu Dashu, or Tar-of the Earth, and those are just the ones we know of. No one knows his real name, but speaking as a scholar, I think it might have been Thû, which means a spirit in the shape of a wolf."

Tar-Castamir hung his head, and for a moment, he looked like an old man. "I wanted so badly for it to be real. The fragile truce with Gondor is deteriorating, and I'd hoped..." He wadded up the letter and shoved it in his pocket. "Oh well, it doesn't matter."

"I was trying to say, it's not a match because the Founder's Letter isn't the original, it's a contemporary copy," Gûlon touched the glass over the three thousand year old document.

Tar-Castamir frowned. "But it says, 'given by my hand....' If it were a copy, the scribe's name would be on the final line."

"You're thinking of a fair copy, a cleaned-up version of a rough draft. It's what you get when you scrawl out a message full of cross-outs and inkblots, and give to an assistant with good handwriting to redo. This is a facsimile copy. The layout and the arrangement of the words on each line are exactly like the original. And unlike a fair copy, the 'given by my hand' line doesn't hold the name of the most recent scribe, it's copied verbatim from the original." said Gûlon.

A Scrap of Parchment

"I always thought this document was the original. If it's exposed as a fake, let's just say it could reflect badly on the Temple." The High Priest stared at Gûlon, his eyes hard.

"The original was lost in TA 933 when Gondor occupied the city, then went after the Temple with particular violence. Everything that wasn't burned was buried in the rubble.

"Copies of the sacred texts, which were considered less valuable than the originals, made their way into classrooms at the Seminary, or into private homes. That's the only reason any of the sacred writings survived," Gûlon said.

"So the original Founder's Letter was lost?" asked the High Priest.

"All that remains of the original is a fragment three fingers wide and no longer than the palm of your hand. If you want to see Sauron's handwriting, I could try to find the fragment. It's here somewhere." He picked up a list and held it at arm's length. "It's in drawer number 902."

Tar-Castamir went to the back wall of the vault, lined with drawers that ran from floor to ceiling. The front of each one bore a brass plate with a number.

"No, Tar-Castamir, let me do it." Gûlon scanned a region right of center and waist high, then touched one particular drawer. "Here it is, drawer number 902."

Moving with exaggerated slowness, Gûlon pulled out the drawer with both hands, then lifted a drawer with a hinged glass top from its frame, and carried it to the case in the middle of the room.

"Stand back, please, I don't want to drop it. It's three thousand years old and could crumple to dust if you look at it cross-eyed." He set the drawer on top of the glass, beside the Founder's letter.

Founder's Letter, original. Recovered from the debris of the Temple, TA 973

Urzahil studied the fragment itself. The size of a dried leaf, and much the same color, it looked as if it would disintegrate at a touch. A piece had broken off and lay beside the main fragment. It was impossible to read the black writing on

parchment dark with age. Gûlon took a silver mirror from his pocket and used it to steer a circle of light onto it.

The fragment contained four or five lines of text, but each line had only a few words of text. Parts of words were missing where the fragment disintegrated at the edges. Urzahil didn't see anything he recognized. There was nothing in the text to tie this fragile scrap to the Founder's Letter.

"This is where the fragment came from." Gûlon traced a shape on the glass above the Founder's Letter over a passage about preparing for ceremonies on the High Holy days, the rituals of purification. Urzahil knew the passage by heart.

Urzahil looked back at the small scrap of parchment. Now that he was oriented, the truncated phrases and torn-apart words made sense. Here was the line about fasting and staying awake all night, there was the one that said, to perform a sacrifice, the priest must approach the altar naked beneath a white woolen robe, feet bare against the cold flagstones.

"Can we have another look at your letter?" asked Gûlon.

Tar-Castamir pulled the crumpled parchment from his pocket and smoothed it flat on the glass over the Founder's Letter.

Urzahil looked from the fragment to Tar-Castamir's letter. Both were written in loopy cursive with a steep slant, long arcs that grew pale at the bottom of the descenders, curlicues, and diacritics of crowns and stars. The hair rose on the back of Urzahil's neck.

"It's a match," said Gûlon.

Chapter 2 The Pillar



Sûlon was putting the drawer holding the scrap of parchment back in its slot.

Tar-Castamir looked off in the distance. “We need this alliance; we can’t defend ourselves against Gondor alone. Yet I hesitate. Sauron is dangerous, and not easy to trust.”

“Sauron is dangerous, but not to us. He’s always been a friend to Umbar, we were allies in the Second Age,” said the High Priest.

Tar-Castamir nodded. “I need to summon the Council of Captains. May I send a few of your servants to round them up? And borrow a place to meet?”

“You can use the Library,” said the High Priest.



Urzahil went up the narrow stairs. After the dimness of the vault, the sunlight was blinding.

“Urzahil, go fetch Sûrion. I think he’s teaching class right now, but it doesn’t matter, pull him out,” said the High Priest.

Sûrion was a Loremaster who’d spent years studying Sauron’s activities in the Second Age. He knew, better than anyone else, how Sauron would behave in various situations. Urzahil went to the Seminary building and found Sûrion standing at the slate board, lecturing a roomful of acolytes about the Second Age.

“The High Priest requests your presence in the Library.”

Sûrion dismissed the class and put down his chalk. While they walked, Urzahil told him what happened. He said nothing, but let out a low whistle.

“So the letter is real? That’s something I’d like to see!”

When he returned to the Library with Súrion, almost the entire Council of Captains had assembled around one of the long library tables. The only men missing were Tar-Orodreth, who was away at sea, and Tar-Marös, who was tending to his estates in the provinces.

Súrion approached the table and stood a respectful distance away, his hands tucked into his sleeves.

Now that he’d returned with Súrion, Urzahil had no good reason to linger. He moved a short distance away and studied the spines of books. *Daily Ritual Practices of the Cult of Melkor*. Not his area of interest. He leafed through the pages and listened to the conversation of the Council of Captains.

Tar-Castamir pulled out the folded parchment and smoothed it on the table.

“This letter was signed by Sauron himself. We’ve just authenticated the handwriting, it’s his. Now we have to decide what to do about it.”

“In the past when he offered his friendship, he killed the leader and destroyed the city,” said Tar-Númendur.

“You’re referring to the destruction of Númenor,” said Tar-Castamir.

“And Eregion before that. And probably others I don’t know about,” said Tar-Númendur.

Súrion raised a hand. “Sauron burned Eregion because he felt Celebrimbor used him for his knowledge, then cast him aside. And in Númenor, Ar-Pharazôn took Sauron prisoner and publically humiliated him.”

Urzahil had playacted that scene once, back in school. He still remembered the taste of dirt in his mouth, and the mocking laughter of his classmates. At that moment, he’d been just about ready to destroy Númenor himself.

“As far as I can tell, he’s only dangerous when he feels threatened. We don’t threaten him,” said Súrion.

“How can we sign a treaty with someone whose word isn’t good? Can we trust him?” Tar-Miruvor asked Súrion.

The Pillar

"To speak the truth? To keep his word? The Elves call him Sauron the Deceiver. He's a habitual liar who uses false names, denies his past, and conceals his true intentions.

"But can you trust him to keep the alliance? In the Second Age, he kept every alliance he made with Umbar, Harad, and Khand."

"Why does he want this alliance?"

"He feels threatened by Gondor. Same as us," said Tar-Adûmir. "It's as simple as that? He wants an alliance because we share a common enemy?" Tar-Castamir got to his feet. "My Lords of the Council, it's time to cast stones."

A servant was sent to find a Go set. He returned carrying a crosshatched board with two bowls of stones balanced on it. Tar-Castamir emptied the bowls on the table and mixed the black and white stones together.

"White is in favor of the alliance with Mordor, black is against." He found a pen case and shook out the pens.

"Tar-Miruvor?" Tar-Castamir's held the leather cylinder where Tar-Miruvor could reach it.

Tar-Miruvor reached to the center of the table and took a handful of stones from the pile. He selected one, and shielding it with his hand, dropped it into the case. He returned the other stones to the pile.

"Tar-Adûmir, you're next." Tar-Adûmir concealed a stone in his hand and dropped it in the case.

Tar-Castamir went last, after everyone else on the Council had voted, then emptied the stones onto the table, eight white and two black.

"It's decided. Umbar agrees to the alliance," said Tar-Castamir.

dong dong dong dong dong dong

Urzahil was crossing the Temple grounds and looked up, startled. Normally, the Temple bell only rang to summon priests to the sanctuary, but as far as he knew, the next ceremony wasn't until tomorrow morning.

dong dong dong dong dong dong

People were pouring out of the buildings. In the tower above their heads, the bell was still tolling. Urzahil cut through the

garden and rounded the corner of the Library. The square in front of the Temple was filled with people, and more were spilling in from every avenue and side street.

Tar-Castamir stood at the top of the temple steps. "People of Umbar, I have an announcement to make." There was a murmur from the crowd, like the hiss of foam sliding up the beach. "Something's happened, quite possibly the most important event in all our lifetimes."

A bird scolded in the distance and someone coughed, but there was no other sound.

Tar-Castamir held up the crumpled letter, decorated with red and black designs. Red tapes dangled from the broken seal.

"Sauron has declared himself in Mordor, and seeks our friendship. He wishes an alliance with Umbar."

There was a collective gasp, and then, "Huzzah, huzzah!" The square rang with their voices. The cry reflected from the faces of buildings and the inside of the city wall.

"Throw down the Pillar!" shouted a voice at the far side of the square.

Urzahil ground his teeth. The Pillar, a humiliating reminder of the Occupation symbolizing everything that made him feel beaten, belittled, or afraid.

"Throw down the Pillar, throw down the Pillar!" The cry was taken up all over the square. Urzahil started yelling it himself.

The crowd surged up the main road toward the gate in the outer wall, and climbed the steep bluff above the city crowned by the Pillar. The crystal globe on top caught the rays of the sun, dazzling bright.

Corsairs and shopkeepers attacked the Pillar with wooden planks, rocks, and their bare hands. They scarred the stone, but did little damage.

A team of stonemasons shouldered them aside. They scored a circle around the base of the Pillar, and then used a hammer and chisel to cut a wedge in one side. Anchor cables were attached as high as they could be lifted by ladder and pole. The master stonemason arranged men along the length of the cables, and told them to wait for his signal.

The Pillar

He cleared the slope between the two cables of all spectators. After the crowd had backed away, the master mason gave the signal, and a huge man swung a sledge which sent a crack through the stone. The teams on the cables pulled. The wedge opened wider. The Pillar seemed to stand firm, then it trembled slightly. All at once it tipped and came down with a horrible tearing noise as the stones fell apart and broke.

A roar arose from the crowd, shouting and cheering and applause all at once. The cloud of stone dust from the devastation reached them, white and gritty. Urzahil accidentally inhaled it and started coughing. He squeezed his eyes shut, but not soon enough. He had to blink away the grit.

The wind picked up. The stone dust cleared away, revealing a line of stone discs scattered down the slope. Some had huge chips knocked out of them, some were cracked in half. The crystal globe had smashed into knife-like fragments sharp enough to slice through boot leather. The last reminder of Gondor's occupation was gone.

Chapter 3 The Delegation



Urzahil returned to the Temple with barely enough time to change into clean clothes before the late afternoon services. He'd forgotten to tell anyone he'd left the compound, a small violation of the rules. Hopefully, his absence had gone unnoticed.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor behind him. He picked up his pace. So did the person behind him.

"The High Priest would like to see you in his office," said a clerk, a spotty faced youth with rounded shoulders.

Urzahil's heart sank. He followed the clerk to the reception room where the High Priest met with important visitors. The door stood ajar. Urzahil knocked and waited to be admitted.

A group of men stood on the patterned carpet in front of the High Priest's desk. Tar-Castamir and Tar-Adûmir were covered with dust. The High Priest was immaculate as usual, but wearing different clothes than he'd had on earlier. Sûrion's silver robes were as grimy as Urzahil's.

"The messenger will return tomorrow. I could hand him a letter, but I'd rather give him our answer in person, so I'm going to send a delegation to Mordor. Tar-Adûmir will lead it."

Urzahil knew the ambassador slightly, having interviewed for a position as tutor in his household right after Urzahil left school. He learned that Tar-Adûmir was pleasant, but didn't have much of a spine.

"Tar-Adûmir will be assisted by two envoys, Marös and Mírdain, and a scribe, Gaerna, to take notes." Urzahil knew all of them from school. Marös, the second son of the wealthiest family in the Haven, was an average student, but Mírdain sat in the back of the room all term making comments under his

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breath. How did he even get into the Diplomatic Service? Oh right, he was Tar-Adûmir's son.

And how had Gaerna gotten in? He had the table manners of a day laborer and no family connections at all. But he'd been a brilliant student, with more natural ability than most of their instructors. More to the point, he had neat, well-formed handwriting.

"I also want to include a priest of Melkor, to show Sauron we still practice the religion he founded." Urzahil glanced at Súrion and silently wished him luck on the trip. It was not without risk.

Tar-Castamir turned to Urzahil. "I asked the High Priest if I could borrow you for a week or so, and he agreed."

Urzahil sank onto a stone window seat without asking permission. Spots swam before his eyes, and he considered putting his head between his knees. Why not send Súrion, a Loremaster who'd studied Sauron his whole life? Perhaps the High Priest thought the younger priests were more expendable.

"What would you have me do?" Urzahil asked.

"My son tells me you have an almost supernatural ability to read people," said Tar-Castamir.

It was true. Urzahil could read a man's thoughts from a twitch in his mouth or the way he lifted his shoulder.

"While the others are talking, stand unnoticed behind them, and watch Sauron's face. Sort out truth from lie. Learn his intentions, and find out if he's dangerous to us. And if he makes a promise, determine whether he intends to keep it."



They would leave in the morning. Urzahil started packing, but took a break when the bell called them to the refectory for the evening meal.

On the short walk between buildings, he impulsively left the Temple grounds and turned in the direction of the house where he grew up. He passed through the gate in the old wall to reach the newer part of the city, where the houses were larger and further apart.

The servant who answered the door was surprised to see him. He said the family had already sat down to supper, but Urzahil was welcome to join them. A place was set for him between his younger brothers, across from Lady Linton. He couldn't think of anything to say to her, and sat in silence, feeling awkward.

"Did you see the Pillar come down?" asked the older of his two brothers.

"The crystal smashed into bits. I saved a piece. Do you want to see?" His youngest brother ran off to fetch it.

Urzahil pushed food around the plate and hoped no one would notice his appetite was gone. What if he never saw them again? When he thought he was unobserved, Urzahil studied each of their faces and committed them to memory.

"What brings you here tonight, Urzahil? We just saw you three weeks ago when you were anointed," Lady Linton said.

"I'm going away for a while. I've been asked to travel with a diplomatic mission," said Urzahil.

"You've wanted to do that for as long as I can remember." She sighed. "Did I ever tell you, you look exactly like your father."

He stayed as late as he dared, trying to make the visit last as long as possible.



The delegation assembled in the foyer of Tar-Castamir's house the next morning. When he got arrived at the great marble hall, the others were already standing around in a group, their baggage at their feet.

Urzahil joined them. Like the others, he was dressed for travel in a heavy cloak, wool leggings, and tall boots. The silver robes which marked him as a priest were folded in tissue and packed in his bag. He'd brought along his father's court clothes, as well.

Tar-Adûmir wore traveling clothes, and his manner was calm. Mírdain and Marös were joking loudly, as if they were nervous. Gaerna kept his face and hands still. Urzahil couldn't read him, even though he knew him well.

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“The messenger will return for our answer at noon. Let’s be there to greet him.” Tar-Castamir headed for the door.

Urzahil hoisted the strap of his bag over his shoulder. In front of the house, Tar-Castamir’s grooms brought in six horses, already saddled and ready to go. A groom led over a chestnut mare. He gave Urzahil the reins and fastened Urzahil’s bag behind the saddle, then gave him a leg up and helped him to shorten the stirrup leathers.

Tar-Castamir wheeled his big stallion around and spurred it toward the road. “Let’s go.”

Urzahil kicked his mare to a trot. They rode through the Main Gate an hour before the appointed time, and stood watching the road. They waited. The shadows got shorter as the noon hour approached.

“There he is!” Marös pointed East, toward Haradwaith.

A plume of dust rose from the road far away in the desert. After a while, they saw a speck that could have been a rider on horseback. They watched while he drew closer. The rider was dressed all in black and he rode a black horse. He drew rein ten paces before he reached them. The hood of his mantle was pulled low, concealing his face.

Tar-Castamir hailed him. “Who are you, and what brings you here?”

“My name is Dwar⁴. I am from Mordor, and I come for your answer,” he said. His voice was a hiss.

“Esteemed emissary from Mordor, this is our answer. We accept Sauron’s friendship, and offer our own in return.”

The messenger nodded. “Do you have a letter for my Master?”

“I ask that we be allowed to give him our answer in person. May our embassy accompany you on your journey home?”

Tar-Castamir made a sweeping gesture toward the five men behind him.

⁴ Dwar, the Dog Lord of Waw, was Nazgûl #3 (Iron Crown Enterprises)

The messenger moved forward. Urzahil's mare tossed her head and danced from foot to foot. He fought to control her. Another horse whinnied and reared up.

"You may travel with me, but do not follow too closely." He backed off a few paces, and their horses settled down.



They traveled due east through an empty stretch of desert, taking care to stay ten paces or more behind their guide. Any closer, and their horses became too hard to manage. Urzahil still hadn't seen the creature's face. He guessed the creature wasn't human, or at least, not a living human.

The road took them through a small town built around clusters of palm trees. In its center, where they grew so thick they completely shaded the road, their guide reined in. He pointed to the side of the road. A low wall of stones enclosed a public well. Urzahil kicked his feet loose from the stirrups and slid to the ground, his legs trembling.

Small children clamored around them, asking questions and trying to sell them homemade trinkets. Tar-Adûmir shooed them away. They moved toward the black-robed creature, who was standing perfectly still. The children slowed and then stopped. All at once, they wheeled like a flock of birds and scattered as quickly as they'd arrived.

Tar-Adûmir watched them go. "What do you bet we're the most exciting thing that's happened here in days?"

While the horses were drinking, the men filled their water skins and stretched their legs. Gaerna strolled over to the far side of the clearing where the creature was unsaddling his horse.

"There's not a cloud in the sky. Will there be frost on the ground tonight? I hear it gets cold in the desert when it's clear." Gaerna hugged himself and shivered.

"It shouldn't be too bad this time of year," the creature replied.

"That's a fine animal you have, by the way. He's not afraid of you?"

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“Not a bit. I raised him from a foal.” He patted the animal’s flank. “Your horses will get used to me too, if allowed to do so at their own pace.”

