

Chapter 1 The Spy



think I can find it. I'll be right back." Khamûl said to his Master. He slipped through the door and went striding down the corridor.

But a few minutes later, he got an urgent summons to return. He retraced his steps at a dead run, but pulled up short in front of a heap of debris blocking the corridor. The ceiling of the corridor had collapsed. The stone dust made him cough.

A terrible thought struck him. Had the Council Chamber collapsed as well?

"My Lord! Are you all right? Adûnaphel? Uvatha?"

He listened, but there was no answer. He was sick with fear, until he heard muffled shouting and banging on the other side of the obstruction. He considered what to do next.

The rubble was shoulder high. There was enough space on top to crawl through, but the ceiling was unstable. Heavy blocks could fall at any time. He scrambled over the broken stones as quickly as possible, and reached the other side without incident.

The doors of the Council Chamber were pinned shut by debris, trapping his Master and the others inside.

"I'm going to dig you out. Just give me a minute to organize the laborers." said Khamûl.

"No. Catch the spy." shouted Sauron.

It went against his every instinct to abandon his Master, but Khamûl obeyed him. He ran to the guards' post and sent bands of orcs fanning out down the hillside in pursuit of the Grey Wizard.

"You walked right by him. He was standing behind the door. You didn't see him?" Sauron was unsmiling.

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"I didn't look." answered Khamûl.

"You didn't sense his presence?"

Khamûl tried to remember.

"I did, but I was in a hurry and didn't slow down to look. I thought there was no one here but us, and I was imagining things."

His Master turned away, his fists clenching and unclenching.

"How did he get in?" said Sauron.

The moment his Master asked the question, Khamûl knew what had happened, and he knew that it was his fault. The East Portal. That's how the spy got in last time. Sauron feared the Valar were about to attack, and fled the same day.

Sauron stayed away for four hundred years. When they reoccupied the fortress, Khamûl should have posted a guard to watch the hidden exit, or at least secured it with a lock or bar. But the intrusion was ancient history by then, and he simply forgot.

"I forgot to secure the portal. He got in the same way he did the first time." said Khamûl.

"You forgot."

Sauron backhanded him across the face. That had never happened before. Khamûl put his hand to his cheek, gasping. Sauron motioned over two men-at-arms.

"Take him down to the cells."

Khamûl allowed himself to be led to the dungeons. He could have overpowered his guards easily, but he submitted to his Master's orders.

The stone steps were narrow and slippery with algae. He smelled damp, black mold, and worse. A jailor showed him to a tiny cell. Khamûl stepped inside, and the cell door closed behind him. He heard the lock click shut.

Now that his Master's identity had been exposed, the Valar might attack him here. Khamûl knew his Master wasn't strong enough to defend himself. He also knew that Sauron feared capture by the Valar more than he feared anything else. Khamûl was sick with self-reproach. Whatever his Master decided to do to him, he would submit to it.

Sometime later, Sauron came down to the cells and

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confronted him through the bars.

“Give me your ring.”

Khamûl would have liked to refuse, but there was no point. He pulled it off his hand. Normally, he would have struggled to get it past his knuckle, but it slipped off easily. Reluctantly, he handed it through the bars.

Without the ring on his hand, the connection was broken, the song fell silent. His hand touched Sauron’s for a moment, but could no longer read his Master’s thoughts.

After his Master left, he paced back and forth in the narrow cell, too agitated to sit down.

They must be having emergency sessions to decide their next move, Khamûl thought. Khamûl was a master tactician. He was worried about his Master’s safety. He should be there, advising him.

He asked the jailor to take a message to his Master, apologizing for what happened and accepting responsibility for it. The jailor went upstairs to deliver it. Hours later, he was still waiting for an answer.

A worse thought struck him. The last time a spy got in, they abandoned Dol Guldur the same day. The others might have gone already. Khamûl feared he’d been left behind, forgotten in this cell. Without his ring, Khamûl was no longer a Nazgûl, immune from death. He could die in here from old age before they remembered him. He sank to the floor and cradled his head in his arms.

In the evening, a jailor brought a tray, but he left it untouched.



He spent a restless night. In the morning, he heard a key turned in the lock. When the cell door opened, he lifted his head from the floor.

“You’re wanted upstairs.” said the guard.

“Why?” Khamûl asked.

“The Necromancer wants to make an example of you, to let people know what happens to those who neglect their duty.”

Whatever happens, I accept it. He drew a deep breath.

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Khamûl walked between two guards, his eyes on the floor. They brought him upstairs and into the courtyard, which was mobbed with people. The crowd fell silent when Khamûl appeared. He felt their eyes on him, and didn't like it. As a ranger, he preferred to be the one doing the watching

The smell of new wood reached him. The crowd parted to let them walk to the low scaffold which, Khamûl was sure, wasn't there yesterday.

He kept his eyes on his feet to avoid looking at the scaffold. He didn't want to see the men who'd just been hanged on there. He didn't know what was about to happen to him, but whatever it was, it wasn't going to be pleasant.

His Master was standing on the scaffold. Khamûl couldn't see his face behind the steel mask, but he didn't need to. He could read his mood from the way he carried himself, and right now, his Master was as pitiless as a stone. He held a rod in one hand, which he slapped against his palm.

At a word from his Master, Khamûl mounted the short flight of stairs to the scaffold.

"Do you have anything to say?" his Master asked him.

Khamûl fought the impulse to explain why it wasn't his fault, and to remind his Master of his long and faithful service. If he made excuses, Sauron would have had him hanged. Khamûl lowered his eyes.

"I submit to whatever sentence you choose for me, and humbly beg pardon for my faults." said Khamûl.

Khamûl saw Adûnaphel and Uvatha standing by the wall. Uvatha was holding Adûnaphel by the arms while she fought to shake him loose. Khamûl met her eyes across the courtyard. He thought she was sending him a message, but since he wasn't wearing a ring, he couldn't hear her.

"Take off your mantle." Sauron told him.

With shaking hands, Khamûl undid the clasp at the throat and handed it to one of the guards. He started to undo the fasteners of his shirt, but stopped when his Master pushed his hands away with tip of the rod.

"Turn around."

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Khamûl did, and looked out on the sea of people filling the courtyard.

“Stand perfectly still with your hands at your sides. Don’t move unless I tell you.”

Sauron paced back and forth behind him, slapping the rod into the palm of his hand. Startled, Khamûl flinched at the sound.

“Your negligence allowed a spy to get into the fortress.”

There was a whistling sound, and a blow. Tears sprang into his eyes.

“Do you have any idea what that means? You endangered all our lives.”

A second blow.

“Now the Valar know I’m here. They could attack this place at any moment.”

A third.

He lost count at twenty. They kept coming. A particularly hard one made him lose his balance and fall hard on his knees. He caught himself on the palms of his hands, which stung where he scraped them on the splintery planks. He knelt there, frozen. He didn’t know if he was supposed to get up. He didn’t know if he could.

At a word from his Master, strong men grabbed him and pulled him to his feet. He kept his head down and didn’t look at anyone.

“Take him to his room.” said Sauron.

He’d expected to be taken back down to the cells. It was over. Relief flooded over him.

The guards didn’t know where his room was, so Adûnaphel went along to show them. After they left, Adûnaphel loosened his clothes and helped him to lie face down on the bed.

“Let’s have a look at the damage.” said Adûnaphel.

She lifted his shirt and pulled the waistband of his leggings down over his hips.

“There’s no blood. The skin’s not broken, so you won’t have stripes, but your entire back is blue and purple. You have a few blows across the kidneys, so you might pee blood for a day or two. Let me take your boots off. And do you want help getting

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out of your clothes?"

She left the room for a few minutes, and came back with a small phial of black liquid.

"Poppy syrup. It should knock you out until evening."

He held his breath and choked down the bitter draught. Adûnaphel got up to leave, and pulled the door shut behind her. Khamûl listened, but he didn't hear the key turned from the outside. He wasn't locked in.

Khamûl heard voices in the hall.

"I thought he was going to be executed." said Uvatha. Khamûl hadn't known he was there.

"I didn't. Sauron needs him, and his loyalty is beyond question." said Adûnaphel.

That's how she remembers it now, but I saw Uvatha trying to restrain her. Khamûl thought.



Khamûl lay face down, sleeping fitfully. His whole body ached, even the backs of his arms. If he attended Council meetings tomorrow, he would have to do it standing.

The door opened, and someone entered the room. He smelled wood smoke, fresh turned earth, and something metallic. Iron, maybe. He didn't open his eyes. He didn't have to, he knew who it was.

Footsteps entered the room and stopped beside the bed. Khamûl held his breath. A hand touched his hair, and he heard a whispered blessing. There was a metallic clink as something was set down on the small table beside the bed. A moment later, the door closed softly. He heard footsteps receding down the hall.

Khamûl opened his eyes. His ring was sitting on the table. He reached for it and put it on.

Chapter 2 The Loss of Tol Sirion



Khamûl woke up stiff and barely able to move. He thought about staying in bed all day, but when he received a summons to the Council Chamber, he crawled out of bed and asked a servant to help him dress.

He walked to the Council Chamber with one hand on the wall for support. He was thinking about the meeting. If we stand and fight, how can we fight the Valar? If we flee, do we go to Mordor or somewhere else?

Adûnaphel and Uvatha were already there, in their usual places. Khamûl started toward his place at Sauron's right hand, but hesitated. He had almost certainly been demoted and stripped of his titles, Lieutenant of Dol Guldur, Second Chief of the Nazgûl, Shadow of the East, ...

Sauron was the last to arrive. He sat down and sorted through a stack of papers. They waited until he finished.

"Khamûl, take your place, please." He touched the empty chair on his right, Khamûl's usual place.

