

Chapter 1 The Ranger



Arathorn led his band of Rangers to the edge of the forest where the shelter of trees and underbrush gave way to bare rock. On a pinnacle of granite just ahead, the profile of Dol Guldur, the Fortress of Sauron¹, was silhouetted against the grey dawn.

Arathorn had come here to learn if the infestation of Orcs plaguing Arnor² had come from this place. When Arathorn's father was a boy, Orcs had been all but extinct. Then Sauron had been unmasked here and no longer bothered to conceal his identity. In the years that followed, Orcs spread across Arnor, growing bolder and more dangerous every year. Arathorn suspected they originated in the forests surrounding Sauron's fortress, and he'd come here today to find out.

Arathorn motioned the others to stay back, then fell to his hands and knees and crept through the bracken. When he reached the last of the underbrush, he was close enough to see figures on the walls of the Enemy's stronghold, but he couldn't tell whether they were Men or Orcs.

He motioned for Halbaron to join him. Halbaron dropped to his belly and inched through the brambles until he was at Arathorn's elbow.

"I see movement on the battlements. You have good eyes. What do you make of it?" Arathorn asked his second-in-command.

¹ The Necromancer of Dol Guldur had been identified as Sauron 70 years earlier.

² Northern Middle Earth including the Shire, Rivendell, and Mirkwood

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“I can’t tell from here. I’ll go in closer to get a better look,” Halbaron said. Arathorn nodded permission, and Halbaron moved out onto the bare rock. He took shelter behind a boulder and peered around it towards the fortress.

Arathorn’s eye moved from the soldiers on the wall to Halbaron and back again. There was no new activity on the wall. The gate stayed closed, and the road to the fortress was empty.

The forest creatures had fallen silent. Arathorn looked up and down the tree line on either side of them. He turned his head, listening. A twig snapped, then another, and something was crashing through the underbrush. Arathorn signaled to the others to fan out behind him, and notched an arrow in his bow.

A large band of Orcs burst from the woods and marched towards the fortress. Arathorn counted at least thirty of them. Their path took them between Halbaron and the other Rangers. Halbaron stayed crouched in the shadow of the boulder, not moving.

When the column had almost passed the spot where Halbaron was hiding, one of the Orcs looked in Halbaron’s direction. The Orc stopped and pointed, and others turned in the same direction. They moved towards Halbaron with their weapons drawn.

Arathorn watched in helpless frustration as the heavily armed Orcs surrounded Halbaron. The Rangers were heavily outnumbered; there was nothing he could do to save him.



Halbaron kept his head down and remained still as the Orcs marched past, seeming not to notice him. When he could no longer hear their footsteps, he lifted his head and saw boots, the hem of cloaks, and the tips of scabbards no more than two feet away.

Halbaron jumped to his feet and drew his two-handed sword. He swung again and again, inflicting heavy damage, but fresh Orcs stepped in to replace the ones he’d felled.

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Halbaron fought until he could no longer lift his arms.

A scimitar came in low. He was slow to block it, and suffered a slash across the thigh. His leg gave way beneath him and he fell to his knees. The Orc swung again, and sliced a stinging cut on his cheekbone.

He expected the next blow to kill him, but a clout to the back of his head knocked him to the ground instead. They held him down and stripped him of his weapons, then bound his hands behind his back and tied a filthy rag over his eyes.



Arathorn led his Rangers back to camp in silence, his head down. Mallor threw his quiver and bow on the ground and sank down onto a rock near the fire pit, his head in his hands.

Arathorn assembled the Rangers who hadn't been part of the scouting mission to Dol Guldur.

"Halbaron was captured. There were so many of them, we couldn't help him. He was taken alive," he said.

Arathorn owed it to Halbaron to bring him back safely. Arathorn had sent him out on the rock where the Orcs caught him, but was more than that, they'd grown up together, and Halbaron was one of his closest friends.

Arathorn wanted to storm the fortress and break Halbaron by force, but Sauron's fortress, perched high on a steep outcropping of rock, was almost unassailable. There was another problem. The local people believed the place was cursed. The men-at-arms under his command wouldn't go anywhere near it.

"There's more than one way to free him. If we can't attack the place where he's being held, perhaps we could buy his freedom with a ransom," said Dírhaborn.

Arathorn knew how hopeless that was. "I don't think the Enemy would agree to release Halbaron, no matter how much we offered for him." Arathorn thought carefully before he spoke. "I will offer to take his place."

"Don't be stupid, then they'd have two prisoners instead of one," Dírhaborn said.

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“There are other ways to get someone back, like a hostage exchange,” said Mallor.

“Except we don’t have anyone to trade,” said Dírhaborn.



When the Orcs marched him up the stony hillside, Halbaron tripped and fell hard. With his hands tied behind his back, he wasn’t able to catch himself, and skinned his knee on the rocky slope. He landed on his face and split his lip as well; his mouth filled with blood.

They came to a halt, and he heard a clicking sound followed by the squeak of iron. They started marching again. The sun no longer warmed his face, and the air turned cold and damp. The Orcs pushed him forward. He took a step into empty space, and would have fallen had the Orcs not been hanging onto him.

He was led him down a long flight of stairs, then a landing, then twenty more steps. The smell of mildew grew stronger the further down they went.

He was pushed into what felt like a confined space. The blindfold was yanked off, and he found himself in a stone cell barely large enough to lie down in. Orange torchlight lit the space, flickering and dim. When his eyes adjusted, he saw irons hanging from chains anchored in the walls.

The Orcs searched him again, more thoroughly this time. One of them untied his hands, and he was made to surrender his clothing. He was forced to stand against the stone wall at spear point while they turned out the pockets of each garment and upended his boots. When they finished, they returned his clothes, but kept his boots as well as his purse, then fastened irons around his wrists and ankles.

A huge Orc knocked him to the ground and stood on Halbaron’s chest. He yanked at the chains until Halbaron thought his arms would be pulled from his shoulder sockets. The irons were forced part way up his hands and left bruises, but they didn’t come off.

“He won’t be getting out of these, then,” said the Orc.

“Right, we’re done here,” said another.

They left the cell and snapped the lock shut behind them, lifted the torch from its iron bracket, and retreated down the passageway. The wall at his back was slick with algae. The orange light disappeared with them, leaving him alone in darkness.

Hours went by. Halbaron heard the squeak of hinges, dripping water, and a snatch of some Orcish song, ghoulish and cruel.

... shall be hang-ed, from the gallows oh so high...³

He hurt all over. The scimitar wound on his thigh was the worst of his injuries, but he’d received half a dozen lesser cuts on his hands, arms, and face as well. One of his front teeth was loose, and the blood from the cut on his cheekbone itched as it dried.



Torchlight approached far down the passage, and Orc jailors removed the irons from his wrists and ankles. They took him from the cell and led him through a large space filled with apparatus made of wood and iron, apparently designed to loosen the tongues of the unwilling. He recognized the rack, but the other pieces were unfamiliar. Most of them had leather straps to secure wrists and ankles, or in some cases, necks. The hair on his arms stood up.

At the far end of the chamber, there was a small room dominated by a heavy table. Two Orcs sat on the far side in tall chairs. They looked more like Orc Captains than the foot soldiers he normally encountered in the woods. One was writing on a slate with a stylus, and both wore rings and other piercings in their scarred faces. They stopped what they were doing and watches as Halbaron was brought in.

“Please sit down,” said the first one. The corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking way.

Halbaron sat down on a low stool. He had to look up to see the two interrogators on the other side of the table. The bloody

³ Long Lankin, Steeleye Span, Commoners Crown

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scrape on his knee showed through the tear in his leggings.

“You were caught trespassing. We’d like to ask you a few questions, just to clear things up, and then you can go home. Does that sound fair?” asked the interrogator.

Halbaron was silent.

“What is your name?” said the interrogator.

Halbaron was silent.

“Who do you serve?”

Halbaron was silent.

“What brought you so close to Dol Guldur?”

Halbaron was silent.

“I expected you to say you were a woodsman from a nearby village. You were hunting deer, and you lost your way and strayed too close to this place by mistake.”

Halbaron was silent.

“But no matter. Your sword gives you away. No simple wood cutter carries the weapons of a warrior. We know you’re a Ranger,” said the interrogator. “I’d just like to hear you say it.”

The interrogator came around the table and lifted Halbaron’s chin. He leaned so close, Halbaron could smell stale wine and onions on his breath. Halbaron spit in his face. The man slapped him so hard, it opened the gash on his cheek. Blood trickled down his neck.

The questioning went on for hours. One of the faceless creatures stood in the doorway, listening. Black robes concealed its body and reached to the floor. Its claw-like hand rested on the door frame, but it made no sound. After it left, the first interrogator said to the other, “Which one was that?”

“Don’t ask me. I can’t tell them apart,” said the other. That meant there was more than one of them.

At some point, the chief interrogator had some sort of disagreement with his assistant. They stepped into the hall for a word in private, leaving Halbaron alone with the servant who brought in tea for the interrogators.

“I’m so sorry this is happening to you,” said the servant. His eyes were kind. “Just give them what they want. They’ll get it out of you anyway. There’s no shame in avoiding what comes

next. Because it's..."

The interrogators returned, and the servant scurried from the room.



Arathorn lay awake in the darkness. He had no illusions about what his friend must be going through right now. Halbaron was captured almost at the foundation of Dol Guldur. The Enemy would want to know why he was there, and they would have no qualms about the methods they used to find out.

Arathorn wouldn't let himself believe it was impossible to attack Dol Guldur. The fortress was perched on bare rock; the woods surrounding it were filled with spiders and poisonous plants, and inside, he felt sure it was garrisoned by countless Orcs.

There must be a stealthy way to gain entry, either by disguising one's self as a servant, or entering the fortress through some hidden postern gate.⁴ Arathorn was Isildur's heir; the ancient blood of the Men of the West ran in his veins. He could rescue Halbaron if anyone could.

There was another threat besides Orcs, the faceless creature that rode through the woods below Dol Guldur, black robed and mounted on a black horse. When he first crossed paths with it, he was overwhelmed by a mindless terror so intense he wanted to throw himself to the ground. Somehow, he toughed it out, and learned something surprising; the fear was an illusion, unpleasant but harmless.

The next time he encountered it, he was prepared. Panic swept over him, and then it was gone. He drew his sword and lunged at the creature, the creature parried the blow with practiced skill. But in that encounter, he learned something important; however terrifying it was to be near the thing, and however proficient it was with weapons, the creature had little physical strength.

Arathorn knew what they had to do. He woke the others.

⁴ like Gandalf did 70 years earlier

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"I'd like to capture the black-robed creatures and trade it for Halbaron," Arathorn told his Rangers. His men weren't as enthusiastic as he was.

"We don't know whether it's dangerous, but I'll wager it is. It carries weapons, I expect it knows how to use them," said Dírhaborn.

"We don't even know what it is, but probably something supernatural. It might be cursed, did you think of that?" said Mallor.

Mallor was right. The last time Elladan and Elrohir⁵ had passed through Mirkwood, they'd mentioned that the Necromancer of Dol Guldur might actually be the spirit the Elves called Sauron, an ancient evil vanquished at the end of the Second Age. If so, the black-robed creature could be one of his most feared servants, a Ringwraith. But whatever it was, the creature was probably dangerous. Was it worth the risk?

"We don't even know that Halbaron is still alive," said Dírhaborn.

Arathorn listened, but he'd already made up his mind.

"As I see it, the hard part will be to capture the creature alive. Normally I'd track it like an animal and put an arrow through its heart. But unless we take it alive, we won't have anything to trade," he said.

They discussed how it could be done. They could rig a line across the trail at throat height, drop a net over its head, or release a snake to frighten the horse into bucking the creature off. It would be difficult, but not impossible.