At a stop late on the second day, Gaerna approached him again. “How much further until we make camp for the night?” A streak of brown flashed by. “Was that a jackrabbit? My dog would enjoy chasing something like that.”

“What kind of dog?” the creature asked.

“Bull mastiff.”

“That’s a nice animal, but for wild boar or deer, you can’t beat a wolfhound.”

“You have one?”

“Oh, aye, half a dozen. I keep a pack for hunting,” said the creature.

On the third day, they turned north on the Harad Road which passed between Gondor and Mordor. The Ephel Dúath, the mountains encircling Mordor, dominated the view to the east.

When they made camp that night, the creature joined them at the edge of the firelight. Gaerna went over to talk with him. Urzahil heard the murmur of their voices and assumed they were having another tedious discussion about the merits of wolfhounds vs. mastiffs. Then the wind changed, carrying their words with it.

“What’s your Master like?”

“You can’t describe what he looks like because of the shape shifting. He takes different forms depending on his mood.”

“So you don’t always recognize him?”

“Well, that’s the funny thing about shape shifting. Whatever form he takes, wolf or demon or monster, he still looks like himself. He has the same eyes, the same walk. I’d know him anywhere.”

“And what sort of man is he?”

“It’s hard to say. Whatever you see, it’s a mask. It’s like he’s figured out what you want him to be, and he becomes that. And what’s behind the mask? I have no idea.”

“But some things must be consistent.”

"Aye. He wants to be admired. He always has to be in charge. He needs to have people around him. He talks a great deal but reveals little about himself. I've known him almost five thousand years, and I still don't know his father's name, or how old he is, or whether he's ever been married."

"Do you know his real name?" asked Gaerna.

"Aye. It's Mairon. He's only told me about a thousand times."



The light was fading, and Urzahil just wanted this day to be over. After four days in the saddle, there was no part of him that wasn't chafed raw. Today had been the worst. They'd been riding through increasingly difficult terrain, and he was almost too tired to speak. The others were no better. The jingle of harness and the sound of hooves stumbling over rocks were the only sounds.

The road climbed and climbed. The Ephel Dúath, the mountains encircling Mordor, loomed before them, orange in the setting sun. There was a great notch between the peaks. The wraith who was their guide lifted what appeared to be an empty sleeve and pointed, his voice a hiss.

"That's the Nameless Pass. This road goes through it, and once you're on the other side, you're in Mordor."

Urzahil had never wanted to go to Mordor. From what he'd heard, it was a desolate country. The land was black, stained dark by ash and cinders from the burning mountain, which, they said, had erupted fiercely long ago. Almost no rain fell, and the few streams were said to be bitter and poisonous. Nothing grew there but thorn bushes, and the land was filled with stinging insects.

It was cold in the mountains, particularly down here in the shadows. He shivered and pulled his cloak more tightly around him, the heat from the horse's body warm against his legs.

"When will we reach Minas Morgul? Is it far beyond the pass?" he asked the wraith.

"We're almost there. It's at the top of a high valley, just a little above where we are now."

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“Wait. It’s on this side of the Ephel Dúath? I thought the Encircling Mountains defined the border.”

“They do. Technically, Minas Morgul isn’t inside Mordor itself. It was built to control the road into Mordor. It’s only ours because we took it from Gondor by force.”

They rounded the final bend, and there it was, the fortress of Isildur. Made of white marble, it seemed to glow as if lit from within. Urzahil assumed at first it was an illusion of the reflected moonlight, but it was a pale phosphorescent light like the wake behind a sailing vessel on a moonless night where the seas were warm.

The moon was high in the sky when they reached the main gate. They passed beneath the arched entryway, and the gates closed behind them. The moon cast gray shadows of towers and ramparts, and themselves and their horses, on the colorless ground. Urzahil slid from the saddle and stood on shaky legs. He gave the reins to an orcish soldier and followed Tar-Adûmir and the others inside.

The inside of Minas Morgul was made from the same white marble as the outside. In the passageways where the light was dim, the walls glowed faintly green.

An orcish servant, long-haired and smaller statured than most, showed them to their rooms. She had elaborate patterns tattooed on her cheeks, but no scars. Urzahil had never seen a female orc before. He hadn’t known there were any.

The delegation was shown to an impressive suite of rooms. The main chamber was furnished with a large fireplace and a long table surrounded by enough chairs for all of them. A wrought iron chandelier with candle holders like dragons’ heads hung over the table.

Off the main chamber was a room with an enormous four-poster bed with silken hangings. The fireplace was framed by an alabaster mantle carved in a pattern of crescent moons. Embers crackled on the hearth. Tar-Adûmir dropped his bag on the foot of the bed and led them to the next room.

A second chamber, slightly smaller than the first, held a pair of beds made up with bolsters and embroidered coverlets. A narrow carpet, dark red with geometric patterns, covered the

floorboards between the beds. The fire had been lit there as well. Tar-Adûmir told Marös and Mírdain to choose beds for themselves. Urzahil opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again. He'd just assumed he and Marös, one of his closest friends from school, would share a room, and Mírdain would share the state bedroom with his father.

The third room was a small space for servants, a windowless cubby that barely held a washstand and two hard, narrow beds. There was no fireplace. On the foot of each bed there was an extra blanket, the thick gray sort used by soldiers. They would need them. The air in the mountains was chilly at night.

"Urzahil, Gaerna, this is your home for the next three days," said Tar-Adûmir.

Urzahil recoiled in surprise. Tar-Adûmir was implying Urzahil didn't have the status Marös and Mírdain enjoyed as noblemen. Urzahil resented having to sleep in the servants' quarters with the son of a day laborer, but at least Gaerna was good-natured and easy to get along with. Still, Urzahil would have preferred to bunk with either of the two envoys. Gaerna was outside of the aristocracy, and Urzahil feared that by implication, so was he.

The she-orc who'd shown them up here brought their supper, pieces of meat in a thick sauce of spices and raisins. She ladled from the tureen onto their plates, filled their wine goblets, tended to the fire, and then left them alone. They dined at the long table under the dragon chandelier.

Mírdain leaned over and sniffed the aromatic steam rising from his plate. "I wonder what kind of meat this is? Or perhaps I should ask, who?"

Urzahil froze, the tip of his dagger halfway to his lips. He lowered it to his plate, untouched.

Tar-Adûmir glared at his son. "I believe you're referring to something that happened during the Siege of Barad-dûr, just before they surrendered. That was a long time ago. I doubt the practice still exists."

Urzahil ate the bread and cheese, but didn't touch the meat. It didn't hurt to be careful. He noticed that no one else touched the meat, either.

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Mírdain reached for an apple. "What will happen tomorrow?" he asked his father.

"Well, our audience with Sauron will be purely ceremonial. We'll give him our answer, that we accept his offer to ally against Gondor. Of course, he already knows. We wouldn't be here otherwise." Tar-Adûmir gestured with his eating dagger.

"Unofficially, we're here to size up our new ally. What sort of man is he? Will he keep his word? He's a habitual liar; the Elves call him Sauron the Deceiver. That's where you come in, Urzahil. You're to watch him and read his thoughts, and if you can, learn his motivation."



They rose early the next morning. Urzahil dressed in the silver grey robes of the priesthood, Gaerna in a dark green tunic lined in apricot silk. It was odd seeing Gaerna in aristocratic silks. He looked nothing like the brawny youth who'd put himself through school prizefighting in taverns.

"Gaerna, I've never seen you in court clothes before."

The embroidered silks was ordinary as far as court clothes went, but Urzahil couldn't imagine Gaerna, a scholarship student and the son of dockworker, in anything but the coarse linens and wools of a laborer.

"The diplomatic service loaned them to me," Gaerna said.

An hour later, the Embassy from Umbar stood in the antechamber outside the Great Hall, where Sauron of Mordor, thought to have died three thousand years ago, would receive them.

The doors were flanked by a pair of sentries, orcs with scarred faces and ragged looking armor. They held weapons taller than themselves, spears with ragged scythe-like blades. Neither paid any attention to the diplomatic Embassy.

"Are we supposed to kneel before Sauron?" asked Marös.

"No, you're not his subjects, you don't have to kneel. Just bow respectfully," said Tar-Adûmir.

Urzahil studied the massive bronze doors to what had once been the audience chamber of Isildur. They bore designs of

trees and stars, relics of a time when this place was called Minas Ithil, Tower of the Moon.

"Aren't these the work of Gondor? Why hasn't Sauron melted them down for scimitars?"

"Sauron has great respect for craftsmanship, and the smiths of Gondor were among the best in the world, after the Elves," said the official who brought them there. "And you should never call him Sauron, he doesn't like it. Address him as Lord Zigûr, which means wizard."

"But everyone in Minas Morgul calls him Sauron, including you."

"Yes, but he doesn't need to know that," said the official.

With a screech of metal, a line of light appeared between the doors. There was a low thrumming noise from within, more felt than heard. It came through the paving stones and reached into his bones. Urzahil tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. Tar-Adûmir brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his robes.

The doors swung wide.

Tar-Adûmir raised his hand. "Follow me. I'll do all the talking. Don't make eye contact, and whatever you do, don't draw attention to yourselves."

Chapter 4 First Contact



It was surprisingly light inside the Great Hall. Urzahil blinked as he looked around. The light came through the clerestory windows high up near the vaulted ceiling and reflected against the polished marble, blindingly bright. It was dimmer in the shadows near the floor where the marble glowed faintly green, the color of lake water far below the surface.

Tar-Adûmir stepped through the doors, and the others followed. Urzahil lagged behind them in the dim, underwater light, his eyes on the slates a few paces ahead.

At the far end of an aisle formed by pillars of white marble, a low platform supported a throne. Behind it hung the largest banner Urzahil had ever seen, black with a red device, the Lidless Eye.

Light glinted from steel. Urzahil's eyes searched the dimness. A tall figure stood beside the throne, his gloved hands wrapped around the hilt of a great two-handed sword. His black garments were almost invisible against the banner behind him. A steel crown rested on his head. The Witch King of Angmar. On the other side of the throne, a second figure was similarly armed. For more stood at the back of the platform.

And what was that on the throne itself? Blackness filled the space, draped across its arms, swept against the floor. The shade unfolded itself and stood, liquid darkness, a blacker outline silhouetted against the black banner behind it.

Tar-Adûmir stopped ten paces before the platform.

"Ambassador from Umbar, I welcome thee." The Lord of Mordor spoke the traditional diplomatic greeting. His voice was a whisper, grating and harsh.

"Lord Zigûr, you do us honor." Tar-Adûmir spoke the customary reply.

"I offer thee my friendship. Let our two nations be allied against Gondor, our common foe. What sayest thou?"

"Umbar gladly accepts thy offer, Lord Zigûr." Tar-Adûmir mirrored Sauron's use of the ancient diplomatic language.

While they talked, Urzahil studied their host. Sauron was dressed entirely in black, without ornament of any kind. Unlike the servant at his right hand, he did not wear a crown. The light was behind him, it was impossible to see his face. Black gloves covered his hands.

Urzahil was here to watch Sauron and determine when he was lying, but how was he supposed to tell when he couldn't see him? Even if he could, it was said that Sauron lied as easily as he drew breath. If Sauron lacked remorse, as the Loremasters said, there'd be nothing to see.

Sauron took a step closer to Tar-Adûmir, leading with his right foot. That meant he was right-handed.

Urzahil watched Sauron's hands. They were relaxed and still, so Urzahil studied his feet. While Sauron was describing the strength of his army, the leather flexed over the tip of his right boot, which meant he was curling his toes. Why would he lie about the strength of his army? Everyone knew he'd just arrived here, and that Mordor was virtually unpopulated. Urzahil continued to watch him. Later, when Sauron promised to honor their alliance, his feet were as still as his hands. Good.

At one point, Tar-Adûmir gave Sauron an insincere complement. Urzahil saw Sauron's shoulders stiffen. Tar-Adûmir must not have noticed, because he did it again later. Marös, and then Mírdain also spoke to Sauron in an obsequious manner, and didn't seem to realize he found it annoying.

The audience drew to a close. It was time to exchange diplomatic gifts. Umbar's gift to Mordor was a fragment of the crystal globe that smashed when they pulled down the pillar. It was a large piece, smooth and curved on one side and ragged on the other. It was mounted on a block of white coral characteristic of Umbar, and on the side was a brass plaque commemorating the event.

First Contact

Sauron's gift to Umbar was an ornamental dagger with a gold handle set with gemstones. The blade was made of obsidian from Orodruin, the burning mountain. It was a handsome gift, worthy of the occasion.



After their audience, they had the afternoon free. Their minder took them on a tour of the fortress. They passed a small squadron of orcs going the other way, their armor clanking. Except for their guide, Urzahil hadn't seen anyone here who wasn't an orc.

"How many people are there in Minas Morgul?" asked Urzahil.

"Half the people from Dol Guldur followed him here, including myself. So let's see, Sauron and the nine Nazgûl make ten..." He counted on his fingers. "Including myself, I'd say twenty-two people."

"There must be more inside Mordor itself?" asked Urzahil.

"Mordor is empty," said the man.

The music of water reached him as they entered a courtyard in the middle of the fortress. In its center was a large fountain, alabaster white, carved in patterns of shells and vines. Water spilled over several basins before it fell into a tiled pool. The wind shifted, carrying with it a cold spray and the scent of water. Urzahil shivered. Even in the summer, it was cold up here in the mountains.

Near the fountain was the stump of a long-dead sapling, falling apart from age. Marks from a blade were visible on its cut surface.

"What's that twisted stump?" Urzahil asked.

"That's all that remains of the White Tree, the one Isildur brought from Númenor. The Witch King cut it down when he captured the fortress from Gondor."

Tar-Adûmir walked over to the fountain and sank down on the alabaster curb around it. He was a slender man with rounded shoulders, but slumped over with his white hair hanging in his face, he looked suddenly frail.

The guide crossed the courtyard to the stairway leading to the top of the wall. "May I take you to see the sights? From the Western Wall, you can look down the valley and see the meadow flowers in bloom. They have grey leaves like frost, and the flowers are a dark purple color. When you look down the valley, it's like a purple mist."

"Go on without me, I'm content to sit here in the sun." Tar-Adûmir made a gesture of dismissal.

"You don't mind being alone?" Their minder looked concerned.

"Urzahil will keep me company." Tar-Adûmir patted the curb beside him.

Mírdain's right here, why not him?

Urzahil sat down beside Tar-Adûmir and watched Marös, Mírdain, and Gaerna climb the stair and disappear along the wall. Urzahil scowled, he would've liked to see the meadow flowers too.

Tar-Adûmir's eyes scanned the edges of the courtyard. He twisted around and looked over his shoulder. They were alone. This close, the splashing from the fountain was so loud it may conversation difficult. He leaned over the water and reached for a leaf that was floating on the surface. Urzahil bent forward to see what he was looking at.

"So what did you observe of our host?" asked Tar-Adûmir, his voice low.

"He was easier to read than I expected," said Urzahil. "He lied a great deal, but mostly about insignificant things to save face, or make himself seem more important."

"What about our alliance?"

"As far as I can tell, he wants to ally with us against Gondor for mutual protection. There's no more to it than that."

"Good. You've just earned your keep on this trip."



A banquet was held in their honor that evening. Before they left their rooms, Tar-Adûmir lined them up and delivered a lecture.

“About that foolishness yesterday, when it was just us? That’s not going to happen again. You’re diplomats, you will behave like diplomats. I don’t care what they put in front of you tonight, you’re going to eat it without a single word of complaint.”

Urzahil was apprehensive when he entered the feasting hall, a long chamber with high arched ceiling. They were shown to places has the High Table. Tar-Adûmir sat near the center, then the two envoys, then Urzahil, with Gaerna at the end.

Sauron didn’t attend the banquet, his Chief Ambassador sat in his place.

“Why do you suppose Sauron’s not here?” asked Mírdain.

“He’s a supernatural creature, a spirit. I don’t expect he eats,” said Tar-Adûmir.

“Or perhaps he doesn’t show his face to strangers,” said Gaerna.

The first few removes were vegetables, bread, and rice. Then the main course was brought in, platters of roast chicken. Urzahil sagged with relief.



That night as he lay between waking and sleeping, Urzahil saw again the audience with Sauron that morning. But in his dream, Caldûr, his former teacher, was on the stage with Sauron, positioning him in the shadow of the hanging banner and arranging the folds of his hood.

“Hold your head high and pull your shoulders back.” Caldûr put a hand under Sauron’s chin and tipped it up, then pulled the hood low over his eyes. “Just like that. It adds an air of mystery if they can’t see your face, just like the low tones of music create a sense of dread.”

Urzahil’s eyes snapped open. He’d been in enough of Caldûr’s plays to recognize theatrical illusions when he saw them. The whole audience that morning had been staged. Urzahil felt disappointed, and more than a little disillusioned.

They rose at first light. Urzahil dressed in the silver grey robes of the priesthood, and Gaerna put on a dark blue tunic with silver embroidery at the cuffs and hem. He struggled to

fasten the closely spaced pearl buttons at the throat, which hadn't been made for a laborer's calloused hands.

When he finished, Gaerna gathered up his writing tools, and they joined the others at the long table under the dragon chandelier for breakfast. A fire was burning on the hearth. The main chamber was pleasantly warm after the unheated room where they'd slept.

Tar-Adûmir was lecturing his two envoys. "Our audience with Sauron yesterday was purely ceremonial. The real work begins today. We're going to negotiate a contract between our two nations, and record every nuance in precise legal language. It's going to be a long day. Plan to be there for eight or ten hours." Tar-Adûmir looked from Marös to Mírdain.

"Now, what should be on the forefront of your mind when you enter the Council chamber?"

"Mordor and Umbar are traditional allies, and have always helped each other," said Marös.

"And?"

"Mordor and Umbar share a common enemy," said Mírdain.

"And?"

Marös frowned, and Mírdain bit his lip. Tar-Adûmir looked impatient.

"We fear Sauron will pressure Umbar to become a vassal state. That must not happen," said Gaerna.

"That's the answer I was looking for," said Tar-Adûmir.

Then he turned to Urzahil. "Remember why you're here. Observe Sauron closely when he speaks. He may let down his guard in a way he didn't yesterday, and reveal more than he intends."

They followed Tar-Adûmir into the corridor. Their minder appeared shortly and led them to the Council chamber. Tar-Adûmir stepped inside and the others followed.

The walls of the Council chamber were the same white marble as the rest of the fortress. A long table ran almost the length of the room. Light poured through a bank of windows, reflecting from the pale walls and the polished oak table.

The Embassy from Mordor sat on the far side of the table. They were dressed entirely in black. Near the windows, a

heavyset man, older and more formally dressed than the others, was speaking to a scribe. He'd been at the banquet last night, the Chief Ambassador for Mordor. The massive chair at the head of the table was empty.