"I thought you demoted him." said Uvatha.

"No, he's not demoted." said Sauron.

Khamûl took his seat. Which is to say, he stood behind his usual chair, his arms crossed over the back. He didn't feel up to sitting just yet.

Uvatha looked at Khamûl, teasing.

"So what's it like to be thrashed in public?"

"It totally sucks." said Sauron, his eyes on the papers in front of him.

They looked up at him.

"When I lost Tol Sirion after a woman slashed my throat and forced me to surrender the fortress, I had to go back to

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Angband and tell Lord Melkor. Let's just say he wasn't pleased with me."

"What happened?" asked Uvatha.

"He said he was going to make an example of me, so he was going to bust me in rank. But I'd worked hard to become his second-in-command, and I didn't want to give it up.

"I told him, if he was going to make an example of me, do it in public and make it something that involved pain. How bad could it be? I'm stoic about pain, and I figured it would be over in a minute or two.

"Afterwards, it occurred to me that we hadn't discussed what he would do to me. I hoped he wouldn't put me on the rack or brand my face, but we'd already sealed the deal, so I just had to trust him.

"I was frightened when they brought me down to the audience hall, where the whole of Melkor's Court was assembled to witness punishment. But when they led me in, all I saw was the frame we used as a whipping post. I was so relieved, I almost laughed out loud." said Sauron.

"So it wasn't that bad?"

"That's what I told myself. I wasn't going to cry out, and I would walk out of there as steady as I walked in.

"And?"

"It still sucked."

At least you had a choice. I didn't. Khamûl thought.

Sauron reached over to Khamûl and touched his hand.

After the meeting adjourned, Khamûl, Adûnaphel, and Uvatha stood in the hall discussing their Master.

"Khamûl, I wouldn't necessarily believe that story was an actual event. You know his habit of taking the truth and improving it." Adûnaphel said.

"Adûnaphel is right. That's just how he is. He has to be the best at everything, even if it's something bad." said Uvatha.

Khamûl knew that they were both right, and they were both wrong.

During the Council meeting, his Master touched his hand. For those few seconds, Khamûl was able to look inside his Master's head, seeing what he saw.

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Finally it was over. It left him with stripes from neck to ankle. He was racked with hiccoughing sobs; snot ran down his upper lip.

Someone stepped forward and cut the leather thongs that bound his wrists to the frame. His knees buckled and he slid to the floor. The paving stones were cold against his bare skin.

If anyone wants me to get up, tell them I died.

Someone was standing over him. The soft wool of a cloak was draped over his body, shielding him from the eyes of the Court.

“I think he was telling the truth.” said Khamûl.

Chapter 3 The Mask is Dropped



ver the course of the next month, life in the fortress returned to normal. Two senior men-at-arms were promoted to replace the captains who were hanged, the debris in the corridor from the collapsed ceiling was cleared away, and the bruises that ran from Khamûl's shoulders to the back of his knees faded to yellow-green and then disappeared entirely.

Khamûl's spirit was slower to heal. His sleep was restless, filled with dreams of the two men who were hanged. Although he shared the scaffold with them, he hadn't shared their fate. They had served him, they were his men and he was responsible for them. If only he'd been more attentive to his own duty, he could have saved them.

Khamûl fully understood the need for secrecy and the harsh measures taken to enforce it. Sauron's enemies were hunting him, and he hadn't yet recovered the strength to defend himself. He had been hiding in Dol Guldur for centuries, where he lived as the Necromancer, a sorcerer with no name, no face, and no past. Sauron moved around the fortress wrapped in a hooded cloak, with long gloves and a steel mask to conceal his features. And he forbade the Nazgûl¹ to use his real name, or to speak or write any name by which he had ever used in the past.

It was the hottest part of August, and Khamûl woke up with the sheet stuck to his skin, even though the sun was not yet up. Fog obscured all but the tops of the trees below the fortress, and the road to the village was invisible. He dreaded putting on the black robes he was required to wear around the living;

¹Hey dude, Is it possible the presence of the Nazgûl might give you away? Think about it.

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they were made from several layers of wool, and covered every inch of his skin.

When he returned from riding the second patrol of the day, and had seen Kestrel brushed down and settled in his stall, he climbed the steps to his room in the gatehouse tower to strip down and wash, and to put on clothes appropriate for the Council meeting.

When he felt presentable, Khamûl descended from his room and crossed the courtyard from the Gatehouse to the Keep. It didn't seem possible, but it felt even hotter and muggier in the afternoon than it had at noon. Heat shimmered from the paving stones, and he felt sweat running down his face. His heavy robes stuck to his skin and made it hard to walk. He passed a stone trough for the horses; the surface of the water was an inch from the sill, and cold water from a spring refreshed it continuously. He wished he'd remembered to drink a glass of water before he left his room.

He was actually looking forward to spending an hour reviewing the sums spent on wheat and cooking oil for the fortress this week; the Council Chamber was a windowless room built into the thick stone walls of the Keep, and likely to be comfortable in weather like this.

A pair of soldiers guarding the entrance to the Keep stepped aside to let him pass. He ducked his head and entered the narrow tunnel, moving carefully through the dark to step around the stumble stones and badger holes built into the tunnel floor to slow invaders. The temperature inside the tunnel was noticeably cooler than it was in the courtyard.

On the other side of the thick wall of the keep, the tunnel reached the main corridor outside the Great Hall, a long barrel-ceilinged room with a raised stage at one end, lit by narrow windows high up where the walls were thinner, and by a row of wrought iron chandeliers hanging from chains. The Great Hall was where formal announcements were made, trials were conducted and judgment passed, and the feasts and celebrations at Yule were held.

He followed the main corridor to a stairwell that led to the formal rooms below ground, and took the wide, shallow stairs

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to a corridor with an arched ceiling, paler in color outside the door to the Council Chamber, where it had recently been repaired.

The doors to the Council Chamber stood wide open. Servants milled about in the room, pouring wine and setting out paper and ink. Khamûl passed between the guards on either side of the door and entered the room.

Sauron was sitting at the head of the table, leafing through a ledger book and jotting down notes. He held the book open with the hand missing a finger. A strand of hair was stuck to his forehead, and there were damp patches beneath the arms of the reddish brown tunic he often wore in hot weather. He'd left the collar open, revealing the white scar across his throat. Khamûl observed that his Master's shoulders were loose and his jaw was relaxed; he was in a good mood, and the meeting would be an easy one.

Then Khamûl's jaw dropped.

At a typical Council meeting, Sauron would dismiss the servants and order the doors of the chamber sealed. If a bailiff or a reeve were speaking at the meeting, Sauron kept his hood pulled down over the mask and spoke in a whisper. It was only when he was alone with the Nazgûl, who already knew who he was, that he would push his hood back and take off the mask, and speak to them in a normal voice. He had never, ever shown his face in public in Dol Guldur before.

Khamûl looked around, but didn't see the mask or robe lying nearby. Sauron must have walked to the Council Chamber like this, where anyone could see him.

Sauron caught him staring and laughed. "Are you going to greet me? I have a name, you know. It's Tar-Mairon."²

The soldiers and servants of Dol Guldur didn't immediately associate the new face among them with the Necromancer, because they'd always believed the mask covered something hideous. They weren't entirely wrong; Khamûl could remember a time when it did.

² Tar-Mairon means Lord Mairon

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Sauron fell in battle at the end of the Second Age and wasn't able to take form again for a thousand years. When he did, it was as something malformed and crippled.

Khamûl never really saw his Master in that state, but he could tell that the thing under the shapeless robes was so deformed that it was barely able to walk. And there was something wrong with his speech, which suggested that part of his face was missing. Once Khamûl saw his Master's wrist between the glove and sleeve; the skin was black and mottled, and hung in wrinkled folds from an armature of bone; there seemed to be no flesh within it. Khamûl ached for him, but knew to keep his own council; his Master couldn't bear to be the object of pity.³

Later, when Sauron's strength began to return, he regained some of his ability to shift shape. In time, he was able to assume something like his old accustomed form, and while he would never again be beautiful, at least he was able to look ordinary. From then on, he only covered his features to conceal his identity.



And now, it seemed, he wasn't even doing that anymore. The mysterious robed figure that had been the Necromancer was gone, replaced by a tall man with reddish brown hair and ordinary features.

"You don't look very scary like that. If I were an Elven lord or a chieftain of Men, I wouldn't be afraid of you." said Khamûl.

"And that is the secret of my success." said Sauron.

³ Sociopaths love pity, narcissists do not.

Chapter 4 Khamûl's Rival



hamûl, Get off of me. You're heavy."

Adûnaphel punched his shoulder.

Khamûl struggled to wake up. It felt like being deep under water, trying to swim back up to the surface. He breathed in her scent. Sea air, salt, storms, fish. He rolled over on his back.

"You wear me out." he said. She laughed.

Adûnaphel was a "manly-hearted woman",⁴ ferocious on the battlefield, outspoken in the council chamber, and shameless about bedding whomever caught her eye. She was intelligent, too. Khamûl loved her fiercely.⁵

Even though they'd been together for ages, she would never stay the night with him. She got up to leave. He watched her while she got dressed.

Tall and slim, she was unselfconscious about nudity, and thought nothing of walking around in her skin. He watched her lift her chemise above her head and drop it around her body. She pulled her dress on over it, then wrapped a leather belt around her waist and knotted it. The loose end fell well below her knees.

The belt was the one she wore most often. The notches scored in its leather surface were a record of all her conquests. Khamûl knew which notch was his. It was surrounded by a

⁴ The term "manly-hearted woman" is a translation of the Blackfoot Indian term 'ninauposkitzipxpe', and refers to a woman with the independence and assertiveness of a man, in a culture where women were usually passive.