Halbaron had been standing here half the night, facing the wall of the cell with his hands behind his head. The cut on his cheek throbbed in time to his pulse. His eyelids were heavy, but when his chin began to sink forward, he was startled awake by the tip of a spear that poked him in the ribs.

"You, no dozing." said the Orc guard.

⁵ the sons of Elrond

Hostage

The hours dragged on. His feet were so swollen, they didn't look like his own.

Another thing had started to bother him. He asked, but was told no. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, but it didn't help. He tried to think of something else, but it was becoming acutely painful.

A metal door slammed nearby, making him jump. He cursed, it was too late, his leggings were soaked. The guard laughed, and Halbaron was forced to stand there for the rest of the night with the wet wool clinging to his thighs.

It must have been near sunrise when Halbaron was allowed to sink into the straw on the floor of the cell. It was a thin layer of straw, no more than one armload, and it smelled rancid, but he didn't care.

Later, the jailor banged on the cell door to wake him, and placed a bowl of porridge between the bars where he could reach it. Halbaron ate using two fingers as a spoon. It tasted moldy, and when he tried to eat, the cut on his lip started to bleed. He pushed it aside and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter 2 The Wraith



Khamûl the Easterling, Lieutenant of Dol Guldur, rode out from the fortress as soon as it was light. He could see in the dark, but Shadow could not, and he didn't want his horse to stumble on the rough terrain below Amon Lanc, the Bald Hill.

He was still riding the perimeter every morning and afternoon as self-imposed penance for forgetting to lock the postern tunnel and allowing the Grey Wizard to get into the fortress and discover his Master's identity.

Ever since he lost his protective cover as the Necromancer, Sauron was perpetually on edge, waiting to learn what the Valar would do next. Dol Guldur went into a state of extreme vigilance. Lookouts manned the walls at all times, and patrols were doubled.

Khamûl's morning route took him up a high bluff that gave him a good view of Southern Mirkwood. In the afternoon, he rode a second route that took him deep into the wooded region surrounding the fortress.

The day before, they caught a spy almost at the base of the fortress walls. Khamûl saw him in his cell and witnessed the early part of the interrogation. The spy was tough. He would have to be. Dol Guldur treated its prisoners harshly.

Following the capture of the spy, Dol Guldur went into a state of extreme vigilance. Patrols were sent out more often. Khamûl's usual route took him up a high bluff that gave him a good view of the surrounding countryside. In the afternoon, he would ride a different circuit that took him deep into the wooded region surrounding the fortress.

Arathorn had stalked the creature before and knew

something of its habits. It usually rode out just after first light, and followed more or less the same route.

On one section of its route, a narrow trail climbed the side of a steep bluff where the creature's horse slowed almost to a stop as it struggled up the difficult terrain. There were trees on both sides, and boulders large enough to hide behind. Arathorn thought they could drop a net over the rider, then subdue it with cudgels.

Before sunrise, the Rangers hung a fishing net above the trail and concealed it among the branches overhead. Even from a short distance away, the course mesh was almost invisible.

They took up their positions. Each of the Rangers crouched behind a tree or boulder. By the time the sun was fully above the horizon, Arathorn thought he heard the clip clip of a horse's hooves. From behind his own boulder, Mallor shot him a look; he'd heard it too.

A moment later, a horse and rider appeared from around the bend, trotting toward the narrow portion of trail beneath the net. The horse was black, with no white markings at all, and the rider was wrapped in a black cloak.

Some forest animal or bird made a scolding noise. The creature drew rein and sat perfectly still, its head turning from side to side as if listening. After a moment, it shook the reins and moved forward through the trees along a different route than expected. Not only did it leave the path that would have taken it under the net, it was headed right for the boulder where Arathorn was hidden. When it rounded the enormous rock, it would surely see him.

Arathorn had no other plan. He could retreat into the woods and avoid a confrontation with the creature, but he needed to capture it if he wanted to save Halbaron.

In desperation, he climbed on top of the boulder. When the creature rode past, he hurled himself through the air, knocking it off its horse. They hit the ground together, hard. With no warning, something slammed into Khamûl's side and knocked him from the saddle. He lay on the ground with the wind knocked out of him, gasping. Shadow whinnied and

stomped the ground. Men were shouting nearby, their voices harsh and threatening.

Khamûl unleashed his most powerful weapon, Fear. He envisioned a black cloud, originating inside himself and extending like tentacles, moving outward like a toxic fog, shapeless and terrifying.

One of them threw himself on the ground, sobbing. In the distance were the sounds of a horse going mad. Not Shadow, but some other animal that didn't know him. The man on top of him started to stir. Khamûl struggled free of him, then groped for the hilt of his dagger and pulled it from its sheath.



The creature's sleeve brushed against Arathorn's face. Arathorn twisted away, and a dagger plunged into the dirt where his heart had just been.

Arathorn tried to draw his own dagger, but an overwhelming feeling of despair and hopelessness clouded his thoughts. The weapon slipped from his unfeeling fingers and fell to the ground. He watched, as if from a great distance, as the creature raised its dagger over its head.

Then the weapon fell from the creature's hand and it collapsed across Arathorn's chest. Mallor stood over them with a heavy cudgel. "Shall I hit it again?" he asked.

The creature's dagger lay on the ground, its edge notched and corroded. It appeared to be a thing of extreme age. Mallor started to pick it up, but Arathorn warned him, "Don't touch it. It might be poisoned, or cursed."

Arathorn bound the creature's hands and feet, then searched it for weapons. He removed a dirk from its boot and unbuckled its sword belt, which held a two handed broadsword and the scabbard for a long dagger.

When they lifted the creature, Arathorn was surprised by how easy it was to lift. It couldn't have been more than nine or ten stone⁶, the weight of a medium sized woman. They'd

⁶ one stone = 14 lbs.

planned to sling it like cargo over the back of a pack animal, but when they tried, the usually docile pony reared and foamed at the mouth, its eyes rolling back in its head. It wouldn't allow itself to be lead anywhere near the creature.

In the end, they had to use the creature's own horse, which was found cropping grass nearby. They draped the creature over the saddle and used rope to tie it down like cargo, with its wrists and ankles pulled together under the horse's belly. All the while, the creature never stirred.

Arathorn led the black horse by the reins while Mallor and Dírhaborn walked on either side, their swords drawn. They set off for Sarn Cardh⁷, a small fort where the creature could be held securely.

Like most strongholds, there was a small alcove behind iron bars in the cellar beneath the tower, built to protect wine and other expensive provisions against pilfering. The storeroom at Sarn Cardh was larger than most, more of a room than a cupboard, and the local Bailiff sometimes used it as a jail.

Arathorn planned to put the creature in irons and lock it in the cell beneath Sarn Cardh until they could arrange a prisoner exchange. He avoided thinking about whether the creature had supernatural powers, like mesmerism or shape shifting, that would help it to escape.



They'd been walking for ten minutes or so when a small stone tower came into view, colorful pennants fluttering above it. Soon after, they saw a palisade of sharpened tree trunks almost twice the height of a man. The main gate was closed.

Sunlight glinted from the helm of a sentry standing watch behind the wall. Arathorn called out a greeting and asked for the Bailiff of Sarn Cardh. The sentry disappeared and returned with an older man. His weather-beaten face bore a stern expression, but when he saw Arathorn, he grinned.

"Arathorn, Captain of Rangers! I haven't seen you in

⁷ sarn = stone, cardh = building or structure

months. Wait right there, I'll open the gate for you."

He vanished from the top of the wall. A moment later, something scraped against the wooden planks, the gate swung open, and the Bailiff stepped out onto the road to greet them.

"What can I do for you? I suppose you'll be wanting food and a place to sleep, stabling for your horses, and ... What's that on the black horse?" the Bailiff asked, his eyes widening.

The unconscious prisoner twitched. *Good, it wasn't dead,* Arathorn thought.

"Don't tell me you actually caught one of those things. What are you going to do with it?" The Bailiff stepped back and made the sign of the evil eye.

"I want to lock it in your jail cell. Once it's in irons, I don't think it will be dangerous. Hurry, I think it's starting to wake up," said Arathorn.

The Rangers led the horse with its burden into the yard within the log palisade. When the gate closed behind them, Arathorn and Mallor cut the ropes that held the creature to its horse and slid it out of the saddle. Mallor lifted its shoulders, Arathorn its feet.

The Bailiff lit a lantern and led them to the cellar stairs. He warned them the wooden staircase wasn't attached to the wall, so it might wobble under their weight. Arathorn worried that he or Mallor might stumble and drop their unconscious burden.

They reached the bottom of the stairs without incident. The inky darkness beyond the circle of lamplight gradually revealed rocky outcroppings poking through the hard-packed dirt floor. Stacks of barrels and crates were arranged against the walls, and in the middle of the room, there was a round stone wall typical of the enclosure around a well.

The Rangers followed the Bailiff to the back of the darkened space and stopped in front of an iron grate set into the back wall. The floor was lower back here, and noticeably damp.

The Bailiff took a key from his belt and snapped open the lock. The grate swung open with a screech of iron against iron, revealing an alcove cut into the rock. Chains hung from iron rings sunk into the wall.

Arathorn and Mallor crouched to enter the small space. The ceiling didn't allow a man to stand upright, which smelled of mildew and urine. They dumped their limp burden on the floor. Arathorn knelt beside the creature. The packed earth was cold, and almost right away, moisture from the ground soaked into the knees of his leggings.

The Bailiff was unwilling to touch the creature, but he showed them how to work the irons, and watched while they fastened them around the prisoner's wrists and ankles.

"Take off its boots, otherwise you'll never get the irons tight enough," said the Bailiff.

Arathorn removed one of the creature's boots. Its foot was missing.

"Well, we'll have to skip that one," the Bailiff said.

Arathorn pulled off the other boot. That leg had no foot, either. Arathorn felt the creature's leg through the fabric of its clothing. It was skeletally thin, but the leg was definitely there. Arathorn's hand moved lower. He felt shin, ankle, and toes. The creature's flesh was as cold as a dead thing's, but it wasn't dead; its foot twitched when Arathorn touched it.

Arathorn looked up at Mallor. "The thing is invisible," he said.

Curious, Arathorn stripped off the creature's cloak, gloves, and black robes. When he finished, he sat back on his heels and asked the Bailiff to bring the lantern closer. There was nothing but empty chains on the dirt floor. Arathorn reached into the space where the creature should have been. His hand encountered a bony wrist, silk clothing, and long hair.

He turned to Mallor. "Go get Dírhabor. I want him to see this." Mallor left and came back with the other Ranger. The two of them stood outside the cell and peered through the iron grate.

"I don't see anything," said Dírhabor.

"Just watch," said Arathorn.

By now the thing was waking up. It stirred in its chains and moaned. When it rolled over, one of the chains wrapped itself around its invisible body.

"The chains moved by themselves, like serpents," said

Mallor.

"Do you have any paint I can use?" Arathorn asked the Bailiff.

"We're staining some woodwork upstairs. Will that do?" the Bailiff asked. Arathorn nodded. The Bailiff went upstairs and came back a few minutes later with a bucket of dark liquid that smelled of pine resin.

Arathorn lifted the bucket and splashed its contents into the cell. Where before there had been nothing but empty chains, now there was something in the shape of a man lying on the floor, its shirt plastered to its skin and its hair hanging in oily strings.

The creature sat up and held its hands away from its body as the varnish dripped from its fingertips. Then it shook itself like a dog. Arathorn jumped back too late, and was hit by a spray of resinous droplets.

With a start, the creature went rigid and clutched one hand with the other, but a moment later, it relaxed. Arathorn guessed that it was, in fact, a ringwraith, checking that its ring was still there.

"I didn't take it, if that's what you're worried about. You're no use to us dead," said Arathorn. From what he'd heard, a creature like that would die without its ring.