Their minder showed Tar-Adûmir to a seat opposite Mordor's ambassador. Marös and Mírdain were given seats next to Tar-Adûmir, and Gaerna sat behind them on a stool near the wall, his writing box balanced on his knees. A wraith got up and moved to Mordor's side of the table, and Urzahil took its seat. The wood was cold.

A narrow door near the head of the table swung open. Something blocked the light. A figure robed in black placed a hand on either side of the doorjamb, then ducked under the lintel and entered the room.

Chairs scraped against stone. With the whisper of fabric, those on the Mordor side of the room rose to their feet. Tar-Adûmir stood also, and the delegation from Umbar followed his lead. Sauron crossed the room in three long strides. The flagstones rang under the weight of his tread. His people bowed their heads as he swept past and took his place at the head of the table.

Everything about Sauron's posture was confident, self-assured, and aggressive. Even if Urzahil hadn't known who he was, or known anything else about him, he would have been able to tell he was dangerous. Urzahil tried to see Sauron's face, but he was visible only as a black outline against the windows behind him. A theatrical trick, almost certainly done on purpose.

A second figure followed Sauron into the room. It wore a steel crown and carried a great, two-handed sword. It was at least as tall as its master, and wore the same featureless robes, but it looked utterly different. It moved fluidly, as if sliding in the shadows, unseen, invisible. Its footsteps made no sound. It reached the window and stood beside Sauron's chair, holding its weapon in both hands, the tip of the blade resting on the flagstones.

"Shall we begin?" Sauron's voice was a whisper, low and harsh. He introduced his Chief Ambassador, the older man on his right, and the junior envoys supporting him.

"Who is standing beside you? The one with the crown?" asked Tar-Adûmir.

"He is the Witch King of Angmar, a great general and my second-in-command," said Sauron.

The tip of the two-handed sword scraped against the flagstones, and Urzahil thought he saw the High Nazgûl stand a little straighter.

Tar-Adûmir introduced himself as Ambassador from Umbar, and named each member of his own delegation.

When the formal introductions were complete, the Witch King leaned his sword in a corner and pulled up a chair, wedging himself between Sauron and his Chief Ambassador, who moved over to make room for him. A look of annoyance flashed across the ambassador's features, but it disappeared an instant later behind a neutral expression. The Witch King moved so close to his master, there was little space between them, but Sauron didn't seem to notice or mind.

Drafting the contract was long and tedious. After they'd been working for a couple of hours, people on both sides of the table put down their quills. At the head of the table, Sauron stood up and stretched, then turned to Tar-Adûmir.

"Let me pose you a diplomatic puzzle. At the end of the Second Age, when my army was wiped out and my fortress besieged, I sent a message to Gil-galad and Elendil offering terms, which were rejected. If you'd been there, what would you have advised me to do?"

"Exactly what you did do. Retreat behind the walls of Barad-dûr and wait. You were well provisioned inside the fortress, while outside, the enemy had long supply lines and were camped on the plains of Gorgoroth where there's no water." Tar-Adûmir's voice was deferential.

"No one could've handled it better." Mírdain assured him, and Marös nodded in agreement. Sauron leaned back and crossed his arms. He looked down the table and his attention seemed to rest on Urzahil.

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“What does our priest have to say?” asked Sauron.

I would have told you to not attack Gondor the first place. Then you wouldn't have provoked the counterattack that cost you your realm, and your life.

Urzahil bit his tongue and murmured that he wasn't trained as a diplomat.

“Even so, I'd like to know your opinion,” Sauron said.

Urzahil weighed his words. He would be polite but honest.

“Well, I think they were options available that may have served you better. For instance, instead of meeting Gil-galad in single combat, you could have escaped through one of the sally ports and gone into hiding. You'd have lost Barad-dûr, but you'd still have the Ring.”

Sauron's fingers, which had been drumming on the table, suddenly stopped. Tar-Adûmir leaned around Mírdain and shot Urzahil a look of warning.

Gaerna leaned forward from his place against the wall. “Or, after they rejected your terms, you might have had Gil-galad and Elendil assassinated.”

Tar-Adûmir's breath hissed between his teeth. No diplomat in the world would have suggested assassination, not even in jest.

“Well, he killed them later, anyway,” said Gaerna.

Tar-Adûmir turned around in his chair. “Gaerna, that's quite enough.”

Gaerna wouldn't be going on any more diplomatic missions for Umbar. Sauron tapped a finger on the table. Urzahil thought he looked amused.

“All right, back to work,” said Sauron.

By late afternoon, the envoys from the two nations began to relax around each other.

“So, how did you come to join the diplomatic service?” a young envoy across the table asked Urzahil.

“I'd always wanted to go on a diplomatic mission. There was a time I didn't think I ever would. My stepmother wanted me to do something practical, but I told her there was no way I'd ever fall so low I'd allow myself to be apprenticed to a blacksmith.”

At the head of the table where Sauron was writing, his quill froze for a moment. All conversation in the room stopped.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! How could he have forgotten about the Forging of the Ring? Before Sauron was anything else, he'd been a blacksmith's apprentice.

Tar-Adûmir's head snapped around. He looked daggers at Urzahil, then turned to Sauron, his eyes pleading.

"My Lord Zigûr, I wish to apologize..."

Sauron continued writing and gave no sign he'd heard. The room was silent except for the scraping of quill against vellum.

Sauron's Chief Ambassador shuffled through a sheath of papers. "I'd like to revisit the clause about establishing a permanent Embassy in each nation. Should the host supply the ambassador's residence, or should the foreign delegation rent the property?"

Everyone in the room had an opinion, and the buzz of conversation resumed. Urzahil stole a glance at Tar-Adûmir, who was looking straight ahead, his face white. Urzahil dreaded the private conversation they would surely have later. He also knew it was unlikely he'd be asked to come on a diplomatic mission again.

Urzahil remembered when his biggest fear was that he wouldn't be allowed to leave Minas Morgul. The last King of Gondor had accepted a challenge of single combat from the Witch King, rode through the gates of this fortress, and was never seen again. After the look Tar-Adûmir shot him, that had dropped down to being his second biggest fear.

It was late afternoon when the last clause was worked out. The scribes, Gaerna and a clerk from Mordor, moved to the table and laid out fresh sheets of vellum, pens, and ink. Tar-Adûmir and the Chief Ambassador for Mordor took turns reading aloud from scraps of paper covered with crossings out and marginal notes, and the two scribes wrote clean copy from it.

Soon, a dozen sheets of vellum were laid side-by-side along the length of the table. When the ink was dry, the contracts were signed by both parties, and the work of diplomacy was over.

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There were no more diplomatic events ahead of them. They would dine in their rooms, and in the morning, they would begin the long ride back home. Tar-Adûmir stayed behind to speak informally with the Chief Ambassador from Mordor, but the rest of the delegation was free to go.



Back in the confines of his unheated room, Urzahil stripped off his silver robes and changed into an everyday tunic and leggings. Gaerna was sitting on the other bed, putting his pen nibs back in his writing box. Urzahil had just finished folding the priestly garments in tissue and packing them in his bag with the journey tomorrow, when there was a knock on the outer door. Gaerna got up and crossed the main chamber to answer it. An ancient orc stood in the doorway. Gaerna looked over his shoulder and shouted, "He wants you to come with him."

Urzahil's mouth went dry. Tar-Adûmir must have finished his meeting with the ambassador from Mordor, and now Tar-Adûmir and Urzahil were going to have a cozy chat about Urzahil's lack of tact this afternoon. Urzahil got to his feet, his heart pounding.

He followed the orc, who limped but moved at a brisk pace, downstairs to the main corridor. But before they reached the Council chamber, the orc turned down a narrow passage and climbed several flights of stairs into a part of the fortress Urzahil hadn't seen before. They stopped in front of a wooden door fitted with decorative ironwork. The orc knocked, then pushed open the door and stood back for Urzahil to enter.

The room looked like a private study. Tapestries hung on the wall, and there was a long table in the center. A figure in black sat at its head. His hood was pulled low, and the light was behind him, leaving his face in shadow. It was like something from one of Caldûr's plays.

Behind Urzahil, the door clicked shut. The black-robed figure placed his gloved hands on the table. One finger was

missing. Urzahil backed toward the door. The roaring in his ears blocked out all other sounds.

"I want to apologize for what I said earlier. I didn't mean to give offense..." Urzahil stumbled over his own words.

"It is forgotten. Sit down." Sauron pointed to the chair on his left.

Urzahil sat. Heat radiated from the creature, far more than from an ordinary person, and he smelled of smoke. It was said the heat of his body alone had killed Elendil. Or Gil-galad. Urzahil couldn't remember.⁵ It was said that Sauron's skin was black with invisible flames running over it. Why didn't his clothes catch fire?

Urzahil yanked his thoughts back to the present. He studied his host. Sauron's hands were still and his shoulders relaxed. Beneath the hood, a veil covered his face. It moved slightly with his breathing.

"I'm negotiating alliances with Harad and Khand, but I don't have enough people. Will you enter my service as an emissary?"

Urzahil blinked in surprise. He understood each individual word, but for a moment, the sentence didn't make any sense.

"It's a great honor, Lord Zigûr, but I'm bound to serve the Temple for another three years."

"I founded the Temple of Melkor, and was its first High Priest. I'm sure your High Priest would release you if I asked him to."

"This is very sudden. I need time to think about it." Urzahil just wanted to get out of there.

"Take your time. The next time you come out, we'll talk again."

It was a moot point. There wouldn't be a next time.



⁵ Tolkien told the story both ways.

Tar-Adûmir paced back and forth, waving his arms as he ranted.

“What were you thinking?” The ambassador sprayed his words. Urzahil stared straight ahead, his arms at his sides.

“Do you realize you just insulted the most powerful being in Arda?” Tar-Adûmir’s face was scarlet, and a vein pulsed in his forehead..

“I’m sorry, it was an accident. And anyway, I don’t think he was insulted, I think he thought it was funny.”

Tar-Adûmir continued to berate him. The door to Marös said Mírdain’s room opened a crack, and closed again. Gaerna was nowhere to be seen. Urzahil’s attention wandered. He didn’t tell Tar-Adûmir about Sauron’s offer. It was his alone, he didn’t want to share it. Tar-Adûmir wouldn’t have believed him anyway.

“Urzahil, you aren’t cut out to be a diplomat. You have a fresh mouth, and you don’t think before you speak. Tar-Castamir was wrong to send you here. We’ll leave for home tomorrow, and not speak of this again.”

That night, Urzahil lay awake staring into the darkness while Gaerna snored softly in the narrow bed next to his own. Or not so softly. But that’s not what was keeping him awake.

Sauron’s offer was flattering, but it wasn’t right for him. He was comfortable in the Temple. His position was secure, and he was well taken care of. He’d just been anointed a priest a few weeks ago, on Midsummer’s Day. He still owed three years of service for his education. Even if he wanted to accept Sauron’s offer, he wasn’t free to at the moment, but it was nice to have been asked.



Before first light the next morning, they assembled in the courtyard behind the gates of Minas Morgul. Their horses were waiting for them, already saddled and bridled. A small group of men-at-arms would ride with them as far as Haradwaith.

Gaerna was the last to join them. He was wearing clothes unsuitable for travel, a silk tunic and soft boots, and he didn’t have any luggage.

Emissary II

"Gaerna, you're going to make us late," said Tar-Adûmir.

"I'm staying on. I've been offered a position as an emissary."

Chapter 5 Regrets



Urzahil rode with the rest of the delegation down the Harad Road towards the deserts of Haradwaith, and then home. The creak of saddle leather and the jingle of harness were the only sounds other than the wind and the occasional squawk of scrub jays. Even in the wilds of Ithilien, they were perfectly safe. A group of men-at-arms rode with them as their personal guard.

To the left, the peaks of the Ephel Dúath clawed the sky. A steep incline of loose stone led to the base of a sheer cliff. Those mountains couldn't be crossed. No one could enter Mordor without its Lord's consent.

Marös led a sorrel mare with an empty saddle by a lead line, the mount that had been Gaerna's on the trip here. Until yesterday, Gaerna had been Tar Adûmir's scribe, slightly above a servant. It wasn't until they were mounting up for the ride home that Gaerna appeared in court clothes, obviously not planning to travel, and announced he'd been asked to stay on an emissary for Mordor.

Urzahil had been offered the position first. He hesitated, and it was given to Gaerna instead. Urzahil hadn't realized how badly he'd wanted it, but by then, it was too late. Now Gaerna was an emissary for Mordor, and Urzahil was returning to his life as a priest in Umbar. Stupid, stupid, stupid! He slammed a fist into his thigh and cursed.

What was Gaerna doing now? Probably being instructed in the duties of an emissary. Being fitted for black robes with Sauron's badge on the left shoulder, the stylized Eye in red on a black background. Being assigned quarters far nicer than the

windowless closet he'd shared with Urzahil during their stay in Minas Morgul. He ground his teeth.

Urzahil had never wanted to be a priest. When he entered University, he wanted to be an emissary, although he'd assumed it would be for the Haven of Umbar. Urzahil brightened. Maybe there were other positions available. The next time he came to Minas Morgul, he would ask.

In contrast to his own bad temper, Ambassador Adûmir's mood was buoyant. "We accomplished everything we set out to do. We met Sauron, we decided he was no threat to us, and we agreed to ally with him against Gondor."

"We could have signed the treaty and had the same agreement without ever leaving home," said the Ambassador's son Mírdain.

"Yes, we could have, but I wanted to see Sauron with my own eyes and size him up before committing the Haven of Umbar to join forces with someone so dangerous. But as far as I can tell, Sauron's intentions are exactly what he says they are, to ally with us against a mutual enemy."

Urzahil sat up a little taller. No one in the delegation could read people like he could. They couldn't read Sauron's face because it was always veiled. But Urzahil could just as easily read a walk, a sag in posture, or the intake of breath. He looked at Tar-Adûmir, waiting for praise.

Tar-Adûmir turned away, unsmiling. It was possible he was still mad about the gaffe Urzahil made at the negotiating table.

The men-at-arms escorting them had ridden slightly ahead. Marös lowered his voice. "The man in the black robes, do you think he was really Sauron? How could someone come back from the dead after 3000 years?"

"Sauron is an ancient being. Some would call him a demon. I imagine the black wrappings cover something deformed and hideous. Those who saw him in the Battle of the Last Alliance said his skin was coal black, with tongues of flame running over it. I sat beside him in the Council chamber, and I could feel an unnatural heat coming off his body," said Tar-Adûmir.

Urzahil had noticed that too. When he'd sat next to Sauron in Sauron's private study, it felt like being next to a stove or a

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hearth. Urzahil still hadn't told Tar-Adûmir about that secret meeting, or the position Sauron had offered him.

Mírdain, who in their University days sat in the back of the room mocking their instructors, twisted in the saddle to face his father.

"I don't believe in demons, but I do believe in minor warlords with big ambitions. Why be Tar-Never Heard Of Him when you could be Sauron the Dreaded, scourge of the Second Age?" He feigned draping a veil over his face. "A black robe and a square of silk could make you the most feared creature in Arda."

Marôs turned around to face Mírdain. "You're right, we never actually saw him. Between the veil, the gloves, and the loose-fitting robes, it could've been anyone under there."

Tar-Adûmir cleared his throat. "You're forgetting one thing. The letter announcing his return matched the only known sample of Sauron's handwriting. And I sat beside him during negotiation and watched him write. The handwriting was the same."

"Your father's right, Mírdain. I watched Sauron closely. He lied repeatedly about a number of things, but when he told us who he was, I saw no sign of deception." Urzahil looked to Tar-Adûmir, expecting to see him nod. Instead, Tar-Adûmir looked straight ahead as if Urzahil wasn't there.



Inside the Temple, Urzahil looked up at the underside of the dome, hundreds of feet above his head. The Temple was the tallest structure in the Haven of Umbar, and the most magnificent.

Every day, Urzahil took his place in a row of priests clad in silver-grey and sang the words of prayer to Melkor. The ceremony today was the same as yesterday, and the same as the day before it, stretching back to the day he'd joined the Seminary almost three years ago. He yawned with his teeth clamped shut, hoping no one noticed.

Urzahil glanced at Súrion. Súrion's eyes were closed, as if he were experiencing a mystery, something sacred and magical.

In the Temple, they were taught that by worshipping Melkor, first and greatest of the Holy Ones, they could stave off death, possibly for years. Every day, they chanted the words from the sacred texts, giving praise to Melkor, Giver of Life.

Urzahil had few religious feelings. He suspected the whole thing had been invented by Sauron to split the Númenorian people into two rival factions, which he proceeded to divide and conquer. It had worked, too. Urzahil hadn't shared his views with anyone else in the Temple. The Priesthood was his livelihood. He relied on the room and board provided by the Temple. Without it, he'd be sleeping in the streets.

Late summer arrived and with it, August Eve, the High Holy Day between the Summer Solstice and the Fall Equinox. On High Holy Days, the Temple offered a blood sacrifice to Melkor, along with ceremonies and prayers from first light until after sunset.

Before dawn, Urzahil entered the robing room beneath the Temple, one of the last to arrive. The other priests were already dressed, the hems of their white garments sweeping the floor. He changed into the fine linen under tunic that priests wore beneath their ceremonial garb and took his place against the wall.

Temple servants brought in the vestments of heavy silk brocade embroidered in metallic thread. When it was his turn, Urzahil stood motionless while they lifted the sacred garment over his head and arranged it so it lay flat. Once he had been arrayed in sacred finery, Urzahil stood with Súrion and the others waiting to be called into the Temple.

A priest famous for his piety had been selected to perform the sacrifice. He entered the room. The others drew back and bowed their heads as he passed. His face was the color of wax, and there were shadows like bruises under his eyes. The rituals of purification required the priest who would wield the knife to fast and to kneel before the altar all night before the ceremony.

This particular priest was said to fast longer and to stay kneeling longer than was actually required by the rules of the

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Cult. He had no interest outside of the Cult of Melkor, and he was the High Priest's favorite. Neither Urzahil nor Súrion could stand him.

The favored one went to the center of the room and stood with his arms outstretched. Temple servants undressed him, then clothed him in a surplice of pure white wool. He wore nothing beneath it, and he was barefoot. His eyes held a faraway expression, as if he had entered a sacred realm.

They watched him leave. When the door closed behind him, Súrion said, "You do know, don't you, that the ritual to prepare for sacrifice wasn't designed by Melkor himself? If it had been, it might have involved sleeping late and eating a decent breakfast."

Urzahil's jaw dropped in feigned shock. "I think you're mistaken, this is Melkor we're talking about. If Melkor had designed the ritual, it would involve falling into bed drunk, rolling on top of a girl, and making the headboard bang in the ancient rhythm."