⁵ The reader may recognize aspects of Diana Villiers from Patrick O'Brian's "Master and Commander".

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dozen others, his rivals. Some were known to him, but of most, he knew nothing. He loved her and no other, and it was an agony to share her with anyone else. But when he complained, she laughed at him.

"You're my favorite. Isn't that enough?" It was the best he was going to get from her, so reluctantly, he accepted it.

Out of habit, he glanced at her belt. Started, he looked again. There was a new line. Perhaps he hadn't noticed it before. No, that was impossible. He glanced at her belt whenever he saw her, and this line was more prominent than any other. He couldn't have missed it.

She saw him looking. "Oh. About that." she said.

He went cold with fear. The size of the line implied someone who outranked all the others. "Who did you add to your collection? The Witch King of Angmar?" he asked.

"No. And not for lack of trying, either." said Adûnaphel. "If I read him correctly, he's the type of man who won't touch a woman unless he's married to her. He's such a prude. Even I couldn't land him."

"Then who .." Khamûl's eyes widened. "No, you didn't! That's impossible!"

She smiled.

"How did you do it?" asked Khamûl.

"I've wanted to add that particular notch to my belt for the longest time. It would be the jewel of my collection." she said.

"I tried everything. I got him drunk. I pressed my knee against his, but he moved away. I tried to lure him, but if he noticed at all, it just annoyed him. In short, my considerable powers of persuasion went exactly nowhere.

"So I changed tactics. I made a bet with him. He only agreed because it was something stupid, and it was long odds, in his favor. But he lost the bet, and he had to pay up." Adûnaphel beamed.

"So. if you've had him, how am I supposed to measure up?" asked Khamûl, jealous.

"You assume you're at a disadvantage. You're not. Even though I pursued him for the longest time, once was enough." said Adûnaphel.

"Why? Did he hurt you?" asked Khamûl.

"No, it isn't that. Let's just say there are a great many things he's good at, but that isn't one of them." she said.

Khamûl relaxed for the first time since he's seen the newest notch. "It was just the once, then?" he asked.

"I wish! Since then, it's become one of my duties. It doesn't happen often, but when he summons me to his room, I have to go."

She sighed. "The trouble is, even with practice, he never gets any better."

Chapter 5 The Perimeter



After the spy got into Dol Guldur and learned their Master's identity, the fortress went on a heightened state of alert. Sauron prepared for an attack that might come at any moment.

Additional enchantments were cast to protect the fortress. Patrols of the perimeter were doubled. Khamûl, who had walked right past the intruder and failed to see him, was trying to redeem himself. He rode as many perimeter patrols as anyone.

Khamûl rode his assigned patrol during the night, and volunteered for a second one during the afternoon. He kicked Mesh to a gallop as they entered an area of the forest known as the shale slopes. Khamûl was so tired he was getting clumsy, but he felt driven, and kept going.

Then a shelf of rock gave way, and Mesh, normally surefooted, went down hard. Khamûl normally would have been thrown clear, but his foot must have caught in the stirrup, because his leg was trapped beneath Mesh. He heard a snap like a tree limb breaking. He wondered what they'd fallen on.

I don't feel anything yet, but when I do, it's going to be really bad.

Mesh struggled to get up. The slope was steep, and his feet were higher than his back. Each time he twisted his body and flailed, Khamûl screamed. Finally, Mesh got to his feet, unhurt. The big stallion wandered off and began grazing, the reins trailing on the ground behind him.

Khamûl was soaked in sweat. He lifted his head to survey the damage. His leg had been bent unnaturally at mid-thigh. He looked away quickly, but it wasn't enough. His stomach

heaved. He clamped his jaws shut, trying not to be sick, but just made it go up his nose instead.

He considered his situation. It was mid-afternoon. He wouldn't be missed until evening. By then it would be getting dark. Not only would it be harder to search in the dark, but nights could be cold in the mountains. His best bet was for Mesh to return to the stable riderless. Then they'd begin searching for him right away.

Mesh wandered aimlessly, seeking green shoots of grass. Much as he regretted doing so, Khamûl picked up some small stones and lobbed them at the grazing horse, ten or fifteen feet away. Most of the pebbles missed, but finally one struck his haunches. At the same time, he yelled.

Mesh took off at a gallop, and hopefully wouldn't stop to graze along the way. Khamûl wished he could fix the reins so they weren't dragging, but it couldn't be helped. Now all he could do was wait. Time went by, and then inside his head, he heard a voice.

Where are you? his Master asked.

Mesh had come back riderless, and now they were looking for him.

South of Dol Guldur, on the shale slopes, he answered. He didn't have to say he was hurt, his Master would know.

Soon after, he heard a Nazgûl's call in the distance. He answered it, and a few minutes later, Uvatha rode into view. He dismounted and knelt beside Khamûl.

"I'm going to leave you alone while I get some men with a stretcher. Can you hold on until then?"

Khamûl nodded. Uvatha covered him with his own cloak.

He had another thought. "Is Mesh all right?"

"He's fine. But you have bigger worries right now. Just try to lie still." said Uvatha. He rode off in the direction of the fortress.

He came back with the medic and a couple of men carrying a stretcher. The medic lifted the cloak Uvatha had thrown over him, looked for a few minutes, and replaced it without saying anything. The men lifted Khamûl onto the stretcher. They were gentle, but even so, it took everything he had not to scream.

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It felt like they'd been walking over the uneven ground for hours when Khamûl finally heard the sound of hollow footfalls of boots on the wooden drawbridge. He saw the stone arch of the main gate above his head, then he was looking up into the teeth of the portcullis which had been raised to admit them.

Gravel crunched underfoot as they entered the courtyard. He heard the medic tell the men to set the stretcher on the ground. Footsteps approached, then stopped beside him.

"How bad is it?" his Master asked.

"He's lost a lot of blood. His clothes are sticky with it." said the medic.

The medic slit the leather of his boot and eased it off his foot. Khamûl was sorry. They were good boots, and he liked them. Then the man produced a pair of scissors and used them to cut Khamûl's leggings away from the wound on his thigh. Khamûl felt cold air against his skin as the last of the fabric was lifted away.

"And as you can see, the broken end of the bone sticking is out through the skin ... My Lord? Get down. Put your head between your knees."

I'm glad I didn't look, though Khamûl.

The chief armorer joined them. Like blacksmiths everywhere, he was often called in to set bones. The three of them withdrew to the far side of the courtyard. They kept their voices low, but Khamûl could still hear them.

"If I set the bone and it heals well, he'll still have one leg shorter than the other. He'll be a cripple." said the armorer.

"There's another issue. If that wound gets infected, the leg will have to come off." said the medic.

"Is that likely to happen?" asked his Master.

"He's undead. They heal slowly, and are more prone to infection." said the medic. "There's another thing. If I take off the leg after it gets infected, it might be too late to save his life." said the medic.

"Do you want me to try and set it, or will you just go ahead and amputate?" asked the armorer.

"The light's still good. Why not him one last time before we decide." said his Master.

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They returned, and knelt beside the stretcher.

“Has anyone given him poppy syrup?” asked his Master.

“I looked for the vial, but it was empty. It should have been half full, but poppy syrup often goes missing, even from a locked cabinet.” said the medic.

“Get him something to bite, then.” said his Master.

A stick with a strip of leather wrapped around it was held in front of his face. He leaned forward and bit it.

At a signal from the medic, the men who’d carried the stretcher held him down. His Master knelt beside him and held his hand. The medic felt along the length of his leg, pressing hard.

Bone scraped against bone. Khamûl screamed and clamped his Master’s hand like a vise. Sauron’s eyes went as wide as saucers, and he said a word Khamûl didn’t even think he knew.

When the medic finished his examination, he and the armorer stepped away to talk. Sauron joined them. Khamûl lay with his eyes closed, too spent to try to eavesdrop. The discussion was heated and went on for some time.

“We’re going to do it my way.” he heard his Master say.

And with that, the discussion was over. The three walked back and stopped beside the stretcher. His Master knelt beside him.

“Here’s the plan. We’re going to set the bone. When it heals, it will be the same length as your other leg, so you won’t limp. The catch is, it’s going to hurt very badly for a few minutes. Can you handle it?”

Khamûl nodded. Khamûl knew that Sauron asking his permission was a fiction. Whether Khamûl had said yes or no, it wouldn’t have made any difference.

“Good.” Sauron said. Then to the others, “Take him to the dungeons, to the chamber where we question prisoners.”

“What?” Khamûl said, alarmed.

“I’m going to put you put on the rack” said his Master.

“WHAT?” said Khamûl.

“It’s an experiment. Humor me.” said his Master.

Khamûl couldn’t image being put on the rack for any reason. To have it done when he had a shattered leg was unthinkable. He had an impulse to run away. He started to sit up, but

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Sauron gripped his shoulder and pushed him back down.

"Don't worry. It will be fine." he said.

I don't doubt your good intentions, but you can be an idiot sometimes. And I'm pretty sure this is one of those times. Khamûl thought.

"I heard that." said his Master.

The men lifted the stretcher and carried him down to the dungeons. As they descended the narrow stairs, the smell of damp got stronger. He guessed they were passing the cells, based on the aroma of body odor and unemptied chamber pots. But as they got close to the interrogation chamber, he started to smell the odor of vomit and excrement, the smell of fear, of horror.

From the stretcher, he could only see the ceiling, but he felt sure the room contained apparatus he didn't want to know about. They set him down on the floor next to sturdy wooden legs supporting a long platform. Just above his head, there was a capstan with ropes wound around the barrel, operated by sturdy levers. The rack.

Uvatha entered the room. He was followed by two orcs Khamûl hadn't seen before. "They know how to work the equipment." he explained.