"Does it understand you?" asked the Bailiff.

"I'm not sure," Arathorn said. He faced the creature.

"What's your name?" The creature didn't respond.

Arathorn tried again, enunciating each syllable. "Do you have a name?"

The creature turned away, hugging its knees.

"It doesn't understand us," said Arathorn.

"Is it simple-minded?" asked the Bailiff.

"I don't think so. It walks normally and can handle a horse, but I don't think it can talk. Or perhaps it doesn't speak our language."

Arathorn rubbed at his hand, trying to remove the stain from his knuckles and fingernails. The oily brown varnish wouldn't come off.

"How do you get this off, anyway?" he asked the Bailiff.

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"Three days," said the Bailiff.

"I mean, what soap or solvent will take it off?"

"Three days. It has to wear off by itself."

If that were true, the creature would remain visible for at least a few days.

Chapter 3 The Ransom Note



Now that they had captured a hostage, Arathorn had to deliver the ransom note, but he had absolutely no idea how to do it. “We could walk up to the gates of Dol Guldur under a flag of truce and knock, but I don’t have a death wish,” he said.

“It’s too bad the creature’s horse didn’t return to Dol Guldur without its rider. Then we wouldn’t need to send this,” said Mallor.”

Arathorn disagreed. An empty saddle meant nothing. The rider usually showed up a few hours later, ill-tempered and covered with mud.

“We could release the horse with the note in its saddlebags,” said Dírhaborn.

“What if they don’t find the note right away?” asked Mallor.

“They will, if we send it with the creature’s robes and weapons. And that will prove we have the rider,” Arathorn said. The others agreed. Arathorn called for parchment and ink and wrote,

*You have one of our people. We have one of yours. I suggest a trade. Meet me on the Sirith Bridge at noon tomorrow.*⁸

The Sirith Bridge was on the road between here and Dol Guldur, accessible to both sides. More important, it was in a narrow, heavily wooded gorge, easy to defend in daylight.

⁸ sirith = flowing stream

Hostage

Arathorn wished the trade could take place today, but almost a day was required just to exchange messages. If the riderless horse arrived at Dol Guldur late in the afternoon, and the Enemy left his reply on the bridge during the night, a Ranger could collect it at sunrise. Noon tomorrow was the best plan he could think of.

He picked up his pen and started to add, *Send a reply to the fort at Sarn Cardh*, but decided it would be unwise to tell the Enemy where they were, or more to the point, where they were holding the prisoner. Instead, he wrote,

Leave your answer on the Sirith Bridge, and we will find it.

He folded the letter and addressed it to, "The Necromancer of Dol Guldur", Sauron's title. He tied the folded parchment with a string, and dripped wax on the knot to seal it.

The clop clop of horses' hooves echoed across the yard. Mallor was leading two horses, his own bay and a coal black horse. A bundle of black fabric was tied to its saddle with a sword and dagger tucked under the ropes holding it in place.

Arathorn went outside and joined Mallor. Mallor held the reins while Arathorn waved the letter back and forth to harden the wax, then pushed it into the center of the roll of black cloth.

"Get as close to Dol Guldur as you can, and release the horse within sight of the fortress," he told Mallor.

Mallor nodded. One of the men-at-arms opened the gate, and he kicked the bay to a gallop. The black horse followed on its lead line. They took the road east, towards Dol Guldur. Arathorn watched the road until the dust raised by the two horses was no longer visible.



Khamûl leaned against the wall and stared into the darkness. He didn't know where he was.

The sticky substance glued his clothes to his body. His skin itched as it dried, and whenever he moved, the fumes from pine resin make his eyes water.

His shoulder ached from hitting the ground and the back his head throbbed in time to his pulse. When he touched the place that hurt he felt a lump the size of a river stone, and his hand came away streaked with blood. Wonderful.

He called silently to his Master, *I am here, I am here, I am here.* There was no reply.

The wall across from his prison was piled high with barrels, and in the middle of the room, there was a stone structure with an iron grid over it; it looked like a well. Every stronghold was the same; the storerooms were filled with provisions against the day it was besieged.

When Khamûl was knocked from the saddle, he thought his assailants were robbers, but ordinary highwaymen wouldn't have the use of a stronghold like this.

But Rangers might. The Rangers were a volunteer force who roamed the woods in small bands. They were formidable enemies who could take on companies of orcs far larger than themselves. He didn't know how simple yeoman acquired such skill as archers and swordsmen, unless, as Sauron believed, they were professional warriors descended from the Kings of Arnor.

Khamûl had seen Rangers in the woods before. Usually they avoided him, so why did they attack him today, and why did they take him prisoner? Obviously they wanted him alive. That's what their leader said, anyway.

They must want him for what he knew. Sauron confided in him, and over time, Khamûl came to know much of his Master's secret plans and intentions.

Khamûl thought about what he could give up under interrogation without harming his Master. Their most carefully guarded secret, Sauron's false identity as the Necromancer, had been exposed thirty years ago. Khamûl could admit to that under questioning, if he had to.

Furthermore, it was likely the Rangers knew the layout of Dol Guldur. Sauron abandoned it once, centuries ago when the Valar came looking for him. While he was away, anyone could have gotten into the fortress and explored it at leisure. Khamûl might reveal details about the fortifications without telling

them anything they didn't already know.

Except that his Master might think it disloyal, and that was something Sauron would never forgive. That left Khamûl with only one course of action, and it wasn't going to be pleasant. Whatever the Rangers did to him, he wasn't going to talk.

The Rangers hadn't tried to question him yet, and he wanted to put it off as long as possible. When he woke up in this tiny cell, he pretended to be deaf, and turned his face to the wall when they spoke to him. Soon, they stopped addressing him directly and spoke only among themselves. Khamûl hoped to keep it that way.



Mairon Artano stood at a window in the highest tower in Dol Guldur, far above the tree canopy of Southern Mirkwood. From this great height, he could see beyond the edge of the endless forest, across the River Anduin all the way to the edge of Lothlorian, the ancient Elvish stronghold.

He was watching the road leading to the fortress. It was mid-afternoon, and Khamûl hadn't yet returned from morning patrol, but Mairon wasn't really worried yet. Twenty years ago, Khamûl was seriously injured when his horse slipped and fell on the shale slopes, an area of loose rock with unstable footing, but since the accident, he'd avoided the most dangerous part of the route, and nowhere else along his route was as dangerous.

Mairon's eyes were on the forest, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The Valar knew where he was. Mairon couldn't understand why they hadn't attacked yet. They were planning something, but he didn't know what it was.

On that terrible day when Melkor fell, the remnants of his people fled before the Host of the Valar, who hunted them down like dogs. Mairon no longer cared what happened to him, so he walked into the enemy camp and surrendered. He was told to appear for judgment and then released. Mairon had meant to stand trial at first, but he'd put it off for a day, and then another, until he realized it wasn't going to happen. He'd lived as a fugitive ever since.

The Ransom Note

Mairon had avoided capture so far, but the false identity that sheltered him for two thousand years was ripped away when Olórin, a spy for the Valar, got into Dol Guldur and recognized him. Once he knew where Mairon was hiding, the Valar knew, and could come for him at any time.

It was a disaster. Mairon, who had been horribly injured at the end of the Second Age, was still too weak to defend himself. If they came for him now, he was finished.

He watched the forest for signs of danger, but days became weeks, weeks became years, and nothing happened. Seventy years later, he still kept a vigil, but the Host of Valar had not yet smashed in his gates and brought before the Council of Valar and forced to listen as the charges against him were read, except in the dreams that came to him night after night.

He was distracted by a commotion in the lower courtyard. A sentry on the wall pointed towards the road. The Main Gate opened; one of the guards went outside and came back leading a horse by the reins. There was shouting and the clattering of hooves, faint and far away at this height. He couldn't see what was happening; the wall between the upper and lower courtyards blocked his view.

"We have to tell Sauron," someone said.

A minute later, footsteps pounded up the stairs built into the wall of the Keep. Judging from the weight of the tread, it must be one of the men-at-arms.

Mairon reached for something to cover his face before the man arrived, then tossed it aside. Why bother, when his identity as the Necromancer had been unmasked. Everyone in Arda knew who he was: from the Valar, to the Rangers in the forest, to the servants in his own kitchens and the soldiers in the guardroom.

The man reached the upper level of the keep and knocked on the door of Mairon's room, even though it was open.

"Lord Sauron!" he shouted, out of breath.

Mairon ignored him. He refused to answer to that name, even though he was seldom called anything else.

"I mean, Lord Zigûr."⁹

Mairon looked up.

"Number Two, that is to say, Lord Khamûl's horse came back without its rider. His robes and weapons are tied to the saddle."

Mairon shoved him out of the way and raced down three flights of stairs, emerging in the sunlight of the upper courtyard. The horse was Shadow, Khamûl's mount. The black robe and sword were Khamûl's as well. The dagger was a Morgul blade, Mairon had made it himself.

A man-at-arms handed him a note addressed to the Necromancer of Dol Guldur. Mairon broke the seal and read the message. It was a ransom note. It took Mairon a moment to figure out what they meant by "one of our people" until he remembered the poor unfortunate who'd wandered too close to the fortress the previous day and been detained for questioning.

It happened often enough. Usually it was someone from a local village, gathering mushrooms or hunting deer, but occasionally it was a spy. They still hadn't figured out which of those this most recent one was, even though they'd been interrogating him for more than a day.

The terms of the note seemed reasonable, and Mairon's first impulse was to accept. But something about it wasn't right; it seemed too good to be true.

The trade was uneven. Khamûl was a great lord, the son of a king, and the other man was a nobody. But even had they been equals, Khamûl wore a ring that made him immortal. That ring was worth more than anything Mairon currently owned, and Mairon was desperate to get it back.

Khamûl's ransom should have been staggeringly high: his weight in gold perhaps, or even the surrender of Dol Guldur. Why were they asking such a low price?

Mairon read the note a second time. It seemed to require that he be physically present when the exchange took place. Did it really mean that? The note was addressed to him personally,

⁹ Zigûr is Black Speech for Wizard.

The Ransom Note

and it said "Let's meet". But why would it matter if he was there? Did they think that one of the Rangers could defeat him in single combat? They were just Rangers, they couldn't hope to take him on.

The hair rose on the back of his neck. It was a trap. What had happened in Umbar was never, ever going to happen again.



Late in the Second Age, Ar-Pharazôn challenged him for his title, Lord of the Earth. The Númenorian king's forces had been so overwhelming that when Mordor's army saw them, they dropped their weapons and fled.

The king had summoned Mairon to Umbar, where he forced Mairon to kneel before him and swear an oath never to take up arms against him. It had been humiliating, but Mairon did it to preserve his realm. Afterwards, Mairon was to return to Mordor, where he and his armies would be required to stay within his own borders.

But when Mairon got up to leave, the king had ordered him arrested. Mairon protested, but Ar-Pharazôn's men seized him, and he was marched through the streets of Umbar in chains to a ship waiting in the harbor. It would be over fifty years before he regained his freedom.

Mairon already knew the Rangers had allied with the Noldor Elves, who themselves served the Valar. It was possible the Rangers, in conspiracy with the Elves, were trying to lure him out in the open where he could be captured and turned over to the Valar.

The Rangers were descended from the same ancestors as Ar-Pharazôn, and Mairon didn't like them any better for it.

Chapter 4 The Trap



Khamûl might not even be alive. Mairon clutched at his chest. He looked over the walls of Dol Guldur at the forest canopy and focused his thoughts.

Khamûl, where are you? he called silently, and listened for any sign of his servant's voice.

Khamûl should have answered right away, but Mairon heard nothing beyond the creak of the earth as it settled on its foundations and the last lingering notes of the Music that created the world, but those sounds were always present.

Mairon called again, but again, there was no reply.