Súrion stared over Urzahil's shoulder, his eyes wide. His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"Come on Súrion, it was just a joke."

"Urzahil, I could have you flogged for blasphemy." Urzahil wheeled around. The High Priest's mouth was set in a thin, hard line.

Súrion pushed between them. "Sir, you're a respected scholar, surely you know that's something Lord Melkor might actually have done. What Urzahil said was rude, but it wasn't blasphemy."

The High Priest turned on his heel and left without a word. The door slammed behind him.

Chapter 6 Homecoming



That night, Urzahil lay awake in his curtained bed. The High Priest had accused him of blasphemy. It was a serious offense. He'd said, "I could have you flogged," but he could just as easily have banished Urzahil from the priesthood. Súrion had defended him, and as far as Urzahil could tell, the had backed down.

But even if he'd escaped standing shirtless in the courtyard with his arms wrapped around a pole before a hundred witnesses, counting aloud while crosshatched stripes were laid across his back, there would still be consequences. He just didn't know what they were yet.

He thought of the day almost three years ago when Súrion's influence got him admitted to the Seminary. Urzahil was destitute. He was about to his mother's people and asking them to take him on as a farmhand, even though he had been raised in an aristocratic household.

Suppose he had gone to them, and his mother's people had taken him in? He'd be one of them now, a farmer working with a hoe, close to the land, the sun is clock, the change in seasons his only calendar. He'd see little of the outside world, save for the steward on horseback coming to collect the rents, or when they all made the long trip to market. He imagined wildflowers along country lanes, and new milk, and coming in at the end of the day tired, but tired in a good way.

He'd never wanted to be a priest. He only accepted the scholarship because it came with room and board. For someone who'd been scraping plates and eating scraps meant for the pig, who hoped to sleep indoors that night, it had the offer was too good to turn down.

Homecoming

Life in the Temple was secure and comfortable, but Urzahil didn't belong here. Everyone else seemed to have a spiritual connection with Melkor, and believed their relationship with him would give them years beyond their natural lives. Urzahil, on the other hand, didn't think Melkor paid any attention to them at all, assuming he even existed. Despite their unending prayers and sacrifices, no one appeared to be living a particularly long time.

Urzahil had never had gone to see his mother's people. All of a sudden, he longed to see the place where she was born, to meet the cousins who, he was sure, would look like him. He wanted to know where he was from.

Once, when he was traveling on the Main Road with his father, his father pointed out the turnoff leading to the farm where his mother's people lived. Urzahil committed the landscape to memory, but he couldn't find the turnoff later. Every farm lane had looked the same.

The farm where his mother's people lived was on Lintoron land. The next time he saw his brother Aldamir, he would ask him where it was. When would he see him next? He promised his family he would stop by the house when he returned from Mordor and tell him about his trip. He resolved to go to the house as soon as he could.



The next afternoon, Urzahil went to the house where he'd grown up.

The garden was bright with late summer flowers, not as meticulously tended as the plantings around the Temple grounds, but well cared for and cheerful. His hand was on the gate, but he hesitated. His stomach felt like acid. He hoped he wouldn't see Lady Lintoron. He couldn't remember a time when there wasn't tension between them, but it escalated after his father died, until after a particularly bad quarrel, he'd stormed out of the house, even though he had nowhere else to go.

He mounted the steps and knocked. A servant opened the door, and came back a few minutes later with his half-brother Aldamir.

"Urzahil! You're back! Stay for supper, and tell us about your trip to Mordor."

Urzahil's stomach lurched. But he'd dined with the family before he left for Mordor, and Lady Lintoron had spoken kindly to him. He hadn't quite known how to react.

He heard footsteps across the marble floor, and looked up. Lady Lintoron came into the front hall, the summer-weight silks of her long tunic rustling around her. She placed both hands on both his shoulders. "You look so like your father." She blinked hard and smiled at him.

The Lintorons filed into the Great Hall and sat around took their places around the long table. A servant set soup and bread in front of them and filled their goblets with wine.

"What was Sauron like?" asked Aldamir.

Urzahil considered. "I don't know what I expected, but whatever it was, he was different than that. I thought he'd be a demon, and he was, but I didn't think he'd be so funny.

"During negotiations, one of the Ringwraiths openly contradicted him. We were shocked, we'd all thought Ringwraiths were slaves without free will. Sauron said, "My servants are supposed to tell me what I need to hear. Of course, it would work better if I'd listen, rather than explain to them why they're wrong."

"Do you want to go on another diplomatic mission, or was this a one-time adventure?" asked Aldamir.

"I'd like to go again, but I don't know if I will," said Urzahil

"You've wanted to be an emissary since before you went to University. I've never heard you express an interest in the priesthood. In fact, when Súrion suggested it the first time, you almost choked," said Lady Lintoron.

A servant cleared away of the last of the plates and topped off their wine goblets. This was the most relaxed part of the evening, when the wind had begun to take effect.

Lady Lintoron excused herself and left the room.

Homecoming

“Aldamir, may I ask you a favor? I’d like to see a map of the Lintoron landholdings. I’m trying to locate the farm where my mother’s people live.”

“All the records for rents are in the study. I’ll be right back.”

Aldamir left the room and returned a minute later with a rolled-up scroll of vellum and a ledger book. He spread the scroll out on the long table and weighted the edges with a salt cellar and an empty goblet.

“These are the Lintoron landholdings. It’s this entire swath between the High Road and the coast.”

He pointed to an enormous tract of land, subdivided into tiny plots. The irregular shapes of individual farms had been drawn in black ink. Each had been given a number.

“Can you find it on the map?” Aldamir asked.

Urzahil studied the map. He traced a finger along the High Road looking for the turnoff. There are several farm lanes, it could have been any of them.

“Do you know their plot number?”

Urzahil had no idea.

“It’s Plot 32,” Lady Lintoron said from the doorway.

Urzahil looked up, his cheeks burning. He’d been talking about to his mother in front of Lady Lintoron, under her own roof. He held his breath and waited for the worst.

“How do you know?” asked Aldamir.

“Once I became aware she existed, I learned everything I could about her: her name, her character, where she came from. Even after all these years, I still remember everything about her.”

She leafed through the ledger book. “Here it is, Plot 32. Your mother’s people have rented it for generations. The current leaseholder is a farmer named Gareth.”

Urzahil studied the map. On horseback, he could reach it in half a day. North on the High Road, left onto an almost invisible farm lane, then follow it for several miles to the first hamlet. Easy. Urzahil would have been able to find the turnoff on his own, without having seen the map.

After thinking about it for a few days, Urzahil asked for permission to be away for the day and made arrangements to

borrow a horse from the Temple stables. He set off at first light and reached the turnoff from the High Road around midday.

He followed the narrow lane, little more than a cart track, for two or three miles. Green farmland stretched out on the either side of the rutted path. The wheat had grown tall, but he didn't see any people working in the fields. Now and then he saw a scarecrow, but that was all.

He went over a small rise, and on the other side, there was a group of three small cottages. Each one looked the same, with a thatched roof, a curl of smoke rising from a wooden chimney, and a woven withy fence enclosing a pigsty. Small towheaded children running around in front of one of the cottages froze and stared at him openly.

This was a homecoming of sorts; he'd never been here before. Would he see his own features reflected in those of his cousins? What they have the same coloring, use the same gestures?

He reined in. "I'm looking for Gareth."

There was a lot of giggling, and several children ran into one of cottages.

More farmers appeared in doorways and from around the cottages, in homespun clothes and wooden shoes, with broad straw hats to protect from some from the sun. They held agricultural implements with long wooden handles and iron-edged blades. Urzahil couldn't even give names to them, but some resembled hoes, and others, pickaxes.

They looked at him, their faces closed. He guessed that a well-dressed stranger on horseback didn't come down this lane very often, unless it was the Steward collecting rents.

A broad-shouldered man appeared in the doorway of one of the cottages. His fair hair, bleached almost white by the sun, and weather-beaten face spoke of a life lived mostly outdoors.

"I'm Gareth." He regarded Urzahil cautiously.

Urzahil swung a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground.

"I'm Urzahil, son of Faethe."

"Faethe's boy? After all these years? What brings you here?"

Homecoming

"I'm not sure. I want to know who my mother was, and where I come from."

Gareth stepped forward. "She was my sister, and dear to me." He clapped Urzahil on the back. "Come inside and share the midday meal with us."

It was dark in the cottage. At first he could only see the bright square of the small window, but as his eyes adjusted, he could see a long table with benches on each side, and a ladder leading up to a sleeping loft. The faces of small children peeked over the edge, watching him.

The round stones of the fireplace black were with soot. Cooking pots hung from hooks. A woman bent over an iron kettle sitting in the coals. She looked up and smoothed her apron.

"This is my wife, Arisen. I suppose that makes her your aunt." He waved a hand at the loft. "Those are your cousins. This one too, he's my oldest son." A young man in the doorway nodded.

Gareth's wife ladled rice gruel with vegetables into wooden bowls and set them on the table. She placed a horn spoon beside each bowl. She also set out a plate of pickled mushrooms, and a pitcher of goat's milk to drink.

"Sit, sit. And I suggest you eat quickly, if you don't want anyone to steal your food." He laughed.

The table filled up. Urzahil counted eight or nine people around the table, with several more moving around in the background. There were several dogs under the table, and a chicken pecked the dirt floor near the hearth.

"What was my mother like?" Urzahil asked.

"She had yellow hair and skin like new milk, and she was as good-natured as anyone I ever knew," said Gareth.

"When Faethe got in trouble, it broke Father's heart. He never again allowed her name to be spoken in his presence. But even though he'd disowned her, Faethe loved him, and she named you after him."

Gareth looked off in the distance, lost in thought.

"She died two years later, and some people from the city tried to bring the baby here. Oh, that's you! Anyway, Father

wouldn't allow a bastard under his roof, even though Mother wanted the baby very badly."

Gareth studied his hands. "Both of our parents are gone now."

Urzahil looked at the faces around the table, hoping to see a family resemblance between them and himself. They were blond with round faces. He was tall and dark, with long, angular features. But why would he look like anyone in his mother's family? He looked exactly like his father.

When he was ready to leave, Gareth walked outside with him. He started to say something, looked at the ground, and shifted his weight. All the signs were there, he was going to ask for money.

"I hate to ask, but the harvest won't be as good as we'd hoped, and we're going to be short on the rent. You're a Lintoron, aren't you? Could you forgive the difference, just for this one year?" Gareth's face was red.

Urzahil took his purse from his belt and emptied it into his hand. It was all the pocket money he had. The Temple wouldn't pay him his stipend until the next full moon, several weeks away. He gave the handful of coins to Gareth.

"Is that enough?" Urzahil asked.

"It's the answer to a prayer," said Gareth.

On the ride back, he thought about how the day had gone.

His mother's people had greeted him warmly and welcomed him into their home, but they were strangers to him. He'd searched for a family resemblance, but there was none. Their conversation was limited to farming and the weather, and their country accent grated on his ear.

He was a nobleman and they were rustics. The chasm was too wide to bridge. Urzahil was filled with sadness, he didn't fit in there, either.

Chapter 7 The Letter



All those who served in the Temple, the priests, acolytes, and servants, were just sitting down to breakfast in the Refectory. The High Priest was sitting in the center of the High Table. Urzahil kept his head down and avoided making eye contact with them. The High Priest hadn't said anything further about Urzahil's quasi-blasphemous remark. Urzahil hoped he'd forgotten ever happened, but it was hard to be sure.

The High Priest pushed back his tall chair and got to his feet.

"May I have your attention." The murmuring in the Refectory fell quiet.

"The Captain of the Haven has arranged the marriage of his son to the daughter of one of the most prominent citizens of the city. This union will promote the security of the Haven of Umbar. I want each of you to include a benediction for this union in your prayers."

Tas was betrothed? Urzahil had spoken to him just a few days ago and he hadn't said a thing. Urzahil resolved to visit him as soon as possible, and offer his congratulations. Plus, he wanted to see him. He needed to talk to someone about his feelings of not fitting in, and Tas had been his best friend since before he could remember.

That afternoon, as he was crossing the foyer of the small building that guarded the entrance to the Temple compound, the clerk at the desk called his name.

"Urzahil? There's a letter here for you." The clerk pulled something from a pigeonhole and handed it to him.

It was a square of parchment, folded into a tight package. Urzahil's name was written on the front. He snorted with annoyance. He'd been to see his mother's people at their farm

just a few days ago, and he'd given Gareth all the money in his purse. It was a little early for Gareth to be asking for more. He hadn't even known Gareth could write.

He turned it over and studied the back. The letter was sealed with red wax, which was normally too expensive for ordinary use. He looked for an imprint of the sender's seal, the wax was smooth, there were no markings of any kind.

Urzahil felt the color drain from his face. It must be an official reprimand. He shoved the letter deep in his pocket and crumpled his fist over it.



Just inside the outer city wall, in the part of the city where the houses were the size of palaces and separated by well-tended gardens, he stopped in front of the Castamiri house, five doors down from the house where he grew up.

A servant showed him in. He waited in the white marble foyer while he was announced, then ascended the sweep of marble stairs. He found Tas in his room. Marös was with him.

"Let me be the first to tell you my news. Father has negotiated my betrothal," said Tas.

"It couldn't have been easy for Tar-Castamir or his lady wife, either. Our young friend rejected the first two brides offered for his approval," said Marös.

"Unlike my older brother, I'm not the heir. I can pick and choose," said Tas.

Urzahil knew he should be happy for Tas, that he should be congratulating him and slapping him on the back. But he felt more like slinking away and sulking. He knew he would never have an arranged marriage, and felt left out.

The discussion never left the details for the betrothal banquet, who would be invited, what would be served, what they would wear. He tapped his foot with impatience. No one noticed.

"Sauron offered me a position as an emissary for Mordor." The moment the words left his lips, Urzahil clapped his hand over his mouth. It didn't matter, no one looked up.

He listened to betrothal talk until the city bells rang the hour, then said goodbye to Tas, who barely looked up from his list of influential guests.



On the way down the stairs to the door he spotted Tar-Castamir crossing the wide marble foyer and hurried to catch up with him.

“Tar-Castamir, I’d like to go on the next delegation to Mordor. Will you ask Tar-Adûmir to include me?”

Tar-Castamir looked uncomfortable. “Tar-Adûmir didn’t request you for the next mission. Actually, he asked that you not be included. He says you’re a liability.”

Urzahil cheeks burned. “Because of the blunder I made, about not wanting to be a blacksmith’s apprentice?”

“That was worse than a blunder. You insulted a head of state, one who happens to be our most important ally. You endangered the entire mission.”

Urzahil shoved his hands in his pockets. His fingers closed on the square of parchment.

“It was an accident, and I don’t think he was insulted, I think he thought it was funny.”

“A diplomat isn’t supposed to make mistakes like that. I’m sorry, Urzahil, I can’t let you meet with foreign dignitaries any more, not when the stakes are so high.”

Urzahil’s fingers traced the outline of the wax seal, a smooth bump on the rough surface of the parchment. He broke off a piece of wax and rolled it between his fingers until it crumbled into bits.

“What about my gift for reading people? I’ll sit in the shadows, unseen and invisible. I won’t even open my mouth.”

“It’s not enough. There’s more to diplomacy than reading people. Emissaries are polite. They think before they speak. They don’t react to insults. The emissaries under Tar-Adûmir receive months of training in diplomatic manners before they’re allowed to meet with their counterparts from other nations.

“You, on the other hand, are given to eye rolling and making sarcastic comments under your breath. Now, I think it’s funny, but we can’t risk anyone doing that on a mission.

I’m sorry, Urzahil. You aren’t you are cut out to be a diplomat. I think you’re more suited to the priesthood. You won’t get in trouble there, where all your lines are scripted.”

Urzahil bent a corner of the parchment forward, then back, until the material started to come apart. He looked at the ground, blinking hard.

“I’m sorry, I’d like to talk more, but I have to go. The delegation from Mordor is about to go home, and I should say goodbye to their ambassador before they finish up this afternoon.”

Urzahil watched him cross the foyer, a large confident man, full of purpose. A servant opened the door for him, and light from outdoors reflected off the marble floor, blinding white.

Urzahil considered following him to learn where the delegation was meeting. Maybe he could give a message to one of them. But he didn’t try, even for him, the breach in protocol was too great.



Urzahil was in no hurry to return to the Temple. He took a meandering path from the Castamiri house back to the old city. By exploring every side street and putting his hand in the water of every public fountain, he was able to turn the short trip into a journey of over an hour.

Although he delayed as long as he could, eventually the gold dome of the Temple came into view, and soon after, the library and dormitories, and the walls around the Temple grounds.

He climbed the steps to the entrance of the small building guarding the Temple compound. The front of the building was closed off, but in the back, tall windows looked out onto the formal gardens.

A man in dark clothes leaned against the wall that separated it from the City of the Dead. Blond hair hung in his face,

covering his eyes. He looked familiar, but Urzahil couldn't place him. He could be one of his mother's people.

The clerk at the front desk was busy writing something in a register book. Urzahil glanced at the pigeonholes above his head fearing a note from the High Priest, but his was empty.

The clerk looked up. "Urzahil? The High Priest would like to see you in his office at your earliest convenience."

Urzahil cast about for a delay. Any delay would do. "Who's that man in the garden?" he asked.

"Someone to see you. He wouldn't leave his name, he said had to speak to you in person. I told him to wait for you outside."

Urzahil grimaced. He'd just given his mother's family all the pocket money he had, and wouldn't receive his stipend until the next full moon. He had nothing to give the man, even if he'd wanted to.

"How long has he been waiting? I suppose I should speak with him." Urzahil went out the back door into the garden.

Up close, the man didn't look like a farmer. His clothes were plain but well made. He could be a merchant's clerk or fish broker, someone from the wealthy part of the middle class.

"Did you get the letter?" he asked.

Urzahil's hand closed on the square of parchment in his pocket.

"We're leaving first thing in the morning. Are you coming with us?"

"Um... remind me how we know each other?"

"I'm Gillis. I was sitting across the table from you. Remember? *I'd never fall so low I'd let myself be apprenticed to a blacksmith.*" The man slapped his thigh. "Sauron is still quoting that. Anyway, he likes you, probably because you're sarcastic and mouthy. Takes one to know one, I guess."

Gillis was Sauron's emissary. When the delegation from Umbar negotiated an alliance with Sauron, Gillis sat across the table from him.

Urzahil pulled out the square of parchment. It was grey from having been in his pocket all day. He broke what remained of the seal and unfolded the square of parchment. He

recognized the handwriting immediately - the slanted cursive of a layman, the descenders fading to grey as the pen ran out of ink. The letters were decorated with ornate diacritics, identical to the 3000-year-old fragment preserved in the Temple archives. It was Sauron's handwriting.