Uvatha, their fastest horseman, was the Nazgûl's messenger. But he was also the most vicious of the Nazgûl. He was assigned additional duties Khamûl would rather not know about.

"I don't want to lay him on the bare wood. The bed of the rack has splinters, and it's not very clean. And what's that stain?" his Master asked.

"Hard to say. Anything that can be expelled from the body, usually is." said one of the orcs.

"Get a sleeping mat from the guard room. I want him to be comfortable." his Master said.

An orc returned a few minutes later with a thin mattress. He laid it on the bed of the rack. The men lifted the stretcher and transferred Khamûl as carefully as they could. He bit his lip and tried not to cry out.

The orcs positioned themselves at Khamûl's head and feet.

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One lifted Khamûl's arms above his head and fastened cuffs around his wrists. The other pulled Khamûl's other boot off, and fastened cuffs around his ankles. A leather belt was wrapped around his chest just under his arms, another around his hips. Khamûl couldn't move. Someone put a pillow under his head.

"Are you comfortable?" his Master asked him.

"I'm cold." Khamûl said. Someone draped a blanket over him.

"Places, everyone." said his Master.

The armorer stood beside his leg, one hand on either side of the fracture. The orcs stood at the capstan levers that operated the rack.

"On my mark," said his Master.

The capstan turned slightly, and the ratchet clicked a few times. Someone tightened the straps around his wrists enough to remove the last of the slack, but not enough to hurt.

"Go."

At that moment, his Master slapped him across the face.

What was that for?

His body was stretched as tight as a bowstring. Something clicked, and a scream rang in his ears.

"That's it, then. The bone is set as nice as you could wish for." said the armorer.

Khamûl couldn't remember when it happened. His throat was hoarse, the scream had been his own. Then the pain hit him. He closed his eyes and waited to pass out. But at least it was over. All that remained was to splint the leg and bandage the wound.

The armorer laid splints along either side of his leg. He wrapped bandages around Khamûl's ankle and worked upward. But then he paused.

"This isn't going to work. The bone is set well, but the moment we release the tension, the muscle spasm will shorten his leg by two or three inches. You can't stretch him on the rack for weeks and weeks."

"That leaves me with just one option. I'm sorry, Khamûl, I

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don't know how to do this without hurting you.”⁶

Sauron pushed the armorer aside and took over. He pressed his hand against the wound and sang something, a harsh-sounding chant in a language Khamûl didn't know. The wound began to sting a little, and then to burn. Khamûl tried to twist away, but he couldn't move.

“Please stop.” he begged.

He tried to push his Master's hands away, but his wrists were still bound over his head. The pain got worse. The bone felt like it was being crushed with pliers. The only thing that could hurt this much was....

“No! Don't take off my leg!” Khamûl pleaded.

Sauron didn't acknowledge him or stop what he was doing. His chanting didn't falter.

“Please don't.”

Khamûl fought like a wild animal. He tried to twist free, but the straps wouldn't yield. Strong hands seized him and held him down. He cursed his Master and tried to bite him. His vision narrowed to his Master's face, and then to nothing.



The room was quiet, torchlight played off a vaulted ceiling. He struggled to remember where he was and how much he'd had to drink. He tried to sit up, but couldn't move.

“Release him.” said his Master.

He heard a click. The capstan spun, and the tension in his limbs vanished. Orcs stepped forward to unfasten the cuffs on his wrists and ankles. Someone else unbuckled the straps around his body.

Khamûl looked away, unable to look at his Master. He wouldn't have minded if the bone healed short and left him a cripple, the choice should have been his. He shouldn't be surprised. His Master had a habit of making decisions about his welfare without consulting him first.

⁶ This bone-setting technique comes from the excellent fanfic 'Dark Judgment' by Glorfindel.

The Perimeter

Sauron started to touch his shoulder.

“Get your hands off me, you filth.” Khamûl spat out the words.

“Excuse me?” said Sauron.

“How could you? I trusted you.” Khamûl was sobbing.

“Why did you take off my leg?”

Sauron walked around to the end of the rack. Khamûl felt a fingernail trace a line up the sole of his foot.

“I didn’t.” Sauron said.

Khamûl lifted his head to look. His leg was still there. Then, with horror, he remembered what he said to his Master. He started to apologize.

“I most humbly...”

“It is forgotten. Let’s see if you can walk.” said his Master.

Khamûl shot Sauron an evil look. That was an unfeeling thing to say to someone who would be bedridden for months.

Sauron helped him sit up. He looked at his leg. Khamûl saw a jagged white scar on his thigh, but as far as he could tell, the injury was completely healed. His leggings were in shreds. When he realized his underclothes were visible, his face burned.

“You must be on the mend, if that’s all you’re worried about.” his Master said.

Khamûl scowled. He didn’t like to be teased.

“Put your feet on the ground.” his Master said.

Khamûl swung his legs over the side of the platform. He put one foot on the floor, then the other. Both legs were the same length. With someone supporting him on each side, he let go of the platform and took his first shaky step.

⁷ ‘Sauron’ means Filth. Sauron doesn’t allow his people to speak the word, or to write it.

Chapter 6 The Attack on Dol Guldur



Footsteps rang against the flagstones. "Lord Khamûl, wait!" a man shouted.

Khamûl spun around and saw a soldier standing a respectful distance away, breathing hard. Khamûl recognized him as one of the men-at-arms who guarded the entrance to the Keep.

"You may approach," Khamûl said.

The soldier made the sign against the evil eye, although he was discrete about it, and took half a step forward. "You're wanted in the Council Chamber immediately," the man told him.

Khamûl went rigid. As the Lieutenant of Dol Guldur, Khamûl was responsible for the fortress and everything in it. He drew a few breaths to control his anxiety. Most likely, the summons concerned ordinary fortress business, not something he did wrong. He'd know more when he got there.

Khamûl hurried to the Council Chamber. Adûnaphel and Uvatha arrived before him and were already sitting at their usual places. Sauron sat at the head of the table, the back of his massive chair taller than he was. He was wearing a chain around his neck that Khamûl hadn't seen before. Khamûl bowed to him, low from the waist, and held it a moment longer than necessary. Sauron looked up and acknowledged him with a nod, then returned to his writing, his hair hanging down over his face. Khamûl relaxed; he wasn't in trouble.

Khamûl took his place at his Master's right hand as befitted his rank of Lieutenant of Dol Guldur and Second Chief of the Nazgûl; only the Witch King of Angmar outranked him. When

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Khamûl was seated, Sauron ordered the doors closed and locked, and called the meeting to order.

"I just received word that the White Council is meeting in Lothlorian as we speak." Sauron said. He leaned back in his chair and tented his fingertips.

"The White Council last met when Olórin⁸ broke into Dol Guldur and recognized me. I thought they would attack then, but something held them back. Now the White Council is meeting again. I haven't been able to learn what they're discussing, but I can guess; they found out I've been searching the riverbed where Isildur fell, and they want to stop me. As of right now, we should assume the attack could come at any time.

"What will you do, stay or go?" asked Adûnaphel.

"It depends on the strength of the attacking force." said Sauron.

"If you left here, where would you go?" asked Uvatha.

"Minas Morgul. I was planning to return to Mordor anyway, just not this soon. The trouble is, I haven't regained enough strength to take on the armies of Gondor, who would surely attack me if they knew I was there. If I went to Minas Morgul now, it would have to be in absolute secrecy.

"But if I stay here and fight, I'll need reinforcements. Uvatha, go to Minas Morgul and tell the Witch King to come here as fast as he can." Sauron said.

Uvatha the Horseman, the swiftest rider among them, was on his feet before their Master finished speaking. He paused in the doorway and bowed his head slightly, then took off running in the direction of the stables.



Khamûl had just returned from riding a patrol. The clouds in the eastern sky were pink with the sunrise. Before changing out of his ranger's clothes and going down to the kitchens to look for coffee, he climbed the stone stairs to the top of the curtain

⁸ Gandalf

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wall, to speak with the lookout stationed there. It had been several days since they'd gone on alert, but so far, no one had seen anything out of the ordinary. The lookout started to tell him there was nothing to report, but froze in mid-sentence. Khamûl followed his gaze over the battlements and saw a cloud of dust on the road leading up from the village.

Khamûl told the lookout to ring the alarm bell, then looked back to the road. The cloud of dust had reached the rocky slope, and in it, he thought he could see the outlines of horsemen. He spoke the words to conjure mists thick enough to block the sunlight and allow the orcs to fight at full strength.

Soldiers dropped heavy beams into brackets to reinforce the gates. The ratchet clicked as the drawbridge was raised. Horns sounded the call to battle, and orcs came pouring out of barracks and guard shacks, taking the positions they'd drilled ever since the fortress went on high alert.

Khamûl ordered the archers to fire a volley at the attackers, but winds from a sudden squall blew the arrows aside and whipped his hair in his eyes, momentarily blinding him.

A crack of thunder made him jump. *That was way too close*, he thought. Afterwards, the air smelled metallic, like sparks. There was another crack, and a stone from the tower crashed into the courtyard, shattering upon impact.

Sauron joined Khamûl on the wall. By this time, the attackers were so close, their faces were clearly visible. Khamûl counted twelve or fourteen wizards and Elven Lords, mounted and lightly armed. The fortress was strong and reasonably well garrisoned.

Khamûl thought they could defend themselves against the attackers, but from the corner of his eye, he saw his Master stiffen.

"Let's get out of here." said Sauron.

"We can hold them off." said Khamûl.

"No, we can't. Let's meet by the stables in five minutes and ride out the back gate." said Sauron.

Khamûl's mouth went dry. He seriously underestimated the attackers. If his Master couldn't hold them off, the attackers were even more powerful than Khamûl could imagine.