Khamûl sat against the wall and studied his bare feet, waiting. His hair was stiff, and moisture from the ground soaked into the seat of his pants. He stared into the darkness, bored and worried at the same time. With an effort, he kept his mind still, listening.

Then something seized his whole attention, something as bright and unmistakable as a signal fire on a high platform.

Where are you?

Khamûl heard the cadences of his Master's voice, not in his ear, but in his mind. He couldn't make out the individual words, but he learned something important, something he hadn't known before. His Master knew he was missing, and was looking for him.

I am here, Khamûl answered silently.

He couldn't know if his Master had heard him or not. He couldn't send as powerful a signal as his Master could; he

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simply wasn't as strong.

Soon after, there was a second summons from his Master, more urgent than the first. Khamûl kicked the bars in frustration; flakes of rust knocked loose and fell on him. His Master hadn't heard him.

Mairon climbed the spiral stairs built into the wall until he reached his room in the highest level of the Keep. From the window facing west, he could see beyond the southwest edge of Mirkwood, across the River Anduin to the edge of Lothlorian, the ancient elvish stronghold.

From that great height, he called again and held his breath, listening. There it was! In his mind, he heard Khamûl calling to him. The signal was distant and faint to make out Khamûl's exact words, but he formed an impression of hunger and thirst, the smell of damp, and stone walls pressing in on a too-small space. And then it was gone, but it had told him what he needed to know, Khamûl was alive.

He sensed Khamûl's presence to the west in the direction of Lothlorian, near where a tributary joined the larger River Anduin.

Mairon considered what to do. Lothlorian was unassailable. At the height of his power, he'd launched a determined attack against it, without success. He was much weaker now; he'd been crippled by the loss of the Ring. Lothlorian had nothing to fear from him. If the Elves were holding Khamûl in Lothlorian, they would hold him until they decided to give him back.

His hand flew to his mouth. What about Khamûl's ring? Had the Elves taken it from him? But no, Khamûl must still be wearing it. If he weren't, Mairon wouldn't have been able to hear him.



In his cell, Khamûl heard his Master's voice. He replied, and almost right away his Master answered. The signal was faint, and Khamûl couldn't make out the words, but he felt sure that Sauron knew he was alive. Even better, Sauron now knew roughly where he was, based on the direction and strength of Khamûl's call. Khamûl felt sure he was going to be rescued,

and envisioned companies of orcs storming this place to free him.

Khamûl sat in the dark humming to himself, a song his mother used to sing when he was young. His stepmother, actually. She'd been his father's second wife, the only mother he'd ever known.

He remembered how stricken he'd been when he learned he wouldn't inherit her Elvish immortality. He'd just assumed he was immortal like she was, and when he learned he had a normal span of years, he'd longed for Elvish immortality all the more. Sauron had told him there was a way to recover the long life Khamûl had hoped for and lost. Khamûl had decided to accept a Ring even before it was offered.



Mairon summoned Uvatha, the most vicious of the Nine. On the far side of the upper courtyard, Uvatha stepped out of the stables wearing riding clothes, spurs, and a sword belt as if he'd been about to go on patrol. He walked across the courtyard towards the Keep with a pinched expression on his face and narrowed eyes.

The Nazgûl were so different from one another. Angmar and Khamûl had chosen to follow him before they'd even heard of the Great Rings, and became his most trusted captains. But most of the others had been lured by the gift of a ring that gave them wealth, power, and long life. That same ring also eroded their free will and replaced it with his own, but by the time they realized it, they already belonged to him.

Uvatha was the most vicious of the Nine. A king in his own right before he entered Mairon's service, Uvatha had accepted a ring in a desperate attempt to preserve his realm. He resented his enslavement more than the others, and was openly rude and disrespectful, but Mairon didn't care. Willing or unwilling, Uvatha obeyed him.

When Uvatha had almost reached the base of the Keep, Mairon started down the stairs to the guardroom and went outside to meet him.

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I suppose this is important? Uvatha was thinking.

Mairon glared at him to remind him of his place. Uvatha looked away and bobbed his head, the smallest gesture of obeisance he could get away with.

“I have a prisoner I want you to question. Do you remember the spy we caught yesterday? He hasn’t talked yet, but from his clothes and weapons, we can tell he’s a Ranger,” said Mairon.

They passed the Great Hall and the craftsman’s shops of the upper courtyard, with Uvatha following. They went through a narrow gate and down a short flight of stairs to reach the lower courtyard, where the cobbled surface was steep enough to make walking difficult. Lean-to structures, from pig pens to woodsheds to barracks for soldiers, had been built in every available space against the curtain wall.

“The Rangers are advised by the Noldor Elves, who in turn are in league with the Valar,” said Mairon.

They reached the bottom of the lower courtyard. Before them was the Gatehouse, an enormous stone structure straddling the main gate. Beneath it, in the mining tunnels dug by the Dwarves long before the fortress was built, lay the dungeons of Dol Guldur.

“I want you to learn whether the prisoner is in league with the Valar or the White Council, and if so, what they’re planning,” said Mairon.

They reached the Gatehouse and entered the arched tunnel housing the portcullis and the huge wooden doors of the main gate. Recessed into the thick stone wall was a narrow doorway flanked by two sentries, who stepped aside to let them pass.

It was dark inside the guardroom, but after a moment, his eyes adjusted enough to pick out an iron grille on the far wall which covered the stairs leading down to the dungeons.

“Do whatever you need to extract the information, but don’t allow him to die. I may need him later,” said Mairon.

“Understood,” said Uvatha.

Mairon didn’t shy away from using torture when it served his purposes, but after giving the order, he rarely stayed to

watch.¹⁰ While there was great satisfaction in seeing the prisoner break and give up everything he knew, to reach that point, he had to endure hours of standing around with his ears ringing, trying not to be sick.

Uvatha, for his part, would lean back with his eyes half closed, breathing through his mouth as if he were watching a woman undress. Whenever Mairon had to use harsher methods of interrogation, Uvatha usually volunteered to do it, and Mairon usually let him.

Uvatha turned towards the grille. A guard jumped up to unlock it and hold it open for him.

"Wait, I'm coming with you. Do your work, but I'll ask the questions," said Mairon.

Uvatha put a restraining hand on Mairon's shoulder. "No, let me do this myself."

"I know what I want to learn from him, you don't," said Mairon.

"I'm trying to say this in the nicest possible way. It's no place for the squeamish. Do you remember what happened last time?" Uvatha asked.

Mairon had thought himself unaffected by what he was watching, until the first bone broke. His vision went black and he was unable to catch his breath. He'd sunk to his knees, head down. It hadn't helped, he'd had to lie down on the stone floor and stay there.

"You fainted, and I don't want to be stepping over your unconscious body while I'm trying to work, it's annoying," said Uvatha.

"I did not faint. I lay on the ground to avoid fainting. There's a difference," said Mairon.

Mairon watched Uvatha descend into the dungeons, then hiked back up to the upper courtyard. He took the stairs that ran beneath the Great Hall and followed the corridor to the Council Chamber. Beyond it, there was a small room whose walls were covered with maps.

¹⁰ Sauron conducted the interrogation of Gollum in the dungeons of Barad-dûr. "The Black Hand has four fingers, but they are enough."

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A large map lay unrolled with weights at its corners holding it open. Dol Guldur was pictured at its center, and the terrain around it was illustrated in detail: the features of the rock, the animal trails through the forest, and the courses of streams.

He needed to know more about the Sirith Bridge, the proposed site for the hostage exchange. He traced the road from Dol Guldur and found the bridge in a steep gorge about twenty miles to the west. It spanned a fast flowing stream not easily forded or crossed. Steep, heavily forested banks could provide cover for archers. It was the perfect place for an ambush.

Adûnaphel entered the room and stood beside him. She leaned forward to get a better look at the map, almost pushing him out of the way. He glared at her and growled. She remembered that, when he first entered Melkor's service, Mairon often took physical form as a wolf. She backed off and kept a respectful distance, shifting from foot to foot.

"We'll get him back tomorrow, won't we?" she asked.

But Mairon already knew he wouldn't be going the bridge tomorrow. He bowed his head and cursed softly. He was deeply sorry, but he couldn't risk being captured himself to save his servant.



In late afternoon, Halbaron was startled awake by a scream, followed by another. There was silence for a while, then a shriek that sounded almost inhuman. When it stopped, he thought he heard a grown man sobbing, which bothered him more than the screaming.

Soon after that, they came for him. He was taken back to the room that housed the rack and other machinery used to extract confessions. The flagstones were cold under his feet, and the chill from the stone floor ran through his body.

They brought him to the same room as before and forced him onto the low stool. The same two interrogators regarded him from across the table. Halbaron looked towards the door. One of the black-robed creatures was leaning against the door frame, watching them.

“What is your relationship with the Elves?” said the first interrogator.

This was a different line of questioning than before. Halbaron wondered what was going on.

“I repeat, what is your relationship with the Elves?” said the first one.

Elrond’s sons Elladan and Elrohir often visited the Rangers and advised him. Elrond took a special interest in Arathorn. Arathorn was Isildur’s heir, but Halbaron wasn’t about to tell his captors that.

“What is your relationship with the White Council?” said the first one.

Elrond sat on the White Council, a gathering of the Wise. Halbaron assumed they met in Lothlorian to plan Sauron’s downfall.

“What is your relationship with the Valar?” said the first interrogator.

The Valar had something to do with the Elvish religion. There were dozens of them, but he could only name Manwë, Chief of the Valar and Mandos, Lord of the Underworld.

“What are the Valar planning to do?” asked the first one. Halbaron had no idea what he was talking about.

The interrogator picked up an iron bar and slammed it on the table. Halbaron jumped.

“I repeat, what are the Valar planning to do?”

The orc guards seized him and held his arm down on the table. The interrogator raised the bar high in the air and

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brought it down hard across Halbaron's fingers. There was a crunch, and Halbaron's vision went black.



Mairon was finding Adûnaphel annoying, so he sent her off on some imaginary errand before turning his attention back to the map on the table.

He drew a line from Dol Guldur in the direction of Khamûl's call, trying to pinpoint exactly where in Lothlorien Khamûl was being held. On the way to the Elvish stronghold, the line passed through a large farmhouse, a cave large enough to shelter in, and on the western border of Mirkwood, a small fort called Sarn Cardh.

Mairon frowned. What if Khamûl wasn't in Lothlorian?

He'd assumed Khamûl's signal was weak because it came from far away, but what if his servant were being held below ground? Mairon had seen an image of a cellar-like prison cell in Khamûl's mind. The underground location and the thick stone walls would make the call seem faint and distant.

If Khamûl wasn't in Lothlorian, he was on this side of the Anduin. Mairon looked at each of the three places where someone might be held, but thought that Sarn Cardh was the most likely. He decided to attack the small fort. It would take a few days to plan, and it posed some risk to Khamûl, but it was the best he could think of.

Chapter 5 The Raid



hen the light began to fail, Mairon descended the stairs of the Keep and entered the building that housed the Great Hall. He took the corridor to a private dining room behind the Great Hall, where he and his high ranking advisors took their meals.

The others were already in their accustomed places. Mairon's Steward sat at the foot of the table, the apothecary and the captain of the guard were on either side of him. The three Nazgûl, Khamûl, Adûnaphel, and Uvatha when he wasn't in Minas Morgul, had places at the head of the table near his own chair. Khamûl's place at Mairon's right hand was empty.

Mairon was the last to arrive, and the others had started eating without him. Not a surprise, since he was often late. Half the time, he got absorbed in what he was doing and didn't show up for meals at all.

A servant fixed him a plate from the communal platters on the sideboard and set it before him. Several kinds of meat, each with its own sauce. Mushrooms, preserves, pickled vegetables. His most important servants were highborn and well-educated; they had refined tastes. Mairon, a blacksmith's apprentice when he was young, would have been just as happy with bread and cheese.