He read what Sauron had written. He would be an emissary representing Mordor. As a member of the nobility, he would be entitled to a furnished suite of rooms, a servant to look after his needs, and the right to be called Tar-Urzahil.

The nobility. He would have a title, and he would belong to the nobility. If he accepted, he would be Tar-Urzahil, which he never could be here.

He turned back to the letter. The stipend was more than what he received from the Temple, by a slight margin, although it was nowhere near what he could've made as a merchant's clerk. He was to come as quickly as possible because he was needed for a mission to Khand.

Bile rose in his throat, and a sense of fear.

"What happened to Gaerna?" Urzahil asked.

"He's in Far Harad, making promises and distributing small presents to tribal chieftains. Taher is responsible for Núrn, and I come to Umbar. The Chief Ambassador will deal with Gondor himself, if the situation ever comes up. There are still two more positions unfilled."

"What about the High Priest? I need his permission to go."

"Sauron founded the Temple. I doubt your High Priest will refuse him." Gillis made a dismissive gesture, and then turned to practical matters. "Meet us outside the Main Gate first thing tomorrow morning. We'll have a horse for you, and room for your things in the baggage cart. Don't be late. We're leaving as soon as it's light enough to see."

Gillis left the garden and strode down the main road, whistling. Urzahil watched him disappear in the deepening twilight.

Urzahil's mouth went dry. He hadn't agreed to enter Sauron's service, but he hadn't refused, either. It was what he'd wanted, but it was too much, too fast. He would sleep on it before he gave Gillis his answer.

But now, he had a more immediate problem. With slow steps and a mouth as dry as cotton, Urzahil made his way to the High Priest's office. The door to the High Priest's office was ajar. Urzahil cleared his throat and rapped on the doorjamb.

"Come in." The High Priest sat behind his desk, writing. It was purple twilight outside, light from the lamp played on the old man's pinched features. He didn't invite Urzahil to sit, so Urzahil stood on the carpet in front of the desk, shifting from foot to foot.

The High Priest looked up. He rested his elbows on the desk with his fingers tented. In

"Of all the priests three weeks out of Seminary, you are unique. Not only did you commit blasphemy inside the Temple itself, right before services began, but you met the founder of our religion and insulted him. If we ever had a worse example of the priesthood among our numbers, I'm sure I don't know who it was."

"I didn't insult him..."

"Really? Tar-Adûmir tells me you told him to his face that his chosen occupation was beneath you."

"I didn't insult him, he thought it was funny. He this asked me to join his organization." Urzahil pulled out the letter and handed it to the High Priest, who read it in silence for some moments.

"I don't suppose your decision is based on religious feeling for the founder of our Cult? I see he offered you a title. No one there will know you were born a bastard."

Urzahil dug his nails into the palms of his hands, his pulse hammered in his ears.

"And you're not doing yourself any harm by joining now, when he has what, thirty people? In a few years, he'll have thousands, and those who joined early will be at the top. I understand your motivation, but I hope you're good at court intrigue, because where you're going, you'll have to be."

The High Priest handed the letter back to Urzahil, who nodded and turned to go. But before he reached the door, the High Priest called after him, "One more thing. Whatever you do, don't mock the cult of Melkor in front of your new Master."

Urzahil had trouble falling asleep that night. Tomorrow he would travel to Mordor, where he would enter Sauron's service. He didn't know what he was getting into. Quite possibly, he had just made the biggest mistake of his life.

Why had he agreed to it? Because Sauron was a figure out of a legend. People in Umbar hero-worshipped him, Urzahil among them. But it was more than that. When Urzahil left Umbar, he would no longer be Tar-Lintoron's bastard, he would be Urzahil of Umbar. He would finally be free of the stigma of illegitimacy that had plagued him all his life.

When he opened his eyes, the sky had already lightened to a grey dawn. He sat up in a panic, and reproached himself for not asking a servant wake him. Gillis had said to meet him at the main gate at first light, and that they were leaving promptly. Urzahil might already have missed him.

Urzahil pulled on traveling clothes as quickly as he could, heavy wool leggings, a linen shirt, and a leather jerkin. When he was dressed, he draped a woolen cloak long enough to serve as a blanket over his shoulders.

There was no time to shave or to go down to the kitchens and snag a piece of bread for breakfast. There was barely time to find anyone to carry his chest. He was suddenly glad he finished the night before, and not left any last-minute packing for this morning. The small wooden chest held everything he owned, all his books from University and Seminary, and a few more he'd been given by the library when they got so worn they were pulled from the shelves.

He'd left almost no room for clothes. He'd managed to fit in his everyday shirts and leggings, an embroidered tunic of his father's, and one of the silver-grey robes of a priest. And one other thing. Wrapped in a linen shirt was a small river rock painted to look like a crab, with a blue shell and orange-red claws. He made it for his father when he was small. It was the only memento he'd kept when he left home for the last time. He'd managed to fit them all between the spines of his books, but it took doing.

The Letter

Two servants lifted it by the rope handles at each end, and followed him down the hall.

He stepped out of the building that had been his home since he'd entered the Temple as an acolyte three years ago. It was cold in the predawn. He hugged himself and shivered.

He walked along the low wall which separated the garden from the City of the Dead. He stopped, and the two men carrying his chest almost ran into him. He scanned the tombs for the one marked Lintoron. He'd only read Sauron's letter yesterday evening, and since then, everything had happened so fast, he hadn't said goodbye to his father.

The sky was beginning to get light, even though the sun had not yet risen. What had Gillis said? Were they were leaving at sunrise, or at first light? Urzahil wasn't sure. It would only take a few minutes to vault the low wall and reach the Lintoron tomb, but he wasn't sure there was time. He'd overslept and gotten a later start than he'd meant to.

"Goodbye, Father. I'm going to make you proud of me." He touched his fist to his opposite shoulder in salute. "Let's go." The Temple servants picked up their burden and followed him.

They reached the main square in the center of the old city. The first of the vendors were just beginning to set up their wares in the marketplace, and the songs of birds were louder than during the middle of the day.

Just before they passed through the gate in the city's inner wall, he stopped again and looked back. Sunlight was just beginning to hit the golden dome of the Temple, the highest structure in Umbar. The Temple grounds were in shadow. He thought he could make out his father's tomb, a white coral structure in a sea of white coral structures, but from an unfamiliar angle, he wasn't sure.

From there, they caught the main road through the city, which took them through the cramped gate in the old city wall and on to the main gate in the outer wall. The main gate was barred closed at this hour, but a night watchman opened the postern door and let them out.

Outside the city gates, the delegation from Mordor was breaking camp. Men-at-arms were rolling up a tent or lifting

Emissary II

wooden chests into the baggage cart. A group of horses and men were milling around. Some were mounted, and some were standing in holding the reins. There was an extra horse, already saddled.

"I thought you'd changed your mind. Any longer, and we would have left without you." Gillis went back to helping load the cart.

The Temple servants struggled to lift his chest into the baggage cart.

"Let's go!"

Chapter 8 Enter on Duty



After three days of travelling, they rounded the last bend up a narrow, rocky path. They emerged from the tangled trees, and there it was, Minas Morgul, phosphorescent in the moonlight.

They rode over narrow bridge and entered the gates of the fortress. The gates banged shut behind them. Urzahil swung a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground, his legs shaky with exertion. They were standing in the same courtyard where, two months ago, Gaerna had told them he wasn't coming back to Umbar with them.

It was late, and few were about. Sauron's Steward came down to meet them, his nightshirt not quite tucked in, his hair rumpled from sleep.

Orcs swarmed over the baggage cart, passing down bundles and bags. Urzahil saw one lift the chest and struggle with it towards the back of the cart.

"Be careful with that!" Urzahil warned.

The Orc wrestled Urzahil's chest over the side and lowered it into the arms of the companion, then let go of the rope handles the other Orc staggered backwards under the weight.

"Sauron's butt crack! What's in there, your rock collection?"

Urzahil glanced at the Steward, expecting him to react, but the Steward never looked up from his sheath of notes. Perhaps he didn't understand Black Speech? Or was that just how Orcs talked?

"Urzahil, one of the new emissaries? Let's see, where did I put you? Third floor overlooking the main gate. Follow me. Someone carry his things."

Urzahil followed the steward along a phosphorescent hallway, a broad flight of steps, and after that, a twist of spiral stairs built into the wall.

The Steward pushed open an ironbound door and stepped into the room. The light from his lamp revealed a large fireplace with a carved stone mantle, and a table with a pair of chairs.

The Orcs dropped his chest near the door with a thump and stood beside it. The Steward made a gesture of dismissal, and they scurried out of the room.

You can't see it at night, but this room has a view of the Ithilien valley," said the Steward.

Urzahil had been here just after Midsummer, when the High Valley was covered with dark purple flowers. He would enjoy seeing that again next year.

The Steward crossed the tiled floor and opened the door in the back of the room. Most of the small space was taken up by a canopied bed with embroidered hangings. There was also a washstand in the corner.

"Come find me in the morning, and we'll finish getting you settled." He said good night and left Urzahil alone. I have breaking

Half an hour later, Urzahil lay in the center of the curtained bed. With his arms outstretched, he could just touch either side. The rounded bolster reached from one side to the other, and plumped out the slim feather pillows. The walls glowed faintly green, and their light competed with the light from the full moon streaming through the window.



When Urzahil woke, daylight filled the room. The morning was half gone. He dressed and went into the outer room, where breakfast had been laid out on the table for him.

He picked up a slice of bread. It was dark with a coarse texture, and heavier than he was used to. Instead of butter to spread on it, there was lard. He was used to bread made from

finely ground wheat flour. Back home, only poor people would eat this.

After he finished eating, he went downstairs and found the Steward in his office.

“Urzahil, how are you settling in?” The Steward asked.

“Your rank as an emissary entitles you to a servant who will see to your needs. Most likely it will be an Orc. I don’t expect you’re used to them, but they make perfectly good servants.” He pulled out a list. “Of course you know that Sauron is our Master. We address him as Lord Zigûr, which means Wizard, or Tar-Mairon, which means Admirable Lord.

“The Nazgûl, the Ringwraiths, are his most powerful servants. They’ve served him for thousands of years, and each of them wears one of the Great Rings. They fall just below our Master in rank. You should take an order from a Nazgûl as if it came from Sauron himself, because it may have.”

“How do you tell the Nazgûl apart?” asked Urzahil.

“You can’t. They all look alike. The Witch King of Angmar is taller than the others, and on State occasions, he wears a steel crown. As for the others, it’s anybody’s guess.”

The Steward leaned forward and lowered his voice.

“You need to know, it can be hard to be around the Nazgûl. They’re Undead, and carry an aura of fear about them. It makes some people go to pieces. But you’re a Sorcerer, right?”

Urzahil nodded. He’d had three University-level courses in Sorcery at the Seminary.

“Then you’re used to supernatural things. The Undead shouldn’t bother you much.”

The Steward began to shuffle papers as if the appointment were coming to an end.

“Oh, one other thing. You should see the tailor as soon as possible. You’ll need proper clothing for official occasions. You know, black.”

“Don’t people in Mordor wear black all the time?” asked Urzahil.

“The Nazgûl’s robes are black, so are the soldiers’ uniforms. As for the rest of us, we only wear black on formal occasions. The rest of the time, we wear whatever’s handy. Just make sure

that you don't have on bright colors when foreign guests are there to see you. We have a reputation to maintain."

The Steward gave him in advance on his stipend so he could pay the tailor. Urzahil pressed his lips together. At the Temple, their ceremonial robes were provided to them. His stipend in Mordor was higher, but it had to cover more.

"Do you think the tailor can have my robes finished before I'm summoned for an audience with Sauron?" asked Urzahil.

"There's time. Sauron's overseeing the rebuilding of Barad-dûr. He won't be back for several days."

Urzahil's shoulders sagged. He'd hoped for an audience before the Dark Throne, or at least to be summoned to Sauron's private study. Urzahil had completely rearranged his life and traveled a long distance to be here. It would've been nice if Sauron had bothered to greet him properly.

Chapter 9 Minas Morgul



Twilight came early in the high mountain valley. It was getting dark when the bell announced the evening meal. Urzahil descended from his room on the third floor and found his way to the Great Hall. Rows of trestle tables stretched the length of the room. Hundreds of people, mostly Orcs, were packed elbow to elbow on the long benches. Others walked up and down between the tables, looking for a place to sit. The sound of so many talking at once filled the Hall with a dull roar.

At the far end of the room, the High Table sat on a raised platform. It was covered with a white cloth that hung to the floor. At its center was an empty chair, as massive as a throne. Behind it hung Sauron standard, the Lidless Eye in red against a black background.

Almost every other place was filled. Urzahil recognized the Steward and the Chief Ambassador, but all the others were Nazgûl. Their faces were invisible, and they were identically dressed in black.

Two lesser tables flanked the High Table. Like it, they were covered in white cloths, and had chairs with high backs and arms. The steward pointed Urzahil to his place at one of the lesser tables, next to Gillis. The chair on his other side was empty.

"That's Gaerna's place. He's in Harad right now," said Gillis.

Urzahil narrowed his eyes. Gaerna was probably fine, but Urzahil would feel better once he saw him in person.

The room went suddenly quiet. Everyone looked towards the High Table. The Orcs and servants at the trestle tables rose

to their feet. A tall figure in black swept across the platform and took the place to the left of the throne-like chair in the center.

"That's the Witch King of Angmar. He's the Lieutenant of Minas Morgul, and Sauron's Second-in-Command. He's in charge of the Garrison here," said Gillis.

"What kind of man is he?" asked Urzahil.

"He's a great general, but humorless and unapproachable. He has a wicked temper. Whatever you do, don't get on his bad side."

The Witch King sat down at one of the few empty places at High Table, to the left of the large chair in the center. A servant with a pitcher came over and filled his goblet.

The conversation at the center of High Table drifted to the lesser table where Urzahil was sitting. He tipped his head to listen.

"... never have enough horses... have to go back to Rohan..." The Witch King's voice rich with the cadences of Númenor.

Like most nobles in Umbar, Urzahil spoke with the trace of a Númenorian accent, which got stronger when he felt the need to impress others with his social status. But the Witch King's accent was more ancient and refined than any Urzahil had heard before.

"He speaks as if he came from Númenor itself," Urzahil said to Gillis.

"I imagine he did. He's the son of Ciryatan the Shipbuilder," said Gillis.

Ciryatan the Shipbuilder, Twelfth King of Númenor. Urzahil's eyes widened. Ciryatan had two sons, the Thirteenth King of Númenor and Er-Mûrazôr, the Black Prince.

Er-Mûrazôr, a famous navigator and a great general, founded the Haven of Umbar. Urzahil had visited the colonial-era house once on a school trip. It was on the Square in the oldest part of the city, a one room mud brick structure with furnishings of astonishing workmanship, imported from Númenor.

"The Witch King is Er-Mûrazôr?" asked Urzahil.

“That’s what I hear from Akhôrahil. He was court physician at Armenelos⁶, and they knew each other before either of them became a Nazgûl,” said Gillis.

Urzahil looked at the center of High Table from the corner of his eye, trying not to stare. The Witch King sat rigidly straight, his back not touching the back of the chair, his elbows against his sides. The posture was characteristic of one who been born into the highest strata of the most civilized nation in Arda. But it could also be a mark of inhibition, of holding something back.

A servant set a plate in front of the Witch King, then served each of the others at High Table from the center of the table to the edges. Urzahil glanced at the High Table. Everyone was concentrating on their food. Urzahil lowered his voice.

“What’s his relationship with Sauron?” he asked.

“They’re seldom together⁷, and when they are, they’re fighting,” said Gillis.

“What about?”

“The Witch King speaks up when he thinks Sauron is wrong. Sauron doesn’t like that.”

When everyone at High Table had been served, servants carried plates to the flanking tables. An Orc set a pewter plate was set before him. The main course was a thick stew in a dark colored sauce. Another filled his cup. He raised it to his lips and tasted ale, not wine. It wasn’t even well brewed; it was cloudy, with bits floating in it.

Urzahil broke off a piece of bread and soaked up some of the sauce. It had a flavor he hadn’t encountered before, pungent but not unpleasant. He speared a piece of meat with the tip of his eating dagger and lifted something white and angular with a rough texture. He wasn’t sure what he was looking at.

“It looks like we’re having tripe tonight,” said Gillis.

⁶ Armenelos was the capital of Númenor

⁷ When Sauron was in Dol Guldur (TA 1100-2941) or Barad-dûr (TA 2951-3019) the Witch King was in Angmar (TA 1350-1975) or Minas Morgul (TA 2000-3019). They may have overlapped at Minas Morgul (TA 2941-2951) but it’s more likely Sauron was overseeing the rebuilding of Barad-dûr during that interval.

Emissary II

Not likely, that's what poor people ate. Urzahil waited for the rest of the joke, but Gillis wasn't laughing.

"No, really. We use every part of the animal here. Mordor is a poor country."



Urzahil stood on the small platform in the tailor's shop, clad from head to toe in the transforming black. It was his second day in Minas Morgul, and Sauron had not yet met with him, or let him know what his duties would be.

"Here, hold this at arm's length and look at yourself." The tailor handed him a disk of polished silver, very like a shaving mirror.

Urzahil tilted the mirror, examining his official robes bit by bit. The tailor had done a good job. He'd shaped the fine wool into something that set off Urzahil's height and build to best advantage. It was a thrill to look at his left shoulder and see and see Sauron's badge, a stylized Eye embroidered in red on a black background.



Urzahil arrived for the evening meal wearing his new black robes, Sauron's badge on his shoulder. He sat down at his place just below High Table, and the Orc who filled his goblet called him 'Sir'. That hadn't happened the day before, even though it was the same Orc. The highest ranking officials in Mordor wore black all the time. He would, too.

There was a scraping of bench legs against the floor and a sudden hush. All rose. The Witch King strode the length of the Great Hall and mounted the platform. He took his place to the right of the massive chair in the center, the place where he'd been the previous evening.

The meal served on the evening of the second day was no more appetizing than it had been on the first, root vegetables and liver. In Urzahil's mind, parsnips and turnips were peasant food, and offal was for dogs.

Minas Morgul

Urzahil studied the High Table. Other than high-backed chair in the center, every place was full, four men and six Nazgûl.

"Aren't there supposed to be nine of them?" he asked Gillis.

"The others are in Dol Guldur. Khamûl the Easterling commands the fortress, Adûnaphel assists him, and Uvatha the Horseman carries messages between Dol Guldur and here."

"... did you ever do that when you were young?" another Nazgûl asked the Witch King, who stiffened and turned away. People of very high rank were often reserved, but not like that. Urzahil could guess what it meant. *He's hiding something.* Because people who are hiding one thing often hide everything.