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“We’ve lost, then. The fortress is lost.” Khamûl said.

A slow smile crept across his Master’s face. He took a step backwards and spread his hands apart, then clapped them together like the jaws of a trap.

“Don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m doing.” He laughed, and took off down the stairs.

A white flash exploded against the main gate; Khamûl saw it from the curtain wall. He was already running down the stairs when several more hit in quick succession. The explosions continued as he raced across the courtyard, stumbling and picking himself up again.

He saw Adûnaphel by the stables, giving the order to have the horses saddled.

“I changed into traveling clothes, but I didn’t bother to pack.” she told him.

Khamûl was still wearing the clothes he’d worn on patrol that morning, so he was ready to go. He gave up any thought of packing.

The explosions terrified the horses; their whinnying carried across the courtyard. Khamûl hoped it would still be possible to saddle them. Another explosion, louder than the ones before, opened a hole between the heavy planks. The front gate was starting to disintegrate. It was time to go.

Khamûl ran to the entrance into the Keep, the strongest tower in the fortress, with walls at least eleven feet thick at its base. Guards posted at the entrance stepped aside to let him pass. He ducked his head and hurried along the narrow tunnel until he reached the alcove in the side of the tunnel that held the spiral stairs built into the thickness of the wall that led to his Master’s room, and took the stairs two at a time, reaching the highest landing dizzy and out of breath.

The door to his Master’s room stood open. Khamûl leaned against the doorjamb, breathing hard. Sauron had already changed into traveling clothes and was putting things into a satchel. Khamûl saw neatly folded clothes, a stack of papers, and a leather purse laid out on the foot of his bed.

“You don’t have time to pack. Let’s go.” said Khamûl.

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Sauron ignored him; he was rummaging through the papers on his bed.

"It was here this morning, why can't I find it now?" he muttered to himself.

A flash of light filled the window and the crack of another explosion rattled the glass. Khamûl crossed the room in two long strides, grabbed his Master by the arm, and pulled him toward the door.

"We have to go NOW." said Khamûl.

For once, Sauron listened to him. He dropped the satchel on the bed, and the two of them took off running. They flew down the stairs and through the tunnel, then burst into the courtyard, where Adûnaphel was waiting by the back gate with their horses.

"I looked out the back gate, and it's clear." she said.

The back gate faced north; it couldn't be seen from the main road. A soldier stood ready to throw it open for them. Adûnaphel was already mounted. Sauron's warhorse Ruin was saddled and waiting. Khamûl gave his Master a leg up and shoved the reins into his Master's hands.

"Let's go!" Sauron shouted.

Khamûl swung into the saddle and kicked Shadow into a gallop. There was no time to put his feet in the stirrups; he gripped Shadow's sides with his legs while the stirrups swung wildly. The soldier threw open the back gate and the three of them burst through it; they careened down the steep path over the bare rock as fast as their horses could carry them.

Chapter 7 The Road South



hamûl listened for sounds of pursuit, but there were none.

They reached the safety of the trees below the hill and vanished into the forests of Mirkwood. In a short time, they put several miles between themselves and Dol Guldur. It was likely their attackers were already inside the fortress.

Once they were a safe distance away, they slowed to a trot and looped around to catch the main road to Mordor. The road traveled through deep forest, thick with the webs of spiders. It would take them a day to reach the southern edge of Mirkwood, and reach the open spaces of the Brown Lands.

"Of course, this is the route they'd expect us to take. Let's take the back roads instead. The map is very detailed. It shows every goat track and footpath between here and Minas Morgul." said Sauron.

He felt in his pocket for the map, and his eyes widened. "I didn't find it in time. The map is still on my bed."

"I was a ranger. I can take us across country, but it will take longer to get there. How long will our food last?" said Khamûl.

"We didn't bring any." said Sauron.

Khamûl had another thought. They'd left Dol Guldur in such a rush. He interrupted his Master before Sauron had finished packing. *Had anything else been left behind? What if...* The color drained from Khamûl's face.

"My Lord, where are the Dwarven rings?"

Please no please no ...

Sauron lifted the chain around his neck. Something jingled

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under his shirt.⁹

“I’ve had them on my person since last week, when I first learned the White Council was meeting again.” he said.

Khamûl expected his Master would be upset about the loss of Dol Guldur, their dwelling-place for over a thousand years, but Sauron’s mood was buoyant. “I’m going home.” he told Khamûl.

They traveled through the forest for the rest of the day. When it got too dark for the horses to see, they found a place well off the road to make camp. Sauron concealed it further with enchantments.

They slept on the ground that night, wrapped in their cloaks. They didn’t light a fire.

Khamûl took the first watch. He woke Adûnaphel before midnight, and told her to wake him in the predawn. They broke camp before it was light, and were soon back on the main road, heading south.

“It’s so hard, being cut off from any news. I know who the attackers were, but that’s all I know. I’d give anything to sit in a tavern and hear what people are saying about the attack.” said Sauron.

Shortly after sunrise, the road left the forest and entered the Brown Lands. By midmorning, they heard hoof beats approaching at breakneck speed. Khamûl looked for a thicket beside of the road that would conceal them.

“It’s Angmar.” said Sauron.

Angmar and Uvatha came thundering up from the south and pulled up, their horses panting and lathered with sweat.

“Change of plans. I’m returning to Mordor.” Sauron told Angmar. “Have you heard any news about the attack on Dol Guldur? Was there an attack on Mordor at the same time?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything. I was answering your summons for reinforcements.” said the Witch King.

They turned south and proceeded at a walk. Uvatha dismounted and led his horse by the reins, Angmar did the same.

⁹ There were three Dwarven rings. The other four had been consumed by Dragon fire.

Khamûl turned to Angmar. "So, did you bring any food?"



A few miles later, the road went through a shallow ford. Sauron, Angmar, and Adûnaphel rode through it without a pause in their conversation. The Númenorians, born and bred to the sea, had no problem with running water.

Khamûl saw Uvatha pause and gather himself. Then Uvatha took a deep breath and plunged in, crossing faster than the others had. He climbed the opposite bank and caught up with the others.

Khamûl sat motionless in the saddle. He stared at the running water, unable to move. Like any evil¹⁰ thing, it was trying to lure him closer.¹¹

The others called to him from the opposite bank.

"Khamûl, it's six inches deep. You're not going to drown." said Angmar.

"Are you worried about getting splashed? It's the same stuff you were drinking a minute ago. It's not going to burn you." said Adûnaphel.

Khamûl agreed with them. He knew his fears were irrational. It made no difference.

Sauron watched the debate without comment, then re-crossed the stream. He pulled up beside Khamûl and gripped his arm above the elbow. Khamûl started to feel strange. He stared off in the distance, unblinking. Nothing seemed very important.

"Ready?" Sauron asked.

Khamûl nodded. They crossed together. When they reached the far side, Sauron released him, and the horses climbed the bank. Khamûl heard the sound of rushing water behind him. He thought of turning back to look, but decided not to.

¹⁰ Khamûl does not consider himself to be evil.

¹¹ The alert reader will recognize Garrison Keillor's Pump Handle.

Chapter 8 The Bane of Isildur



It had been wet all morning, and by noon, the misty drizzle had turned into a steady rain. Khamûl's leg ached. He guessed it was going to rain all night.

"Let's stay at an inn tonight," said Sauron.

"I'd rather do what we always do, make camp and sleep on the ground," said Angmar. Nazgûl travel a great deal. They sleep rough, and often make camp in the rain. But they usually had food, bedrolls, and a change of clothes with them.

They'd fled Dol Guldur with the clothes on their backs. They brought money, but Khamûl wished there'd been time to bring, oh, let's say food. And blankets. And a change of clothes.

"In case you hadn't noticed, we've run out of food. At an inn, we can buy more," said Sauron. "Besides, I'm starved for news. It's hard, not knowing what happened after the attack." Sauron said.

They came to one of the larger towns, which sat at an important crossroad. Khamûl was surprised there wasn't an inn along the road into town. He saw a few small alehouses, but that was all.

When they came to the crossroads, Khamûl saw that the east-west road was wider and more heavily traveled than the road they'd come in on.

Sauron made inquiries, and got directions to the Bane of Isildur, a respectable inn and tavern. A block east from the crossroads, Khamûl spotted a tavern sign with a hand holding a sword hilt, with the blade in two pieces. When they arrived, they found a well-maintained establishment with stables large enough to house all their horses.

"Wait here. I'll go in and make the arrangements." He put

his hand over his pocket, and his eyes widened. "We have a problem."

Khamûl thought of their frantic departure. The alarm bell tolling, himself screaming, *We have to leave NOW*. He could almost see the gold sitting on the foot of his Master's bed, beside the map.

"Don't tell me. The gold was left behind." Khamûl said.

"No, I have it right here." He pulled out a leather pouch, heavy with coins.

"The trouble is, we can't use it here. A single gold coin represents a fortune. I didn't think to bring any copper or silver, which we could have used without drawing attention to ourselves."¹²

They searched their pockets and pouches and came up with a handful of copper coins and one silver shilling. It fell short of the price of dinner and beds for all of them, and they still had five horses to feed and stable. Angmar put the coins into a leather pouch and handed it to their Master.

"I could find a traveler and rob him for you," offered Uvatha.

"Hold that thought, it may come to that. But I want to try something else first." said Sauron.

They rode up to the Inn, and Sauron dismounted.

"Wait here while I go in and talk to them. If nothing else, maybe I can hear some news. I'd like to know what they're saying about recent events up north." said Sauron.

He started towards the entrance, then stopped and looked back.

"Adûnaphel, can you sing well enough to earn your supper?"

She nodded. He told her to take off her ring. She did, and became visible to the living.