Mairon told Uvatha to sit in Khamûl's place so they could talk. "I think Khamûl is being held in the fort at Sarn Cardh. I want you to lead the attack to free him."

Uvatha agreed, and got up so quickly his chair tipped over and struck the floor.

"Wait. We need a plan first," said Mairon.

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Uvatha set the chair back on its legs and sank into it with an exaggerated sigh. Uvatha, a fierce warrior who'd led countless raids and skirmishes, hadn't seen battle in years. Mairon used him to carry messages between Dol Guldur and Minas Morgul, it seemed he longed for more.

"The map shows very little about Sarn Cardh, other than its name and location," said Mairon.

Mairon pushed his plate aside and put pieces of bread on the tablecloth to mark the location of the fort, cave, and farmhouse. He positioned the salt cellar to represent Dol Guldur. In an artistic flourish, he stuck the salt spoon upright in the salt to be the Keep.

"Ride out at first light tomorrow to study the fort. Visit the cave and the farmhouse on the way, if only to rule them out." He showed Uvatha their locations on his map.

"Think about how the fort should be attacked. Look for weak points in the palisade walls. Where is the high ground? Where is the thickest ground cover? What is the best route by which to approach?"

"But most of all, find out how many men defend it. Notice whether it's occupied, and if it is, count the sentries on the walls and the number of men coming and going through the gates. Better yet, grab one of them and put the question to them," Mairon said.

"The spy might know some of those things. He's already begun to talk," said Uvatha.

"Good. Pay him another visit tonight and ask him about the fort."

Uvatha got up and headed for the door. He paused in the doorway, turned and bowed almost imperceptibly, then strode in the direction of the gatehouse tower and the dungeons below it.



They came for him during the night. Halbaron was brought back to the small room and forced him back onto the stool across the table from his two interrogators.

He sat on the low stool with his hands resting on his thighs.

Hostage

He couldn't close his hand, which was purple and swollen, and throbbled with his pulse. He set his jaw, determined not to speak.

"Tell me about Sarn Cardh" said the interrogator.

It was a small fort. He couldn't imagine what interest the Enemy might have in it.

"How many men defend the fort?"

He had been in the fort, but not recently, and only to eat and sleep. He didn't know how heavily it was garrisoned. Maybe ten or twelve, whatever was typical for small forts.

"How long could it withstand a siege?"

Not long. It wasn't exactly a sophisticated fortification.

"Are there any secret entrances?"

He had no idea. It wasn't his fort.

"I asked you a question, are there any secret entrances? Perhaps the fort has a sally port in back, or an escape tunnel?"

"I think it's time to go to the next level," the creature said. Its voice was something between a whisper and a hiss.

They took him to the chamber where the terrifying machinery was kept, and forced into something like a chair, a device of wood and iron with leather restraints. His hands were pinned above his head, and a crosspiece forced his knees apart. He noticed a nearby table held an unusually shaped pair of tongs.

"Prepare him," said the creature.

"Do you want everything off?" asked the interrogator.

"No, just below the waist."

Halbaron clenched his teeth.



It was late, and Mairon had retired to his room for the evening. He sat at the table in front of the fireplace, arranging pieces on the chessboard. He placed two pawns, one black and one white, in the center of the board, the two hostages standing on the bridge.

He put a black king, which stood for himself, on his own side of the board. Then he covered the opposite side with

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powerful white pieces, the setup for an ambush. His hand closed around the black king, and he took it off the board. Whatever happened, he was not going to be caught unawares on the Sirith Bridge.

Mairon turned the chessboard around and studied it from the other side. He tried to understand the Rangers' motives to predict what they would do, but while he knew what he would do under a given set of circumstances, he couldn't guess what other people would do.

A new thought struck him, and he stiffened. What if they tried to force him to the bridge by threatening to hurt Khamûl? He tipped the black pawn on its side. He wouldn't allow that to happen. Mairon resolved to protect Khamûl by feigning indifference. He dipped a pen in ink and thought about what to write.

It didn't really matter. Mairon would free Khamûl by launching an attack on the place where he was being held, but it would take at least two days to plan the attack, and the Rangers proposed to conduct the trade at noon tomorrow. To stall for time, Mairon would pretend to bargain with the Rangers, but he would drag out the negotiations as long as possible.

Mairon considered what to ask for. He needed time, so he couldn't offer terms they would accept right away. Nor could he propose something so objectionable they would rip his note to pieces. He had to think of something in between that would provoke a counteroffer. Mairon decided to leave the conditions as open-ended as possible.

The creature is of little value to me. Offer me something I care about.

What did he care about? To get his Ring back, to take revenge on Gondor, for Melkor not to be dead. To see Eönwë again. Now all he had to do was think of something realistic to ask for. He dipped the pen again and wrote,

The Men of the West must leave Southern Mirkwood forever.

Hostage

It wasn't more than they could pay, just more than they wanted to. A lot more.



Halbaron fought against the leather straps, but instead of twisting free, he only made them cut into his skin.

"Tell me about Sarn Cardh," the creature hissed.

Halbaron was silent. The creature made a gesture to the orc guard, and Halbaron felt something tighten. He sucked in his breath, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Once again, tell me about Sarn Cardh."

He had been in the fort, but not recently, and only to eat and sleep.

"It's a small fort, a stone tower three storeys tall surrounded by a log palisade," he said.

"How many men defend it?" The creature leaned over him. Where its face should be, there was only a black pit.

"Ten or twelve," said Halbaron. He didn't know how heavily it was garrisoned, but that was typical for small forts.

"How long could the fort withstand a siege?"

Not long. It wasn't exactly a sophisticated fortification. "Two weeks," he said.

"Are there any secret entrances?"

"Not that I know of," Halbaron said.

"Once again, are there any secret entrances? Perhaps the fort has a sally port in back, or an escape tunnel?" asked the creature. It waited, then turned to the orc. "Give him another quarter turn."

"Wait! There's a nearly invisible postern door, hidden in the back."

"Tell me about it."

They twisted the screw again, and something inside him ripped. His stomach heaved and his mouth filled with acid. They released the pressure slightly and he slumped forward, gasping for breath. The front of his shirt was warm with vomit; the smell of it made him retch.

Halbaron had nothing left to give.

"Give him another turn," said the creature.

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“Please no! I’ll talk, I’ll tell you everything I know! My name is Halbaron son of Amarion. I’m a deputy Captain of Ranger. Our Captain is Arathorn son of Arador, Isildur’s heir. There are fifteen of us, and their names are ...”

The words spilled from him so fast, he doubted they heard half of them. The whole time he was blathering, not one of them wrote anything down.



Khamûl called to his Master during the night, and was surprised when he answered right away. Normally his Master didn’t stay up late, except during wartime or in a crisis.



Back in his cell when they were done with him, Halbaron slumped against the wall of his cell, in too much pain to sleep. He couldn’t find a comfortable position, sitting or lying down. He was so tired; he hadn’t slept more than a few hours at a time since he was captured.

He’d lost his sense of time. He no longer knew whether it was day or night, or how long he’d been a prisoner here.

He wanted to curl up and make himself as small as he felt, a coward who’d betrayed his friends. He was haunted by the sound of his own voice jabbering about the Rangers and their mission, Elrond’s sons, Isildur’s heir, and the Ring of Barahir.

Something made him look up. His wife Evonyn was standing outside the cell, holding their son Halbarad by the hand. She looked care-worn and old before her time; a widow’s life was hard. Halbaron knew he was dreaming, but knowing didn’t interrupt the dream.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you, not like this,” Halbaron said.

She smiled kindly. She forgave him, even though he couldn’t forgive himself.

“You never got to see me grow up,” said his small son, Halbarad.

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Halbarad was six years old, and such a beautiful child. He was kind, and good to his friends. Halbaron was sure Halbarad would become a good man. Halbaron was so proud of him. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead on his knees.

He was glad his wife and son couldn't see him like this. The things that had been done to him had broken him.

He remembered hearing his own voice screaming, begging, saying he'd do anything they wanted. He'd told them everything. When people learned he'd given in and cooperated with the Enemy, they wouldn't want anything to do with him.

They'd promised that if he talked, they would release him. Nobody needed to know that he'd told them anything. He didn't really believe them. He did believe that if he told them everything he knew, his escape would be through death. By now, he welcomed it. He only hoped it would be quick.

Chapter 6 The Counteroffer



n hour after sunrise, Arathorn was watching the road from the palisade when Mallor and another Ranger rode up to the fort on horseback. He climbed down the catwalk ladder and stepped through the gate to greet them.

“We visited the Sirith Bridge at first light, and found this,” said Mallor.

He held up a black arrow of the type the orcs used, with a piece of parchment wrapped around its shaft. Arathorn unfolded the note and read the narrow, slanted handwriting. Their offer had been refused. The note went on to name their own terms. To win Halbaron’s release, the Rangers must leave Southern Mirkwood forever. The note was unsigned.

Arathorn blanched. This was not what he expected. The trade he’d offered was a good one, and he’d never imagined it would be refused.

He missed Halbaron’s council more than ever, and tried to guess what his friend would say about this note. In his mind, Arathorn could almost hear his friend saying, “Maybe it’s not so bad. They answered the ransom note; that means he’s interested. And he just told you I’m still alive.”

And why would Sauron claim the creature had no value? Like all the heirs of Isildur, Arathorn had been fostered by Elrond Peredhil.¹¹ What would his old mentor have to say?

When Sauron the Deceiver tells you something is of no value, do not believe him. The creature wears a Great Ring. In the Second Age,

¹¹ peredil = half-elven

Hostage

Sauron waged war to recover the Great Rings¹², said Elrond in his imagination.

"But I offered him a fair trade, one of his people for one of mine. Why didn't he accept?" asked Arathorn.

If he accepted your offer too quickly, it would tell you the value of what you had. He was afraid you would raise the price, said Elrond.

"He was afraid I'd ask for its weight in gold?"

He was afraid you'd ask him to surrender Dol Guldur.

Arathorn considered his next move. Sauron had already raised the price for Halbaron's release beyond the trade of captive for captive. He wondered if he should raise his own price to include Surrender Dol Guldur.

But in the end, he decided Sauron would choose his fortress over his servant, and any attempt to drive a hard bargain would just get Halbaron killed.



Arathorn sat in front of a blank piece of parchment, struggling to compose a counteroffer. In his first note, he'd proposed a fair trade, but Sauron had turned it down.

Arathorn could demand a higher price, and possibly even get it, but the risk to Halbaron was too great. What approach would be best? Sauron respected strength, so Arathorn would offer the same terms a second time, but this time he would insist they be accepted. He picked up a pen and wrote,

I'll trade your creature for my man on the Sirith Bridge at noon tomorrow. Return my man alive and well, or I'll have your creature hanged.

Arathorn was about to add, *and leave its lifeless body on the bridge.* but that might not be much of a threat given the creature was one of the Undead. And even if it could be killed, from what he'd heard, the Nazgûl were all alike, faceless

¹² The War of the Elves and Sauron, SA 1700. In an attempt to acquire the three Elven Rings, Sauron overran Eregion and tried to invade Lindon and Imladris.

The Counteroffer

wraiths with no free will. It was the ring they each wore that was prized. He began again.

... or I'll leave its lifeless body on the bridge, without its hands.

That ought to get Sauron's attention.

Arathorn folded and sealed the message, then had Mallor take it to the Sirth Bridge. If the message was placed on the bridge by late afternoon, the Enemy should find it during the night.

Chapter 7 The Watchers



ome see something," Dírhaborrn said.

Arathorn followed him up the ladder to the catwalk around the inside of the palisade. The other Rangers were staring into the underbrush at the edge of the tree line.

"I think we have company."