Urzahil had been in Minas Morgul for three days now, and was running out of things to do. He'd no idea what his official duties were supposed to be..

"You've never been in Mordor, have you?" asked Gillis.

"What do you call Minas Morgul?" asked Urzahil.

"Minas Morgul isn't in Mordor. It's in Ithilien, which is part of Gondor. It straddles the road just below the Nameless Pass, the only way into Mordor from the West. Let's take a hike up to the Pass tomorrow. It's steep, but it's not that far. If you stand in the Pass and then take one step, you'll be in Mordor."

It was a difficult hike. Just below the Pass, the road was a steep as a flight so steep, he was tempted to his hands and knees could stretch out his hands and touch the road in front of him.

And then, in a wedge between two pinnacles of rock, the road leveled off. Urzahil stood in the Pass itself. His chest heaved, and his mouth was dry from breathing hard. He stretched out his arms and touched the rock on either side. The wind whistled through the narrow slot, chilling the sweat on his body.

"Go on, take another step," said Gillis.

Emissary II

Urzahil walked through the notch, to the point where the road began to slope downward. He stopped and put his hands on his knees, breathing hard.

Beyond the Pass, the road descended into a knife-cut chasm with a sheer cliff on one side and a precipitous drop on the other. It had the look of deadly peril. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to go there.



Urzahil was due to leave on his first mission as an emissary to Khand in a few days.

He spent the morning with Mordor's Chief Ambassador, who told him what he would need to do.

"This first mission is very simple, really. You'll carry a message to their Caliph, inviting him to send an emissary of his own to Mordor for an audience with Sauron."

"Is that how one gets an audience with Sauron? By being an emissary from another nation?"

"I trust you won't use that tone with the Caliph? See that you don't," said the Chief Ambassador.

They went over countless details of what was a simple mission. "Khand is one of our traditional allies. You can expect to be well received. You don't have to do any negotiating. You're only delivering a message and waiting for reply."

The ambassador went on to say that while the mission would be uneventful, there were some danger in making the trip. There were always bandits and highwayman to worry about, so he would be traveling with an armed escort.

"I wish I could send Khamûl with you, he's from Khand. He knows how to get there, and could have explained the local customs. But since he's Lieutenant of Dol Guldur, he's in Mirkwood right now.

Urzahil left the Ambassador's study feeling reasonably well prepared for the mission, but he would have really liked some high-level guidance from Sauron himself. Sauron was supposed to have returned within a few days, and it had been more than that. Surely he would be back soon.

Urzahil went to the Steward's office, and after a couple of tries, found him in.

"When will Sauron be back?" asked Urzahil.

"He's been back for a couple of days. I met with him first thing this morning," said the Steward.

"He wasn't at High Table last night," said Urzahil.

"He gets busy and forgets to eat. I sent a plate up to his room last night," said the Steward.

Urzahil left the Steward's office, discouraged. He saw one of the Nazgûl on the stairs, and ran to catch up with him. It was one he hadn't seen before. This one was heavysset, and moved as if his joints hurt.

"Have you seen Sauron?" Urzahil asked.

"I passed him on the stairs a few minutes ago," said the wraith. His accent suggested he came from the Island Kingdom of Númenor.

Urzahil hoped he would see Sauron at the evening meal tonight, but when he entered the Great Hall that night, Sauron's place at High Table was empty. When the meal was over, Urzahil approached another of the Nazgûl.

"I need to speak with Sauron about my mission to Khand. What's the best way to find him?"

"Oh, you just missed him. He's gone back to Lugbûrz."⁸



Later in the day, Urzahil passed another Nazgûl in the corridor. This one was medium height with a wiry build. He swung his arms and walked with the energy of a coiled spring.

"I think here for over a week and I still haven't seen Sauron. Is that normal?" said Urzahil.

"Most people aren't allowed to know this, but you're of high rank, I can trust you with the secret." He spoke like the desert people from the Far East.

⁸ Lugbûrz is Black Speech for Barad-dûr

Emissary II

A second wraith joined them, the one that always moved slowly, as if exhausted. "Indur, don't tell him that!" he said.

Indur lowered his voice until it was barely audible. "Sauron was killed at the end of the Second Age. He's not coming back. We Nazgûl take turns pretending to be him." He pointed to the other Nazgûl. "Ren played the role of Sauron when your delegation came here last month. The next time we have important visitors, it will be my turn."

Urzahil felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. The handwriting in the letter had matched the handwriting on the ancient fragment. For a few weeks, he'd really thought Sauron had returned.

The wraith was so close, Urzahil could feel the chill from his body. Nazgûl were undead and cold to the touch, but when Urzahil had been near Sauron in his private study, Sauron had radiated heat.

"Liar!" Urzahil took a swing at Indur, but the wraith deflected it easily.

"You actually believed me, didn't you?" Indur hissed, laughing.

Chapter 10 The Trip to Khand



Urzahil stood on a rampart, looking down into the Morgul Vale, watching the shadows get longer. The purple flowers that filled the valley at Midsummer were gone now, only the tall grasses remained.

Since he'd arrived in Minas Morgul, the days had passed uneventfully, each one blending into the next. The sun was setting earlier now, and in this high mountain valley, it was already starting to get dark by late afternoon. He banged his fist against the railing in frustration.

Urzahil still didn't know what he was supposed to be doing. He hadn't set eyes on his new master, not once, not even from a distance, since he'd joined Sauron's service. Sauron should have been back from Barad-dûr two days ago, but had sent word he'd be delayed.

The wind picked up, and Urzahil shivered. With a sigh, he turned and went back inside. He had no particular plan other than to explore the corridors of the fortress until it was time to go to dinner, an hour from now.

On the way down to the main level of the fortress, Urzahil had to dodge and weave around people on the stairs. When he first came here as part of the delegation from Umbar, there were maybe twenty people in Sauron's service other than the Orcs. It was rare to see another person in the halls.

Urzahil returned three weeks later when he entered Sauron's service. There were a significant number of new faces, a hundred or more. Urzahil managed to learn the names of maybe half of them. Since then, their numbers had doubled. Forget about learning their names, he didn't know half of them by sight.

A servant tugged his sleeve. "Tar-Urzahil? The Chief Ambassador wants to see you in his study."

Had Sauron returned? No, Sauron would have sent for him directly, as he had when he offered Urzahil a position as emissary. Urzahil reached the main level of the fortress and knocked on the tall paneled door, wrapped in polished copper.⁹ He found the Chief Ambassador at his desk, sifting through a sheath of papers. After a moment, the Ambassador looked up.

"Urzahil, you're going on a diplomatic mission. You're to carry a letter to the Caliph of Khand, with Sauron's greetings and his offer of friendship." He held up a diplomatic letter sealed with wax and red tape bindings. The outer wrapper bore a design of the Eye in black and red.

"Sir, wouldn't it be better if I accompanied someone who'd done this before? The alliance with Khand is important."

"You're only delivering a letter. The hard part is getting there without being sold into slavery, or killed by highwaymen. Dwar will go with you." The Ambassador turned his attention back to the sheath of papers, indicating the interview was over.

Dwar was the same Nazgûl who'd escorted him from Umbar. He was one of the lower ones on the pecking order, as far as Urzahil could tell. On the other hand, he was approachable, and Urzahil was used to him.



Early the next morning, Urzahil stood in the courtyard checking the girth of his saddle and mentally rehearsing what to say to the Caliph of Khand. Beside him, Dwar swung into the saddle and adjusted the reins in his hands.

Horses' hooves clattered against the cobblestones. A second Nazgûl rode out of the stables and reined in beside them.

"Khamûl, I didn't know you were here," said Dwar.

⁹ Very like the copper-covered doors of professors' offices in Porter Hall, believed to be the work of art students in the middle of the night.

The Trip to Khand

"I arrived late last night. I hear Mordor is going to pay an official visit to Khand."

"Yes, our Master's sending them a letter to announce his return. I'm to escort the messenger." Dwar gestured towards Urzahil.

"I'll escort him. I come from Khand. You don't even know where it is."

"But our Master said I was to..."

"Let's go." The second Nazgûl kicked his stallion into motion. Urzahil followed him through the Main Gate of Minas Morgul onto the stone bridge beyond.



Urzahil and the black-robed creature rode in silence. The creature's reserve made him uncomfortable. Urzahil opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. There were plenty of things he wanted to ask, like 'What's it like to be undead?' or 'Are we going to invade Gondor next year?' but he couldn't think of a polite way to phrase it.

"So, you're not usually in Minas Morgul?" Urzahil finally asked.

"No," said the wraith.

They traveled for several miles more, and the creature said nothing further. Unlike Dwar, this Nazgûl wasn't much of a conversationalist.

After sunset, when it became too dark for the horses to see, the wraith went off the road into a thick stand of trees and beckoned Urzahil to follow. He tethered his horse and went into the underbrush, gathering firewood. He moved delicately, like a forest animal.

Urzahil recognized that walk. The day the Embassy of Umbar sat down with the Embassy from Mordor, the same wraith had crossed the flagstones on silent feet and taken a seat on Sauron's right.

Urzahil hadn't been impressed with him. The entire day, he'd sat at the table either saying nothing, or nodding agreement with his master. Either. He was either obsequious or

timid. Urzahil didn't think much of either type, they were both weak.

Urzahil watched the wraith arrange branches in a pyramid. The creature sang a spell, different than the one Urzahil used for starting fires. Wisps of smoke rose from beneath the bark. When the flames caught and the wood began to crackle, Urzahil asked, "What's your place among the wraiths?"

"I'm Second Chief of the Nazgûl, and the Lieutenant of Dol Guldur."

Urzahil was taken aback. The Nazgûl held high rank for one who appeared to be timid and reserved. Maybe rank was determined by the order in which they entered Sauron's service.

"Were you the second to join?" Urzahil asked.

"Yes." Urzahil waited for the wraith to say more. Minutes went by, but the only the sounds of insects broke the silence.

They traveled south into Harad, then turned East towards Khand. The trees were replaced by stunted scrub, and even that gave way to stone and sand. Soon the heat became so intense, they decided to travel at night.

The moon was waxing, there was enough light for the horses to see. The road connected a series of oases. They reached them the Eastern horizon was getting pink, and slept in the shade of Palm trees during the day.



Four days after entering the desert, they reached the mud brick walls protecting the capital city of Khand. The dun-colored fortifications were embellished with decorative moldings along the battlements, and the planks of the main gate were studded with brass.

It was just after sunset, and though it was not yet full darkness, the gates were already closed.

Behind the low walls, Urzahil could see a number of dwellings. Yellow lamplight shone from narrow windows in the thick walls. In the center of the city was a high domed structure, several stories taller than any other building.

"That's the Palace," said Khamûl.

The Trip to Khand

They found a place to make camp, a shallow cave at the base of a cliff. It got cold in the desert when the light was gone. Urzahil was grateful to sit by the fire, wrapped in a cloak with his hands around a mug of tea. Khamûl, who'd been born here, lectured him on local customs.

"The food here is different from what you're used to. Their everyday fare is cracked wheat or lentils with yogurt, garnished with raisins or dates. They even make a drink from yogurt flavored with lemon or tropical fruit. Oh, and a local specialty is blood pudding. Another is fried grubs. You must accept whatever they put in front of you. I don't care if it's sheep's eyeballs in honey, it would be an insult to refuse."

After the swill he'd been eating in Mordor, Urzahil didn't think that would be a problem.

"But they might not serve you a meal at all. You're just a messenger, here to deliver a letter."

Urzahil fingered the diplomatic letter inside his jacket.

"Um...there's something else I wanted to ask you. When Sauron declared himself to Umbar, the letter was delivered by a Nazgûl. Why aren't you delivering the letter to Khand?"

"The Nazgûl cast fear upon the living. Dogs shy away from us, horses panic. Men feel it too. It's no way to begin a diplomatic negotiation. You may have noticed that Dwar never entered the city gates, and he kept well away from people."



Urzahil stirred. The sun lit the back of the cave, deep orange against the sandstone. This was the first time he'd slept the whole night through, without the usual wakings caused by rain, or tree roots in his back.

He was wrapped in his wool cloak with his pack for pillow, lying in sand hollow that had shaped itself to his body. In the center of the cave, Khamûl was crouching over the fire. A pan of water on the coals was just beginning to boil. Urzahil sat up. Sand had gotten into every seam of his clothing, and his hair as well.

He brushed himself off as best he could. After he finished shaving, he removed the fine silk garments from his pack, took them out of their protective muslin wrappers, and tried to shake out the wrinkles. He was a diplomat, and he had to dress the part.

When he finished dressing, Urzahil joined Khamûl at the mouth of the cave. Khamûl had already brought the horses around. They mounted and rode to a position just above the city, from which they could view the city gates.

The morning sun was orange against the mud brick walls of the fortified city. At this hour, the gates stood open. Through the arched passageway in the thick walls, Urzahil could see narrow streets crowded with displays of fruit, bales of silk, and animals in cages.

"This is where I leave you. I'll see you tomorrow, after you've received their answer," said Khamûl.

"It might not take that long. Suppose they give me their answer right away? Will you be waiting for me at the cave?" asked Urzahil.

"No, I'm visiting family for a few days."

So that's why Khamûl came racing down from Dol Guldur and took the mission away from Dwar. Urzahil had assumed it had something to do with his interest in Khand politics.

"Wait. You have living relatives here? For some reason, I thought you were at least a thousand years old."

"My stepmother is Elvish. I used to think I was, too. It was a shock to learn I didn't have her Elvish immortality."

Khamûl spurred his horse and rode toward the green farmland by the river, where several large estates dotted the landscape. Urzahil watched him until he disappeared, then turned back towards the city gates.

He wished he didn't have to do this alone. At one level, he understood that Khamûl couldn't be the messenger, the living wouldn't tolerate his presence. Even in Umbar, where they practiced the Cult of Melkor and embraced supernatural things, Dwar hadn't been able to enter the city walls.

The Trip to Khand

Urzahil sat on silk cushions on the floor, making polite conversation with the Caliph and several members of his court. Steam rose from tiny cups of mint tea on a low table in front of him. Pastries of honey and nuts sat on a platter nearby. Tall windows looked out on a tiled fountain in the middle of the courtyard. Above the music of the water, he could hear cicadas, an occasional songbird, and the scolding of a jay. Even within these thick walls, out of the sun, it was oppressively hot.

“You say you bring us a letter from the Lord of Mordor himself.”

The Caliph was a heavysset man, with copper colored skin and roll upon roll of flesh cascading down his sides. Urzahil produced the leather wallet containing Sauron’s message, and placed it in his hand. The Caliph broke the seal and unfolded the square of parchment. The letters were formed with graceful curves and ornamental diacritics, Sauron’s handwriting.

“Your master’s greetings are not unexpected. Our Ambassador was in Harad when they received their letter.” The Caliph indicated a thin, white-bearded man seated at his left.

Urzahil cringed. Ideally, all their allies would have been contacted at the same time.

The Caliph’s Ambassador leaned forward. “Is it true that Sauron appeared in Mordor at Midsummer, with no retainers and no army, and that he’s been building his army with astonishing speed ever since?”

Urzahil stammered. Of course the Ambassador was fishing for information. Any diplomat in Arda would do the same. Urzahil hadn’t been told how much he was allowed to say. Inside his silk brocade garments, sweat trickled down the small of his back.

“They say Sauron offers a position to anyone who shows up on his doorstep.”

Urzahil’s face burned. That may be how he got his position, but he didn’t like to be reminded of it.

“I heard a shepherd let his flock wander too close to Mordor, and when he was captured, Sauron promoted the terrified boy to Minister of Finance,” said the Ambassador.

“And the sheep were offered positions in the counting house,” said a young emissary, slapping his thigh.

The Caliph hoisted himself to his feet. “If you’ll excuse us, we need time to confer. It’s approaching the hottest part of the day, and time for afternoon sleep. Someone will show you to your quarters. After you’ve rested, we’ll meet again for the evening meal, and then we will give you our answer.



The Caliph clapped his hands, and a servant appeared to take Urzahil to his room. Urzahil followed the boy through passageways deep within the palace, where he was shown to a low ceilinged room with white plaster walls and a terra-cotta floor. A low bed, as wide as it was long, was covered with a thick cotton coverlet. Other than the bed, a table and chair were the only furnishings. The windows looking onto the courtyard were covered with carved latticework, made from an aromatic wood. Beyond the garden, the heat of the day made the outlines of the buildings shimmer.

Urzahil pulled off his boots and lay down on the bed. The heat, and the drone of the cicadas, made him sleepy. He’d started to nod off when there was a light rap on the door. Urzahil’s eyes snapped open and he remembered where he was.

A servant entered the room with a tray. She was plain, and dressed in a tunic crossed left over right, secured by a sash at the waist. She set the tray on a small table and poured tea into a tiny cup. He smelled mint. Urzahil sat up and accepted the cup from her.

He finished and set the cup on the tray, and made a gesture of dismissal. But instead of leaving, she put a towel under his heels, poured oil onto her palms, and rubbed her hands together.

“Just relax, let me do everything.”

She looked older than he’d thought at first. She wasn’t a girl, she was at least thirty. There were fans of fine lines around her eyes, and she had a self-assurance a girl wouldn’t have had.

The Trip to Khand

She removed his stockings and set them aside, then she took off his jacket. She pressed her thumbs into the soles of his feet just below the toes, and worked downward with firm strokes. The oil smelled of sandalwood, subtle, but not overpowering.

He adjusted the pillow behind his head and closed his eyes. Her thumbs moved in a circular pattern, and as the pressure increased, he realized he was getting aroused. He pulled the edge of his jacket over himself. Hopefully she wouldn't notice.

"Is everything all right? Your shoulders are tense. I can fix that." She straddled him, then undid the collar of his shirt and put her hands inside. Expert fingers kneaded the place between his shoulder and the sinews of his neck. The smell of sandalwood was stronger now.

She leaned forward as she worked. In that position, her wrap fell away from her body, and through the neckline, lower than it had been, he could see everything she had. She didn't seem to know she was exposing herself. He looked away, but from the corner of his eye, he could see her breasts hanging free, swinging back and forth as she worked. He wondered how they would feel in a man's cupped hands.

She sat back, resting her weight on his hips. Her sash had come loose, and when she straightened, the two halves of her tunic fell open. She made no move to cover herself, but watched him watching her, a faint smile on her lips. She raised herself a few inches and undid the laces of his leggings, then pulled them down over his thighs.



When Urzahil woke, he was lying with his body curled around hers. Late afternoon sun filtered through the gridded windows and cast patterns on the terra-cotta floor.

He studied her sleeping form. Her skin was the same copper color from her face to her ankles. It was so different from his own tanned hands and arms, with white everywhere else. Even through thick walls and shuttered windows, their skin glistened with moisture in the afternoon heat.