"Khamûl, you're my bodyguard."

Khamûl took off his cloak, which made him invisible. As

¹² Consider Richard Cœur de Lion, who was captured in a tavern while traveling through Austria with four attendants disguised as low-ranking pilgrims. An expensive ring gave him away. In Nora Lofts, "The Lute Player", it was a gold coin.

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they approached the Inn, Khamûl saw Sauron and Adûnaphel reflected in the window.

Sauron and Adûnaphel went in, with Khamûl following close behind. Hel gripped the hilt of his sword. A cat wandered by his feet. It hissed and fled the room, its tail a bottlebrush. Khamûl hoped the people they met wouldn't react to him the same way.

They found themselves in a small foyer. He saw pegs for hanging up cloaks, and room keys on the wall behind a small counter. A wide doorway led to the Inn's common room. The kitchens must be nearby. Khamûl smelled yeast from bread and beer, cabbage and onions, and roasting meat.

Sauron greeted the landlord. "Do you have beds for some travelers? We'd like to sleep indoors tonight, what with the rain. If you have nothing else, even the hayloft would be fine."

"I have much finer rooms than that. You and your lady look like gentlefolk. I'm sure you're used to the best."

"Well, the truth is, we're short on funds at the moment. I came in to ask, how far can we stretch a few coppers?" He showed the landlord how much he had.

"That might buy a few dinners, but it wouldn't put two people and their horses up for the night."

"If you need a musician to entertain your patrons in the tavern, my wife and I would be happy to perform this evening in exchange for room and board." said Sauron.

This is how you avoid calling attention to yourself, by singing in a crowded tavern? Khamûl wanted to shake him.

"You want to sing for your supper? You and everyone else. This is the third time today I've heard that offer, and we're not even busy yet. It gets tiresome pretty fast."

"You're right, I had no business suggesting it. The only singing I do is for my own enjoyment," said Sauron.

Unless you count spells, or the Ainulindalë.

"What do you do for a living, then?" asked the landlord.

"I'm a portrait painter for the gentry," said Sauron.

"You're really a portrait painter?"

"That's why we're on the road. I have a commission in Osgiliath to paint the one of the nobility there. If he likes it, he'll

give me commissions to do the rest of his family.”

“I suppose you have paints and canvas with you?”

“No. The materials are quite expensive. They’re usually provided by the patron.”

“First you’re a singer, then you’re not. Now you’re a portrait painter, but you didn’t bring any paint with you. You won’t mind me asking, can you draw?” He put a scrap of paper on the bar, and set a stick of lead beside it. Sauron sat down at the bar and began to sketch.

“Should I stop talking?” the landlord asked.

“No, you can talk. Tell me about yourself. It helps me put your personality into the drawing,” said Sauron.

After a few minutes, he handed the finished drawing to the landlord, who looked at it with wonder.

“Well, if that doesn’t look more like me than I do myself. I don’t need a portrait of me, though,” said the landlord.

Khamûl looked outside. The rain showed no signs of letting up. If he started looking now, he thought he could find them a cave or an abandoned barn to sleep in tonight.

“But I’d really like a portrait of my wife. Can you do that?”

“Of course. What do you say to a drawing, a life-size portrait, in return for lodging for five people and stabling for their horses?”

“Five people? I thought it was just the two of you.” said the landlord, not looking pleased.

“I’m traveling with my wife, so I hired three men-at-arms to escort us to Gondor,” said Sauron.

Khamûl ground his teeth. He considered Adûnaphel to be his. He saw Adûnaphel roll her eyes, but couldn’t tell whether she objected to being called a wife, or being called defenseless. Khamûl remembered when thieves attacked her on a lonely road. She left two of them on the ground and the third running for his life.

“If you’re prosperous enough to hire men-at-arms, why did you run short of funds?” the landlord asked.

“We didn’t bring much with us because we’d made arrangements to stay in the manor house of a nobleman while I painted his portrait. I expected the fee for the painting to cover

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the rest of the journey to Osgiliath. But when we arrived, we found the house deserted. Apparently he had political problems and had to leave town rather suddenly.”

“Oh, I think I know who you’re talking about. Bad luck, that.” said the landlord.

“So what do you say? Our coins and the portrait in exchange for lodgings for five, and stabling for the horses?” said Sauron.

The landlord considered the offer. “I’d say you can afford dinner for five, plus feed and stabling for the horses, but not lodgings. Tell you what. If you really meant it about the hayloft, I’ll let you have the small room over the stables. It’s for travelers’ servants. Our own grooms sometimes sleep there, too. It has beds for four, so one of you will have to take the floor, but you’ll be out of the weather.”

Once the deal was sealed, Sauron went outside into the stable yard to tell the others. While he was explaining the arrangements to Angmar, Khamûl whispered to Adûnaphel,

“When he was telling that story about being a portrait painter, for a moment I actually believed him,” said Khamûl.

“He can be very convincing. When he implied he was one of the Holy Ones, I believed that too, at first,” said Adûnaphel.

“And now?” asked Khamûl.

“I think he’s probably a Lord among the Elves who became a follower of Melkor,” said Adûnaphel.

“He was a member of Melkor’s Court,” said Khamûl.

“I’ve heard him say so, but it’s hard to be sure, because he makes things up.”

Adûnaphel was wrong. In his Master’s thoughts, Khamûl had seen Valinor and Utumno, and even the Void. Khamûl figured out, even before Angmar did, that his Master was one of the Holy Ones, and one of Melkor’s captains.

Khamûl searched for a memory of Melkor seen through Sauron’s eyes. He had seen Melkor covering his Master with a cloak after he had been beaten. But why did he think it was Melkor? He never saw his face or heard him speak.

Khamûl realized that, in all the times he’d seen his Master’s thoughts, he’d never seen Melkor’s face. He wondered why not. It bothered him.

They led the horses into the stables. He smelled dust, sweet straw, leather, but above all, the smell of horses.

They walked around the long way to avoid the other horses stabled here, but even so, the animals moved restlessly in their stalls and neighed loudly. Khamûl hoped no one would come to the stables to see what was frightening them.

Sauron looked around to make sure he was unobserved, and collected all their rings. He said it was to make them visible, to attract less attention. Khamûl hated giving up his ring, but he did what he was told.

Sauron and Adûnaphel went back into the Inn, while Angmar, Khamûl, and Uvatha got the horses settled. Uvatha didn't like anyone else touching Rogue. Khamûl also preferred to unsaddle and groom Shadow himself.

Angmar finished with Eclipse and began to work on Ruin. Both Eclipse and Ruin were huge animals, over sixteen hands at the shoulder. They had to be, smaller animals couldn't have carried their masters.

After he finished with Shadow, Khamûl picked up a brush to help Angmar. He looked around to be sure Uvatha wasn't listening, then said in a low voice,

"When we talked to the landlord, our Master introduced Adûnaphel as his wife." said Khamûl.

"So?" Angmar didn't seem to find that interesting.

"I didn't like it," said Khamûl.

"It was just playacting," said Angmar.

"You may not know this, but occasionally he summons her to his bed."

"I wouldn't necessarily believe her. She likes to brag," Angmar said.

"She wasn't bragging. She was complaining about having to do it," said Khamûl.

Angmar froze with his hand in midair, then resumed brushing Ruin's sides as though nothing had happened. Khamûl was sure he'd just witnessed a white hot flare of jealousy.

Not you too. She told me you didn't want her.

Once the horses were fed and watered, they crossed the

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stable yard to the Inn. They hung their wet cloaks on pegs and went into the Common Room.

Inside, they found their Master sitting at a small table near the fire, sketching on a small scrap of paper. Several finished sketches lay near the one he was working on. A plump woman with red cheeks sat opposite him. She must be the landlord's wife, the subject of the portrait, Khamûl thought.

Khamûl joined Adûnaphel on a bench at the back of the room. Angmar and Uvatha found chairs near them.

The landlord came in with a rough panel of wood tucked under one arm. It was painted white, and looked like it had been salvaged from a door panel.

The landlord stood behind Sauron, looking over his shoulder as he sketched. He leaned over and picked up the sketches, frowning as he studied them. Khamûl tensed. He hated to let a stranger get that close to his Master.

"This is the one I really like. It looks the most like her," said the landlord.

"This is it, then," said Sauron.

The landlord set down the wooden panel on the table. Sauron placed the landlord's favorite sketch beside the panel. He sat back and studied his subject for a few minutes, then picked up the lead and began to draw. He held the lead oddly, because of his injury.

"What happened to your hand?" asked the landlord.

"It was stupid, my own fault. Say, I bet you know everything that happens in this town. Would you mind sharing a few stories?" asked Sauron.

The landlord told several stories of local interest. His Master was still working on the portrait, but he appeared to be listening attentively.

"It's been unusually dry this year. It's bad for the crops, but then..." The landlord went on and on.

Khamûl's attention wandered. He looked out the window. Raindrops were visible on the surface of a puddle. It looked like it was getting colder. The others were standing around in the stable yard. They wore gloves and had their hoods pulled low, concealing their faces.

The Bane of Isildur

“...had known each other from the cradle...’

The horses were drinking from a large stone trough. Khamûl hoped that someone had thought to look after Eclipse.

“...but their parents forbade them to marry...”

Whoa! What was that? Khamûl clutched his chest and tried to draw breath. He breathed in and out, but couldn't get enough air.

“...sent away to live with distant relatives...” the landlord continued telling his story.

Khamûl looked at his Master. Something rattled him, and badly.¹³ You couldn't tell by looking. Sauron appeared to be listening to the landlord with polite interest, his face neutral, his body relaxed.

