

A SCRAP OF PARCHMENT



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

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

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

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

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

A Scrap of Parchment

He turned to the next page. The text described an enchantment to summon storms. Magical symbols, the standard ones used by all sorcerers to record their spells, were strung together like words in a conversation he couldn't understand. On the line below, the same spell was written out a different way. It should have helped him understand the structure of the spell, but neither version made any sense. He couldn't even tell by looking what they were supposed to do.

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

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

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

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

Urzahil laid out paper, uncorked a jar of ink, and began to

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

write. He dipped the brush and drew a graceful line from the middle of the letter upward, and twisted the brush as he lifted it from the parchment, forming a sharp tip. He dipped the brush again, and starting from the same place, drew a long downward arc, black all the way to the end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

² Egyptology technique regarding hieroglyphics

black, wrapped in the tapes and seals characteristic of a diplomatic letter.

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

“I’ll find you a handwriting sample.” It was unusual to hear the High Priest speaking in such a deferential tone to anyone.

“The Temple Archives house an extensive collection, and Gûlon will turn up something to compare your letter against.”

Curiosity satisfied, Urzahil returned to his task.

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

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

“We want to see the Founder’s Letter,” said the High Priest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

scribes. The block printing was legible and clear, without slant. There were no inkblots, no cross-outs, and it lacked ornamentation of any kind, even the diacritics were plain.

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

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

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

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

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

I seek the friendship of Umbar, and propose that our two nations form an alliance against our common enemy, the nation of Gondor...given by my hand at Barad-dûr, TA 2951"

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



Diplomatic Letter
to Tar-Castamir

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

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

"It's not a match." Gûlon said.

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

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

"How did I fall for it? I should have known the moment I

broke the seal. 'Sauron sends greetings'. He wouldn't have called himself Sauron, he hated that name. He would have used his real name, Tar-Mairon." Tar-Castamir pressed his lips in a thin line.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of the sacred writings survived," Gûlon said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Urzahil studied the fragment itself. The size of a dried leaf, and much the same color, it looked as if it would disintegrate at a touch. A piece had broken off and lay beside the main fragment. It was impossible to read the black writing on parchment dark with age. Gûlon took a silver mirror from his pocket and used it to steer a circle of light onto it.

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

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

A Scrap of Parchment

rituals of purification. Urzahil knew the passage by heart.

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

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

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

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

“It’s a match,” said Gûlon.