He hadn't intended it to happen. On the other hand, Khamûl had told him to accept whatever gifts were offered. If Urzahil had been a high-ranking ambassador, or if the outcome of the mission had mattered more, they'd have given him an untouched girl, which in practice meant they'd have sent a weeping child to his room. His stomach lurched. He didn't care what Khamûl said, he'd have found a way to refuse. But happily, Urzahil was only a messenger, not anyone important. They had no need to bribe or impress him, so in place of a maiden, they'd sent someone who was obviously a professional.

The kitchen maids at the Temple had no use for a junior priest. The only experience he had was that which had been purchased. He knew the tricks the professionals used. Wear loose clothing that fell open easily, and pretend you don't know you're exposing yourself. Brush your hand between a man's legs and make it seem like an accident. She'd done all of that and more, and he'd just now realized it. He fell back to sleep.

When he woke, she was gone. He sat up and stretched, filled with a sense of well-being. His clothes were scattered across the foot of the bed and on the floor around it. He retrieved his leggings and turned them right side out. He found his undergarments beyond the foot of the bed, and his shirt lost among the bedclothes.

In the evening, there would be an informal dinner, and he had half an hour to prepare for it. His Chief Ambassador had provided him with notes about local customs, geography, tribes, and the genealogies of the ruling families. He'd read through the notes already, but he wanted to make sure he had them committed to memory.

He sat down at the small table and pulled open his pack. He reached for the thick bundle of notes, but hesitated. He took another look. He wasn't fussy about the way he packed, he tended to jam things in any old way. His papers were too neat, and he couldn't blame it on travel. Travel would have made them messier.

The Trip to Khand

Urzahil sat up with a start. What about the notes from tea this morning? He'd sealed them with his personal seal, then put them in a hidden pocket in his bag. He lifted the false panel and pulled out the folded square, then took it to the window where the light was better.

The seal was firm. It wasn't right, though. It was set too high on the parchment. He lifted it with the tip of his dagger. Bits of parchment clung to the underside. A small dot of red wax, similar in color to the wax he used but not identical, attached his seal to the parchment. He wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been looking for it. It was expertly done.

He knew she was a professional, but he'd been wrong about which profession.

He opened his folded notes and scanned what he'd written. There were a few observations about the Caliph, some of them not very flattering. Most likely they'd already been reported back to him. Oh well, probably the man already knew he was pompous.



On the ride home, he said to Khamûl, "My room was searched while I was sleeping. The seal on my personal notes had been lifted quite expertly, even though the papers were hidden in a secret pocket of my bag."

The wraith clasped a hand to his mouth.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, they always do that. Not just in Khand, on any diplomatic mission. Next time, leave a decoy. When they find it, they won't search any further. Do you remember anything more?"

Urzahil thought of the spy, her legs wrapped around his waist with her ankles crossed at the small of his back. With his weight on his hands, he studied her face, then his gaze traveled down her chest to her belly, to the part of himself that was mostly within her. Then he fell forward, and she raised her feet in the air like the oars of a boat while his hands cupped her bottom.

"No, nothing more," Urzahil said. His face burned.

They rode in silence.

“What will Sauron do when he learns of it?” asked Urzahil.

“This isn’t a high-stakes mission with terms to negotiate or veiled threats, you were just delivering a letter of greetings. I don’t think we need to trouble him about it,” said Khamûl.

“But won’t he learn anyway? Can’t he read your thoughts?”

“Technically yes, but he’s not what you’d call a good listener.”

The road led them into a narrow gorge. The stream bed at the bottom was dry, as it was most days of the year. The path narrowed to the point where they had to go single file. Khamûl drew rein, and sat very still in the saddle, his head turning left and right as if he were listening. Urzahil looked around him to see what had drawn his attention.

A huge man stepped out from behind an outcropping of rock and blocked the path. A homemade cudgel hung loosely in his hand, its head studded with nails. Urzahil’s mouth went dry and his hands shook. Men like these wouldn’t stop at horses and gold. From what he’d heard, they were unlikely to leave a witness alive.

Urzahil looked over his shoulder. If he could get the horse turned around in this narrow space, he could outrun them. Something glinted in the sun, the blade of a curved knife. A man crouched in the underbrush above the path. Before he could call out, there was a rumble and a great cloud of dust. When it cleared, boulders blocked the path behind them.

Urzahil looked forward. The man in the road was smacking the shaft of his makeshift weapon against his palm. Three others appeared, and stood behind him.

“Climb down from those fine animals, nice and slow, and drop your purses to the ground.”

Urzahil was shaking, and something wet ran down his leg.

“Allow me.” Khamûl swung a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. His sword came out of the scabbard with a hiss.

The Nazgûl gripped the hilt with both hand and stepped into the blow. The blade flashed, and a spray of crimson splattered the clothes and faces of the three others. A head

The Trip to Khand

rolled across the dirt, coming to rest against a thorn bush, its eyes staring back at him, not so much in fear as surprise.

"Too easy." The Nazgûl took a step towards the others.

They took off at a dead run without looking back at the headless corpse or the dark stain soaking the ground beneath it.

The Nazgûl wiped his blade on the hem of his cloak and re-sheathed it, then climbed back into the saddle. He shook the reins and nudged his horse around the body. Already, flies were beginning to gather on the stump of what had been its neck.

Urzahil stared with astonishment. "You killed him."

"It's what I do."



Urzahil and Khamûl returned to Minas Morgul as the afternoon shadows were lengthening. They dismounted and dropped to the cobblestones inside the gate.

Khamûl sighed. "I should report in. You might as well come with me." He swept down the marble halls, his boots scarcely making a sound on the polished floor, the muddy hem of his robe swirling about his feet.

The fortress was unusually quiet. The officials and administrators who followed Sauron from Dol Guldur, and the even greater numbers who'd joined his service since then, seemed to be missing. There was nobody in the hallways but Orcs.

Urzahil followed the wraith through the main hall to an alabaster staircase, along a broad hallway, and up a spiral stair built into the thickness of the wall. He stopped in front of a heavy door with decorative ironwork like the tendrils of vines, the door to Sauron's private study. Urzahil recognized it from the day of his private meeting with the Dark Lord, when Sauron had asked Urzahil to join his service.

Khamûl raised his hand and knocked. He waited a moment, and knocked again.

"I don't sense Lord Zigur's presence, in this room or anywhere in the fortress."

Emissary II

Khamûl pushed the door open and stepped inside. The room was empty. The table and chairs were gone, so was the tapestry on the wall. An eyebolt in a ceiling beam was the only thing left of the wrought iron chandelier, with dragons' heads holding candles that he remembered from the last time he was here.

A door stood open on the far side of the room. Urzahil followed Khamûl into a small room that, like the outer room, had been stripped of furniture and ornamentation. A bank of windows looked out on the jagged cliffs of the Ephel Dúath. A wedge like a knife cut sliced between the peaks, the Nameless Pass, the only way into Mordor from here.



In the Great Hall, the din of conversation had reached a dull roar, and the long tables below the salt were packed. Orcs sat had squeezed themselves elbow to elbow on the benches, while others were carrying plates of food and walking up and down between the tables, looking for a place to sit.

At the far end of the room, High Table was empty except for Dwar, and so were the lesser tables that flanked it. The wall behind High Table looked unusually pale. It took a moment to realize why, Sauron's banner was gone.

The Witch King entered from a side door and swept across the platform. He took his place in the throne like chair at the center of High Table as if it belonged to him. Urzahil's stomach clenched. What had happened while they were in Khand? It had the look of a Palace coup.

Khamûl mounted the platform, pulling Urzahil along with him. He rounded the end of High Table and sat at the Witch King's right hand. Urzahil hesitated, then took the free place to Khamûl's right.

His back rigid, Urzahil sat watching and listening to everything around him. What was going on? He grew up on tales of court intrigue, but was too new here to navigate these waters. Servants set plates in front of them in order of rank, and Khamûl began to eat, apparently unconcerned.

The Trip to Khand

"So, where's our Master?" Khamûl asked the Chief of the Nazgûl.

"He's still at Lugbúrz.¹⁰ He decided to stay on permanently, and ordered everyone other than the Garrison that mans the Fortress to join him there."

"He wouldn't even consider it. That shattered pile of rocks which used to be the Dark Tower is home to him in a way this alabaster palace will never be."

A servant clear dishes from the table. The Witch King fell silent until she moved out of earshot.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mairon wants you to leave for Lugbúrz as soon as you can pack. You too, emissary."

¹⁰ Lugbúrz is Black Speech for Barad-dûr.

Chapter 11 Cirith Ungol



Urzahil and Dwar left Minas Morgul at first light and headed east. Urzahil rode a chestnut gelding and Dwar rode Enigma, the same black stallion he'd ridden when he'd escorted the delegation from Umbar to Minas Morgul. He was careful not to let the chestnut get too close to the Nazgûl for fear of panicking it, but the horse seemed to tolerate the creature's presence. "We feed and groom the horses from the time they're born. They're used to us," the wraith explained.

Packhorses carried their belongings. No baggage cart could navigate the route they plan to take. As they approached the Nameless Pass, the road became so steep that Urzahil dropped from the saddle and led his mount by the reins. Dwar did the same.

They reached the Pass and kept going. Urzahil had come here once before so he'd be able to say he'd set foot in Mordor, but this time they went through the pass and kept going. It gave him a creepy feeling.

Once inside Mordor, the path descended into a knife-cut crevasse. Urzahil glanced at the broken rock in its depths, and felt sick.

"Let's lead the horses for now. It levels off after a bit, then we can ride. Don't worry about the drop, the horses are more surefooted than we are." Dwar waved a hand towards the crevice on the right.

They edged down the road with tiny steps, their feet slipping on loose gravel which clattered over the edge into the chasm. After they'd descended thirty or forty feet, the path leveled out and became less treacherous underfoot. Dwar put a foot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle.

Cirith Ungol

Urzahil tried to do the same, but the girth was loose, the stirrup slipped, and he pitched backwards. His grip on the saddle, and the stability of the horse, were all that prevented him from going over the edge. He stood for a moment with his heart pounding, then untangled himself from the stirrup leather and tried again.

Once he was safely back in the saddle, he squeezed the chestnut to a walk. The surefooted animal walked along at a good pace, more comfortable near the edge than Urzahil was.

"Let's go a little faster. I'd like to come down from the mountains before dark." Dwar was already well ahead of him, and gaining. Urzahil kicked the chestnut to a faster pace. He clamped his eyes shut and jammed his fingers under the edge of the saddle, and wished it were over.



Urzahil stared at the ground with a hand on each knee, laboring for breath. This pass was higher, and the road to it steeper, than any they'd gone through so far.

"This is it, Cirith Ungol." Dwar wasn't winded at all. Urzahil hated him.

Urzahil recovered enough to lift his head. A tower at least three stories high controlled the road. It appeared to be unoccupied.

"There'll be a garrison here someday, but for now, you and I are the only ones here," said Dwar.

Urzahil let his head drop, and continued trying to catch his breath. There was still time to descend from the mountains by nightfall. Soon, the temperatures would start to drop. He knew Dwar wanted to keep moving.

They went forward a little further and rounded the crest. Urzahil stopped in his tracks, stunned. The whole plain of Gorgoroth was laid out before them, dominated by the dormant volcano. A wisp of smoke rose from the cinder cone and disintegrated in the wind.

"What do you see?" said Dwar.

Urzahil let out a low whistle. "The volcano looks like it could spring to life again."

"Not the volcano, behind it."

There was a great pile of rock on the promontory. One side reached the cliff, and some of it had spilled onto the plain below.

"I see what looks like a huge mound of gravel. Several mounds, but the one in the center is highest."

"Look harder," said Dwar.

Urzahil squinted and scanned the promontory, hazy in the distance. There was only broken rock, the same dark-colored basalt as the living rock of the promontory itself. He stared at a section, moved his gaze, and stared again.

"There's a group of white dots, a hundred or more. It looks like a flock of birds." He watched for a few moments. None of them moved.

And then he saw it. A vertical line, the same dark color as the basalt of the promontory, almost invisible against the background of broken rock. The top of the structure went on and on, as flat and level as the horizon at sea, and almost as tall as the mounds of gravel behind it.

Urzahil gasped. "It's a wall, as big as the curtain wall encircling the Haven of Umbar. They're rebuilding the curtain wall surrounding Barad-dûr!"

"No, that's the base of the Tower itself. The curtain wall will be built after the Tower is finished," said Dwar.

Urzahil gasped. If that was the size of its base, it was going to be immense.

"Your flock of birds is a tent city for the workers who are rebuilding the Dark Tower. They're building on top of the original foundations, using whatever stones they can recover from the rubble," said Dwar.

Urzahil tried to make out details of the tent city. That must be where Sauron was now.



Cirith Ungol

A day later, they were following Sauron's road, a causeway from the volcano to the base of the promontory. Huge piles of rock formed huge mounds at the foot of the cliff.

The blocks of stone, which looked like bricks from a distance, were about as high as a man's chest and longer than a man is tall. He couldn't even imagine how they were moved, or lifted and stacked, as the structure was built.

A great section of wall sat among the broken stones, its blocks of stone still mortared together.

"How did it survive the fall?" asked Urzahil.

"That's a pretty small fragment, considering the original size of the Tower. Only a few pieces were left intact. They tore it to pieces, all but the foundations which were beyond their power to harm."

Chapter 12 Tent City



he road up the side of the promontory consisted of one switchback turn after another. Where the path was steepest, they had to dismount and lead the horses by the reins. Within a few minutes, Urzahil was breathing hard and his calves burned.

They rounded the final bend and crested the lip of the plateau. A sea of tents stretched out before him, arranged in neat rows. Fire pits were scattered here and there, the air carried the scent of smoke. In the distance, a cluster of pavilions towered over the tents around them. Banners on poles flanked the entrances to each. It looked like a military encampment, without the shields and weapons.

A mountain of loose stone dominated the background behind the tent city. The shattered rock was all that remained of the first Barad-dûr. Dark gray in color, the great pile of debris rose at least a hundred feet above the camp.

A channel excavated into it revealed the living rock below, leveled and smoothed when the original tower was built at the end of the Second Age. The channel led to a cleared area within the rubble. In it was a stone structure just tall enough to poke out above the pile of wreckage.

A crane perched on the wall lifted a massive stone block. The click-click of a ratchet reached them as if from a great distance. The wall and the engines of construction must be further away than they appeared, and much larger. The outlines of figures walking the treadmill powering the windlass seemed impossibly small.

"Oh, there you are." Berktay, who had been Sauron's steward at Minas Morgul, came bustling over to them.

"I'll leave you here, then." Dwar tossed Enigma's reins to a servant and disappeared between among the tents, presumably to report to his master.

"Let me show you around and get you settled." Steward Berkday threaded his way further into the camp, and Urzahil followed. Row upon row of tents were arranged on either side of a corridor, all exactly alike, as far as Urzahil could tell. A breeze stirred the still air, carrying with it the smell of stone dust and latrine.

"This is where people of rank are quartered. Remember the symbol over the doorway, that's how you'll know which one is yours. I'm afraid it's austere compared to what you're used to. The canvas gives you shade and privacy, but it's not much protection against real weather."

The Steward lifted the tent flap. Inside, two cots stood side by side on the bare ground. One was newly made up with a blanket and pillow. The other looked slightly rumped, with a dark green tunic discarded at its foot. A wooden traveling chest rested on the dirt nearby. Gaerna's chest, and Gaerna's green silk tunic with the silver embroidery.

Urzahil sighed with relief. He'd heard nothing of Gaerna since the day his friend decided to stay behind in Mordor rather than return home with the rest of the delegation from Umbar. That had been six weeks ago.

"I'll leave you, then." The Steward started to lift the tent flap. "Oh, before I forget. You need to report to the Chief Ambassador first thing in the morning. Sauron has made offers of friendship to every nation that borders us on the North, South, and East. Their answers should be coming in soon. You're going to be busy."

After the Steward left, Urzahil sat on his cot, listening to the sounds of construction and the wind that never seem to stop. Someone cursed outside. The tent flap stirred, and a pair of Orcs struggled in with Urzahil's travel chest.

"Set it at the end of the bed." Urzahil told them, and they dropped it on the ground with a thunk. They left, and he opened the lid to inspected his belongings for damage. There wasn't anywhere to put his things, so everything went back

into the chest. The tent canvas rustled behind him. He looked up, startled.

"Hey, look who's here! I heard you'd joined us." Gaerna stood in the doorway, grinning. "I just got back from Far Harad last week, and before I could do more than wash off the dust of travel and change my shirt, I received the summons to come here.

"With me, it was Khand, and I was ordered here two days ago. So what happens next?"

"Are you hungry? Let me show you the cook tent." Gaerna washed his hands and face from a basin, then combed his hair with his fingers. "All right, let's go."

They stopped in front of a huge expanse of canvas which enclosed an area the size of a Great Hall. Sections of the wall were open, allowing them to wander in and out with ease. Inside, row upon row of rough tables, no more than planks of wood resting on sawhorses, filled up most of the space.

Urzahil breathed in the aromas of fresh bread and roasting meat. An enormous line snaked out of the tent. Orcs, laborers, and slaves held tin plates, waiting their turns.

"Meals are catch as catch can. You go to the cook tent when you're hungry, and they'll serve you what they have," said Gaerna.

"Is there a High Table?" Urzahil asked.

"No, there's just the trestle tables, and they're mostly for the workman. Most of the heroes, those of high rank who report to Sauron directly, take their meals in their own quarters. Their assistants, meaning folks like us, take our plates outside and find a place to sit."

Urzahil's face fell. If there wasn't a High Table, it would be that much harder for him to locate Sauron, or the Chief Ambassador, or anyone he needed to find. He didn't care for the rough-and-tumble of camp life.

Gaerna bypassed the people who were waiting and went directly into the tent. "We're the swells here. You know, the nobility. We don't have to wait in line."

Inside, they went to the serving area and were given tin plates. An Orc gave them a slice of bread, another ladled a stew

onto their plates which seemed to have been made primarily from turnips.

"I thought I smelled meat roasting," said Gaerna. The Orc went over to a fire pit and returned with several thick slices of lamb, charred black around the edges are.

Urzahil followed Gaerna outside. They found places to sit on one of the long benches next to the tent. Urzahil soaked up the uninteresting gravy with hunks of bread.

"Tell me everything. What's going on in Mordor?" asked Urzahil.

"Well, we're rebuilding the Dark Tower, that's the main thing. We're also trying to form alliances with all the nations who were our friends in the Second Age. Given enough time, and more than a little bit of luck, Mordor will be a great power again." said Gaerna.

"Can I ask you something? Have you seen Sauron since you got here?"