“And how about the wider world?” he asked, as if it were just a polite question. “Before we left, I heard scraps of conversation about something happening north of here, in Mirkwood I believe. Do you know anything about that?” asked Sauron.

“No, but something's up. A few men-at-arms passed through here on their way to Gondor. They'd been manning a small outpost on the frontier, but were suddenly recalled to Osgiliath, something about a heightened state of alert,” said the landlord.

“What's going on?”

“I don't know. I don't think the soldiers knew either.”

The first patrons began to trickle in during the late afternoon. The Inn hadn't begun to serve the evening meal yet, but it was possible to get a tankard of ale or a plate of bread and cheese.

At an unspoken command from his Master, Khamûl went outside to collect the others. When they were hanging up their wet cloaks, he asked Angmar, “Do you know if our Master was ever betrothed?”

“He's never been married,” said Angmar.

¹³ see Rebellion by Uvatha the Horseman, (AU) in which Sauron and his girlfriend are forbidden to marry, which severs the last tie preventing him from joining Melkor.

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“That’s not what I asked. I think he was betrothed once, but something happened. Do you know anything more?” asked Khamûl.

Angmar excused himself and went into the common room. *He knows something. It’s too bad he actually can keep a secret,*

When Khamûl rejoined the others in the common room, Sauron was putting the finishing touches on the portrait. The landlord was hovering over his shoulder, which didn’t seem to bother him, but it bothered Khamûl a great deal. None of the Nazgûl liked to let strangers anywhere near their Master.

“It looks just like her, but there’s more to it. You can see how she looked as a girl.” the landlord said. His wife got up to look, and beamed. Sauron signed the portrait with the initials ‘MA’¹⁴ and handed it to the landlord.

Once the portrait was finished, their room and board was paid for and they could all relax. Sauron found a booth where they were relatively hidden, but from which he could hear conversations all over the room.

A servant set a tankard in front of each of them. Another put serving dishes and a stack of plates on the table.

Everyone in the Common Room was served the same meal, bread and butter, cheese, cold meat, and ale. They had been on light rations for days, and the simple country fare, served in large quantities, was very welcome.

The Inn featured live music in the evening. There was a tiny stage in the corner of the room near the door. On it, a slender young man with dark hair perched on a low stool, a lute on his knee. He sang a ballad in a lyrical voice. Khamûl assumed that being a minstrel was the way he made his living.

The singer had a tankard nearby, clearly not his first, and it was getting the better of him Every now and then he’d hit a false note or forget the words of a verse, but even so, he was a fine singer. No wonder the landlord hadn’t been interested in hiring amateurs.

After the pewter plates were cleared away, they ordered

¹⁴ Mairon Artano (“the High Smith”) or Mairon Aulëndûr (“servant of Aulë”)

another round. Khamûl was starting to feel the effects of the ale, and he suspected the others were, too. The music was loud, so they were able to talk without being overheard.

Uvatha leaned back in his chair. "Let's play a game. What kind of liar are you?"

Angmar looked offended. "Excuse me?"

"Which do you do more, lie to impress others, to avoid punishment, or to get out of doing something?"

"None of those, although I might conceal something I considered private."

"Adûnaphel, you were raised on court intrigue. I could see you lying while playing politics."

"Or to get out of doing something you didn't want to do," said Angmar.

"I don't do that," she protested.

"Yes, you do," said Sauron.

Adûnaphel looked hurt. "No, but I might lie to cover up something I was embarrassed about."

"Such as?" said Uvatha.

"Well, let's say you asked me how many men I'd been with. If I told you a number, it might be a bit low." Her cheeks were burning.

"Why would anyone ask, when it's notched on your belt?" observed Uvatha.

"Oh right, you just keep believing that. But what about Khamûl? I don't think he lies at all," said Adûnaphel.

"I might lie by omission, or to avoid an argument." Khamûl admitted.

"How about you, Uvatha?" asked Adûnaphel.

Uvatha laughed, his eyes merry. "I lie for sport. I don't need a reason."

A burly-looking farmer walked into the common room and took a seat close to the stage. He never took his eyes off the young man who was performing. The singer didn't notice him right away, but when he did, he flubbed more than a few notes. His song stopped completely for a moment. He tried to start again, but gave up almost right away and ran from the room.

The farmer got up and followed him. There was the sound

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of a tussle and some yelling. Then a door slammed and all was quiet. The other patrons in the Inn didn't seem to find the scene all that surprising.

Uvatha looked at Sauron. "It's your turn, but you're too easy."

"Excuse me?" said Sauron.

"You're good at bluffing," said Khamûl.

"You exaggerate to make yourself look more powerful," said Angmar.

Uvatha lowered his voice. "The face you show the world is a façade. You show people what you want them to see."

"You missed the big one," said Sauron.

"Which is?" asked Uvatha.

"I lie to myself. There are things I tell myself never happened." said Sauron.

"Such as?" asked Uvatha.

"It's not open to..." Sauron stopped talking when the landlord came to their table.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm in kind of a bind. Can I take you up on your offer to sing? I'll pay you double the usual rate," said the Landlord.

"Why did the last singer run off?" asked Khamûl.

"Tom? He's always in some kind of trouble. This time, he borrowed a horse without asking. The farmer who owns it wants it back, is all. At any rate, he left me in the lurch."

Khamûl was offended. He didn't like seeing his Master addressed like an itinerant day worker.

"What we really need are provisions for the road. If you can throw in a few blankets, we have a deal," said Sauron.

Khamûl watched his Master stride across the room and mount the stage. It occurred to him that his Master would have performed for free. Sauron loved being the center of attention, he seemed to feed on it.

Sauron sat down and picked up the lute. He played a few notes and adjusted the tuning, then began a ballad about a soldier saying goodbye to his children on the eve of a battle.¹⁵ Adûnaphel stood behind him and sang the harmony. She had a

¹⁵ "Take your pay" by Dramtreo

sweet voice, high and pure. Khamûl rarely heard her sing. He thought she was wonderful.

The next one was a cheerful song about a married couple having a fight they'd already had, time after time.¹⁶

When Khamûl looked around the table, he noticed Angmar staring at the stage, transfixed. *So much for his famous reputation for chastity. He ground his teeth. Adûnaphel is mine. Keep your eyes off her.*

The musicians returned to their table during a break. A serving maid brought another round. Sauron lifted his tankard and said, "That was great, Addy! What shall we do for the second set?"

Addy? Since when does he call her Addy? Khamûl's jaw was tight.

Adûnaphel considered. "Suppose we start with a lively number, then go to something quiet, like a love song?"

The landlord came over to their table. "I might have mentioned earlier, but my brother-in-law runs a tavern in Osgiliath. Have you heard of The Shards of Narsil?"

"I believe I have," said Sauron.

"Since you're going to Osgiliath anyway, you might want to stop in there. He could use a pair of musicians like yourselves. Oh, I'm forgetting, you have a commission to paint. No harm in asking, though."

Khamûl followed the others into the night. They crossed the stable yard, pulling their hoods up against the rain, and ran through the rain to the door of the stables.

As soon as they were inside the barn, their Master gave each of them a ring. Khamûl was relieved the ring given to him was his own. No one else was trading, either. He hadn't known their Master knew which ring went with which Ringwraith.

At the top of a narrow staircase, they found a small room with two large beds, typical of country inns. A straw pallet had been brought in for a fifth person.

Sauron sat down on one bed, and Uvatha claimed a place in the other. Adûnaphel wasn't expected to share a bed with the

¹⁶ "For Better or Worse", by Robin and Linda Williams

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men, so she had the pallet to herself.

"Who wants to bunk with me?" asked Sauron.

"I will," said Khamûl.

Like all of them, Khamûl found it awkward to share a bed with their Master when they were traveling, but today he wanted to.

Khamûl planned to get his Master talking about Melkor as he fell asleep, and if Khamûl happened to be touching him at the time, which was impossible to avoid in narrow beds like these, he would very likely see a memory with Melkor in it.

"Khamûl, you'll bunk with Uvatha tonight," said Angmar.

"I'm fine with things the way they are," said Khamûl.

"Let me put it another way. I'm pulling rank," said Angmar.

Khamûl fumed. Trust Angmar to pick this moment to remind the rest of them he was Sauron's favorite. Angmar's relationship with their Master was unique. He was more like a friend or a kinsman than a servant. Khamûl wasn't jealous, but he chaffed at having his scheme thwarted.

Reluctantly, he climbed into bed beside Uvatha and turned his back. The pillow smelled like compost, a stale odor of all the bodies here before him, made worse when he shifted. The straw mattress was lumpy, but he didn't mind; he was used to sleeping on the ground. It was raining hard outside. Water gurgled in the gutters, and the wind rattled the shutters, fastened tight against the storm. The heat from the animals in the stables below warmed the small room.

Khamûl listened to the breathing of the others. From the next bed, Khamûl heard the soft whisper of heavy sleep; once their Master was out, it took a lot to wake him.

Angmar, a light sleeper, was awake and restless beside him. Uvatha was snoring. Khamûl closed his eyes and listened to the storm outside.

Chapter 9 The Fortress of Minas Morgul



Three days later, they stood before the Black Gates of the Morannon. However, Cirith Gorgor was empty and the Gates were unmanned. Since they couldn't enter Mordor from the north, they turned west and took the road skirting the Ephel Duluth, the fence of mountains that protected Mordor. When they came to the crossroads, they turned east towards Minas Morgul.

Minas Morgul, their destination, was the only occupied fortress in Mordor. There was nowhere else they could go. The Morannon were abandoned, and Barad-dûr had been reduced to rubble.

The road climbed into the foothills of the Ephel Duluth. They slowed the horses to a walk. A few hours later, a band of orcs passed them going the other way. Their captain bowed to the Witch King but not to their Master.