Dírhaborrn pointed to a thick stand of trees. Arathorn looked where he was pointing, but only saw motion due to the wind, or to birds and woodland animals. Then he saw it. A branch at the height of a man's shoulder jerk, then stilled too quickly. Nothing about it looked natural.

"There it is again. The Enemy is watching us," said Dírhaborrn.

This was not good. The Rangers would have to move their prisoner before the fort was attacked.

"Perhaps the creature draws them like a beacon," said Mallor.

"Then moving it will accomplish nothing. They'll just find it again," said Arathorn.

But while the paralyzing aura of fear the creature emitted was impossible to miss, Arathorn didn't think it could be detected at a distance. As far as he knew, neither Men nor Orcs could sense it beyond the walls of the fort, or from the woods beyond. How else might the Enemy have learned where the creature was being held?

Elrond said the faceless creatures were undead ringwraiths, servants of Sauron. They became wraiths when they accepted a Great Ring, which conferred power, wealth, and long life, at a terrible price. Elrond said that when someone took a ring, Sauron could read his thoughts, and after a time, control them

as well. Unless the bearer took off the ring and never touched it again, his free will eroded away to nothing, and he became Sauron's slave.

Arathorn knew how the servants of the Enemy had tracked the creature to Sarn Cardh. Sauron was reading its mind.

If Arathorn was right, the creature wasn't a beacon that drew the Enemy, it was it was Sauron's eyes and ears inside Sarn Cardh. When the creature heard something, Sauron heard it too. Even if the creature couldn't understand their language, Sauron could. Elrond had told him that Sauron spoke every tongue in Arda.

Arathorn tried to remember what he'd said in front of the creature. He'd called the other Rangers by name. He'd asked the Bailiff how many men defended the fort, and how long they might be able to withstand a siege. He'd said how much he cared about Halbaron, and that he'd pay any price to get him back.

How much of it had the creature passed on to Sauron? For the safety of the fort and everyone in it, Arathorn had to know. He plunged down the palisade ladder two rungs at a time and ran for the cellar door. He grabbed a torch from a bracket and ran down the rickety stairs with several of his men following at his heels. In front of the cell, he confronted the creature directly.

"Does your Master know where you are?" Arathorn demanded. The creature didn't answer.

Arathorn tried again, enunciating each word. "Sauron? You talk to?" The creature looked away and hugged its knees.

Arathorn didn't like to do it, but maybe the threat of force would loosen its tongue. He grabbed the Bailiff's cudgel and banged it against the iron grate.

"Get back!" he shouted.

The creature backed away and hissed.

"Does it understand you?" asked the Bailiff, working the lock.

"I'm not sure. It may be reacting to me hitting the bars," said Arathorn.

He addressed the creature again. "You tell Sauron where

you are? You tell him about the fort?" Arathorn shouted, yanking open the cell door. "Well, that's going to stop right now."

He smacked the cudgel into the palm of his hand. In that moment, he blamed the creature for the danger Halbaron was in, the rejection of his ransom note, and for the unseen watchers just outside the fort. His whole body tensed. He stepped forward and raised the cudgel over his head, ready to strike the creature again and again and again until he'd beaten the unclean thing senseless.

The creature shrank into the far corner of the cell, one hand raised before its face and the other shoved behind its back, to the extent its chains would allow. The links rattled, and Arathorn realized the creature was shaking.

It thinks I want to take its ring, he thought. It needn't worry. Arathorn wasn't about to risk becoming one of those creatures himself.

His arm fell to his side, the cudgel loose in his fingers. From all he'd heard, the creature was a mindless slave. Beating it wouldn't accomplish anything. It probably wouldn't understand what it was being beaten for, anyway.

Then the now-familiar wave of dread horror washed over him, but he ignored it. From the corner of his eye, he saw Dírhabor and Mallor drawing their weapons. One of the Bailiff's men fell to the ground, weeping.

Arathorn kicked the creature in the stomach. "Stop it."

He left the cell. The Bailiff locked the door behind him, and they all went upstairs, leaving the creature curled up on the floor with its arms wrapped around its middle.

In the sunlight of the yard, Arathorn asked each of them what they'd said in front of the creature, particularly if it was something they wouldn't want the Enemy to hear.

"If we want to stop sending information to Sauron, we're going to have to watch what we say in front of that thing," Arathorn said.

Chapter 8 The Decoy



Arathorn stood in the palisade yard before a dozen men, his Rangers and the men-at-arms who guarded the fort. He chose his words carefully.

“We need to prepare for an attack. Bailiff, how many men can you station on the east palisade wall?” Arathorn said.

“Four or five,” said the Bailiff.

Arathorn frowned. It wasn’t enough, not even close.

“Mallor, ride out to the surrounding villages and gather as many farmers as you can. Have them bring axes or scythes, anything that looks like a weapon. And have them carry the lids of barrels. From a distance, barrel lids can look like shields.” he said.

Mallor nodded, and headed for the stables.

“Dírhaborn, make a dozen scarecrows and dress them like soldiers wearing helms and surcotes. Position them on the east palisade wall, and prop spears beside them,” said Arathorn.

“I don’t have enough helms,” said the Bailiff.

“Dírhaborn, make something helm-shaped out of leather or felt. They don’t have to be strong, they just has to be the right shape,” said Arathorn.

“Won’t the Enemy know they’re scarecrows?” asked the Bailiff.

“Not in the later afternoon, when all they’ll see is a black outline with the sun behind it. If we put a few real men-at-arms among them, moving naturally, the whole fake garrison will look real,” Arathorn said.

Khamûl lay on the dirt floor. His hair felt like tarred rope. Dampness from the ground had soaked into his clothes, but he no longer cared. He was so hungry, he felt faint. When he heard footsteps on the stairs, he didn't bother to lift his head.

"The creature isn't doing well. It's listless and unresponsive," said the first voice.

"I shouldn't have kicked it so hard. It has to stay healthy, or we'll have nothing to trade," said the second.

Trade? They didn't want him for what he knew; they wanted to trade him for something?

"They're outdoors most of the time. I wonder if it's bad for them to be cooped up," said the first voice.

"Or maybe if they're away from evil places too long, they start to fade," said the second.

Khamûl raised himself up on one elbow. "Or maybe nobody remembered to feed him. Did you ever think of that?" he said.

They backed away. One of them was halfway up the stairs before the others pulled him back.

"You could bring me some water, while you're at it," said Khamûl.

They filled a leather tankard from the well in the middle of the room and gave it to him. He'd meant to sip a little and save the rest for later, but he drank the whole thing in one long swallow. When the tankard was empty, he handed it back.

"More," he said. They filled the tankard again and gave it back to him. He drained it a second time, and told them he was hungry.

"I didn't realize you needed to feed. But we can't give you human blood. You understand that, don't you? But I can get you cow's blood, maybe," said the Bailiff.

"I want bread and butter, and an apple," said Khamûl. "And water to drink, or tea, if you have it."

“Lord Zigûr?”

Mairon looked up from the map in front of him. Uvatha bowed and gave his report.

“As you recall, this morning we estimated the strength of the garrison at Sarn Cardh to be ten to twelve men,” he said.

That was typical of small forts, and it agreed with what the Ranger spy had told them, once he had begun to talk.

“However, late this afternoon, I counted over forty men on the walls. Soon after, another group of ten, heavily armed and carrying shields, arrived at the fort,” Uvatha said.

Typically, a fortification gave the defenders a ten-to-one advantage over the attackers. Mairon had planned to send a hundred orcs against the fort, now it appeared that he needed at least five hundred. He had three hundred and fifty at the most. If this report was true, the raid on the fort could not proceed, at least not as originally planned. And if the raid was canceled, he couldn’t rescue Khamûl. Mairon closed his eyes and cursed.

Mairon made a decision. “The raid is off.”

Uvatha’s face was still. He said nothing, but Mairon could read his thoughts.

Are you sure it was just your finger they cut off?

“I heard that!” said Mairon.



The cell door rattled. Halbaron looked up, not caring that his face was wet. There were two of them. They took him by the arms, pulled him upright, and undid the irons.

They led him down the hall. He walked carefully, with his knees apart, and kept his eyes on the floor in front of him. They entered the chamber with the terrifying machinery. Halbaron couldn’t do that again, he just couldn’t. He began to weep openly.

The guards took him to the interrogation room and sat him on the stool. Two interrogators were sitting across the table, waiting. The guards who brought him in pushed him onto the

low stool across from them.

"There was a problem with one of the things you told us earlier. You said something that wasn't quite true. Would you like to try again?" said the first interrogator.

"What question?" asked Halbaron. He bowed his head. He just wanted this to be over.

"I think you know which one. Let's not play games," said the interrogator. There was a long silence. "Let's start from the beginning. What's your name?"

"Halbaron son of Amarion," said Halbaron.

"Who do you serve?"

"Arathorn, Captain of Rangers."

"Tell me about the fort at Sarn Cardh," said the interrogator.

"A stone tower of three rooms, stacked one on top of another. A wooden palisade around it, with a wooden gate in front." Sarn Cardh was no different from any other small fort. There was no harm in telling them about it.

"How long could they withstand a siege?"

"Two weeks, maybe."

"Are there any secret entrances?"

"A nearly invisible postern door, hidden in the back." They must have caught him in the lie. His mouth went dry.

"How many men defend the fort?"

"Ten or twelve." Halbaron didn't know that one either. He had no role in the defense of the fort. He'd only been there to eat and sleep, and last time was several months ago.

"That's not what you said earlier. I don't like being lied to. Let's try again. How many men man the fort?" said the interrogator.

"I don't know," Halbaron said. He had nothing left to give.

"There's a lot you don't know. I think it's time to go to the next step," said the interrogator. He spoke in a quiet, silky tone which Halbaron found more threatening than the angry shouting from before.

Halbaron hung his head. He just wanted it to stop.

A black-clad creature was watching from the doorway, its face invisible beneath the hood of its cloak. The wraith beckoned the interrogator to come outside. He sighed, and

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followed the creature out into the hall. A heated discussion followed, with arm waving on both sides. The interrogator said, "Who ordered this?"

The interrogator stomped back into the room and said to his assistant, "That's all for now." He turned to the orc guards, "Take him back to the cells."



Mairon leaned against the side of the window frame and looked over the forest of Mirkwood, now cloaked in darkness. Then he stood bolt upright, listening. The thoughts of his servant came through so clearly, Mairon could make out the individual words.

"They need...me healthy...trade..."

Mairon saw the same images as before, stone walls and iron gratings. He had the impression his servant hadn't been harmed, and that he was no longer being starved. Perhaps they really did want to trade Khamûl for the spy, and they weren't just use Khamûl as bait. In that were so, the trade was back on the table.

Mairon cringed when he remembered the letter he'd written rejecting their original offer. He'd lied about Khamûl's value, then mocked them by asking exorbitant terms for their man. Soon he would receive the Rangers' reply. He dreaded what it would say.

They would almost certainly come back and ask for Khamûl's true value, and Mairon had no one to blame but himself. If they asked for gold, he would give them all the gold he had, although it was only a few handfuls. If they asked him to surrender the fortress...Mairon bit his lip, thinking. He didn't want to, but he was willing to do it.

He paced back and forth. A lamp burned in the room below, and through the cracks between the floorboards, he could see leather-bound books and expensive carpets, along with the oak chairs where his Steward and Purser sat when they gave their reports on business concerning the fortress.

It was too soon to return to Mordor. Mairon was still weak,

and in no condition to stand up to the forces of Gondor. Instead, he would go north to Arnor to look for Isildur's heir.

Isildur took the Ring from Mairon at the end of the Second Age, and was last seen traveling home to Arnor with the Ring on a chain around his neck. It would be an heirloom of his house now, and might still be in Arnor. Long ago, Mairon sent the High Nazgûl north to look for it. His most powerful servant established a base in the north, the Witch Realm of Angmar, but the search for the Ring was interrupted when they lost the Battle of Fornost and the Witch Realm had to be abandoned.