"I saw him picking his way across the debris pile earlier today. He often does that. They say he can peer through the rock and see what's underneath."

"How did you know it was him?"

"It was obvious, even at a distance. The Nazgûl were hovering around him."

They lingered by the cook tent until the light failed, then Urzahil followed Gaerna back to their tent. He was glad to have a guide. If he'd been alone, he could easily have gotten lost.

After Gaerna blew out the lamp, Urzahil lay in the darkness, unable to sleep. The murmur of men's voices, sometimes punctuated by cursing followed by laughter, kept disturbing him just when he was beginning to drift off. Sounds of construction floated on the night air, the tink tink tink of chisel on stone, the click-click-click of the ratchet, then a shriek and an enormous crash.

He got up and padded over to the tent flap, the packed earth gritty beneath his toes. A few lights shone faintly around the Tower, but they weren't enough to work by. There was no moon, either; the night was overcast and threatening to rain.

"Does work on the Tower ever stop?" he asked Gaerna.

“No, it goes on through the night, every night. It’s mostly Men on duty during the day, but the greater part of the workforce is Orcs.”

Orcs hated sunlight, but could easily see in the dark. Of course they’d be working at night.

Sometime during the night, rain drummed on the tent like a handful of pebbles flung at the canvas, and after a while, a drip fell on his face. The wind picked up, making the tent flutter loudly. Rivulets of water ran across the dirt floor. Urzahil worried about the books in his wooden chest.



After breakfast, Urzahil made the short walk from the cook tent to the group of pavilions in the center of camp. Gaerna had told him the one in the middle was the command tent where Sauron met with his highest-ranking servants each morning. If Urzahil were to go over there after breakfast, he should be able to catch Ambassador Kiran as he left the meeting.

He reached the end of a corridor between tents, and three pavilions came into view, even larger than they’d appeared from a distance. Each was identified by a standard hung from a pole beside the door. Sauron’s red device on a black background marked his headquarters, and presumably his personal quarters as well.

Urzahil licked his lips, but his mouth was too dry for it to do much good. When Ambassador Kiran left the tent, it seemed likely all the other officials would be there too, including the Nazgûl and Sauron himself. His breath caught in his throat.

Just then, the sentry stepped forward and pulled the tent canvas aside, and Steward Bertay stepped out with another man, taller and stouter than himself.

“Urzahil, what brings you here?” The Steward looked surprised.

“I was hoping to find the Chief Ambassador here. I’m the new emissary, I need to learn what I duties are.”

“I’m Ambassador Kiran,” said the older man. “Things are quiet at the moment. Be patient for a week or two, and then I’ll find you something to do.”



Urzahil had been at Barad-dûr, or Lugbûrz in Black Speech, for three days now. In all that time, still hadn’t seen Sauron, not even from a distance. He had no instructions from his new master, and no idea what he was supposed to be doing.

An empty afternoon stretched out before him. He walked towards the great pile of broken stone that covered most of the promontory.

He reached the edge of the rock pile. Weeds, scrub bushes, and gnarled little trees grew between the blocks, and gray-green lichens spread across the surfaces of the blocks themselves. He counted a hundred stones tumbled together, not one of them was free from damage. A great chunk had been knocked off the corner of one, another was cracked almost in half. They were partially buried under gravel and fist-sized rocks.

Not far from where he stood, an enormous stack of stone blocks had been arranged in neat rows, three or four blocks high and as many deep. A small group was clustered in front of it. A man in the leather apron of a stone mason appeared to be giving a lecture to half a dozen scribes, clerks, and other minor officials who made up Sauron’s government. Care not and Gillis were among the group. Urzahil went over to join them.

“... and these blocks were salvaged from the rubble. They may not be pretty, but we can still use them.” The mason pointed to the stacked basalt behind him.

Urzahil craned his neck to see around the scribe in front of him. Each block was as tall as a man and as long as a trestle table. Most were battered. Some were chipped all over, others had broken into pieces. Not one was unscarred or without damage.

“When we arrived in Lugbûrz, we expected to find the stones had shattered when the Tower was pulled down. But

when we cleared the debris from the foundations, we discovered that most of stones were still usable. They might look like a tomcat who lost a fight, but there's nothing wrong with them structurally. We're mortaring them in place as fast as we can dig them out of the wreckage, and the wall is going up at an astonishing rate."

"But why would you want to rebuild from damaged stone? The promontory is made of basalt, wouldn't it be better to quarry new blocks?" asked the scribe.

"Him the stone is the most time-consuming part of construction. It took six hundred years to raise the first Tower. Between building on the original foundations and reusing salvaged materials, we think we can rebuild it in sixty."

The group followed their guide to the next stop on the tour, a circular area cleared from the debris field. Tall mounds of gravel enclosed the small space.

Their guide led them to a rude table made from splintered planks. Small artifacts were arranged on its surface.

"Look what we pulled from the rubble. You can still see the original design." He held up a palm-sized fragment painted red and yellow, showing the jaws and teeth of a mythical animal.

"This is the neck of a glass bottle that somehow survived. And this used to be part of a door latch, a fine example of decorative ironwork. See the pattern engraved in the metal?"

More artifacts lay piled on the ground. Shattered timbers, twisted weapons, bits of paneling carved in a delicate pattern. A few strips of iron, mangled in the collapse, were still recognizable as a wall bracket for a torch. It was sobering. The first Tower had been something proud. This was all that was left of it.

"From here, we'll go on to our last stop." The mason led them into the shadow of the Tower itself. They stood at the base of the wall, which seemed to rise forever. Urzahil looked up the expanse of gray-black basalt to the blue sky overhead, then looked away just as quickly. The movement of clouds against the top made him dizzy.

"When we set out to clear the debris from the original foundations, we masons wanted to start with the highest part

of the rock pile, but Sauron believed they were under a shallower area off to the side. We didn't really believe he could see into the earth, but sure enough, they were right where he said they were."

Deep trenches scraped into the bedrock laid the foundation bare in several places. The shear planes looked metallic, with a repeating geometric pattern embossed in their polished surface.

"That writing, if you can call it that, is a manifestation of the spell laid on them, that's why they're so strong. The bedrock itself would collapse under the weight of the Tower."

"Now, what do you notice? Yes, they looked metallic. What else? There's not a scratch on them. The Men of Gondor dug these sapping trenches intending to undermine the foundations and bring down the Tower, but because they're enchanted, they can't be harmed."

"Will the new Tower be just like the old, then?" asked a captain of the guard.

"The first Tower took six hundred years to finish. By rebuilding on the original foundations, and reusing as much of the original stone as we can recover, we think we can rebuild it in a couple of decades. Of course, in the interest of speed, we'll have to cut corners. The Tower won't have any luxuries, at least not at first."

"By going without things like painted floor tiles and carved paneling?" asked a thin-faced purser's agent.

"By going without things like privies and staircases," said their guide.

Chapter 13 Behind the Veil



urzahil, I'm glad I found you." The Chief Ambassador hurried to catch up with him.

"The letter you carried to Khand has borne fruit. A messenger arrived with a formal dispatch from their Caliph, saying he would be honored to send an ambassador to meet with Sauron. The messenger said the ambassador and his delegation will arrive in two days' time."

Urzahil wondered how they were going to receive foreign guests. Lugbúrz was, as Gillis had observed, was a construction site.

"How can we impress important guests if we make them sleep in tents and pick their way through piles of stone?"

The Ambassador clapped Urzahil on the shoulder. "A lot can happen in two days. Want to see how much the workmen have done already? Follow me."

The Ambassador led the way to the path cleared through the debris field to the base of the Tower. In the few weeks since Urzahil had come here from Minas Morgul, the Tower had risen at least another story, and was now around ten stories tall.

Cranes positioned along the top of the wall at regular intervals lifted stones a hundred feet in the air. The clatter from the ratchets was deafening. No stones fell from the claws while he watched, but even so, Urzahil wouldn't have been willing to walk under them.

The Ambassador headed for the main gate, an arched portal at the base of the Tower. It was several stories high, and wide enough for a dozen soldiers to march abreast, or for a war machine to pass through without losing any parts.

They entered the main gate. No door sealed the entrance, though holes drilled into the rock showed where the hinges would be. It was dark in the tunnel. The base of the Tower was at least thirty feet thick, and their voices echoed from the surface of the stones.

They emerged from the tunnel and found themselves inside the Tower itself. An interior wall stood directly in front of them, a stone structure three or four stories high with scaffolding built against it. At its foot were piles of construction debris.

The walls of the Tower rose around them on all sides. High above, Urzahil saw a patch of blue sky and the towering clouds of late summer framed by dark stone. It was like the view from the bottom of a well.

"It's an empty shell," Urzahil said, disappointed.

"Not quite." The Ambassador took them around the wall with the scaffolding, through a makeshift door, and into a warren of roofless corridors. He stopped in front of a pair of doors twice as tall as himself. Finely-made ironwork covered its surface. The Ambassador gripped an iron ring and pulled. The door hardly moved at first, but once it started, it kept going.

Urzahil followed the Ambassador into the room beyond. Rows of pillars flanked an aisle stretching the length of the chamber. His eye followed one of them from the torch brackets, up and up to the dimness of the vaulted ceiling, easily four stories above the stone floor.

At the end of the aisle was a raised platform at the far end of the room. The platform held a throne of black granite, its surface utterly plain and without ornamentation.

Against the wall behind the throne, workman climbed on ladders propped against the wall, hanging Sauron's banner. It appeared to be the same one that used to hang in the dining hall at Minas Morgul, black with the emblem of the Eye. It was as tall as three men, but in this chamber, it looked tiny.

The Ambassador narrated as he walked. "The audience chamber is the only part of the Tower with a roof, save for a few storage rooms and offices. The masons and carpenters have less than two days to make it look like it's finished."

“Why not just tell them the truth, that we’ve only just begun to build the Tower?” asked Urzahil.

“Sauron needs to appear strong. Khand is a traditional ally, but people will talk, and word will get out. We don’t want Gondor to hear any rumors that we’re not ready to defend ourselves.”



Over the next day and a half, Urzahil was plunged into a whirlwind of preparations. It was decided to house Khand’s ambassador and his party in a guardroom that had a ceiling. Sauron’s exchequer loaned his own four poster bed and bed curtains for the visiting ambassador’s use, and between the rest of them, they were able to pull together enough carpets, tables, and footstools to make the rooms look complete.

Once the visiting ambassador’s room was furnished, Urzahil climbed a ladder and laid canvas tarpaulins on the floor above it so sunlight wouldn’t shine between the cracks, revealing that there was nothing above them.

“What if it rains?” the Chief Ambassador asked Urzahil.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t, or they’ll learn the Tower is hollow as a chimney.”

Similar quarters were cobbled together and furnished only slightly less elegantly for the rest of the delegation.

“If any of them bring an extra scribe or servant they haven’t told us about, we’re in serious trouble,” Urzahil muttered under his breath.



Urzahil followed the Chief Ambassador down a hallway open to the sky.

“Now remember, when you escort our visitors through the Tower, only take them down hallways that are finished, even if the route is longer. We can’t have them seeing this.” He looked up, where there should have been a roof.

They stopped before a tall stone wall, the outside of the audience chamber. Ladders and scaffolding lay against it, the roof had been finished barely in time.

The Ambassador stopped before a narrow door. He pulled it open and stepped inside. The small room was filled with people, a dozen or more. Many of them were already dressed in black robes with embroidery on the cuffs and collars, and satin piping along the seams.

The matron handing out the robes, an Orc so ancient she might have served in the first Barad-dûr, moved among them, adjusting a fold here, straightening a collar there.

Crates and chests stacked against a wall held more robes. The matron lifted a folded robe from one of them and handed it to the Ambassador, who lifted it over his head and let them drop to the floor. She went back to get another one for Urzahil.

The Ambassador struggled to fasten the tiny buttons with his large, clumsy fingers.

“Sir, your collar is crooked,” said Urzahil.

The Ambassador fumbled with the buttons of his collar, then tugged to pull the two halves apart.

“Stop! What are you trying to do, send buttons flying all over the room?” The matron flew across the room and smacked his hand away. “Here, let me. I can’t trust the likes of you with such an expensive garment, you’ll wreck it.”

The ancient she-Orc undid the buttons and did them up again properly. “There! And don’t touch it. If you need help, call me. That’s what I’m here for.”

The Ambassador looked stunned. He held perfectly still, keeping his hands well away from the robe.

Urzahil shook out his own robe and held it up. It was surprisingly heavy. Made from black wool, the collar and cuffs were trimmed with black silk embroidery on a black background. He put his arms in the sleeves, the coarse fabric scratchy against his skin. He fastened up the buttons as carefully as he could, trying not to draw the matron’s eye.

The room brightened for a moment when the door to the hallway opened and then slammed shut. A man in workman’s clothing leaned against it, breathing hard. He smelled of smoke, and his hands were covered in soot. Reddish-brown hair framed his unremarkable features. He straightened and shoved a strand of hair from his eyes, leaving a streak of soot across his

forehead. He looked familiar, Urzahil thought he'd passed him on the stairs back in Minas Morgul.

"You're late," said the matron.

"Sorry, I lost track of time." His voice was low and harsh.

It was past time to meet the delegation from Khand, who must surely be standing in the antechamber by now. Urzahil hoped they weren't feeling ill-used by being made to wait. He glanced at the Chief Ambassador, expecting him to reprimand the newcomer.

The matron held up a robe for the man and he shrugged into it. Unlike the other robes, it was without ornamentation of any kind. He stood still while she draped a veil over his face and pulled his hood forward.

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

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

A servant opened the door to the audience chamber. The newcomer threaded his way through the crowd, turning sideways to squeeze between Urzahil and the Chief Ambassador. The folds of his robes brushed against Urzahil's hand, as soft as cashmere. The heat from his body was like coals on a hearth.

The man stepped through the door into the audience chamber and the others followed. The light was dim in the vaulted hall. Rows of torches, mounted on the pillars at shoulder height, ran the length of the chamber, but they were just enough to turn darkness into semi-darkness. The vaulted ceiling far above their heads was lost in shadow.

The man crossed to the center of the room. He started to mount the dais, but missed his footing. Urzahil heard something rip, followed by a muttered curse.

"Do you have any idea how much that fabric costs?" said the matron.

"Sorry."

The newcomer stood before the Dark Throne, a massive structure of black marble, facing the door where the visitors would enter. Two Nazgûl arrange themselves a little behind him, one on each side. The Ambassador stood to one side. Urzahil followed, and stood behind him.

Behind the Veil

The man sat on the Dark Throne and laid his arms along its sides, his black-gloved hands hanging over the ends. One finger was missing. The matron arranged the folds of his robe so the rip didn't show. When she was done, he raised his hand, and the sentries threw open the twin doors at the far end of the hall.

Chapter 14 Easy As Falling Off A Wall



Urzahil pressed his hands over his ears against the tink of chisel on stone, the cursing of the workmen, and the clak-clak-clak of ratcheted cranes as they strained to life huge blocks of stone hundreds of feet in the air. Choking on stone dust, he struggled to keep pace with his master, who strode across the mound of broken rock with ease, never checking to see if Urzahil had managed to keep up with him.

Sauron was rebuilding his Tower on the foundations of the first Barad-dûr that had been pulled down at the end of the Second Age. Ten years into construction, it was already twenty or thirty stories high.

They passed through the great arch that pierced the base of what would be the Tower's outer wall. Sauron headed for the scaffolding built against the inner wall and mounted the stairs. Urzahil followed him up flight after flight of shaky wooden steps, twenty flights, thirty. Finally they emerged into the sunlight. He found himself standing on a construction platform at the very top of the Tower.

On the far side of the platform, workers milled around, mixing mortar and cementing stone blocks into place. They didn't stop work, or even appear to notice, the arrival of their lord.

Urzahil put a hand to his chest, breathing hard. His calves burning with cramp. A breeze stirred his hair, and he looked around while he caught his breath. The whole plane of Gorgoroth spread out before him, arid and merciless, black with fingers of ancient lava flows. The volcano seemed closer from up here, and to the east, the ragged peaks of the Ephel Dúath scraped the sky, blue purple in the distance.

Falling Off A Wall

Urzahil took a step toward the edge, and then another, until he could just see over the top of the unfinished wall. The Tower was wider at the base than the top, and stepped in at intervals. About five stories below his vantage point, a walkway behind the battlements hugged the wall, wide enough for two men to walk abreast.

Twenty stories below that, the base of the Tower sat almost on the edge of a sheer cliff that fell all the way to the plain of Gorgoroth, a thousand feet below. A wave of vertigo hit him and Urzahil pulled back.

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid of heights?” said his master.

“You’re not?” asked Urzahil.

Sauron climbed onto the wall, got his knees under himself, and stood up. He took a step, heel to toe, his arms outstretched like a tightrope walker at a fair. He lost his balance for a moment and his arms wavered. Urzahil started to rush forward to seize his Master’s arm, but held back when he realized he could be pulled over too, but Sauron righted himself and kept walking.

Urzahil watched him, hand over his heart. If anything happened to Sauron, Urzahil would be left homeless and destitute.

A workman mixing mortar nearby finished stirring the dark grey slurry and looked up. His eyes widened and he shouted, “Don’t step there, the mortar’s still wet!”

Urzahil looked where the man was pointing. The mortar joints in the wall where Sauron was about to step were dark grey instead of white. The stones had just been laid, and weren’t safe to walk on.

Sauron, who was better at talking than listening, didn’t heed the warning. He took another step, and the stone gave way beneath his foot. He clawed at the air and went over the edge with a shriek. Urzahil flung himself against the wall and leaned over it, looking for a broken body on the stones below, but saw nothing. He ran down the rickety stairs, flight after flight after flight, gasping for air.

One of the Nazgûl was coming up the stairs. Urzahil grabbed him by his black robes and shouted, "Sauron's fallen from the wall!"

"What, again?" said the Nazgûl, whom Urzahil recognized as Indur.

Urzahil continued going down, with Indur following him. They reached ground level and went out of the Tower into the courtyard. A sentry was opening the postern door, a small opening in the massive Main Gate. Sauron stepped through it with exaggerated dignity, his shoulders back and his chin held high.

"I meant to do that," he said, avoiding their eyes.

His shirt hung in shreds, and there were bloody scratches on his arms and chest. Skinned knees showed through his torn leggings.

"How did he survive the fall?" Urzahil asked.

"He shape-shifted into something that can fly, like a demon or a vampire. He must have tried to claw his shirt off, but not managed to free his wings completely. That would explain the hard landing and the skinned knees," said Indur.

Sauron picked his way across the courtyard in bare feet. He gave them a small nod and disappeared into the Gatehouse tower.

"Do you think he'll tell us about it later?" asked Urzahil.

"I think that if you ask, he'll say he doesn't know what you're talking about," said Indur.