"You should know, people here don't know you." Angmar said to his Master. "They say prayers and make sacrifices to you, but they don't really understand that you're a person who will be living among them."

By evening, the gates of Minas Morgul came into view. Khamûl had been here before. He came here to live, after Sauron fled Dol Guldur the first time and vanished into the east.

The fortress was called Minas Ithil back then, built by Gondor to control the road into Mordor. The Nazgûl had only just captured it when Khamûl arrived. From this stronghold outside the encircling mountains, they had retaken the rest of Mordor.

The portcullis was raised for them, and they rode in beneath

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it. Khamûl glanced at his Master. Sauron was looking around, taking it all in.

“It’s bigger than I expected.”

Khamûl realized his Master had never been here before. In fact, this was the first time Sauron had been in Mordor since he fell on the slopes of Orodruin almost three thousand years ago.

Khamûl knew how attached his Master was to Mordor, and how much he missed it. It must feel good to come home. He looked again, and saw that his Master was smiling, a real smile that reached his eyes.

The Council Chamber was packed. All of the Nine and half a dozen other nobles sat at the table, and their Master sat at the head, with the Witch King at his right hand. Lesser officials stood in the back of the room.

Khamûl grieved for the loss of his fortress. He was Lieutenant of Dol Guldur for over fifteen hundred years, but here in Minas Morgul, he was just another Nazgûl. He felt lost.

“What are you plans?” the Witch King asked their Master.

“As far as I know, no one outside Mordor knows I’m here. If I’m careful not to draw attention to myself, Gondor won’t attack us. But I’m only going to lie low for so long. Pretty soon, Gondor will know I’m here.”

“Why is that?” Angmar asked him.

“I’m going to rebuild Barad-dûr and light the volcano.”

So much for not drawing attention to yourself. Khamûl thought. “Wouldn’t it be better to keep a low profile?” he asked.

“The Valar won’t notice. They’re preoccupied with their own concerns.” said Sauron.

“Don’t you mean ‘the Valar .. they’?” said Indur. “You said ‘we’.”

“I said ‘they’.” Sauron said. Spots of color appeared on his cheeks.

Indur leaned close to Khamûl and whispered, “I told you he was one of them.”

“Oh, and one other thing.” Sauron said. “Doesn’t Minas Morgul have a Palantir, the Ithil Stone? I’d like to see it.”

On their first night back, they went to the Waning Moon tavern. It had the best ale in Minas Morgul and live music most

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nights. Most of the Nazgûl, their Master, and several Black Númenorians arrived at the tavern in a large group.

The Black Númenorians had never met Sauron before. In a few days, they would kneel before him in a formal ceremony, place their hands between his, and swear the oath of fealty. They were acting nervous and shy around him.

The Nazgûl, on the other hand, were not shy around him at all. They had a plot, and Khamûl was part of it. They were trying to get their Master drunk. For bonus points, they would get him to sing.

More of them than would fit comfortably crammed into one of the larger booths. The rest pulled up chairs at the end of the table. Khamûl was squeezed in between his Master on one side and Adûnaphel on the other. His knee was pressed against his Master's. All of them began drinking as soon as they got there.

The walls were decorated mostly with murals depicting Sauron's deeds during the Second Age, but there was also a portrait of Melkor wearing the Iron Crown. Khamûl noticed his Master looking at it.

Then, as clearly as if it were his own memory, he saw Melkor. His black hair was fluid as a waterfall. When he laughed, his voice was like music. And on his brow, three jewels blazed like stars.

Sauron started to say something to Angmar, who was sitting on his other side. He moved, and when their knees no longer touched, the connection was broken. Khamûl only saw it for a moment, but the image of Melkor when he was alive would stay with him.

Chapter 10 The Celebration of Yule



It was the Winter Solstice, the first day of Yule. Ordinary work was suspended in favor of feasting, drinking, and yuletide festivities. Mordor would pretty much shut down for the next twelve days.

A huge bonfire burned in the central courtyard. Embers rode high into the air in the updraft. When the wind shifted, the smell of smoke was overpowering. Smaller bonfires and groups of torches were everywhere.

Khamûl stepped inside and breathed in the scent of pine. Every bannister, pillar, and railing in the Great Hall had been wrapped with pine garlands. To mark the occasion, the hall was lit by hundreds of beeswax candles. They gave off a warm yellow light, and a faint scent of honey.

An enormous log burned in the fireplace at the other end of the hall. It would burn for all twelve days of Yule. It seemed as if everyone in Minas Morgul, nobles, soldiers, servants, laborers, and skilled craftsmen, was assembled there.

After the formalities, the trestle tables would be set up and the feast would begin. Dishes for the feast were already being staged in the hallway, waiting to be brought in.

At the Feast of Fools, everything was turned upside down. The nobility would wait upon their own servants and slaves. When they finished, they in turn would sit at the High Table, where the Dark Lord himself would wait upon them.

Khamûl watched from the side of the hall as The Witch King mounted the dais and strode toward an enormous chair used as a throne. He stood in front of it, but did not sit down.

The Celebration of Yule

"I have been Lord of this fortress for almost a thousand years. But today I gladly yield my place to one greater than myself."

He stepped aside. A tall figure mounted the dais and approached the throne with long strides. He was robed in black, and a veil concealed his face. Angmar introduced him. "I give you...."

The figure threw back his hood and veil, revealing a sandy-haired young man with a toothy grin.

"The Lord of Misrule!" Angmar said with a flourish.

The young man took his place on the throne. The Witch King set a paper crown upon his head and bowed to him. People in the Hall hooted and stomped their feet.

In the crowd, Sauron leaned over to Khamûl and whispered, "He's one of the stable hands. They elected him because his practical jokes are legendary."

"The Court of Fools is now in session." the Lord of Misrule announced. He spoke to the Witch King. "I command my first victim, I mean subject, to bring me a cup of wine. And none of that swill we who sit below the salt have to drink. I want the good stuff you swells keep for yourselves."

"Yes, my Lord." Angmar bowed to him again and left to fulfill the command.

The next victim was an orc captain, a man of military bearing thought to be somewhat pompous. The Lord of Misrule commanded him to get down on all fours and run around like a dog, barking and growling.

Next, he asked a serving girl to give him a kiss, although he had to settle for a chaste peck on the cheek.

Khamûl knew this game. No one was exempt. All the nobles, and particularly the Nazgûl, would be called up before the game was over. He wondered who would be next.

"I summon the Lord of the Rings to come forth." the Lord of Misrule commanded.

Khamûl looked at his Master. *Shall I put a stop to this?* But his Master was laughing. He walked up to the dais and bowed to the Lord of Misrule, like all the other victims before him.

"I hear you're a powerful demon who's taken a fair form.

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Show us your true form." said the Lord of Misrule.

"Pick something else." said Sauron.

"Let's see you shape-shift into a girl. But if you can't do it, put on a dress and wear it for the rest of the day."

"One Balrog coming up."

When Khamûl thought back on it later, he couldn't think of anything Sauron could have done that would have impressed his people more.

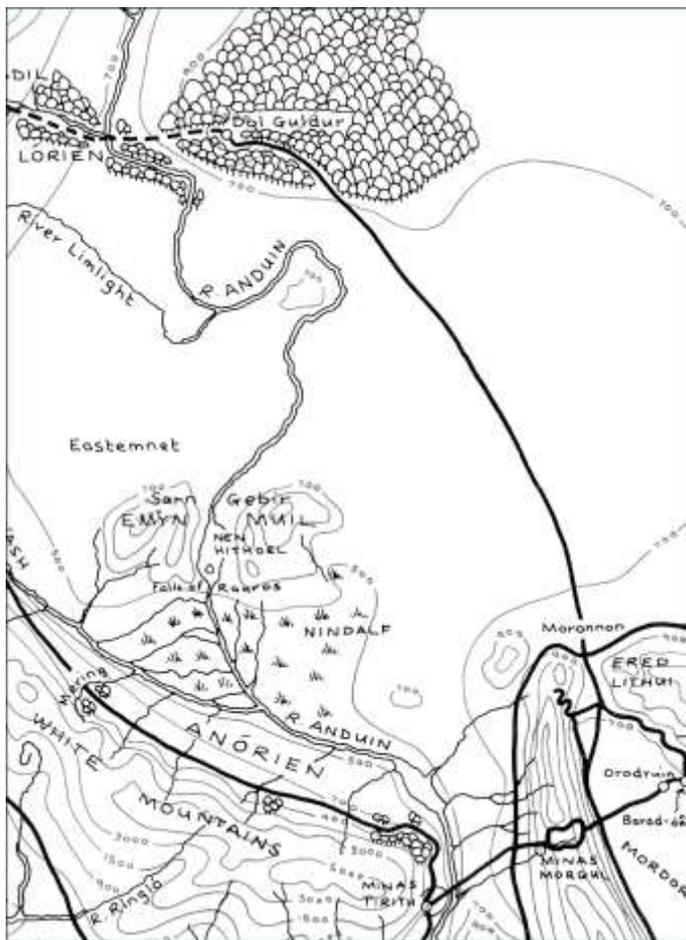
Duty discharged, Sauron left the dais and rejoined Khamûl in the crowd. His clothes were smoldering. "Aieeee! I burned my clothes. I knew that would happen. Now I have to go change." he said, beating at his sleeve where an ember still glowed.

Khamûl didn't say anything. All of a sudden, he felt shy around his Master and wouldn't meet his eye.

"What?" said Sauron.

"I've never seen your true form before." said Khamûl.

Sauron rolled his eyes. "Yes, you have. Wolf, serpent, monster, demon, it's just shape-shifting. My accustomed form, the one you see every day, is my true form."



Journeys of Frodo by Barbara Strachey