Mairon thought about practical matters. What they would take with them? The gold, the horses, his personal papers. The other livestock: the chickens, pigs, goats, even the dogs would have to be left behind. The workshops of blacksmith, cooper, leather worker, and carpenter were stocked with specialized tools, expensive and hard to make. Those would have to be packed.

He summoned his Steward before he remembered that his Steward couldn't hear his call, so he sent a servant to fetch him. A few minutes later, there were footsteps on the stairs, and he went down one flight of stairs to meet his Steward in the study. He took his place in the massive chair behind his desk and delivered his instructions in an impassive voice.

"Tell all of the skilled craftsmen, and also the healer and the apothecary, to pack anything they can't replace. They should start now," Mairon said.

"But ... most of them have gone to bed already," said the Steward.

"Wake them. I want everything packed by morning. Then gather up my important papers: records of those who work for us secretly, the interrogation records, my personal letters, and the account books. Don't burn them yet, wait for my order. And when you're finished with that, pack up the best of the books and maps," said Mairon.

When his Steward left, Mairon removed the casket of gold from its hiding place. He transferred its contents from the casket into a leather pouch, and put it the table with three gold

The Decoy

rings with gemstones.¹³

You make decisions too quickly. Slow down. You haven't even seen their counteroffer yet.

That's what Angmar would say. Whenever he thought Mairon was about to do something stupid, he said so. Mairon usually didn't take it well. Sometimes they screamed at each other, and sometimes they came to blows. But Angmar wasn't here to advise him; he was far away in Minas Morgul. Mairon had few close friends, and he missed Angmar fiercely.

Mairon ignored his imaginary adviser and continued packing.

¹³ The three remaining Dwarven rings

Chapter 9 The Threat



he clash of swords; and horns rang out above the sounds of shouting. With a thundering roar, the Host of Valar swept across the battlefield, engulfing the phalanx around Melkor's banner. The black standard wavered, and then fell. The Valar overwhelmed Melkor's personal guard and surrounded him like a pack of dogs. A weapon was raised high.

"Please no please no ...," Melkor was sobbing.

Mairon struggled to reach his Master in time, but the battlefield turned to knee-deep mud. He labored through it, but something grabbed him by the arm and held him back.

The weapon came down hard. There was a scream, and then silence. The grip on Mairon's arm tightened, but His Lord had fallen; Mairon no longer cared what happened to himself.

His captor spoke. "You do realize that you're dreaming?"

Mairon opened his eyes. Rain murmured against the roof slates. The fire had died down, but the embers still cast an orange light on the planks of his bedroom floor.

Someone was standing over him, a black profile silhouetted against the dim light from the hearth. Firelight reflected from the droplets on his clothing and the rainwater pooling at his feet. Mairon tensed. He tried to get up, but the sheet had gotten twisted around him.

The figure moved, and light glinted from the hilt of his dagger. It looked like a Morgul blade, jagged and brittle, designed to break off in the wound. Only the Nazgûl wore them. Mairon let out a breath, and his whole body relaxed.

"You said to wake you if anything happened. There's been

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another message." Uvatha regarded him with a crooked smile. He reached inside the folds of his rain-soaked clothing and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. Mairon untangled himself from the sheet and reached for it. When Uvatha's hand brushed against his own, images from Uvatha's thoughts filled his mind.



A light rain, the clip clip of a horse's hooves. Dropping to the ground with a thud and continuing on foot.

Wet boards that reflected the light. A darker shadow that became a rock that sheltered a fold of parchment, the dry spot beneath it soon eroded by the rain.

The drumbeat of hoof beats, the shelter of the gatehouse arch, bright with yellow torchlight.

A folded piece of parchment, its corners wet, the writing on the outside blurred by moisture. The seal broke with a crack. The damp had not yet reached *inside*, the writing was still sharp and clear, and it said....



Mairon looked at the fire. It sprang to life and cast yellow light on the whitewashed walls and the chessboard on the table, still set up like the Sirith Bridge. He broke the seal and read.

I'll trade your creature for my man on the Sirith Bridge at noon tomorrow. Return my man alive and well, or I'll leave your creature's lifeless body on the bridge, without its hands.

It said the same things as the first note, with the addition of the threat.

But when Mairon read it a second time, he noticed that, due to slight difference in wording, it didn't have the feel of a trap that the first note did. The second note proposed a straightforward trade, the spy for Khamûl. That was all. The implied condition for Mairon to be present wasn't there.

If this really was a simple prisoner exchange, it was a good deal. Mairon couldn't attack the fort before tomorrow night, and when he did, the raid carried a certain amount of risk to

Khamûl, greater than the risk of conducting the trade.



The guards took Halbaron to a part of the dungeon he hadn't seen before. They stopped in front of a wooden door with a small opening covered by iron bars at eye level. One of them selected a key from the bunch at his belt and worked the lock. When the lock snapped open, he pulled on the door, and after a moment, it began to move. When the gap was wide enough to admit them, Halbaron was shown inside.

The cell was furnished with a simple bedstead made up with a pillow and blanket, and on the opposite wall, a small table and chair.

The jailor sniffed. "Oh, and you might want to have a wash. Soap and water's over there," he said, pointing to a pitcher and basin on a washstand in the corner. Then he left the cell and pushed the door closed behind him. Metal ground against metal, and the lock snapped shut.

Halbaron was exhausted, but he couldn't sit still. He didn't understand why they were treating him differently. They were planning something, but he didn't know what.

He didn't trust what they were showing him. The most recent session with the interrogators, the one interrupted before they did anything to him, could have been staged. The servant who spoke kindly to him earlier, the one who urged him to give them what they wanted, could have been reading from a script. Even the terrible screams he heard before they'd tortured him could have been staged.

He looked through the iron bars of the door. Two sentries were stationed outside his cell. They stood silently, one on each side of the door. He asked them why he was here, but they didn't answer.

The jailor brought him supper on a tray. It looked more like tavern fare than like the prison swill they'd brought him earlier. It smelled good, and he was hungry. He started to reach for it, but stopped himself. It could be drugged. He imagined himself peaceful and floating, his tongue loose,

telling them whatever they asked him and giggling like a little girl.

Later, the jailor came to collect the tray. "Not hungry? Then you won't mind if I have it?" The jailor dipped a piece of bread in the gravy and chewed happily.

A bell rang. There were footsteps in the corridor as new people arrived. It sounded like a change of shift. "All you have to do is watch the door. Stay awake, and if one of you needs to take a break, the other one has to stay here."

The night shift stood at their posts in silence only until the footsteps of the others receded down the hall. After the others had left, they passed the time in idle conversation. Halbaron stood close to the door listening, but learned nothing other than the older one thought his young assistant was a peasant, and none too bright. There's no need to speak unkindly; farm people are simple folk, but they're honest and helpful.

Perhaps the new guards were part of a trap being set for him, although it didn't seem likely. His two interrogators had been cunning and shrewd. Even the servant who brought their tea had seemed intelligent. These two did not; he thought they were just guards, low-ranging ones who'd drawn the night shift.

"Mind the fort for a minute, will you? I've got to drain the dragon," the older one said.

When Halbaron judged the guard was out of earshot, he spoke through the grating to his assistant. "You do know why I'm getting special treatment all of a sudden, don't you?" Halbaron said to the young farmhand, as if they were sharing a secret.

"Oh, aye. You're being ransomed," said the youth. "And they cain't sell no damaged goods."

It was the best possible news. And suddenly, he was so exhausted he could barely stand.

He would have fallen into bed, but the sheets were white and newly ironed. He couldn't bear to lie between them the way he was. He felt soiled. He would never be clean again, not as long as the filth from the dungeons clung to his skin, not as long as he could hear the answers to their questions being

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given to them in his own voice. He shook his head to silence the memory.

He stripped off his clothes and dropped them on the floor. They were stiff and gritty to the touch.

He stood over the washstand and poured water over his head. He watched the water run back into the basin, grey and oily. He rubbed the towel with soap and scrubbed his face and body. The towel turned grey wherever it touched his skin.

When his skin had air dried, he bent down to pick up his clothes, but gagged on the smell of stale urine and fear. He pinched the fabric between thumb and forefinger and deposited the stinking rags in the far corner of the room, then climbed between the sheets and instantly fell asleep.

Chapter 10 The Exchange



When Halbaron woke, his clothes were stacked and folded on the chair. He held up his shirt and sniffed it, it must have been washed while he slept. His boots and cloak had been returned as well.

He was getting dressed when he heard the key turn in the lock, and the door swung open with a scraping sound. The jailor came in with a breakfast tray and set it on the table. Bread and jam, cold meat, and tea.

"I let you sleep late, but you'll need to be ready within the hour," the jailor said.

"Ready for what?" asked Halbaron.

"You're going home."



A tin plate sat on the ground beside Khamûl, with the crumbs of bread, cheese, and an apple core. A jug of water sat beside it.

A group of Rangers came down the wooden steps. Khamûl sat up, and the chains clinked around him as he moved. The jailor opened the cell door, and the leader of the Rangers stepped inside. He held out a vial containing two or three fingers of amber liquid.

"Drink it," said the Ranger.

"And if I refuse?" said Khamûl.

The jailor smacked a cudgel into his palm. It sounded heavy.

"We're going to knock you out. How we do it is up to you," said the Ranger.

Khamûl reached for the vial, but the irons on his wrists held

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him back. The Ranger stepped forward and put it in his hand.

Khamûl sniffed the vial and his head jerked back. It smelled like aquavit and unwashed feet: tincture of Valerian, a sleeping draught; foul smelling, but not poisonous.

He brought the glass to his mouth and took a small sip. Fire exploded in his throat, and it was so bitter it made him gag.

"It looks like you get to use that, after all," the Ranger said to the man with the cudgel.

Khamûl held his breath and drained the glass.

The men took the lanterns with them when they left. It didn't matter, he could still see. He stared into the darkness, fighting the effects of the draught, determined to stay awake. His head fell forward, startling him awake. The next time it happened, it was harder to wake up. He rested his eyes for just a moment.



Footsteps from heavy boots clomped on hollow wood. Iron screeched against iron, and loud voices filled the room.

His clothing was damp at the shoulder, hip, and along the length of his leg. The chill from the dirt floor reached the marrow of his bones. He tried to remember where he was.

"It's unconscious. Take off the chains and tie its hands."

He was rolled face down, and someone bound his wrists behind his back. He tried to wake up, but wasn't able to.



Arathorn and his men arrived at the bridge with their prisoner well before noon. Arathorn left the handcart and its sleeping cargo under heavy guard beside the road.

Then he crept down the slope and paused when the Sirith Bridge came into view. It was a sturdy wooden structure, level and wide enough for two men to walk abreast. It had rained during the night, and the stream was running unusually high. Its surface was white with foam and spray, and it made a roaring sound.

Arathorn wasn't sure if the other side would show up. He

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looked for the rock with his threatening message under it, but it wasn't there. Good.

He scanned the underbrush on the opposite bank. There was motion in the foliage near the ground, and occasionally, the tip of an orcish arrowhead on a black shaft. They were here. He was glad they'd brought their own archers to cover them during the exchange.

Just before noon, he saw a group approaching the bridge from the opposite site. Most of them wore black with their hoods pulled low. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw another of the faceless creatures among them.

A man with his hands bound walked between two others who held his arms. He looked up at Arathorn and grinned. Halbaron! He had a purple bruise on his cheekbone, and one eye was swollen shut, but he was alive.

The group halted on the road at the foot of the bridge, and waited.

Arathorn turned to Mallor. "Time to get the creature."



They bumped along to the sound of horses' hooves and the creak of wheels. Splintery boards pressed against his cheek. Sunlight filtered through the shadows of leaves, and the air smelled fresh, as if it had rained recently.

A man shouted an order, and they jerked to a stop. Boots crunched on the gravel, and someone grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him.

"All right, you. Rise and shine."

Strong hands gripped his arms hard enough to hurt, and forced him to sit up. His head lolled forward. He opened his eyes, but could see nothing through the sack. He coughed on dust from corn and oats.

They pulled him forward until he found himself sitting on the end of the cart with his legs hanging over the edge. One push, and his feet hit the ground. He would have fallen if he weren't being held on each side.

They walked. The gravel hurt his bare feet. He tripped over

every tree root and stone on the path.

They went down a slope. The air smelled fresh and clean, as if it had just rained. The ground was wet. Sometimes he lost his footing and slipped.

He heard a dull roaring sound below, and his gut twisted.

Not water, please don't let it be water.

They stepped onto a platform of some sort. Wooden planks, like a scaffold. It felt warm from the sun under his bare feet. The roar of running water drowned out all other sounds. He felt the spray from it, heard it all around him. Tons of water rushed under the boards beneath him, cold and malevolent.

He felt like it was pulling him towards it. It wanted him. And when he fell in, swirling vortexes would suck him under and hold him down. Khamûl was trembling. He didn't know what they were going to do to him. If they decided to throw him in, there was nothing he could do about it.

Voices were all around him, before and behind. He felt the vibrations of footsteps through the planks.

"Remember the terms, alive and unharmed."

"Let go of him. I want to see him stand on his own."

"Show me his hand. No, the other hand."

Someone slit the cord binding his wrists. His fingers were numb. Someone grabbed his wrist and held up his hand for display.

"On the count of three. One, two, ..."

Khamûl was shoved between the shoulder blades so hard he stumbled and would have fallen, but someone caught him in his arms. Her arms. He tried to speak, but his tongue wouldn't obey. His whole face was numb.

"Khamûl. You're drunk," Adûnaphel said.

Behind him, the voices of his captors cried out in greetings to another.

Adûnaphel draped Khamûl's arm over her shoulder. "Help me. He can barely stand." Someone took his other arm. The sack was pulled off his head and he blinked, blinded by the sunlight.

He took a step, but his knees buckled. Strong arms lifted him up.

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He knew he had just been released and should be celebrating, but he couldn't relax enough to enjoy it. Beneath his feet, a torrent raced under the planks of the bridge, tearing at the supports, kicking up whitewater, and roaring loudly enough to drown out all their voices.

All he could think about was getting off that damn bridge.

Chapter 11 Khamûl



hamûl dozed in the saddle. His head lolled and his hand clutched the saddle horn for support, while someone led Shadow by the reins.

"We've arrived," Adûnaphel said, her voice artificially bright.

He lifted his head and blinked. They were in front of Dol Goldur's Main Gate, an arched tunnel through the Gatehouse tower. The drawbridge was down, and the portcullis had been raised. He couldn't remember going through the village, although they must have come that way.

Sauron waited for them inside the main gate. "Did they harm you?" he asked.

Khamûl shook his head, and his eyes closed again. Strong arms helped him to the ground. Someone took Khamûl's wrist and pulled his arm across their shoulder. Someone familiar. His Master. His assistance was all that kept Khamûl from sinking to his knees.

Together they climbed the steep incline under the main gate. Khamûl felt a tingling pressure on the side of his head just inside his skull, and sensed that he was no longer alone. The presence expanded, reaching wider and going deeper into his mind.

It roamed through his mind at will, and when it paused to touch something, an image sprang up: being knocked from the saddle and hitting the ground, resinous fumes that brought tears to his eyes, gnawing hunger from the first few days when they starved him.

Khamûl's cheeks burned. He could have blocked the intrusion, at least for a while. He chose to drop his defenses

and submit to the search, because it was better than having to answer endless questions about his captivity. He wasn't in the mood to talk right now, he just wanted to be left alone.

They entered the lower courtyard and passed familiar structures built against the curtain wall: barracks, wood sheds, and chicken coops. They stopped in front of the infirmary, its doorway flanked by beds of medicinal herbs. His Master released his arm, but kept a hand on Khamûl's elbow to steady him.

"Find him a bed and let him sleep it off, and treat him for the sickness that follows intoxication," Sauron said.

The apothecary and his assistant helped him inside. The dark space smelled of medicinal herbs, fennel, lavender, and mint.

They navigated between the heavy wooden worktables that crowded the small space, and Khamûl's eyes adjusted to the dimness. The tables were covered with medical glassware and the tools for preparing herbs: chopping boards, mortar and pestle, and copper vessels over spirit lamps.

Light glinted from the blade of razor-sharp tool for bloodletting. Nearby, curved needles to suture wounds, enematic clysters, and pliers for the extraction of teeth lay on trays. He flinched and looked away.

Amidst the clutter that crowded every surface, one of the tables was almost bare. Wooden crates full of straw sat on the floor beside them. The apothecary's assistant was unpacking glassware from one of them and placing it on the table. Bits of straw clung to his sleeve.

Against the far wall, there was a row of cots. Each was made up with pillows and clean white sheets, and a blanket folded neatly at its foot. Khamûl would have fallen into the nearest one, but the apothecary asked him to wait while his assistant spread an old sheet on top of the bedding.

The apothecary filled a cup of water and stirred something into it. "Drink this," he said.

The liquid in the cup bubbled and tasted like salty plaster dust. Khamûl held his breath and forced it down. The apothecary handed him a tankard that held a pint or more.

Expecting a bitter potion, Khamûl took the smallest possible sip, but the tankard held nothing but cold water from the well. He drained it in a few gulps.

Khamûl handed back the tankard and was finally allowed to collapse onto the bed. The room spun, and he grabbed the sides of the bed to steady himself. Adûnaphel laid her hand on top of his, and kept it there. Something scraped against the flagstones, and he heard the apothecary say, "I'm putting a bucket here, right beside your head."

He was falling. He found himself at the bottom of a well in an inch or two of water. The sides of the wall were made of round river boulders, with wildflower growing in the space between them. If he stretched his arms as wide as he could, he could just touch both sides at the same time.

Far above, a circle of light showed the way out. He found handholds on the boulders and climbed until his feet were higher than his head had been. But the stones were slick with moss and algae, and he lost his grip and fell.

The impact knocked the mud at the bottom of the well further down, where the sides of the well were narrower. He tried to grab the stones, but when he moved even slightly, the floor fell away even more. Soon his elbows were jammed against his ribs and his fists were pressed against his face. The stone walls pressed against his ribs, and he fought to breathe.

Someone grasped his hand, and he hung on for dear life. "Shh, shh, you're among friends, you're safe," Adûnaphel said.



Much later, someone gripped his shoulder and shook him awake. Adûnaphel. "You're wanted outside," she said.

Adûnaphel helped Khamûl to sit up. The varnish must still be tacky, because the sheet he had been lying on stuck to his skin and clothes. His head was throbbing. He burped, and his mouth filled with acid. The bucket was still beside the bed. Good, he might need it.

Adûnaphel pulled him to his feet, and Khamûl allowed himself to be led to the courtyard. A table had been set up on

the paving stones just outside the Infirmary. His Master was arranging glass bottles on it. A wooden stool sat nearby, with a basin and towels on the paving stones beside it.

Sauron waved a hand towards the stool. "Get out of your clothes and sit down. Addy, help him," he said without looking up.

He gave Adûnaphel a pair of scissors and turned back to what he was doing. People hung around in doorways, watching.

"Why are we doing this out here?" Khamûl asked. *The courtyard isn't public enough; maybe we could go down to the village and set up shop in the middle of the street instead.*

"I heard that," said his Master. "We have to do this outdoors because of the fumes."

Khamûl sat with a towel across his lap while his Master studied the oily substance that covered his skin, clothes, and hair; he was so focused on the problem, he seemed to have forgotten Khamûl was there.

Sauron scrubbed a swath of Khamûl's arm with soap and water. The substance didn't come off. It didn't appear to have been affected at all.

"Lord Zigûr, I can do that for you," said the apothecary.

"This is my project," said Sauron, waving him off.

Khamûl watched as his Master scrubbed Khamûl's skin with vinegar, which did nothing, and neither did mineral oil. He put on heavy gloves and tried spirits, bleach, pine resin, and a variety of other solvents. There were seven swatches on Khamûl's arm, and while a few of them lightened the color of the stain or smeared it a little, none of them took it off. Some of the treatments itched and others burned his skin.

Bees droned among the medicinal plants in the Infirmary garden; lavender and chamomile flowers trembled under their weight. The afternoon was warm. Khamûl's chin fell forward, and he woke with a start.

"I have one more idea. There's a powerful solvent found in bee venom¹⁴," his Master said.

¹⁴ Bee venom contains formic acid, a powerful solvent.

"Let's not," said Khamûl.

"Then we'll have to let it wear off by itself. I'm sorry, Khamûl. I'm going to have to cut your hair."

Khamûl's hair hung down his back, elbow length, blue black, and as smooth as obsidian. Nobody was going to cut his hair.

A young orc, a girl of about ten, came over with a bucket of water and set it down next to the basin and towels.

"Excuse me, my Lord? Cooking oil will get that off, you know," she said.

Sauron stared at her. Domestic servants weren't supposed to speak to him directly. She must be new here, because she kept talking. "My dad's a carpenter. He uses that stuff all the time, and gets it off with cooking oil," she said.

She was sent back to the kitchens and came back with a measure of cooking oil. Sauron dipped a rag in it and wiped it over Khamûl's wrist. It left a swath that was perfectly clean.

Chapter 12 Halbaron



Halbaron walked across the bridge into the arms of his friends. Arathorn pulled a dagger from his belt and cut the leather cord that bound his wrists. The others surrounded him, putting their arms over his shoulders and clapping him on the back. It seemed like everyone was talking at once.

"They returned your sword belt and weapons," Arathorn said. "Didn't you say this sword was your father's, and his father's before him? And wasn't this dagger a gift from your wife on your wedding day? You must be glad to have them back."

Halbaron shrugged, and looked at the ground.

They hiked up the side of the ravine. When they reached the place where the horses were tethered, Dírhaborn wrapped his injured hand in strips of linen and fashioned a sling.

"Can you ride a horse?" Dírhaborn asked.

"Not just yet," Halbaron said. He let Dírhaborn help him into the cart.

They made their way to the village where their families were staying. People working in the fields dropped their farming tools, shouting in welcome. More people came out of their houses or around from the vegetable plots and animal pens in back, calling "What news, what news?"

Evonym dropped an armload of clean linen in the dust and ran to him, laughing and sobbing all at once. Halbaron wrapped his good arm around her and pressed his mouth against hers, then fell to one knee and embraced his small son as if he were clinging to life itself.

“I knew you would be all right,” said Halbarad.¹⁵ Halbaron laughed and hugged him again.

That night, the Rangers sat around the fire, drinking and telling stories about everything that had happened during the last three days. They told Halbaron how they captured the faceless creature, a supernatural being that carried an air of dread about it, how Arathorn discovered it was invisible under its robes and made it visible by dumping a bucket of varnish over its head.

Halbaron talked and laughed with the others. But after a while, he fell silent. He stared into his leather tankard. He was drinking far more than usual. He felt so alone, even though he was surrounded by other people.

“Well, I think we’ve told you every single thing that happened while you were gone. So what happened to you, after they led you away?” asked Arathorn.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Halbaron.



This piece was inspired by “Born of Hope”, a Lord of the Rings prequel written by Paula diSanta and directed by Kate Madison.

The rangers not named in J.R.R. Tolkien’s work are their original characters.

¹⁵Halbarad grew up to be standard bearer to Aragorn son of Arathorn, and fell in the Battle of Pelennor Fields.
